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MASON CLARK

RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE



MILITARY LEARNING AND
THE FUTURE OF WAR SERIES

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Mason Clark, Institute for the Study of War

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Cover: Chief of the General Staff of Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov arrives for the Victory Day parade, which marks the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two, in Red Square in central Moscow, Russia May 9, 2019. REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov

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RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE

Executive Summary

America's current strategy for responding to the Russian threat is based on a misunderstanding of the Russian approach to war and exposes the United States and its allies to a high risk of strategic defeats. The 2018 US National Defense Strategy gives primacy to deterring major conventional great power wars. Russia also seeks to avoid such wars even as it designs a different way of waging war to achieve its revisionist objectives. The US largely views this Russian approach, hybrid war, as a set of activities below the level of conventional conflict. But Russia includes significant conventional conflict in its conception and execution of hybrid war. If the US continues to focus on deterring the kind of war Russia does not intend to fight while underestimating the role military force can and must play in preventing Moscow from accomplishing its aims through hybrid war, then the US will likely suffer serious strategic defeats even as its defense strategy technically succeeds.

The Kremlin is even now waging a hybrid war against the United States. The Kremlin assesses that hybrid wars already dominate 21st century conflict and will continue to do so. The Kremlin believes it must adapt to win this struggle, profoundly shaping Russian military development and assessments of the future of war.

Russian hybrid wars include the use of significant conventional forces and conflict. The Russian military defines a “hybrid war” as a strategic-level effort to shape the governance and geostrategic orientation of a target state in which all actions, *up to and including the use of conventional military forces in regional conflicts*, are subordinate to an information campaign.

The Russians define hybrid war precisely and coherently as a type of war, rather than a set of means to conduct state policy. The U.S discussion of hybrid war overly focuses on the means short of conventional forces and conflict that the Russians have most famously used. The Russian soldiers without insignia (“little green men”) who helped seize Crimea in 2014, and the proxies Russia uses in eastern Ukraine, are most often the focus of Western assessments about how to respond to Russian hybrid war.

The Russian conception of hybrid war is much more expansive. It covers the entire “competition space,” including subversive, economic,

information, and diplomatic means, as well as the use of military forces extending above the upper threshold of the “gray zone” concept that more accurately captures the Chinese approach to war.

The Kremlin considers conflicts including Belarus, Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and Venezuela to be hybrid wars. The Russian Armed Forces openly discuss several ongoing conflicts as hybrid wars. The Kremlin is actively refining and utilizing its theory of hybrid war in Europe and around the world. It uses a blend of means and instruments, including conventional military forces. Russian Air Force aircraft in Syria constitute its most important means of influencing that conflict, although it has also deployed Russian Army Military Police and special forces (SPETSNAZ) troops as well. Russian hybrid war efforts in Belarus include sending three battalion tactical groups from Russian Airborne Forces divisions to exercise there, along with Tu-160 nuclear-capable bombers. Russia's engagement in Libya, by contrast, has been primarily through its private military companies (PMCs), which are also operating in Syria. The Kremlin adjusts the kinds of forces it commits to hybrid conflicts according to its assessment of the conflict's requirements. The Kremlin does not shy away from sending and using units from its conventional military forces just because it has defined the war as hybrid.

Russia sees hybrid wars as the main line of future military development, rather than a temporary phenomenon. The Russian military maintains theoretical space for the idea of a traditional conventional war and does not assert that all conflicts are now inherently hybrid. It instead argues that conventional war is a legacy type of conflict that is increasingly unlikely in the 21st century due to technological changes and strategic power balances. The Kremlin further asserts that Russia should shape its military and national security tools to optimize for hybrid wars not only because they are increasingly common, but also because they are now more practical and effective than traditional conventional warfare.

The Russian military is therefore adapting to improve its capabilities to conduct hybrid wars. The Russian military is not attempting to hide its intent to conduct offensive hybrid wars. Russian military theorists write extensively and openly on general strategies and doctrine for offensive hybrid wars, and additionally discuss the development of individual hybrid means. The Kremlin's ongoing adaptations include efforts to:

- Centralize all potential Russian decision-making bodies — civilian, military, media, and economic — to coordinate whole-of-government efforts.
- Adapt traditional military theories and doctrine to enable the Russian military to conduct hybrid wars as a core mission.
- Conduct society-wide information campaigns to improve “patriotic consciousness,” which the Kremlin assesses is essential in hybrid war.
- Increase the adaptability and strength of Russian information campaigns to successfully conduct hybrid wars over many years.
- Improve the conventional expeditionary capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces to enhance their capability to deploy abroad in support of hybrid wars.

- Improve the Kremlin's capability to employ PMCs and other supposedly deniable proxy forces.
- Subordinate kinetic operations to information operations—which the Kremlin assesses is the ongoing foundational change in the character of war—in planning processes and execution.

The United States must revise its strategy for confronting the Russian threat and re-examine the tools and resources it will need to support that strategy in light of a more accurate understanding of the Russian concept of hybrid wars. The US must avoid imposing its own conceptual boundaries on the Russian threat—particularly regarding the Russian theory of hybrid war. The Kremlin has established a continuum between and among military and non-military means to conduct unified campaigns—hybrid wars—to achieve its strategic objectives. The United States must also recognize that deterring major conventional and nuclear war with Russia is not a sufficient objective to preserve US interests in the face of Russian hybrid war efforts. And it must accept that US and NATO conventional military forces must play an essential role in any counter-hybrid war strategy.

The United States should take several actions to support this revision of its strategy and approach to Russia.

- *Analyze the Kremlin's decisions within the Russian framework of hybrid war to understand and mitigate Russian lines of effort.* Obfuscating the nature and purpose of Kremlin activities is a key objective of hybrid war, and US confusion about the term and the Russian approach to such conflicts hinders the development of effective counterstrategies.
- *Confront Russian hybrid wars in their entirety as synthetic threats instead of confronting individual Russian lines of effort separately and partially.*
- *Counter the Kremlin globally as well as in Europe.* Putin is not playing three-dimensional chess, but instead playing many games of checkers

simultaneously. The US policy and military community should increase its analysis of the Kremlin's hybrid wars outside Europe, including in Syria, Libya, and Venezuela while retaining necessary focus on Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States.

- **Pursue whole-of-government coordination of information and kinetic operations.**
- **Reinforce Western norms and institutions—key targets of Russian hybrid wars.** The United States should not allow the Kremlin to normalize its malign behavior and worldview.
- **Work to align the Russia policy of the United States and its allies.** The United States should particularly seek to standardize across NATO the red lines that would lead to responses to Russian actions.
- **Actively challenge Russian information campaigns.** The Kremlin's information campaign is its center of gravity in each hybrid war. The United States cannot win hybrid wars with Russia if it loses in the information space.
- **Deprive Russian PMCs and proxy forces of their deniability.** The United States and its allies must relentlessly work to expose the connections between these forces and the Kremlin and highlight that they are direct tools of Russian military policy to reduce the Kremlin's freedom of action.

If the US focuses on deterring the kind of war Russia does not intend to fight, underestimating the role of military force in hybrid war, then the US will likely suffer defeats even as its strategy technically succeeds.

- **Recognize and plan for the military requirements to confront hybrid threats.** The United States should be prepared to confront Russian hybrid wars with the conventional forces that will be required and avoid establishing false red lines for the use of Western forces against Russian aggressions.
- **Recognize that Russia also aims to avoid major great power war.** The US must of course continue to deter both nuclear and full-scale conventional war with Russia. But it must revise its strategy to recognize that Russia also seeks to avoid such conflicts while nevertheless accomplishing its goals.
- **Shift its military posture to confront the global nature of the Kremlin threat.**
- **Enable deployed US forces to combat Russian hybrid wars with non-kinetic means.** Conventional forces can act as a platform for additional cyber, civil-military relations, intelligence, technical, and special operations assets which are essential in hybrid wars.

The challenges presented by Russian hybrid war and preparations for the future of war are not insurmountable. The West must not throw up its hands at the challenge of confronting an unfamiliar conception of the future of war. The Kremlin is optimizing for its expectations of the future of war, not ours, and the West must fully understand the Russian threat to successfully confront the Kremlin.

Introduction

Russia sees itself as fighting an ongoing hybrid war against the United States and is shaping its military and non-military tools of state power to win this war. The Russian military defines a “hybrid war” as a strategic-level effort to shape the governance and geostrategic orientation of a target state in which all actions, up to and including the use of conventional military forces in regional conflicts, are subordinate to an information campaign. Russia considers the Venezuelan Presidential crisis, the ongoing Libyan conflict, the Syrian Civil War, and the current crisis in Belarus as examples of hybrid war. The Russian military is actively focusing its preparation for future conflicts on increasing the capabilities it assesses are necessary to win hybrid wars.

Russian strategic thought identifies “hybrid wars” as the main line of future military development, rather than a temporary phenomenon. The Russian military maintains theoretical space for the idea of a traditional conventional war and does not assert that all conflicts are now inherently “hybrid.” It instead argues that conventional war is a legacy type of conflict that is increasingly unlikely in the 21st century due to technological changes and strategic power balances. The Kremlin further asserts that Russia should shape its military and national security tools to optimize for hybrid wars not only because they are increasingly common, but also because they are now more practical and effective than traditional conventional warfare.

The Kremlin rejects many distinctions the US makes among various sorts of conflict, synthesizing those types of conflict under the singular framework of hybrid wars. The Russian hybrid war framework specifically includes the use of conventional military operations and lacks a boundary between “deniable” proxy operations and disinformation on the one hand and conventional conflict on the other. Russian conceptions of hybrid war are thus incompatible with the idea of “gray zone” warfare, which depends on a relatively clear threshold above which a conflict is “war,” but below which there is an

ambivalent state of semi-war or competition. From the Russian perspective, the entire “gray zone” is potentially a component of hybrid war, which additionally includes the use of military forces extending above the upper threshold of the “gray zone” into what the US and China would both regard as conventional war.

The US must therefore profoundly reorient its geostrategic thinking about Russia. It must proceed from the reality that the Kremlin sees itself as currently fighting a war against the US and its allies and is extrapolating experience from fighting this war to shape its preparations for future war. The US must additionally avoid imposing its own conceptual boundaries on an evolving Russian theory that explicitly rejects them. It must particularly recognize the key differences between hybrid war and gray zone conflict and the incorporation of major conventional military operations into the Russian notion of hybrid war. Only then can the US begin to devise a suitable approach to counter the real threat Russia poses.

Confusion about Russian Hybrid War in the West

Hybrid war, “гибридная война” in Russian, is a coherently defined term for a typology of war—not simply a set of means to conduct state policy—in Russian military thought with explicit and specific meaning. The muddling of the term in Western discourse has led some to reject it entirely or to propose their own definitions of it.¹ Western discussion of hybrid war in general uses the term primarily to discuss *means*, whereas it denotes a *category* of war for the Kremlin. The Russian usage of the term is neither muddled nor confused. The United States cannot understand Russian national security policy, let alone Russia’s military policy, without clearly understanding the Russian conception of hybrid war.

Western discussions of the nature of the Russian military threat often split the problem set into two

parts. One part is the threat of conventional war against NATO. The other consists of strictly information-focused and subversive Russian actions in which the deployment of “little green men” (a term for the Russian troops in unmarked uniforms that enabled Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea) is the upper bound of kinetic operations. This split conception does not capture the Russian view of “hybrid war,” which includes conventional maneuver war as well as activities American theorists assign to the “gray zone.”² Several studies accurately note that the Kremlin will use “hybrid means” in any conventional war, but do not fully explore the inverse—that the Kremlin conducts conventional military operations in what the US considers the “competition space.”³ This inaccurately split conception of the Russian threat obscures the Kremlin’s conception of its own campaigns; it risks leading Western policymakers to focus on components of the Russian military threat separately when they are in fact part of a cohesive whole.⁴ A strategy to confront Russia based on responding to incomplete, discrete portions of the problem set is doomed to fail.

Constraining the notion of hybrid war to activities below the threshold of conventional conflict leads Western analysis of the Kremlin to focus too much on the Russian military’s conventional threat to NATO and Europe. The false dichotomy between hybrid means and conventional means leads many in the West to expect that conventional forces will be used—and must be matched—by conventional forces in conventional ways. Western analysis therefore does not devote enough attention to the Russian Armed Forces’ conventional units capability and intent to conduct hybrid operations directly themselves and not just through subversive actors or other elements of the Russian state. Studies attempting to examine the relationship between hybrid efforts and conventional units have thus explored how NATO’s conventional units can confront Russian hybrid efforts conducted primarily by Russian proxy forces, as in Ukraine. But Russian hybrid warfare efforts often aim to succeed without engaging NATO conventional units; such studies do not address how NATO should respond in that case and fail to adequately consider how to identify and

respond to Russian conventional forces being used to shape, support, and conduct hybrid wars. These studies have informed how the United States and NATO understands the interaction between kinetic conflict and the information space, and have narrowed the problem in ways that miss the Kremlin’s intent.⁵ The 2018 National Defense Strategy, for example, focused largely on the conventional military balance, arguing that Russia is eroding the United States’ “competitive military edge” and recommending improved conventional military capabilities in response.⁶ This recommendation is not wrong, but it is insufficient. It understates Russian efforts to circumvent rather than directly challenge NATO’s capabilities.

One consequence of studies that overvalue the Russian conventional threat and undervalue the hybrid war threat is an excessive focus on nuclear or strategic deterrence.⁷ NATO’s conventional force posture in Eastern Europe is necessary and important to deter any potential Russian conventional threat. Russia certainly could develop and use conventional forces against its western neighbors if the United States and its allies did not maintain adequately equipped and trained forces to help those neighbors defend themselves. These conventional forces can additionally serve as baseplates for additional assets to directly contest Russian hybrid operations.⁸ But the assumption that keeping conventional forces in the eastern NATO states postured to defend against a conventional Russian invasion will also protect NATO’s eastern flank from Russian hybrid operations is not well-founded. Russian theory and doctrine increasingly assume that Russia cannot or should not engage in force-on-force conflict against NATO, but that it can and should achieve its goals—even against NATO states—through hybrid efforts that nevertheless include elements of conventional war.

The National Defense Strategy (NDS) gives primacy to deterring major conventional conflict between great powers. But Russia also seeks to avoid major conventional wars between great powers even as it designs a way of waging war that would achieve its objectives. The NDS thus creates a hidden risk that Russia can achieve its political objectives via

hybrid warfare, to the great harm of the US and its allies, even as the US formally achieves the objective of deterring major great power war. Russia does not intend to fight a conventional great power war. If the US focuses on deterring conventional great power war while underestimating the role military force can and must play in preventing Moscow from accomplishing its aims below the threshold of major conventional war, then the US can suffer serious strategic defeats even as its defense strategy technically succeeds.

Studies of the Russian military threat to Europe are necessary but insufficient for another reason: they do not capture the global scope of the Kremlin's intent to use conventional assets as part of hybrid warfare.⁹ Several valuable case studies of Russian hybrid wars focus exclusively on conflicts in the former Soviet Union, neglecting the Kremlin's global aims and conception of hybrid war.¹⁰ Russia will be hard-pressed to pose a major conventional military threat to the West outside its own borders. Russia has already posed a tremendous challenge to the US and its international coalition against the Islamic State in Syria, however, by incorporating the use of limited conventional military power in its hybrid wars. Russia's conception of hybrid war thus enables Moscow to pose military challenges to the US and its allies in areas far beyond what Russian conventional military forces could otherwise reach.

Western decision makers and military personnel must study Putin's Russia with a full understanding of Russian intent, not only Russian capabilities. Intelligence analysis of Russian military capabilities without analysis of Russian intent is valuable but often misleading.¹¹ Western analyses of Russian military learning and development often correctly identify Russian capabilities and weaknesses but do not envision how Russia will employ its increasingly modernized force in ways consistent with the Kremlin's intent and views of hybrid warfare.¹² Discussions of Russian lessons learned in Syria and Ukraine, for example, often focus strictly on how

Russia will apply these lessons to combating conventional NATO forces, rather than understanding these lessons as components of the Russian theory of hybrid war.¹³

Western decision makers must shift their conception of Russian hybrid war from a term that identifies a set of *means*—the focus of most existing studies—to a definition of a type of war. Numerous analysts in the Western policy community have accurately assessed the Kremlin's changing means of achieving its policy objectives, the majority of which fall below the level of conventional war.¹⁴ Several salient reports have highlighted key lines of effort within the Kremlin's hybrid wars and suggested excellent recommendations to counter them—discussed further in the conclusion of this paper. Many reports, however, dismiss defining hybrid war as a hopeless endeavor

and instead describe it as one term among many defining the same phenomena; others add further terms to the dense discussion of what the Kremlin would consider the means of a hybrid war.¹⁵ The existing literature on Russian hybrid war has not engaged with the Russian

conception of the term as a type of war, rather than simply a set of means. This is not meant to argue that the United States and its allies should not continue to develop their own frameworks—but the US cannot throw out important Russian terms due to flawed Western definitions. The US and its allies must understand the Kremlin's conception of hybrid wars to successfully counter the means involved in those wars—or the West risks winning individual battles but losing a war it isn't aware of.

This report aims to identify the shift in the US mindset that is necessary to confront Russian hybrid war in current and future conflicts. Western writing has analyzed the key building blocks of the Russian military threat but has so far failed to synthesize these building blocks with the Russian military's views of the future of war. The West cannot successfully counter the Russian threat without understanding Russian military thinking holistically.

Russia sees hybrid war as a type of conflict rather than the means of waging it.

Russian Hybrid War Theory

This report analyzes the public-facing Russian military discussion of hybrid war and Russian assessments of the future of war from 2015 to 2020. This public discussion is very likely a good indicator of overall Russian military thinking, even that which is concealed from public view.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely conducting both internal and public discussions of hybrid war and the future of war. Much of the Russian discussion of hybrid war is conducted in the open military journals analyzed for this report. The Russian military is almost certainly additionally discussing the details of hybrid war in classified forums and directly conducting lessons learned assessments on ongoing hybrid wars such as the Kremlin's campaign in Ukraine. However, unclassified publications reach a larger audience in the Russian military than classified documents and influence the thinking of greater numbers of Russian officers. The theories and development priorities the MoD chooses to publish in respected journals and the priorities outlined by senior officers in speeches demonstrate the Russian Armed Forces' clear prioritization of studying the conduct of hybrid wars.

Open discussion of hybrid war and the future of war benefits the quality of the Russian learning process. The barrier to entry for authorship is lower in unclassified publications than in classified discussions, which are likely limited to select groups of officers and planners. Inputs into the open discussion include officers with command experience discussing experience from the war in Syria—which the Kremlin considers a hybrid war—in military newspapers, military academics projecting the future of conflict in military journals, lower-ranking

officers discussing how they will synchronize their actions with information campaigns, and retired officers and military professors providing historical context for modern lessons, among others. The public discussion is an iterative process, enabling authors to reference and learn from each other. The entire discussion echoes the development of Soviet military theory and doctrine in the Interwar Years (1918–39) in its scope, nuance, and extent.

Unclassified Russian military discussion primarily occurs in two types of sources: military doctrine journals and Kremlin-run news outlets. The Russian military mainly uses monthly military journals as the forum for discussing past operations and planning future doctrine revisions. This report focuses on two premier Russian journals, *Military Thought* (Voennaia Mysl') and *Army Collection* (Armeiskii Sbornik).

Military Thought is the official journal of the Russian General Staff and the key Russian forum for debate on doctrine and projections of the future of war.¹⁶ *Military Thought* primarily publishes content produced by professors or students at military academies—who are often captains, majors, or more senior officers—and staffers in research and planning organizations, rather than work by active-duty line officers. Their articles predominantly focus on grand strategy and the future of war. Authors commonly discuss development priorities, theoretical tactical problems, and preparations for future operations. *Military Thought* authors frame their projections as informed by recent conflicts but rarely explicitly discuss operations in Syria or Ukraine. Articles in *Military Thought* often discuss specific changes to formal Russian doctrine, proposing rewritten passages on specific topics and strategic policy suggestions for the Kremlin.

The Russian Ministry of Defense additionally publishes *Army Collection*, a similarly analytical but less theoretical journal.¹⁷ Active duty officers, most commonly writing on behalf of their respective military branches, produce most of the articles in *Army Collection*. These articles tend to emphasize tactical problems and operational planning over strategic forecasting. *Army Collection* articles frequently discuss

Russian military officers and academics are building an extensive body of hybrid war theory and lessons learned in professional military journals.

how traditional kinetic actions interact with the growing importance of information operations in hybrid wars. *Army Collection* articles also commonly include references to specific actions in Syria or ongoing military exercises, and each issue includes several news items on ongoing operations.

Kremlin-run media outlets, primarily military-run newspapers, are also forums for Russian military discussion. Content within these non-journal sources can be roughly divided into three groups: transcripts of speeches and lectures by key officers, including Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov; news reports on Russian actions in Syria and domestic military exercises; and interviews with Russian military personnel on their experiences in Syria.

These sources include:

- *Red Star*: The official newspaper of the Ministry of Defense, with a wide distribution within the Russian Armed Forces.¹⁸
- *VPK*: A military newspaper that often publishes transcripts of key speeches by Russian generals, including annual speeches by Gerasimov.¹⁹
- *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*: The official newspaper of record of the Russian government.²⁰
- The Russian International Affairs Council: A Kremlin-run think tank founded by Vladimir Putin that publishes strategic analysis of the Syrian conflict.²¹
- Kremlin-run media outlets including but not limited to *TVZvezda*, *TASS*, *Ria Novosti*, and *Kommersant*: Kremlin-backed outlets that often publish interviews with active duty and retired Russian military personnel.

The Russian View of Future War: Unconventional, Diverse, and Rapid

The Russian military assesses war is becoming increasingly unconventional, faster, and diverse in means and participants. Russia's senior military analysts and planners believe Russia is fighting an ongoing Western hybrid war against Russia. The Kremlin assesses that the likelihood of a conventional war against Russia is decreasing, and that Russia should optimize for other types of conflict—namely hybrid wars—to best prepare for the future of war.

Hybrid War

Definitions and Characteristics of Hybrid War

The Russian Armed Forces define hybrid war as a war in which all efforts, including military operations, are subordinate to an information campaign.²² The Kremlin does not view hybrid war as a descriptor

for all future conflicts, an operational approach within a wider conventional war, a set of means to achieve state policy, or “gray zone” activity that does not meet the threshold of war. The Kremlin considers hybrid war a whole-of-government activity, up to and including the use of conventional military forces.

Russian analysts frame the objective of a hybrid war as gaining the ability to determine the long-term governance and strategic orientation of a target state. In the Russian view, victorious states or coalitions in hybrid wars successfully impose their worldview, values, interests, and understanding of the “fair” distribution of resources on a target state. Victorious states or coalitions then gain the power, and in the Russian view the right, to determine a country's future.²³ Senior Combined Arms Academy researcher Valery Kiselev asserts hybrid

wars aim to fragment states and change their governments as a means to the end of shaping a target state's orientation.²⁴ The Russian military considers determining the governance of a target state a political objective, while the broader objective of a hybrid war—gaining control over the fundamental worldview and orientation of a state—is an information objective, requiring hybrid wars to therefore center on information campaigns.²⁵ Russian analysts believe hybrid wars are almost uniformly lengthy conflicts, as aggressors use a combination of “crushing and starving” to undermine the opponent, targeting both their resource base and political will.²⁶ Russian writers use these same descriptors to describe the West's “hybrid wars” and “color revolutions.”²⁷

Russian military writers make clear that not all individual uses of the means Western writers often describe as “hybrid war” rise to the threshold of a hybrid war. Russian analysts assert that a conflict only rises to the threshold of a hybrid war if the aggressor state explicitly sets reshaping the strategic orientation and “worldview” of a target state as its goal.²⁸ Much like the West's large body of work discussing hybrid means under the varied terms of gray zone conflict, hybrid war, hostile measures, and others, the Russian military utilizes several often vague terms to describe hybrid *means*—loosely defined as any actions beyond traditional kinetic operations. Examples include “hybrid conflict,” “hybrid means,” “asymmetric operations,” “information warfare,” “non-military struggle,” and “non-traditional war.”²⁹ The Russian military identifies a wide set of means, discussed below, as characteristic instruments in a hybrid war, but identify that states can employ these means outside of a hybrid war. The Russian Armed Forces use the scale of the **objectives** of a conflict—not the means used—to delineate the line between hybrid war and international competition, rather than discussing a “gray zone” between war and peace.

The Kremlin Perceives a Hybrid War Against Russia

The Kremlin holds an institutional worldview that the US has led the West in an ongoing hybrid war

against Russia since the end of the Cold War. The Kremlin asserts it is in a defensive, civilizational struggle against the West's efforts to dominate the world. The Kremlin believes it must adapt to win this struggle, a worldview which profoundly shapes Russian military development and assessments of the future of war.

The Kremlin considers many diverse conflicts to be components of this Western hybrid war against Russia. Russian military thinkers argue the US is attempting to retain its unipolar status by any means necessary, using NATO to consolidate this dominance and restrain Russia.³⁰ Russian analysts additionally frame globalization as a concerted Western effort to dominate the world since 1991.³¹ Russian analysts argue the hybrid war between the US and Russia is similar to the Cold War due to its focus on shaping the “basic moral core of humanity,” but is between civilizations rather than ideologies.³²

Senior leaders of the Russian Armed Forces assert this view as well—it is not a fringe or hardline view. Gerasimov stated in March 2019 that the US and its allies are developing offensive capabilities including “global strike, multi-domain battle, color revolutions, and soft power” to eliminate unwanted governments, undermine the concept of sovereignty, and change lawfully elected governments—citing Belarus, Iraq, Libya, Ukraine, and Venezuela as examples.³³ Russian military thinkers conceive of all of these varied Western actions as elements of the hybrid war against Russia, with Kiselev claiming “the theory of hybrid war developed in the bowels of the Pentagon.”³⁴ The Kremlin's false assessment of Western responsibility for the creation of the theory of hybrid war is essential to understanding the Kremlin's own conception of its efforts—discussed further below.

Russian military thinkers assert the United States adapted to the increasing cost of conventional operations by developing the means to enable hybrid wars. In the Russian view, Western hybrid wars are a change from the previous US model of “invasions to restore democracy.”³⁵ Dvornikov claimed in July 2018 that the 1991 Gulf War is the most recent fully conventional Western war, and the West now achieves its political goals by making the enemy submit to its

will using other methods.³⁶ He claims the goal of these Western hybrid wars, conducted using a mix of state forces with international legal cover and non-state actors, is to create an obedient target government in a given territory.³⁷ Russian analysts claim NATO previously “chose a victim” and forced other states to join large scale military operation, as in Yugoslavia and Iraq, to eliminate unwanted states. Russian analysts claim the West now uses hybrid wars to achieve its goals.³⁸ Gerasimov stated in March 2016 that the “falsification of events [and] restriction of activity of mass media... can be comparable to the results of large-scale use of troops and forces.”³⁹ Gerasimov cites as examples the Western “incitement of nationalism in Ukraine,” referring to the 2014 EuroMaidan Revolution, and the Arab Spring, arguing Western governments can now achieve regime change through hybrid wars primarily utilizing information warfare rather than conventional forces.⁴⁰ Prominent hybrid-war theorist Alexander Bartosh further claims the West is refining this model in ongoing operations in Latin America, the Middle East, and the Balkans—with other Russian authors specifically citing the NATO interventions in Libya, the former Yugoslavia, and the ongoing Syrian war as key examples of Western hybrid war.⁴¹

The Kremlin considers the perceived Western hybrid war against Assad in Syria as a component of the West’s wider, ongoing hybrid war against Russia. Russian analysts assert that, much like the Cold War, the alleged Western hybrid war against Russia will extend into smaller hybrid wars against other states, like Syria.⁴² Gerasimov identifies Syria as an example of the West’s new approach to eliminating unwanted countries—undermining sovereignty and changing the lawfully elected governments of states—alongside Iraq, Libya, Ukraine, and Venezuela.⁴³ Bartosh argues these diverse Western hybrid wars serve a dual purpose of pressuring Russia and allowing the West to further develop and refine its hybrid war approaches.⁴⁴

The Russians believe the West is waging hybrid war against them in Ukraine, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere.

This Russian conception that the West is already waging a hybrid war against Russia drives much of Russia’s assessments of the future of war. Bartosh stated in October 2018 that Russia must reconceive what it considers war, as a hybrid war is being waged against Russia daily.⁴⁵ Senior Russian analysts claim that the West’s “quest for world domination” necessitates reassessing what constitutes war, as Western actions would not be considered a war under traditional definitions.⁴⁶ The Russian military believes it must adapt to the increasing prominence of hybrid wars or lose Russia’s civilizational struggle for survival against the West.

Russia’s narrative regarding US and Western involvement in global conflicts certainly serves the propaganda interests of the Kremlin and often mischaracterizes US intent and capabilities, but this narrative genuinely shapes Russian military thinking and planning. This deeply paranoid and frankly hyperbolic worldview ignores conflicts without great powers, bypasses other actors including China, and presents a truly distorted sense of the nature of events the US is driving around the world.

Readers may reasonably question whether this worldview is an intentional Russian information operation or propaganda cover. The Kremlin could intend to use this rhetoric to shape Russian public opinion against the US or obfuscate Russian discussions of how to conduct their own hybrid wars by ascribing all offensive actions to the West, but it is driving Russian military thinking.

The worldview that the West is engaged in hybrid war against Russia permeates official Russian military planning and discussions. Discussion of the Western hybrid war against Russia is not confined to blatant propaganda outlets like *RT* and *Sputnik*. The arguments and analysis that inform this worldview are published in *Military Thought*—the most authoritative discussion forum of the Russian Armed Forces. The highest-ranking officers of the Russian military argue this worldview in public speeches outlining the yearly priorities of the armed forces. The

researchers cited above are respected military academics and leaders of high-profile military research institutions, not fringe analysts or junior officers. Russian military analysts additionally openly discuss how to wage offensive hybrid wars. The Russian military is not hiding its intent to use hybrid means offensively, or discussing the Kremlin's own actions in the language of accusation.⁴⁷ The Kremlin will struggle to counteract the relentless, high-level publications and statements by the most senior figures in the Russian military indoctrinating their subordinates on this worldview if it is truly an information operation.

Russian military analysts openly discuss how to wage offensive hybrid wars, and are not concealing their intent to use hybrid means offensively.

The Russian conception of an ongoing defensive hybrid war against the West shapes strategic Russian priorities and assessments of the future of war. At most, the Kremlin truly believes it is in a defensive struggle against a Western hybrid war and is shaping its preparations for the future of war on this assessment. At the absolute least, the Kremlin has created a fake tail to blame the West—and that tail is now wagging the dog, driving concept and execution.

Russia Assesses Hybrid War Requires Further Centralizing Russian Decision-making

The Kremlin assesses it must improve its capability to conduct hybrid war to respond to the perceived ongoing American hybrid war against Russia. Russian theorists further argue that hybrid wars, spearheaded by the West, will dominate the future of war and that the Kremlin must make whole-of-government changes to better wage this type of warfare. Russian military theorists and analysts prioritize centralized decision-making as the key enabler of successful hybrid wars.

Russian writers assert hybrid war necessitates centralizing all potential Russian decision-making bodies to coordinate whole-of-government efforts. The prominent theorist Bartosh argued in October 2018 that Russia must create a single governing center to centralize decision making

between the government, corporations, financial structures, and influential individuals.⁴⁸ Bartosh argues hybrid warfare strategies must incorporate a “totality of means,” in which the varied stakeholders of these assets jointly plan and execute hybrid wars using both the information space and kinetic operations.⁴⁹ Russian military analysts persistently argue that the military and civilian government should jointly improve strategic situational awareness and forecasting capabilities.⁵⁰

The Russian Ministry of Defense claims it has already created a central body to manage Russian security policy. Chief of the

General Staff Gerasimov stated in December 2017 that Russia successfully created a new structure for whole-of-government management—the National Defense Control Center (NDCC)—and utilized this new structure to manage Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War.⁵¹ The MoD launched the NDCC in April 2014 as a central command, coordination, and planning center located in the Ministry of Defense Headquarters in Moscow.⁵² Russian planners assessed the NDCC was necessary to fill a perceived gap in Russia's central planning and foresight capabilities that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁵³ *Red Star* reported in February 2017 that the NDCC connects 73 federal executive authorities, authorities from all 85 of Russia's federation subjects, and 1,320 state corporations and defense enterprises into “a single system of interdepartmental interaction.”⁵⁴ The Kremlin's creation of this unified structure for both security and civilian ministries reflects how highly the Russians prioritize centralized governance for hybrid war. The Kremlin assessed the need for the NDCC prior to both the war in Syria and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, with Putin issuing the formal order to create the NDCC in December 2013, though the NDCC was used for the first time in those two conflicts.⁵⁵

Central Kremlin management of hybrid war likely extends beyond the NDCC. Gerasimov stated in

March 2016 that every government ministry, not just the Ministry of Defense, must have a clear management structure and be able to respond to crises in hours to support hybrid warfare, reflecting Russian conceptual discussions of the need for unified control of hybrid wars.⁵⁶ The Kremlin is additionally expanding the pool of assets engaged in national security to include all of Russian society, including government, business, culture, and media institutions.⁵⁷

The Russian Military is Actively Preparing for Whole-of-Society Hybrid War

The Russian military is spearheading the development of hybrid warfare theory and strategy, including recommending actions to shape Russian society beyond the armed forces. Russian writers assert that traditional military principles remain relevant in hybrid war and can guide Russian adaptations to conduct hybrid wars. Bartosh argues that conventional war theory can be applied to hybrid warfare, describing the varied ideological, economic, military, and diplomatic aspects of hybrid war as “fronts,” a seminal, defining aspect of Soviet military thought.⁵⁸ He asserts that the essential difference between hybrid and conventional war is that armed forces are not the only prerequisite for victory in hybrid wars.⁵⁹ The head researcher of the Russian General Staff argued in January 2017 that future wars involving primarily non-state actors and terrorists will still follow the traditional military principles used in previous conflicts, rather than necessitating a new intellectual framework.⁶⁰

Russian military analysts assert that the Armed Forces must work with the rest of Russian government and society to improve Russia’s capabilities to resist hybrid war’s wear and attrition on information campaigns and Russian society. Bartosh argues the multidimensional and long-lasting nature of hybrid war increases the threat of economic, physical, and moral wear on combatants.⁶¹ Bartosh

argues that improving socio-economic conditions, reducing corruption, and centralizing control of the economy are key actions the Kremlin can take to prepare for hybrid war to reduce wear on the economy.⁶²

The Russian military also stresses the need to improve the strength and adaptability of Russian information campaigns.⁶³ Bartosh states, “strategies, concepts, [and] ideologies” undergo intensive wear in hybrid warfare as well, necessitating constant updates to Russian information campaigns used in a hybrid war.⁶⁴ The Russian military prioritizes instilling a unified ideology to mitigate wear on the Russian population in the information space. The Russian military highlights American “war weariness” over Iraq and Afghanistan as examples of failure to properly mitigate wear in the information space.⁶⁵ Russian military writers do not go into further detail on these whole-of-government priorities to increase resistance to wear. Other Kremlin organizations, including the Presidential Administration and Kremlin-run media organizations like *RT* and *Sputnik*, are likely prioritizing resistance to wear on Russian information campaigns.⁶⁶

The Russian military, not just the Kremlin, is actively preparing to conduct society-wide information campaigns in support of hybrid wars. The Russian MoD created the Military-Political Directorate in July 2018, a structure to create and instill the unified ideology necessary to conduct hybrid wars.⁶⁷ Col. Gen. Andrei Kartapolov, who leads the Directorate, published an essay justifying the Directorate’s creation and outlining its priorities in September 2018.⁶⁸ Kartapolov stated that “we want to take a lot from the Soviet system,” claiming the forms and methods of the Directorate will continue Soviet structures while the content will change.⁶⁹ Russian military planners recommended in September 2017 that “[Christian] Orthodoxy, state interests, military-patriotic traditions, national psychology and culture... can

“...falsification of events [and] restriction of activity of mass media... can be comparable to the results of large-scale use of troops and forces.”

— Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov

be the state-patriotic doctrine of a new system.”⁷⁰ Kartapolov argued Russia must ensure the “information protection” of military personnel and create a stable conviction in both the military and broader society of why they must serve Russia, often called “The Motherland” in such literature, in future conflicts.⁷¹ Kartapolov contextualized this priority historically, arguing Russia cannot endure a repeat of the collapse of the Imperial Russian Army due to “Bolshevik agitation.”⁷² This effort is not limited to targeting the military. Kartapolov stated one of the Directorate’s most important tasks will be work with the population and youth, arguing “today’s student is a future soldier.”⁷³

The Russian military is not attempting to hide its intent to conduct hybrid wars but is not openly discussing some ongoing conflicts—such as its campaign against Ukraine—that it defines as hybrid wars. Russian military theorists write extensively and openly on general strategies and doctrine for offensive hybrid wars, as well as discuss the development of individual hybrid means. Bartosh highlights the need to formulate the objectives of each hybrid war clearly and to study weak points in the internal and external security of the enemy country before forming a “complex” of hybrid threats to deploy, taking into account local specifics.⁷⁴ Further actions should then focus on influencing the narrowly vulnerable areas of the opponent, anticipating the enemy’s likely counter strategy, employing “consistent destructive impact on the key areas of government” and deploying undeclared conventional military forces into the target state.⁷⁵ All of these components clearly match the Kremlin’s past and ongoing efforts in Ukraine, and much of Russian hybrid war theory is likely informed by the Ukraine conflict. Talking about lessons learned from the Ukraine conflict in a public forum or in military journals is likely not politically acceptable to the Kremlin.

The Russian military considers kinetic military operations, including the use of conventional military forces, an integral part of hybrid war. Russian analysts argue that states most often deploy conventional forces as the concluding step of a hybrid war. The Russian military argues these forces are often

used under the cover of legal frameworks such as peacekeeping, requiring new strategies for the deployment of troops to include considerations of legal cover.⁷⁶ Russian officers cynically assert that “diplomatic covers,” like United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approval for peacekeeping or multinational NATO operations, are simply methods to enable individual states to deploy conventional military forces, regardless of the stated nature of the deployment. The Kremlin is actively integrating the Russian military into several international security organizations, likely to grant the diplomatic cover Russian officers believe is necessary for the use of conventional forces in hybrid wars.⁷⁷ Russian analysts assess unconventional forces, including nonstate actors and state-run special forces, are active throughout hybrid wars.⁷⁸ The diversification of participants in kinetic operations will be discussed in detail below.

The West must understand and appreciate that the Russian conception of hybrid warfare includes conventional forces. Much of Western writing on the Russian threat, as previously discussed, overly separates the threat of the Russian military from the threat of the Kremlin’s subversive, “gray zone” campaigns. The Kremlin’s offensive hybrid wars include the threat of utilizing conventional forces. Russian military thinkers do not believe that conventional, kinetic operations will decline in importance. The Kremlin continues to prioritize conventional military development, but does so with the expectation that future kinetic actions will predominantly support hybrid wars.

Kinetic Conflict in Hybrid Wars

Russian military writers discuss the future of kinetic conflict both in its own right and in the context of hybrid war. Russian assessments of the future of kinetic conflict focus on the increase in its speed, the diversifying participants and means of war, the blurring of boundaries between the levels of war, and the subsequent necessity of improved command and control. Russian writers often discuss elements of the changing nature of kinetic conflict



Above: *ITAR-TASS: TRANSBAIKAL TERRITORY, RUSSIA. JULY 17, 2013. Russia's president Vladimir Putin, Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, L-R, watch military manoeuvres of formations and military units of the Central and Eastern Military Districts at Tsugol firing range. (Photo ITAR-TASS/Alexei Nikolsky) (Photo by Alexei Nikolsky\TASS via Getty Images)*

independently, but primarily nest their discussions in Russia's theory of hybrid war. Understanding the Kremlin's intended means to wage hybrid wars is essential to understanding Russian hybrid war as a whole.

Information Operations Increasingly Permeate and are Supported by All Other Military Actions

Russian officers and researchers argue the key change in future conflicts will be a reversal of the historical pattern of non-military measures supporting military operations: kinetic operations now support information campaigns, particularly impacting the use of kinetic operations in hybrid wars.⁷⁹ Russian researchers do not assess that a new form of “non-traditional” conflict is emerging. They instead argue that non-traditional means are increasingly modifying how war as a whole is fought.⁸⁰ Russian researchers articulate that “traditional” and “non-traditional” war will not coexist as separate categories, instead arguing the Russian

military must adapt to new “non-traditional” means that fundamentally alter the nature of conflict. The Russian military assesses these fundamental changes will be particularly important in hybrid wars — which are inherently centered on the information operations that will permeate all future conflict.⁸¹

Discussion of information operations permeates the Russian military discourse. Gerasimov stated in March 2017 that non-military efforts have four times the impact on the political outcomes of war than conventional military efforts, a point echoed throughout Russian writing.⁸² Kiselev asserts that information warfare is becoming the most important sphere of military operations, as both an independent battlefield and an enabler of successful kinetic actions.⁸³ Russian analysts assess that confrontations between combat systems increasingly transpire in the information space.⁸⁴ Russian analysts conducting an early after-action report (AAR) of the Russian deployment to Syria in January 2016 concluded that Russia must sharply increase its

attention to the information space to enable successful kinetic operations, demonstrating an immediate recognition of this priority after only 3 months of operations.⁸⁵ Dvornikov similarly stated in July 2018 that information warfare against militants was essential to Russian success in Syria.⁸⁶ Russian analysts caveat that information and “hybrid” operations have always been part of conventional war but are now increasing in prominence—reversing the previous relationship of information operations supporting kinetic operations, as argued by Gerasimov.⁸⁷

The Russian military views this new relationship between information and kinetic operations as a two-way street: kinetic operations are now inherently subordinate to the information campaign of a hybrid war; no kinetic operation can succeed unless it is nested in and enabled by the overall information campaign. The Russian military therefore extensively discusses how kinetic operations must be enabled via prior successful information operations.⁸⁸ A kinetic operation cannot serve its purpose of enabling the overall information campaign if it is not planned and conducted with support from the information campaign.⁸⁹ Russian analysts extensively discuss the Russian intervention in Syria, which the Kremlin considers a hybrid war, as an example of successfully setting conditions in the information space for kinetic operations—which themselves were secondary to the overall information campaign.⁹⁰

Russian theorists argue that the increasing prominence of information operations has turned traditional kinetic operations into the final measure of defeat after full information superiority has been achieved.⁹¹ Russian analysts state “information superiority” is now essential to enable successful kinetic operations.⁹² Russian analysts argue that “not only the initial phase of military operations, but also the outcome of the whole campaign depends on the skillful, clearly calculated and reasoned” information operations.⁹³ The Russian military assesses that a kinetic operation cannot succeed without a successful information operation to enable it.

Information warfare stands out in the Russian discourse for the disparity between the importance

Russian writers give it and the detail of their discussion. Russian writers can openly discuss principles of other priorities such as superiority of management and approaches to combating jihadist groups, two key lessons from Russia’s deployment to Syria, but do not openly discuss information operations.⁹⁴ The Russian military is choosing not to discuss openly the details of integrating kinetic and information operations despite the importance of this integration during Russian operations in Syria and other ongoing hybrid wars such as Ukraine and Libya. The Kremlin and the Russian military are certainly conducting internal analyses of and preparations for information warfare, but the Russian military cannot openly discuss exact methods of misdirection and information operations without exposing sensitive information.

The lack of open Russian discussion of information warfare does not reduce its importance in the Russian conception of the future of war. That said, conducting only secret studies of information operations will impede developing new doctrine and training the new generation of personnel. The Russian military assesses kinetic operations now fundamentally support information campaigns. Russian writers additionally acknowledge Russia is preparing to shape the information space in future conflicts to affect opposing forces directly. The West must prepare for future Russian military operations to both be oriented on supporting information campaigns and be increasingly prefaced by comprehensive information operations.

Participants in Conflicts are Diversifying

The Russian military assesses the forces involved in conflict are diversifying. Bartosh asserts that states are losing their monopoly on the use of violence to state-supported groups and independent actors, and that Russia must adapt to increasingly unconventional opponents.⁹⁵ Russian analysts assess future conflicts will be increasingly multisided, much like the war in Syria.⁹⁶ Kiselev argues “illegal armed forces”—the general Russian term for militant and insurgent groups—and Private Military Companies (PMCs) are the key kinetic actors in hybrid wars, almost always directed by states.⁹⁷ The Kremlin

assesses the increasing prominence of these actors requires the Kremlin to increasingly prioritize both the employment of these proxy forces and prepare to combat them in the development of hybrid war strategies.⁹⁸

Russian writers extensively discuss the increasing utility of private military companies (PMCs) in general terms. Russian analysts conceive of PMCs as inherently government assets, asserting that their main customers are states even if individual PMCs occasionally serve private interests.⁹⁹ Russian analysts link this assessment to both the historical Russian employment of Cossack groups and, in a modern context, the large number of contractors employed by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ Russian analysts argue PMCs are useful due to their lower cost and perceived deniability relative to traditional armed forces.¹⁰¹ Russian General Staff researchers openly argued in January 2015—before the widespread deployment of Russian PMCs abroad in 2015 and 2016—that PMCs grant the state’s foreign policy “immunity from the norms of international law” because states can respond to any criticism by answering “the state does not interfere in the internal affairs of private companies.”¹⁰² This argument prefaced eventual Kremlin denials of Russian government links to Russian PMCs in Syria.¹⁰³ The Russian military continues to actively discuss the use of PMCs in military operations and hybrid wars—despite the fact that PMCs are illegal under the Russian constitution. Russian researchers additionally note that MoD support for PMCs can solve the weaknesses of PMCs caused by their lack of resources and coordination, which the Russian military has provided for PMC deployments around the world, including in Syria, Libya, and several states in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰⁴

Russian analysts additionally consider “illegal armed forces,” or IAFs, to be integral parts of hybrid wars. The Russian military uses “illegal armed forces” as a catch-all term for militants, terrorist groups, and conventional but non-state formations. Gerasimov

claimed in March 2018 that Western states backed opposition forces to overthrow Assad instead of carrying out direct military conflict, and will attempt to do so to other states in the future.¹⁰⁵ Kiselev claimed in March 2017 that IAFs and PMCs are usually indirectly led by states as part of hybrid wars, asserting they are often one of the first kinetic steps in a hybrid war.¹⁰⁶ This contrasts with the Western view that at least some non-state actors and armed groups are fundamentally independent and act without state direction, even if they receive some state support.

The Kremlin forecasts a jihadist threat to Central Asia and Russia and is integrating this concern into assessments of likely future conflicts. Shoigu stated in August 2016 that groups like ISIS can provoke “crisis situations as in Syria... in any country, including in the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.”¹⁰⁷ Gerasimov warned in December 2017 that the bulk of ISIS fighters fled Syria to Libya or Southwest Asia to try and establish a new caliphate.¹⁰⁸ Lieutenant General Alexander

Lapin, at the time of publication commander of the Central Military District and responsible for responding to threats from Central Asia, particularly warns of the threat of ISIS regrouping in Afghanistan or Central Asia and calls for an increased Russian military presence in the region.¹⁰⁹

The Russian perception that IAFs are almost always weaponized against Russia by foreign actors, not distinct local groups with their own agendas, will likely lead Russian planning and training astray. The Russian military will misunderstand the threat of jihadist and insurgent groups if it focuses its preparations to combat militant groups on countering a broader hybrid war directed by another state. Russian military writers acknowledge many IAFs are, or begin as, local actors not intrinsically linked to other states.¹¹⁰ However, discussions of and exercises practicing combat against IAFs predominantly focus on IAFs as backed by states. Russian military exercises increasingly frame the simulated opponent as an IAF with foreign backing that has

Russian analysts see private military companies as inherently government assets...their main customers are states.

seized territory somewhere in Russia or Central Asia and is attempting to destabilize the region.¹¹¹ Russian authors additionally discuss how they can apply lessons learned fighting IAFs with international backing to the potential jihadist threat to Central Asia, and the Kremlin expects this threat to be exacerbated by foreign actors.¹¹² The Russian shift away from exercises practicing large-scale combat against conventional forces (usually NATO) is a key indicator of the Russian concern that IAFs are destabilizing actors. The Russian military's focus on combating IAFs backed by international support has likely granted Russia advantages in its efforts against groups in Syria, Libya, and other conflicts in which some local groups are in fact vigorously state backed. That said, the Russian military's overemphasis on IAFs as tools of international hybrid warfare and overgeneralization of the term IAF to describe diverse organizations may impede its ability to understand the particulars of IAFs in future conflicts.

New Technology and New Actors Require Simultaneous, Distributed Operations

Russian writers assess that unconventional forces that do not fight on static frontlines and increasing weapon ranges are blurring the lines between the levels of war. Gerasimov stated in March 2018 that operations are “changing from sequential and concentrated actions to continuous and distributed, carried out simultaneously in all spheres of confrontation, as well as in remote theaters of military operations.”¹¹³ The steadily increasing ranges of weapons at all levels of war—including strategic bombers, ICBMs, strike aircraft, and multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS)—additionally blur the lines between levels of war.¹¹⁴ The Russian military assesses these collective changes require Russian officers to improve their command and communication capabilities—identically to the Kremlin's assessed need for improved centralized management in hybrid wars as a whole.

Russian analysts assess the combined effect of the erosion of cohesive frontlines above the tactical level and increasing weapon ranges necessitates a common operating picture across the levels of

war and unit area of responsibility boundaries to fully confront diverse threats. Changing frontlines and weapon ranges additionally require units to shift their areas of responsibility up a level and think strategically; Russian analysts, as a successful example of this shift, cite American divisions now taking on the responsibilities of larger, corps-sized units.¹¹⁵ Long-range weapons additionally make the dividing lines between areas of responsibility of different units and even lines of contact with the enemy less definite, necessitating improved communications over increased distances at all echelons of the Russian Armed Forces.¹¹⁶

Russian analysts forecast that tactical actions will have an outsized impact relative to their scale in the future because kinetic operations during modern hybrid wars contain different participants than past wars. The kinetic operations in hybrid wars are predominantly local clashes defined by the limited resources of unconventional combatants, instead of regular fighting on conventional front lines.¹¹⁷ Russian analysts assess the nonlinearity of hybrid wars and limited scale of capabilities of unconventional forces means these tactical events—even when involving conventional Russian forces—can have strategic implications, as the entire kinetic focus of a hybrid war may be fought by small units in limited geographical areas.¹¹⁸ For example, pro-regime operations in Syria against opposition forces around Russia's Hmeimim Airbase in late 2015 occurred with low numbers of troops in small tactical actions.¹¹⁹ However, Russian analysts note that these relatively minor actions forced Russia to establish a security perimeter around Hmeimim before building up its forces for further operations against opposition-held terrain, a notable strategic change in the Russian plan.¹²⁰ Russian analysts assess that the potential strategic implications of tactical actions increase the need for a common operating picture and improved communications across echelons and units.

Implications

The West must understand the Russian military's worldview and development priorities to properly confront the Russian challenge. The US must avoid imposing its own conceptual boundaries on the Russian threat—and particularly avoid imposing its own boundaries on the Russian theory of hybrid war. The US and its allies cannot successfully prepare to counter an aggressive Russian policy it does not understand.

Accepting that Russia and the West are in a war of any kind is an understandably difficult undertaking. The Russian conception of an ongoing global war contradicts the mainstream Western understanding of the delineation between war and peace. Shifting the West's perception of the Russian threat to understand this Kremlin framing will be challenging, but the United States and its allies must understand how the Kremlin conceptualizes its own actions to confront it. It only takes one side waging war to have war. The United States and its allies must study and confront the Kremlin's hybrid wars as the strategic, cohesive, multi-domain wars the Kremlin conducts them as. The United States cannot beat the Kremlin in something the Kremlin views as a war while the US conceptualizes it as occurring in the "competition space." The United States and its allies have identified several key methods to counter specific hybrid means but have yet to conceptualize a cohesive understanding of and response to Russian hybrid wars.

The West must revise its prioritization of the Russian capabilities it prepares to counter and the vulnerabilities it should exploit. The West's divergent focus on a conventional Russian invasion of European allies and subversive Russian actions with little to no kinetic fighting are out of date. The West is not even preparing to fight a past war with Russia, it is

preparing to fight a set of actions the Kremlin does not consider itself to have carried out—and does not intend to carry out in the future.

The Kremlin is not going to confront the West on the West's terms. Western preparations for the type of war it would like to prepare for further exposes the United States and its allies to ongoing Russian efforts to offset US and NATO advantages. This report does not argue against a robust conventional NATO presence in Europe. The US and NATO must take steps to mitigate the minor but still present risk of a conventional war with Russia. Western states

are similarly studying the impact of Russian cyber operations and subversive activities. The United States cannot rely on either of these preparations in isolation, however. NATO cannot confront Russian hybrid campaigns around the world using only a strong conventional force posture in the Baltic States. NATO also cannot counter Russian activities

in Europe or beyond solely with increased cyber defenses and information operations.

The United States' key priority regarding the Russian military must be to profoundly reorient its understanding of the Russian threat and the nature of hybrid wars. The United States must understand the Russian concept of hybrid wars on Russian terms to successfully develop counterstrategies and confront the Russian threat. This is not to say the United States should conceptualize and plan its own efforts in the structure of hybrid wars. Rather, it must understand the threat the Kremlin's hybrid wars pose and respond in appropriate ways.

This rethink is a necessary condition-setting step to developing effective responses to Russian hybrid war. The United States should take several actions to support this reassessment of the Russian threat.

The US must not impose its own conceptual boundaries on the Russian theory and practice of hybrid war.

- **Analyze the Kremlin's decisions within the Russian framework of hybrid war to understand and mitigate Russian lines of effort.** The United States must identify the Kremlin's ongoing hybrid wars and assess their likely objectives. While the US should not constrain itself to confronting individual Kremlin hybrid wars against target states (Ukraine, Libya, etc.), the United States must understand the Kremlin's conception of these conflicts as efforts to change the long-term geostrategic orientation of the target state.
- **Avoid overly focusing on the Kremlin's hybrid wars in Europe and counter the Kremlin globally.** Paraphrasing the National Defense University's Dr. Francis Hoffman, Putin is not playing three-dimensional chess, but is instead playing many games of checkers simultaneously.¹²¹ The United States naturally focuses on the Russian threat to its European allies and NATO, but must not lose sight of the Kremlin's global ambitions. The US policy and military community should increase its analysis of the Kremlin's hybrid wars outside of Europe, including in Syria, Libya, and Venezuela.
- **Confront entire Russian hybrid wars as synthetic threats instead of confronting discrete Russian lines of effort.** The US must ensure its own language of "domains" does not overly compartmentalize its responses to the Kremlin's hybrid wars. The United States must understand that the Kremlin views all domains—including kinetic military operations—as supporting efforts to the information campaign in each hybrid war. The United States and its allies will not be able to deter the Kremlin's hybrid wars in their entirety. The United States can deter, and already is deterring, key lines of effort within Kremlin hybrid wars, including cyberattacks, establishing international basing, and weapon sales. The United States should ensure these existing efforts synthesize to enable effective responses to the Kremlin's hybrid wars.
- **Promote cross-government coordination, particularly between information and kinetic assets.** The Kremlin's assessment of an increasing need for cross-government coordination in the future of war applies to the US as well. The US cannot form comprehensive responses to Russian hybrid war without increased coordination and planning. Congress should take on a key role in facilitating this collaboration by bringing attention to the Russian threat through hearings and appropriate legislation.
- **Reinforce Western norms and institutions—key targets of Russian hybrid wars.** The Kremlin fundamentally views its hybrid war with the United States as a struggle over global norms and values. Do not allow the Kremlin to normalize its malign behavior and worldview. The United States must not allow the Kremlin to abuse existing international frameworks and institutions to advance its hybrid wars—such as seeking to label its expeditionary forces "peacekeepers."

The United States should also take several discrete actions to confront the Kremlin's hybrid wars under the cohesive framework above.

- **Work to align the Russia policy of the United States and its allies.** The Kremlin seeks to exploit divides between the United States and its allies, particularly in NATO. The United States must work with its allies to align their policy on Russia. The United States should particularly seek to standardize red lines regarding responses to Russian actions across NATO.
- **Actively challenge Russian information campaigns.** The Kremlin's information campaign is its center of gravity in each hybrid war. The United States cannot win in hybrid wars with Russia if it loses in the information space. The United States and its allies should increase their counter-messaging capabilities to refute Kremlin information operations. The United States must protect its sources and tradecraft

but should increase its willingness to openly use information to confront Kremlin information campaigns—which thrive in the absence of counter-messaging. The United States must additionally increase its understanding of, and planning for, the effects of its actions across all domains in the information space to avoid unintentionally enabling Russian information campaigns.

- **Deprive Russian PMCs and proxy forces of their deniability.** The Kremlin is openly utilizing PMCs such as the Wagner Group and proxy forces such as the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in Ukraine to wage its hybrid wars. The Kremlin exploits the West's lack of understanding of these groups to maintain deniability in hybrid wars and reduce the risk of a Western military response—which would likely result if the Kremlin openly used conventional forces in similar missions. The United States and its allies must relentlessly work to expose the connections between these forces and the Kremlin and highlight that they are direct tools of Russian military policy to reduce the Kremlin's freedom of action.
- **Recognize and plan for the military requirements to confront hybrid threats.** Russian hybrid war is not confined to the information and cyber domains. The US must therefore turn away from the inclination to decide that confronting hybrid wars is primarily a non-military line of effort and carefully evaluate the military elements of a counter-hybrid war undertaking. The United States should be prepared to confront Russian hybrid wars with conventional forces and avoid establishing false red lines.
- **Shift its military posture to confront the global nature of the Kremlin threat.** Russian hybrid wars are not confined to Europe and cannot be countered by conventional deployments alone, although conventional deployments to Europe remain essential. The United States and its

allies should reassess their global force posture to prepare to counter Russian hybrid efforts. The US need not deploy its own military forces everywhere Russia undertakes hybrid war, but it must find and develop allied and partner military forces to perform the military tasks essential to confronting the hybrid war military threat—even as it works with all partners and allies to address the non-military aspects of the hybrid war campaign.

- **Enable new and existing force deployments to combat Russian hybrid wars with non-kinetic means.** Conventional military units deployed by the United States and its allies are necessary but insufficient to combat Russian hybrid wars. Conventional forces cannot inherently deter or combat hybrid operations. Conventional forces can, however, act as a baseplate for additional cyber, civil-military relations, intelligence, technical, and special operations assets that are essential in hybrid wars. The Russian military is actively evaluating how its forces can support hybrid wars without large-scale conventional actions, and the United States and its allies must do the same.

The challenges presented by Russian hybrid war and preparations for the future of war are not insurmountable. To quote Gerasimov himself, “no matter what forces the enemy has, no matter how well-developed his forces and means of armed conflict may be, forms and methods for overcoming them can be found. He will always have vulnerabilities and that means that adequate means of opposing him exist.”¹²² The West must not throw up its hands at the challenge of confronting an unfamiliar conception of the future of war. The Kremlin is optimizing for its expectations of the future of war, not the West's, and the United States must fully understand the Russian threat to successfully confront the Kremlin.

Endnotes

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