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RUSSIAN MILITARY STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

From the Editor

Geopolitical competition between the collective West and Russia has stood out as a key trend in international relations over the past decade. While the intensity of this contest has experienced ebbs and flows, it has to be assumed that tensions between the West and Russia are likely to remain a defining feature of international relations in the years to come, and will therefore remain high on the political agendas on both sides of the Atlantic. The authors of this RAD issue critically scrutinize some of the conventional Western assumptions about Russian military thinking and intensions, offering alternative interpretations of Moscow's current art of strategy and the larger geopolitical implications thereof.

Andrew Monaghan deals with Russia's conceptualization of war and military strategy, and criticizes the Western fixation on "Russian hybrid warfare"—a thinking that, according to Monaghan, has "remained stuck in the mid-2010s." He argues for a shift from seeing Moscow's activities as "measures short of war," obscuring the lines between war and peace, toward greater clarity on Russian military strategy and the blurring of lines between the offensive and the defensive. Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky claims that the Anti-Access Area Denial concept (A2/AD) euphemism is nonexistent in the Russian lexicon and that the accompanying Western conventional wisdom about Russian aerospace power and its political implications are flawed. He reflects on a Russian term describing Moscow's aerospace theory of victory, analyzes its deficiencies, and argues that the latter leaves little space for the Kremlin to consider the strategy of land grabs. Michael Kofman builds on the claims introduced by Monaghan and Adamsky and unpacks them further. He questions the current scenarios for a Russian *fait accompli* in the Baltics that circulate in Western defense planning circles and challenges the prevailing arguments that a Russian "fait accompli strategy" is even possible. Finally, Pavel Sharikov focuses on the repeated misunderstandings between the U.S. and Russia regarding the regulation of the non-military use of cyberspace. The small steps toward each other that his analysis proposes might put Washington and Moscow in a more cooperative mode, fostering a joint approach to challenges and security dilemmas in the cyber era.

Taken together, these four articles challenge the interrelated wisdoms about Russia that are widespread in the West. The authors aim to stimulate critical thinking and to provide food for thought for practitioners and theoreticians of international security worldwide and in NATO member states in particular. The issue might be especially handy and relevant to experts and decision-makers of the incoming U.S. administration if they seek to revisit, reexamine, and reformulate basic policy assumptions and strategies related to Russia. Regardless of whether the new U.S. administration opts for a tougher approach to Moscow, adopts a more compromising line, or considers a new "reset" in U.S.–Russian relations, the insights that this issue of RAD offers will be equally important, if the goal is to seek to avoid misperceptions, miscommunications, and inadvertent escalations.

While this RAD issue will hopefully enable Russia-watchers worldwide and decision-makers in Washington and in European capitals to critically reflect on some of the underlying Western assumptions and perceptions of the current Russian approach to strategy and military operations, it needs to be stressed that each article represents the views of its author, not necessarily the views of the editors of RAD.

Jeronim Perović (on behalf of the RAD editors)

Understanding Russia's Measures of War

Andrew Monaghan[1]

Abstract

In the context of NATO and its member states seeking to enhance deterrence and defence postures and looking ahead to 2030, the article argues for a shift from seeing Moscow's activities as "measures short of war," blurring the lines between war and peace, toward greater clarity on Russian military strategy and the blurring of lines between the offensive and the defensive.

Introduction

NATO is attempting to look to the future. Through the spring and summer of 2020, the alliance launched the NATO 2030 reflection process to make sure that the "alliance and its member states are prepared for new threats and challenges." This process has three broad priorities: to ensure political strength, military strength, and a more global approach. It includes and seeks to enhance the alliance's deterrence and defence posture that has taken shape over the last two years, not least by developing a new Military Strategy. In this context, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, Chairman of NATO's Military Committee, recently described an effective deterrence posture as being one that convinces a potential aggressor that the consequences of coercion or conflict outweigh the potential gains.

If NATO points to a number of challenges and threats, Russia stands out as one of the most prominent concerns driving this reinvigoration of military and political strength: Moscow's aggressive actions are seen to constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based order. Indeed, since the mid-2010s, the question of how to deter and defend against threats posed by Russia has been the key concern driving the Euro-Atlantic discussion about security. Much attention has focused on the annexation of Crimea, the destabilization of eastern Ukraine, and Russian "hybrid actions"—including interference in domestic politics and elections through disinformation and propaganda campaigns—and malicious cyber activities.

These challenges are defined as being in the "gray zone" between normal state relations and armed conflict. This view was well illustrated in September 2020 by the UK's Chief of General Staff, General Sir Nicholas Carter, who stated that Russia cannot "afford to go to war as we define it, so Moscow seeks to achieve its objectives by using attacks below the threshold that would prompt a war fighting response." His characterization of Moscow's approach to conflict as being one that was "predominantly political rather than kinetic," and a continuous struggle that blends non-military and military instruments in a way that blurs the lines between war and peace, reflects what has been a widespread orthodoxy since the mid-2010s. Yet rather than looking ahead to 2030, thinking about the challenges Russia poses appears to be anchored to the mid-2010s and important aspects of Russian thinking about war are being missed.

Gerasimov's "Sacred Text" and Russian Measures Short of War

The characterization of Moscow as using "measures short of war" emerged in the mid-2010s with the sense that Russia had shaped a new form of warfare: "hybrid warfare," a "fight in the shadows" in which non-military means such as information warfare, propaganda, and cyber-attacks predominated. Such hybrid warfare was thus tantamount to an epithet for a wide range of hostile actions in which military force played only a small part; instead the measures were intended to emphasize ambiguity, to deceive, subvert, influence and destabilize societies, to coerce sovereign governments and to disrupt or undermine an existing regional order. Only in this asymmetric way could Moscow hope to gain an advantage over the West.

Much of this understanding of Russian activity was based on a narrow and partial reading of an article published under the name of the then newly appointed Chief of the Russian General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov, in early 2013, an article that became something of a sacred text for those seeking to understand Russia. But an over-reliance on—and misinterpretation of—this one source has warped Euro-Atlantic views of how Russia understands war, giving rise to a series of epithets attempting to depict Russian activity. These include, among others, "Russian hybrid warfare," the "Gerasimov Doctrine," "gray zone operations," "non-linear warfare," and "liminal warfare." Some believed that this set a doctrinal model for assessing future Russian activity; others

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even suggested that with its emphasis on such asymmetric approaches, the Russian military now sought to avoid the use of violence.

This has served to create considerable confusion about Russian thinking, intentions, capabilities, and actions. Gerasimov did indeed write that the role of non-military means in war had grown, to the extent that they exceeded the power of military force. He also pointed to the role of special operations forces and even the blurring of the lines between peace and war. But these epithets do not relate to actual Russian military concepts (Russian officials and observers were emphatic that hybrid warfare is not a Russian concept but a *Western* one). Moreover, they served to anchor Western thinking about Russia to the methods used in the annexation of Crimea and the early period of the outbreak of war in Ukraine, even as conditions and Russian actions were evolving.

Thinking in these terms served to draw a veil over the ongoing importance of conventional aspects of war-fighting in Russian thinking and action—what might be called Russia's measures of war. Yet these more traditional conventional measures were very visible, not least at the battles of Debaltsevo, Donbass airport, and Ilovaisk, during which much of the fighting involved high-intensity combat, including massed bombardments. And just as the Euro-Atlantic focus on hybrid warfare was reaching its peak, Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war again emphasized Russia's growing conventional capability.

Any reference to Gerasimov's reflections on the growing importance of non-military means in Russian thinking must therefore be balanced against President Putin's statement in 2015 that "a great deal has been done over the course of the past year to expand the potential of our armed forces … Russia has reached a new level of operational use of its troops." And by 2017, senior officials were stating that the Russian armed forces were emerging on a "principally new level of military readiness" and that improvements in combat capabilities meant that it was possible to extend Russia's military presence in strategic areas of the world.

War in Russian Thinking

But Gerasimov himself had already suggested this, and the broader context of the Russian defence community's debate about war offered a very different view to that found in the Euro-Atlantic discussion. Even in his 2013 article, Gerasimov had highlighted the importance of the military means of conducting war, noting that military actions are becoming more dynamic and pointing to the role of mobile groups of forces. He has also written on 21st-century blitzkrieg and the significance of territorial defence. In a noteworthy article in 2017 entitled the "World on the Brink of War," he stated

that an analysis of the characteristic features and tendencies in the development of contemporary war "indicates a common quality to all: the use of military force."

This "World on the Brink of War" article is significant because it reflects a reappraisal of the conceptual aspects of war that has been underway in Russia since the mid-2010s as the Russian defence community attempts to understand war's changing character. Again, Gerasimov acknowledged the mixed methods of struggle and the application of political, economic, diplomatic, and other non-military measures. This created a new perception of peacetime, he suggested. But (again) he emphasized both that the spectrum of reasons and justifications for using military force is broadening and it is now used more often, and that the main characteristic of today's wars and those of the foreseeable future is armed struggle.

If, therefore, there is ongoing debate in Russia about the characteristics of war between those who advocate a more classical definition and those who advance the case for the definition of war to be revised to include economic and information aspects, the classicists remain in the ascendency. War is still understood to be the extreme form of resolving policy disagreements, characterized by a sharp change in relations between the parties, and its content is armed conflict.

And while the changing character of war remains a subject for debate, the focus has now shifted to the question of military strategy in contemporary conditions. In 2019, for instance, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that "conflicts of the new generation reflect the merging of classical and asymmetric means of conducting armed conflict, where military actions are short and fast-flowing and there is simply no time to correct mistakes"—and therefore Russia needed to "modernize its theory of armed confrontation."

This has significant consequences for our understanding of how the Russian leadership thinks of war. And again, Gerasimov sheds a light on this that too rarely illuminates the Euro-Atlantic discussion about Russia. Addressing the Russian Academy of Military Science in 2019, he stated that the priority of military strategy is the study of the means of increasing Russia's combat power, not least the size and quality of the armed forces and their level of preparation and combat readiness. Indeed, the main content of military strategy, he stated, even in an era of new spheres of confrontation in modern conflicts, is about the question of preparation for war and its conduct in the first instance by armed forces. While there are non-military measures that affect the course and outcome of the war, these are separate activities with their own strategies, means of action and resources which the military should coordinate rather than direct.

Noteworthy, too, was his emphasis on three features of Russian military strategy: an enhanced system of territorial defence; an "active defence strategy" that frames measures for pre-emptive neutralization of threats to state security; and a "strategy of limited actions" that seeks to carry out tasks for the protection and promotion of Russia's national interests. These features of military strategy chime with a broader strategic outlook that emphasizes growing global competition for resources, trade routes, and access to markets, a competition that is seen in Moscow as likely to grow through the 2020s, and thus to require the ability to project power.

Conclusions

It may be that an effective deterrence posture is one that convinces a potential aggressor that the consequences of coercion or conflict outweigh the potential gains. But it can only be so effective on the basis of an ability to communicate: being able both to transmit signals to the adversary and receive the adversary's signals in turn. This requires a dynamic and evolving understanding of the adversary.

If NATO is attempting to look to the future to address evolving challenges and strengthen the alliance, however, there is too strong a sense that, at least where Russian activity is concerned, Euro-Atlantic thinking remains stuck in the mid-2010s even as a new stage is taking shape in Russia's conceptualization of war and military strategy. If references to the mythical "Gerasimov doctrine" are finally decreasing (though still too frequent in policy circles), the "sacred text" of his 2013 article remains the central point of reference for many in the policy and analytical community. This could be useful—his revealing references to Russian military thought, his emphasis on the importance in contemporary warfare of mobile groups of forces, and his discussion of Libya are all instructive. But many of these remain unnoticed, let alone analyzed. More importantly, much has since been said by Gerasimov himself and other senior figures that is more illuminating about Russian military thinking and strategy—Russia's measures of war.

Coming to terms with these "measures of war" will require a shift in thinking beyond the blurring of the lines between war and peace toward an understanding of Russian military strategy, and thus the blurring of the lines between the offensive and the defensive. Without this shift, the alliance and its member states will become engaged in the wrong competition with an abstract and largely mythical adversary, leaving themselves open to strategic and operational surprise. As a result, deterrence and defence will become increasingly reactive as the risks of misunderstanding and miscalculation grow.

About the Author
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Moscow's Aerospace Theory of Victory: What the West is Getting Wrong[1]

Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky

Abstract

This article refutes the assumptions that underlie the U.S. perception of the current Russian approach to aerospace operations and offers alternative interpretations of Moscow's current art of strategy and its geopolitical implications.

Introduction

Three assumptions are widespread among the expert communities in the West and underlie the U.S. perception of the current Russian approach to aerospace operations and its strategic implications. First, that the Anti-Access Area Denial concept (A2/AD) dominates Moscow's aerospace-defense strategy; second, that this concept is mainly based on defensive weapons systems; and third, that it emboldens the Kremlin to consider a strategy of "fait accompli land grabs"—i.e., opportunistic regional aggression against U.S. allies, mainly in Europe.

The alternative analysis offered here argues that the A2/AD euphemism is nonexistent in Russian military theory and practice, and that the accompanying Western conventional wisdom about Russian aerospace power and its political implications are flawed. The article offers an alternative interpretation, which it unpacks in three steps. It first describes the traditional presence of the strike (offensive) component in the Soviet-Russian approach to aerospace defense missions; then it introduces the indigenous Russian term, which encapsulates the theory of victory in the aerospace sphere and illustrates how the inter- and intra-service competitions have shaped it; and finally it describes how the current Russian procedural, organizational, and weapons-related deficiencies enabling this theory of victory condition Moscow's strategic aspirations.

The article argues that it is impossible to grasp the evolution of the aerospace defense mission of the Russian military, or any other military innovation, if the analysis of doctrinal thinking and modernization trends is divorced from scrutiny of the impact of organizational-bureaucratic factors. The latter left the most significant imprint on the course of this and other Russian military innovations, which were more often than not shaped by institutional parochialism, the personal ambitions of military leaders, and various inter- and intra-service competitions.

Offense-Defense Dialectics in Russian Air Defense

Some in the West presume that fighter aviation (IA) troops and other strike (offensive) components of the Russian military are entities unrelated to the air (aerospace) defense mission. They therefore perceive the latter as an activity based on defensive weapons. This article argues that a greater historical and conceptual oversight is difficult to imagine. In Russia, decoupling IA and other offensive elements from aerospace defense (ASD) is simply wrong.

Historically, the Soviet and Russian theory and practice of the ASD mission have comprised a harmonic mixture of offensive and defensive capabilities and activities. Since the establishment of the Soviet AD Troops (PVO) during the interwar period, the strike component epitomized by the IA—and by capabilities pertaining to other troops—has been part of the AD mission. The role of the strike component was so significant during certain episodes in Soviet history that the IA succeeded, albeit temporarily, in subordinating the whole AD mission to itself and bringing in PVO troops as a sub-element under the command of the Air Force.

Due to the ever-present strike-defense dialectics within the ASD mission and the service entrusted with executing it, elements within the PVO have traditionally engaged in two interrelated competitions. The first has been over the conceptual-organizational leadership

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1   This publication is based on: Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, Aerospace Theory of Victory: Between Western Assumptions and Russian Reality (Washington DC.: Center for Naval Analysis, 2020); "The Art of Net Assessment and Uncovering Foreign Military Innovations: Learning from Andrew Marshall's Legacy," Journal of Strategic Studies, vol. 43, no. 5, 2020, pp. 611–644; Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Jeffrey Edmonds, Russian Strategy for Escalation Management (Washington DC.: CAN April 2020); Michael Kofman, "It's Time to Talk about A2/AD," WOTR, September 2019; "Fait Accompli," forthcoming; Andrew Monaghan, Dealing with the Russians (Manchester UP, 2019); Clint Reach, Vikram Kilambi and Mark Cozad, Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means (Washington DC.: RAND, 2020); Greg Whisler, "Strategic Command and Control of the Russian Armed Forces," Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 2020, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 237–258; Dave Johnson, Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises and Nuclear Thresholds (Livermore, Ca.: CGSR, 2018).

of the AD mission within the PVO service. The second competition, over the command and control (C2) authority for the ASD mission and areas of responsibility (AoRs), has been between the commanders of the PVO and those of the Military Districts (MDs). Despite endless intra-service and inter-service competitions, the IA has continued to be responsible for the strike element within the PVO, albeit in confusing subordination schemes, while the Military Districts, albeit not without tensions, have allocated Missile and Artillery Troops (RViA) units to the PVO mission. These tendencies remain intact, while the repertoire of offensive means in the ASD missions has expanded significantly.

Moreover, the premise of the Russian military today seems to be that in the current state of affairs the defensive element, even if augmented with strike capabilities, cannot ensure the successful repulsion of an aerospace attack if not supported by nuclear capabilities. Thus, the Russian aerospace operation will not only have to lean on a defense-offense mix, but must also be preemptive in order to succeed, as implied by the comments of Vladimir Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, on threat neutralization during a threatening period of war.

Not A2/AD but Strategic Operation for Repulsion of Aerospace Aggression

This article argues that Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) is a misnomer when it comes to defining the Russian theory of victory against an aerospace attack. To represent the host of activities which Western experts group under the A2/AD rubric, and to fill in the missing pieces in the Western perception, this article suggests employing the indigenous Russian professional term: Strategic Operation for Repelling Aero-Space Aggression (SORASA).

The term Strategic Operation (SO), a brainchild of Soviet-Russian military thought, refers to combat activities at the highest level of war in a given theater of operations. It has been the main analytical framework for exploring combat activities in the Russian military tradition and is a lens through which the Russian military brass designs, plans, and executes combined arms operations. As the highest gradation of military art, it is a mechanism that mediates between the political objectives of war and the missions entrusted to the military, and as such is a responsibility of the supreme echelons—the General Staff (GS) and commanders of the MDs.

Since the 1970s, despite its ongoing evolution, the SORASA concept has remained intact as the main frame of reference for operational planning and force employment against aerospace aggression in the Soviet-Russian military. The Soviet SORASA rested on three postulates: that systemic integration of defensive elements and offensive (strike) components is necessary; that the strike component should encapsulate the offensive capabilities of services within and beyond the PVO Strany service: IA, RViA, Radio-Electronic Warfare (REB), Airborne Troops, nuclear and nonnuclear armed Long Range Aviation (DA), maritime and regular aviation carrying cruise missiles, and the missile capabilities of the Navy and Nuclear Forces; and that these assets would strike all of the adversary's means of aerospace aggression (missiles and airplanes, their bases, C4ISR systems, as well as missile-carrying submarines and air carrier groups) wherever possible (in flight, on the ground, and at sea).

The contemporary Russian SORASA inherited the Soviet theory of victory as a doctrinal and organizational frame of reference. Despite several reincarnations of the concept and the services executing it, the Russian military sees repelling aerospace aggression as a holistic endeavor that encompasses all the strike and defensive capabilities aimed against all means of aerospace aggression, on their bases, in flight, and over the theater of military operations (TVD). Russian experts attribute the offensive element of SORASA to the same components (listed above) as in the Soviet era. The novelties are greater emphases on cyber capabilities, sabotage-diversion groups, and special operations forces.

Despite an elegant theory of victory, competitions among the services and deficiencies in capabilities related to SORASA have raised obstacles to executing it. Institutional-doctrinal rivalries peaked in the run up to and following the establishment, in 2015, of the service associated with SORASA: the Aerospace Forces (VKS). Many of the reforms have been suboptimal, self-damaging, and irrational. The personal ambitions of senior military leaders and the institutional interests of the services have driven the majority of the approximately two dozen PVO transformations since the Second World War. The parochialism of the post-Soviet reforms, the narrow-mindedness of some of their authors, efforts to please the leadership, and the promotion of organizational ambitions at the expense of other services have often echoed the pathologies of the Soviet PVO reorganizations.

Fait Accompli: Between the Lack of Intention and Insufficient Capabilities

This article argues that, contrary to the assertion by many Western analysts that a fait accompli strategy is driving Russian operations, there is apparently little space for the political-military leadership to consider this option. The issue is not even the lack of strategic intentions, but rather insufficient capabilities. As of this writing, organizational, operational, and procedural deficiencies are limiting the capacity of the Russian military to properly execute the mission of strategic ASD.

First, there is an issue with AoR and C2 procedures. The VKS, a service that is in theory associated with the

ASD mission, lacks control and operational authority over different types of defensive and offensive systems allocated to the repulsion of missile-aviation aggression. Second, the strike component, especially the advanced, long-range precision-guided arsenal, is insufficient to support SORASA missions, despite the Russian embrace of the precision-strike regime. Finally, the view of the organ that will merge strike and defensive components and manage them on the strategic directions, and thus be the meta-operator of SORASA, is under-elaborated. Against the backdrop of the questionable combat potential of the Russian military in its current shape to repulse effectively a massive NATO aerospace campaign, the military brass estimates the chances of successful execution of SORASA, if not augmented by nuclear capabilities, as low.

As the military wrestles with issues related to the operationalization of the offensive-defensive dialectics and a vaguely demarcated command authority, it sees SORASA as posing more challenges than opportunities. As long as the Russian military brass does not have confidence in the ability of the armed forces to effectively neutralize aerospace aggression in the form of a U.S. Prompt Global Strike, not to mention the ability to conquer and maintain strategic aerospace dominance, there is apparently little space for the political-military leadership to consider a fait accompli strategy. The apparent awareness within the Russian strategic community of these insufficiencies in the realm of military capabilities, and the limits of power which they produce, is likely to project on the realm of geopolitical intentions. Presumably, the Russian political leadership shares these insights of the military brass. This conventional wisdom is likely to predispose the leadership toward a defensive-reserved rather than assertive-offensive modus operandi, and to curtail rather than embolden its geopolitical assertiveness; it would probably disincline rather than predispose Moscow toward a fait accompli strategy. The Kremlin's strategic intentions aside, solely the analysis of military capabilities suggests a lack of confidence to plan for "sanctuarization" gambits.

Conclusion

This article sought to wrestle with Western assumptions related to Moscow's aerospace theory of victory. It has argued that whereas the Western term A2/AD is a misnomer, the proper term to describe the Russian theory of victory against an aerospace attack is SORASA, and that this strategic operation encompasses a mixture of strike-defense activities, regardless of the organizational deficiencies. If the aim is to reflect the Russian strategic mentality, there is basically no other way to represent Russian thinking about military campaigns at the highest level of war, regardless of the sphere of combat activity under scrutiny.

The analysis also claims that as of this writing, in contrast to Western estimates, Russian sources assess the capabilities that would enable SORASA's implementation and the overall correlation of forces in the aerospace sphere unfavorably. The Russian military perceives the capabilities on which SORASA rests as inadequate and is therefore skeptical about its scale of effectiveness. Flaws in early warning, means of defense, strike capabilities, and the C2 architecture hinder the ability to execute this theory of victory in an ideal fashion. This in itself suggests that the Kremlin is more likely than not to be disinclined to pursue the geopolitical course of "fait accompli land grabs."

Although such a gambit would be too risky, it is still hypothetically possible. However, if forced by the circumstances, Moscow is likely to opt for it in a deterrence (preserving the status quo) rather than in a compellence (changing the status quo) setting. If such a coercion scheme materializes, it is more likely to be the result of hasty overreaction and inadvertent escalation than a preplanned move driven by the geopolitical assertiveness that many Russia watchers in the West have been attributing to Moscow. Arguably, the Kremlin, advised by military brass aware of these aerospace deficiencies, is more likely than not to avoid such a risky eventuality.

In addition to the findings about the Russian modus operandi in the aerospace sphere, a broader insight arises from the article that is applicable to future efforts to diagnose Russian strategic behavior, operational activities, and military innovations. The case under scrutiny reveals that a confluence of strategic and nonstrategic considerations shaped the conceptual and organizational history and current state of the Russian aerospace theory of victory. Russian reforms in the aerospace sphere have often been suboptimal, self-damaging, and irrational, due to such nonstrategic factors as the ambitions of senior military leaders and parochial institutional interests, which have driven the majority of the transformations. Consequently, one can grasp the Russian ASD theory of victory, and any other Russian military innovation, only in the context of the intra- and inter-service competitions that underlie and shape a given defense transformation. Moreover, along the lines of Russian strategic culture, the contest over ownership of areas of responsibility and over combat assets often materializes in the form of doctrinal-conceptual debates between competing institutions, which seek to justify scientifically the force posture they are advocating to promote their organizational ambitions. As is often the case in bureaucratic politics, organizational competition is interwoven with the conceptual debates, on the principle that where one stands [conceptually] depends on where one sits [organizationally].

See overleaf for information about the author.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Assessing a Russian Fait Accompli Strategy[1]

Michael Kofman

Abstract

This article questions whether current scenarios for a Russian fait accompli in the Baltics are representative of this stratagem and challenges prevailing arguments that a Russian "fait accompli strategy" is possible, along with commonly held interpretations of Russian strategy in defense planning circles.

Introduction

Since 2014, the United States and NATO allies have invested considerable resources to deter the threat of Russian territorial revisionism by fait accompli. This contingency is a strongly held thesis among American defense planners, driving many of the operational warfighting scenarios and wargaming premises for a hypothetical conflagration in the Baltic. There are three central problems with this premise. First, the fait accompli is not being correctly interpreted as a tactic or stratagem given its history. Second, the fait accompli as a strategy for territorial revisionism remains fundamentally impractical for Moscow to pursue in the contexts where it is most feared. And finally, no evidence of such strategic intent can be deduced from Russian military activity, political statements, or posture. As a consequence, the U.S. conversation on faits accomplis has become a Bantustan of pseudo-theories regarding adversary behavior.

Perhaps surprisingly, this discussion need not focus on Russian strategic intentions, since intentions can be debated and change over time. Defense planners must consider vulnerabilities, and this means that capabilities matter, since they govern military options even as intentions can prove difficult to predict. Defense establishments logically seek to hedge against an uncertain future, but in the process tend to make ill-informed choices about where to focus their efforts and the likely fights they will face. This is because they privilege what they find most accessible, namely military technology and the military balance, over what matters: the opponent's military thinking, political decision-making, and the historical logic of these scenario constructs. The fait accompli, as it has been used to describe a potential Russian strategy, is a proposition that can be evaluated without the need for a specific interpretation of Russian political intentions.

Fait Accompli as a Tactic for Territorial Revisionism

At the heart of U.S. and NATO thinking on this problem lies scenario confusion and an ahistorical understanding of what faits accomplis are. A fait accompli constitutes the imposition of gains at the expense of the other side, under the calculus that they will not counter-escalate and cause a larger conflict. This strategy is based on the belief that gains can be attained in a relatively bloodless manner because the opponent will not show up to the fight. The history of this form of territorial revisionism

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1   This article is based extensively on Michael Kofman, "It's Time to Talk about A2/AD," WOTR, September 2019, and a forthcoming article in War on the Rocks, "Getting the Fait Accompli right in US strategy." This article makes extensive use of the work and research by Dan Altman in: Altman, Dan: By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries, International Studies Quarterly 61(4): December 2017, 881–891, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049; Altman, Dan: The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm. International Organization 74(3), 2020, 490–522. doi:10.1017/S0020818320000119; Altman, Dan: Advancing Without Attacking: The Strategic Game Around the Use of Force. Security Studies 27(1), 2018, 58–88.

is surprisingly consistent. It is a means by which states acquire parts of other states, but, by definition, is not a form of conquest with maximalist aims.

These forms of territorial revisionism cluster around low-value territory, with the driving calculus being that the victim will not fight for object in question. Often, the territory in dispute is not especially valuable *per se* (islands, deserts, mountains, etc.) but has political worth for the aggressing party. Most importantly, fait accomplis tend to happen where the territory's status is in legal dispute and the norms of sovereignty unlikely to deter an aggressor because they believe that this land is rightfully theirs. The present scenarios for Russian aggression against a NATO member do not follow this logic, but are in fact large-scale territorial conquests of entire countries, reminiscent of pre-World War II territorial revisionism. These are not fait accomplis because they involve prolonged warfare, occupation, and the conquest of whole states. Hence, they constitute a total war between the respective parties.

There is the prospect of Russian seizure of territories belonging to Baltic states, but not the states themselves. However, there is no such territory in legal dispute between Moscow and NATO members. Russian irredentism must have some basis, and without any claim or historical dispute related to the territory of a NATO member, it is difficult to substantiate a Russian motive for aggression. Furthermore, because the states are small, they tend to value their territory; anything presumably worth fighting for could bring with it the threat of a prolonged conflict. This implicitly deters the fait accompli rationale, which is a judgment of the other side's resolve to resist. Similarly, there is nothing in the region that would prove of substantial political value to Moscow, akin to Crimea, that could substantiate this calculus. Consequently, the impulse for a fait accompli, opportunistic or otherwise, is hard to divine. In general, the region is not particularly well-suited to fait accompli strategies, given its physical geography and established political boundaries.

Prospects for a Russian Fait Accompli Strategy against NATO

If the current scenarios do not constitute a fait accompli, then what about the proposition of large-scale territorial conquest employing a so-called "fait accompli strategy" against the United States as the security provider? This would envision a Russian conquest of the Baltic states, or some part thereof, presumably in a manner designed to prevent a U.S. counter-intervention. The conquest via "fait accompli strategy" against the United States is a more accurate way to describe how planners think about the scenarios that constitute the Russian threat to NATO. This is militarily impractical, leaving aside the

lack of evidence that anyone in Moscow thinks it is feasible. Additionally, it tends to conflate military strategies designed to interdict or fight a third party with those intended to attain gains without fighting. The distinction is important, since it reflects that two different strategies are at play. Fait accomplis are born of political judgments that gains can be imposed without escalation to a larger conflict, not assessments of the military balance, and are therefore often initiated by the weaker side in the conflict.

Since U.S. forces are deployed in the Baltic states and NATO has robust plans for rapid reinforcement in the event of crisis, it is not possible for the Russian military to operationalize a fait accompli strategy. (Moreover, Baltic forces can also be expected to fight for their own nations.) Any reasonable timetable for force generation and deployment would give NATO the opportunity to forward deploy additional forces to support those already stationed in the region. This means there is no way for the Russian General Staff to devise an operation that places the initial burden of escalation on NATO, but most importantly, gains cannot be made without fighting NATO forces. Specific advantages offered by time or distance in such scenarios are not especially relevant, since the fait accompli calculus rests on a determination of the opponents' will to fight. Theories to the effect that Russian military capabilities can somehow "hold NATO at bay" are essentially a discourse on the prospects of large-scale conventional warfare, not a fait accompli strategy, and are wrong in their own right on the technical merits of how such capabilities work. Therefore, even a classic surprise attack cannot render a fait accompli strategy viable in this case, which is all that matters for political decision-makers.

Unlike land grabs via fait accompli tactics, which have been studied and documented, fait accompli strategies against security providers remain intellectual constructs that in the Russian case lack a *casus belli*. Efforts to right this intellectual ship by proposing that Moscow's objective would be to ruin NATO's credibility do not have a discernible basis in the history of state behavior. An objectless invasion remains an illogical construct. States fight over things, not to discredit alliances, which can be done without resort to war. The premise of a credibility-based war is imaginative, but illustrates that the Russian motives for military aggression in these scenarios are not well thought through.

The "credibility attack" is hardly a novel supposition. Indeed, strategists came up with similar theories for how the Soviet Union might attack NATO and defeat it politically via "political *blitzkrieg*." Unsurprisingly, these were never validated. The resultant scenario selection strangely lends itself to cases where Russian aggression would be the most escalatory and easiest to defeat, such

as the Suwalki gap, as opposed to those where it could easily challenge NATO's credibility with minimum risks.

Military Capabilities and the Fait Accompli

Political leaders tend to judge intent based on their counterparts' observed behavior in international affairs, penchant for risk-taking, and their sense of another state's ambitions. This tends to result in generalizing from few cases and reasoning by analogy across dissimilar scenarios. Analysts look at military capability, force posture, and observable data that could be used as evidence to build a case for an assessment of intent. However, capability-based assessments can lead to erroneous conclusions on intent or strategic planning if they do not emphasize the other military culture's interpretations, its operational concepts, and the calculus of its political leadership. Without due consideration for the political and military views of the other establishment, it is easy to mirror-image and invent strategies for one's opponent while overlooking their actual plans. Thus, perceptions are paramount.

Consequently, two profound misgivings emerge about contemporary interpretations of Russian intentions based on military capabilities. First, they appear to be based solely on tactical-level assessments of technology that do not necessarily reflect Russian military thought or operational concepts. Hence, an area-denial and anti-access theory has emerged for describing Russian military strategy that, while plausible, is broadly incorrect. Military cultures have differing interpretations of the utility of capabilities, and they often come to different conclusions as to their implications for the military balance or military strategy. There is a strong desire to presume an objective offense/defense advantage to the observed military capabilities of the two sides, but no such impartial determination can be made. Tanks, artillery, aircraft, missiles, and ships can all be used in support of an offensive in theater just as they are essential to defensive operations.

Here it truly matters what the Russian General Staff believes. Russian military operations emphasize disorganization, attrition, and the annihilation of adversary forces, not area denial or interdiction. There is also strong evidence in Russian military thought that they view rote defense as impossible in the case of large-scale aerospace attack, requiring cost imposition and attrition-oriented strategies. As such, the notion of a Russian offensive to take territory and then successfully defend against a superior aerospace opponent is misaligned with what the technology can do, and more importantly with what the Russian military believes it can accomplish. Strategic aerospace defense without sustained offensive operations is not possible, and in many cases is even considered to be cost-prohibitive. This means that a fait accompli strategy is simply not in the cards, requiring at a minimum regional or large-scale warfare in the European theater.

There is similarly contradictory evidence when looking at Russian force structure, which appears to be expanding in size to the detriment of readiness and manning levels. This force is increasingly built out for regional and large-scale war, presuming months of indications and warnings, and an observable change in the military-political situation. This is the opposite of what one would expect to see from military planning around a fait accompli strategy. The latter would emphasize readiness and forward deployed forces near the Baltic states rather than expanding formations that take longer to mobilize. Although fait accompli strategies feature surprise attacks, they often do not need to do so, as states signal their intentions via irredentist claims. Hence, many cases of fait accompli revisionism are remarkably predictable. However, Russian force structure design appears to be maximizing NATO's opportunity to react and introduce forces into the Baltic region rather than minimizing it. Perhaps the Russian military will attain overmatch, or local superiority, in the initial period of war, but that is not determinative of success when evaluating a fait accompli strategy.

As it stands, there is little in Russian force posture or operational concepts that might substantiate the intention to commit a fait accompli in the Baltic region, or the prevalence of "fait accompli strategy" against the United States as a security provider. The Russian armed forces clearly plan for large-scale war in Europe, with NATO being the central opponent, but not in the manner ascribed to them. Conversely, defense planner arguments for why such a strategy might exist have always carried a logical contradiction. Their premise has always been that Russia is militarily inferior to NATO and therefore has need of a fait accompli strategy, but is militarily superior due to its newfound military capabilities and might be emboldened on the same account.

Conclusion

Military strategy is often confused for political strategy. While military communities may debate the significance of capabilities or the implications of force postures, most of those conclusions are irrelevant for political decision-makers, who make the actual decisions when it comes to war. Capability match-ups, tactical advantages or disadvantages, etc., are not relevant factors for decision-making when it comes to the fait accompli. Political leaders are neither emboldened nor deterred by specific military capabilities. In the case of a fait accompli, the matter rests almost entirely on a judgment in Moscow of whether NATO will show up to the fight, not how well it would fare if it did. Here, a modicum of capabil-

ity goes a long way toward shaping decisions, but the military edge plays at best a marginal or insignificant role. Indeed, abstract perceptions of superiority or inferiority are largely irrelevant once it has been established that the opponent has the means to resist and that the fight may escalate.

There is no need for NATO or the United States to project the ability to win in the initial period of war, since victory is hardly a requirement of deterrence. The possibility of a sustained battle effectively eliminates the prospect of a fait accompli strategy. Warfighting, be it through annihilation or attrition, inherently carries risks and costs that are not likely to be commensurate with prospective Russian gains in the Baltics. This makes positional fait accomplis, gains in relative position that do not involve territorial revisionism, much more lucrative, especially for nuclear powers in a context where war carries the risk of nuclear escalation.

To be clear, there are reasons why Moscow and NATO might come to blows, but there is little evidence for the notion that Russia harbors a fait accompli strategy or has need of one. This article renders no judgment on whether Moscow has designs on territorial revisionism writ large, simply on the premises that govern U.S. and NATO defense planning and scenario constructs. The notion of NATO as object, or *casus belli*, has proven the most puzzling. Alliances are sabotaged or neutralized through subversion, steady erosion of relative influence, and wedging strategies (which generally fail), rather than objectless declarations of war. Hence, NATO remains safe from overt challenges, but vulnerable to death by a thousand cuts and the internal disconnect between its desire for greater cohesion along with a desire for further enlargement.

About the Author
Michael Kofman serves as Director of the Russia Studies Program at CNA and as a Fellow at the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, DC. His research focuses on Russia and the former Soviet Union, specializing in the Russian armed forces, military thought, capabilities, and strategy. Previously, he served as a Program Manager and subject matter expert at National Defense University, advising senior military and government officials on issues in Russia and Eurasia. Mr. Kofman is also a Senior Editor at War on the Rocks, where he regularly authors articles on strategy, the Russian military, Russian decision-making, and related foreign policy issues. Mr. Kofman has published numerous articles on the Russian armed forces and security issues in Russia/Eurasia, as well as analyses for the U.S. government.

ANALYSIS

Will Russia's Efforts to Prevent the Weaponization of Information Succeed?

Pavel Sharikov (Institute for USA and Canada Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow)

Abstract
In September, Russia made another effort to negotiate the nonmilitary use of cyberspace with the United States. Predictably, Washington rejected the proposal, despite admitting the urgency of the issue and the need to find a consensus solution with Moscow. The problem is not new: Russia has insisted on establishing common cyber norms in the United Nations for a long time, while the US has reserved the right to develop its own military cyber capabilities and blocked all Russian initiatives. With the stakes raised dramatically, Russia and the US have to find a way to agree on cybersecurity.

Russia's Proposal to the US
President Putin suggested a comprehensive information security program to the US. It was predictable that the US would reject the Russian proposal, for many reasons. First, an agreement with Russia on any issue, especially

on cybersecurity, is political suicide for Donald Trump. Second, regardless of Donald Trump's relations with Vladimir Putin, the American political establishment would never believe that Russia is not interfering in the elections: Russia's voluntary commitment not to meddle

with the elections is not credible in the US. Third, Russia expects the US to cease what the Russian authorities see as American interference in Russia's domestic politics, primarily the free press and critical reports about the Russian government. The US sees this as a violation of freedom of speech.

The Russian proposal is the continuation of a two-decade-long crusade to prevent the militarization of the Internet. The history of Russia's efforts can be divided into three major periods, reflecting Russian domestic policies as well as changes in the international environment.

Three Periods of Information Policy

Between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, the Internet was chaotic. The US established the Internet Corporation on Assigning Names and Numbers (ICANN), an organization that was seen in Russia as an attempt to dominate cyberspace. Russia introduced a UN resolution that called for information technologies not to be used for non-peaceful purposes. Since that time, Russia has led the international drive for Internet governance, including making a significant contribution to the establishment of a vehicle for this debate at the UN: a Group of Government Experts (GGE).

Between the late 2000s and 2014, the Internet became more organized, mostly due to the activities of Internet giants. The Russian government was very concerned that social networks and social media were used for political means. The experience of the color revolutions and the Arab spring forced Russia to enhance government control over the Internet. The Russian and American positions grew a little closer. Russia still sought to regulate the Internet as a domain, but also reached a number of bilateral agreements (including one with the US) and regional accords.

Since 2014, we have seen a new stand-off between Russia and the West. It was predictable that Russia would want to build up its defenses against Western influence, which was seen in Russia as a deliberate information operation. The Russian government has adopted many measures to control Internet users, measures known collectively as the "sovereignization of the Internet," which is seen as an analogue of the Cold War-era Iron Curtain. Sovereign Internet is intended to ensure not only that the Russian people only have access to the proper information, but also that international audiences receive information that the Russian government considers "reliable." Thus, the foreign policy dimension of sovereign Internet is as important as the domestic aspect. Russia still rejects the military use of the Internet and has succeeded in bringing together an international coalition around the idea of countering the weaponization of information.

2018 became a significant landmark in Russia's Internet governance crusade. The UN adopted two resolutions, one sponsored by Russia and its allies and the other introduced by the U.S. and Western democracies. The Russian resolution included 13 norms of responsible behavior of states in cyberspace, as well as establishing a new vehicle for further discussions of Internet governance: the Open Ended Working Group. The American resolution prolonged the mandate of GGE. The two organizations have different tasks and do not compete, but rather complement each other. It is obvious that the establishment of global norms of responsible behavior in cyberspace is impossible without consensus between Russia and the US.

Cyber Security

One of Russia's key points is denial of the existence of cyberweapons. According to Russian decision makers, if cyberweapons are legally prohibited, no country would have legal authority to use the right of self-defense against a cyberattack. Instead, the Russian government suggests considering all forms of cyber aggression as crimes and treating them as such, developing tracks for cooperation in investigation and prosecution. Needless to say, many countries—chief among them the US—have developed robust military cyber capabilities.

While it is clear why military cybertechnologies are kept secret, it is also noticeable that even cybersecurity strategies are classified. The US has declared many times that Russia is among America's most serious cyber opponents.

American cybersecurity strategy declares that these opponents are constantly attacking U.S. cyber infrastructure. The document "Achieve and Maintain Cyberspace Superiority: Command Vision for US Cyber Command" introduces the term "persistent engagement"—a continuous operation "below the threshold of armed conflict." "Persistent engagement" as described in the Strategy implies that opponents inflict some damage, but not sufficient damage to provoke U.S. retaliation through military operations.

Russia's denial of cyberweapons implies that other countries' open development of military cyber capabilities is most likely perceived as a declaration of hostile intentions and consequently a source of potential conflict. It is unclear how Russia would retaliate against cyberattacks. Arguments that Russia is not developing its own military cyber capabilities are not credible, especially in the US, which has leveled many accusations of cyber aggression. I believe it came as a great surprise to Russian diplomats that the issue of International Information Security was linked to accusations of election interference. Before those accusations, the U.S. argument against Russia's really peaceful proposals seemed weaker, but now that Russia has established a clear image as a "cyber aggressor," American criticism sounds much more solid.

After almost a month of silence, Washington finally answered Moscow's proposals after indicting 6 Russians—alleged GRU officers—on different charges of hacking. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, "These cyber activities demonstrate a complete disregard for public safety and international stability. Russia, which presents itself as a champion of stability in cyberspace, is in fact one of the global Internet's greatest disruptors. We call on Russia to put an end to its irresponsible behavior."

Assistant Attorney General for National Security John Demers added, "This indictment lays bare Russia's use of its cyber capabilities to destabilize and interfere with the domestic political and economic systems of other countries, thus providing a cold reminder of why its proposal is nothing more than dishonest rhetoric and cynical and cheap propaganda."

Trump's Weakness in Dealing with Russia

For many reasons, including domestic political factors, President Trump and his administration are clearly in no position to discuss cybersecurity relations with Russia. However, it is obvious that cybersecurity issues cannot be solved without dialogue between Moscow and Washington.

The US would likely be willing to discuss cyber security issues with Russia as part of arms control. But this would require a principal change in Russia's position: the acknowledgement that cyber is a weapon. President Trump's position on arms control has also been quite unclear. During John Bolton's time at the National Security Council, it seemed that the US was going to withdraw from every arms control agreement that somehow limited the development of American military power.

Democrats would likely be more willing to negotiate on arms control, including cybersecurity issues. But the Democrats can hardly agree to a noninterference agreement with Russia. First, it is impossible to agree on the subject of the agreement: cyber capabilities are impossible to count. Second, it is impossible to verify any commitment to an agreement on cybersecurity and ensure compliance.

If the Democratic Party takes the White House and increases its influence in Congress after the November elections, it is possible that Russian-American relations will become a little more pragmatic and a little less ideologically spoiled.

Russia's Position

Russia's proposal is difficult to take seriously; however, it should be noted that Moscow is ready and willing to negotiate and cooperate. A number of small steps seem feasible for Russia and the US in the field of cybersecurity.

First, the top Russian and American politicians could make a declaratory statement that they would refrain from cyber and/or information attacks against each other.

Second, assuming that military cyber capabilities would make it possible to inflict serious damage, it is important to cooperate on countering, prosecuting, and investigating cybercrimes and nonmilitary cyberattacks. It is clearly necessary to develop a glossary in order to ensure that diplomats speak the same language.

It is also obvious that no cybersecurity agreement between Russia and the US is possible without the general improvement of bilateral relations. Russia and the US have a lot of contradictions, which creates a situation where incidental escalation may lead to catastrophic consequences. Even if an incident happens in cyberspace, the escalation of the conflict can hardly be separated from physical space and the use of kinetic weapons. Confidence-building measures should not be in isolation from other issues that may cause conflict.

About the Author
Pavel Sharikov, PhD., is a senior research fellow at the Institute for USA and Canada Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, where he has worked since 2002, studying the American political system, cybersecurity policies, and Russian-American relations. He has participated in a number of exchange programs with the United States: in 2005 with the Center for International Security Studies at the University of Maryland and in 2008 with the George Washington University. In 2009, he defended a dissertation devoted to American cybersecurity policies. Starting in 2015, he taught a number of courses as an associate professor at Moscow State University. Most recently, he was a visiting research scholar at the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland, where he investigated Moscow's and Washington's mutual accusations of interference in elections and domestic affairs.

Further Reading
Sharikov, Pavel. "Alternative Approaches to Information-Age Dilemmas Drive US and Russian Arguments about Interference in Domestic Political Affairs." (2020). Available at: https://cissm.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/alternative-approaches-information-age-dilemmas-drive-us-and-russian.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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