Russian Capability and Usage of Hybrid Tactics During the Intervention in Ukraine and Crimea in 2014

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Introduction

The hybrid war in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine is linked to history, geography, demography, local and national power play and international level power politics between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Russia. Russia has strong fraternal ties with Ukraine dating back to the 9th century and the founding of Kievan Rus, the first eastern Slavic state, whose capital was Kiev/Kyiv. The country has been under partial or total Russian rule for most of those intervening centuries, which is a big part of why one in six Ukrainians is actually an ethnic Russian, one in three speaks Russian as the native language (the other two-thirds speak Ukrainian natively), and much of the country's media is in Russian. It is also why the subject of Russia is such a divisive one in Ukraine: many in the country see Moscow as the source of Ukraine's historical subjugation and something to be resisted, while others tend to look at Russia more fondly, with a sense of shared heritage and history.[1] Nikita Khrushchev

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and the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union transferred Crimea from under the government of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the government of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. As both republics were a part of the Soviet Union, the move was largely symbolic and of little practical consequence.[2] Because of its large Russian population, Crimea's links with Russia have remained very important, and Russia's military on the peninsula represented a bond with Russians on the mainland and was perceived to be an important part of the economy. The 45 million people of Ukraine have failed to resolve their internal divisions and build strong political institutions, hampering the ability to implement economic reforms. In the decade following independence, successive Presidents allowed oligarchs to gain increasing control over the economy while repression against political opponents intensified. By 2010, Ukraine's 50 richest people controlled nearly half of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), writes Andrew Wilson in the Council for Foreign Relations' book *Pathways to Freedom*.[3]

At a 2008 NATO meeting in Bucharest, Russian President Vladimir Putin told US President George Bush, "You don't understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territories is Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us."[4] Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote in a *Washington Post* op-ed.[5] "The West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country."

The immediate genesis of the hybrid war can be traced to the Maidan Protest in November 2013. President Yanukovych (a native of eastern Ukraine's Donets Basins, drawing much of his support from that region's ethnic Russian population), elected in 2010, strengthened ties with Russia, extending Russia's lease on port facilities in the Crimean city of Sevastopol to 2042-47, and signed legislation that indefinitely halted Ukraine's progress toward NATO membership.[6] In November 2013, when Yanukovych announced that he would not proceed with the long-

anticipated association and trade agreements with the European Union (EU), mass protests erupted in Ukraine. After meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on November 9, Yanukovych instead moved to further expand ties with Russia. Thousands of people took to the streets in response, and demonstrators established a protest camp in Kiev's/Kyiv's Maidan (Independence Square). Opposition politicians voiced their support for the protesters, while Moscow backed the Yanukovych administration with promises of low-interest loans and reductions in the price of natural gas. In the subsequent months, a series of government crackdowns was unsuccessful in suppressing dissent, and in February 2014, the Ukrainian security forces opened fire on the Maidan protesters, killing scores and wounding hundreds. With his political base disintegrating, President Yanukovych released Tymoshenko, a political opponent and ex-Prime Minister, and scheduled snap Presidential elections for May 2014.[7] On February 22, three months after his reversal regarding the association agreement, the protesters got their wish as Parliament voted to "remove Viktor Yanukovych from the post of President of Ukraine."[8]

President Viktor Yanukovych was replaced by a pro-Western interim government. The fear that a pro-Western government at Kiev/Kyiv could tilt and align with the EU and NATO, probably convinced Russia to plan the annexation as the protests intensified. In the months leading up to the decision, Russia launched a hybrid campaign which included covert operations, information warfare, and, eventually, a conventional invasion to take control of the Crimean peninsula. Simultaneously, from March 2014, it conducted a separatist campaign in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk with a mix of political warfare, the support of paramilitary groups, and conventional forces.[9]

Given its geography as a peninsula, Crimea was easy to seal from the mainland and simple to defend from a counter-attack. Russia was also easily able to sever communications between Crimea and the mainland. Crimea was a well-defined administrative entity, with its own polity and

history, including some degree of political autonomy, allowing it to be neatly separated from Ukraine as an annexed territory. Crimea was closest to Russia's Southern Military District, which had the highest state of readiness among the Russian forces, manned at 90 per cent, according to some estimates.[10] Circumstances conspired against Ukraine because the Southern Military District was already on high readiness, given that Russia was hosting the Olympic Games in Sochi in February and March 2014. Finally, Crimea's small size relative to Ukraine (the largest country in Europe) made the Russian annexation much more feasible.[11]

Russia had transit agreements with Ukraine that allowed it to deploy personnel and material to Crimea before and during the military operation. The terms of Russia's basing agreement with Ukraine offered substantial leeway for transfer of units from the mainland, if needed; there was a sizeable troop limit in the basing agreement, which gave Russia the capacity to increase its military presence while still being within the terms of its deal with Ukraine. Russia had roughly 12,000 military personnel in the Black Sea Fleet in February 2014, the only infantry unit of which was the 810th Independent Naval Infantry Brigade. The Russian Naval Infantry was staffed by contract troops, who were better trained, paid, and equipped than typical conscript units. In terms of numbers and available firepower, these forces were inferior to Ukraine's units in Crimea, lacking infantry fighting vehicles, armour, or artillery.[12]

Russia's 810th Naval Infantry Brigade was a leading and supporting asset for the operation, with anti-air and anti-naval capabilities. The naval base at Sevastopol allowed Russian military units to deploy early in the operation and provided the logistics for inserting Special Forces and reinforcements. This permitted Russia to insert Special Forces without initially causing alarm and introduce the necessary capabilities to conduct the operation. It also had a transit agreement through Ukraine for its forces in Transnistria (Moldova), although Kyiv/Kiev had unilaterally cancelled this deal on May 21, 2015.[13]

In February, Ukraine's interim Defence Minister assessed this number as closer to 15,000 troops, but considered approximately 1,500–2,000 troops as dependable and willing to obey if ordered to fight the Russian military. A contingent of 2,500 Ministry of Interior troops was also present, but had little defence value. The military force included 41 tanks, 160 infantry fighting vehicles, 47 artillery systems, and heavy mortars. The Navy's coastal defence troops included a missile artillery brigade, two independent marine battalions, and a coastal defence brigade. Of the 45 MiG-29 fighters at Belbek air base near Sevastopol in southwest Crimea, only four to six were operational. The Ukrainian air defences included the Buk-M1 and S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, which were at questionable readiness levels but could still be potent deterrents.[14]

Post February 22, 2014, Ukraine's political leadership made three mistakes which also helped Russia's cause. First, the Ukrainian Parliament, the Rada, on February 23, repealed the legislation that had given the Russian language official status and protection. The interim President, Oleksandr Turchynov, did not agree to sign the changed law, but great damage had been done. The Russian-speaking public judged it as an anti-Russian agenda.[15] Second, the next day, on February 24, Igor Mosiichuk, a leader of the Right Sector, a far-right political party and paramilitary group in Ukraine, without government support, publicly threatened to bring paramilitary fighters to Crimea. The Russian-language media used Mosiichuk's statements to convey a sense of imminent danger for those living in Crimea. Crimean Berkut riot-police officers, reinforced with Kuban Cossacks, who reside in parts of Russia near the Black Sea, set up checkpoints under the guise of responding to a potential right-wing threat. Clashes between Crimean Tatars and Russian nationalists, protests for secession from Ukraine, and counter-protests for unity ensued, leading to a general state of chaos and disorganisation and facilitating Russia's takeover. This validated the need for Russian help in Crimea and the legitimacy of Russia's intervention

to its domestic audience.[16] Third, on February 25, Ukraine's Minister of Interior disbanded the Crimean Berkut riot police returning to Sevastopol after suppressing protests in Kyiv/Kiev. Upon their return to Sevastopol, these units were greeted as heroes by the people and issued Russian passports by Moscow. They defected to the Russian side and provided auxiliary units in the early operations, when Russia was short on manpower. Some participated in further operations in paramilitary units, which left Crimea for the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine to fight on behalf of the Russian government.[17]

Ukraine's government was in transition following the ouster of Yanukovych. Russia's task was made relatively easy by the confusion and chaos that generally follows an uprising, such as what happened in Kyiv/Kiev. It is not clear whether any action would have been successful, as Ukraine's head of intelligence services [SluzhbaBezpekyUkrayiny (SBU)] reported during a decisive meeting that the military and security forces were demoralised and not receptive to the interim government.

Ukrainian and Russian units went on alert on February 20, 2014, as the Maidan protests in Kyiv escalated into violent clashes with the government security forces and on February 22, 2014, the Ukrainian Rada removed President Yanukovych from power. Russian operations in Crimea effectively began on February 22 and 23, as battalions of the Spetsnaz (elite infantry) units and Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska (Airborne Forces or VDV) left their bases, while others were airlifted close to the strait separating Russia from Crimea. On February 24, the city council in Sevastopol installed a Russian citizen as Mayor, and several units from the 810th Naval Infantry arrived in the city square in Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs). This was the first tangible sign that Russia had decided to intervene militarily to change the political order on the peninsula. On February 25, the *Nikolai Filchenkov*, an Alligator-class landing ship, carrying 200 Russian Special Operations Forces [likely the Special Operations Command, Russia (KSO)], arrived in Sevastopol,

in addition to bringing Special Operations Forces units that would subsequently be used in the covert takeover of Crimea.[18]

On February 26, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a snap inspection involving 150,000 troops from parts of the Western and Central Military Districts. A drill of this scale was not unusual. The new Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, had been frequently ordering large snap readiness checks and simultaneous drills since 2013. Ostensibly, the exercise was not focussed on Ukraine's borders but to move VDV and Spetsnaz troops northward in Russia. Roughly, 40 Ilyushin Il-76 military transports left the Ulyanovsk air base in Russia, with a large portion of these units moving to Anapa, a staging area just east of Crimea. On February 27, 50 Special Forces operators from the KSO unit pretending to be a local "self-defence militia" seized the Crimean Parliament and raised a Russian flag over the building.[19] Another large landing ship, with 300 Russian soldiers, arrived, following proper border procedures to enter Ukraine but without advance notice to the Ukrainian authorities, as stipulated in the agreements. Later that night, Russian soldiers without markings surrounded the Belbek air base. On the morning of February 28, a convoy of three Mi-8 transport helicopters and eight Mi-35M attack helicopters crossed into Ukraine without permission, giving Russia the ability to neutralise Ukrainian armour and operate at night. Ukraine scrambled fighters, deterring further helicopter units from transferring, but the Mi-35s already were operating openly over Crimea and supporting the Russian forces on the ground.

On March 1, President Putin requested Parliamentary approval to use troops in Ukraine to protect the Black Sea Fleet and ethnic Russians who faced "real threats to [their] life and health". In sum, the Russian movements of late February 2014 effectively boxed in the Ukraine forces, even though the Russian capabilities were limited to one incomplete naval infantry brigade and several hundred Special Forces operatives. On February 28, the Russian forces also seized Simferopol airport, cancelled

all flights, and began airlifting VDV units into Crimea. Still at a distinct numerical disadvantage, on March 1-2, Russia brought reinforcements by heavy landing ships. These units spread across the peninsula without much resistance, quickly encircling or taking over bases and military facilities. Armed with light utility vehicles and APCs, the Russian units had little firepower but high mobility.[20]

Ukraine saw its docked fleet blockaded by Russian ships; the Commander of its Navy, Denis Berezovsky, defected to Russia. The Russian forces made ad hoc arrangements with the trapped Ukrainian troops at bases across the peninsula to maintain the siege without violence. The Russian troops applied heavy psychological pressure, propaganda, and promises to the Ukrainian Commanders to get them to defect, with little success until after the annexation in March.

From March 6, Russia began a conventional troop build-up over the Kerch ferry crossing in eastern Crimea, bringing in units from motor rifle brigades, towed artillery, a variety of air defence units, and anti-ship missile batteries. The Russian military also began to mass units on Ukraine's eastern border as a threat and diversion. The Russian forces sealed Crimea off from mainland Ukraine at its northern crossing points. They severed landline communications between the Ukrainian mainland and bases on Crimea; in some areas, cell phone signals were jammed, possibly from ship-based equipment. The Russian soldiers also cut electricity to some bases to apply pressure on the besieged Ukrainian troops within. In brief, Ukraine had lost effective command and control over its units on the peninsula roughly one week into the operation. Russian intelligence also used this time to organise self-defence units consisting of local militia, Cossacks (a distinct cultural group of East Slavic people common to the region), and the former special police called the Berkut. Russian airborne troops also donned police uniforms to help keep order among the population under the pretence of being local security forces. Russia used non-military and paramilitary elements to confuse the battle

space. Russian Special Forces were critical, but other elements were also deployed to give the impression of local support. Volunteers included Army veterans, boxers, and members of the biker gang "Night Wolves."[21] Russia annexed Ukraine with no direct Russian casualties. From March 19 to March 25, the Russian forces seized Ukrainian bases in Crimea, most of which offered no resistance. Moscow promised to honour the rank of, and provide better pay and benefits to, all Crimea-based Ukrainian soldiers who defected and accepted Russian citizenship. Most did so, in large part because they were stationed near their families and homes on the peninsula. Ukraine's Defence Minister was subsequently forced to resign, announcing that out of 18,000 soldiers and families, only 6,500 chose to leave for Ukraine proper. Even among those who left, such as the 10th Naval Aviation Brigade, some soldiers later resigned and returned to Crimea. By March 26, the annexation was essentially complete, and Russia began returning seized military hardware to Ukraine.[22]

The Crimean Parliament initially declared a referendum on independence for May 25, and then moved it to March 30, before finally deciding on March 6 to hold the vote on March 16. The political process to hold a referendum was organised; there were two votes: one to leave Ukraine, which was necessary for Crimea to become an independent polity, and the second, a referendum to accede to the Russian Federation. The March 16 referendum would become the political instrument to annex the peninsula, a process that concluded on March 18.

While the Russian troops were conducting operations in Crimea, the Kremlin also launched an information campaign targeted at the Russian public and Crimean residents. During the seizure of Crimea, the information campaign had three objectives. The first was to discredit the new government in Ukraine, which was often referred to as a "fascist junta." Russia also sought to highlight the danger faced by ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Finally, the Kremlin emphasised the broad support for Crimea's return to Russia.

The Russian media had always covered events in Crimea for its own domestic public, but this intensified as the clashes between the pro-government forces and the protesters in Kyiv grew more violent. The media was also addressed, smaller players exited the scene and existing government outlets, such as RIA Novosti and Voice of Russia, were consolidated into Russia Today, now known as RT. In the period before the Crimean campaign, most of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea watched Russian television, and the overwhelming majority of the population received their news from televised media. Ukraine had largely ceded Russian-language information to Russian-based outlets, particularly in Crimea—information and entertainment from these channels were dominant among the Russian-speaking Ukrainians. The Russian forces turned off nine Ukrainian television channels on March 9, leaving access to Russian channels only. Channels from Ukraine remained accessible via satellite receivers.

On February 26, Russia began promoting its message that the regime change in Ukraine was illegal. This was one day prior to the takeover of government buildings in Crimea. This message was advanced by several Russian figures and elites contending that Russians were under threat in Crimea and required protection and that Russia needed to act to secure their safety. The message was straightforward: "[N]ationalists and fascists took power in Kyiv/Kiev, they will force Russians to abandon the Russian language, and present a general threat".[23]

A movement called Stop Maidan emerged in Simferopol. Russia apparently also took advantage of a grassroots movement running in opposition to Euromaidan. Stop Maidan's rallying cry was centered on pro-Russian statements such as "Crimea for stability", "no to extremism", and "no to foreign interference!" The movement used thousands of billboards and visible advertisements to amplify its message, which largely aligned with Russia's information campaign. Though the Stop Maidan protesters denied any ties to Moscow, varying degrees of connection have been alleged. In general, Russia's information warfare "aims at affecting the consciousness

of the masses, both at home and abroad, and conditioning them for the civilizational struggle between Russia's Eurasian culture and the West." The themes of Russia's strategic communication on Crimea pertained to the Ukrainian government and the role of the Western countries. These included the following: The Crimean land historically belonged to Russia. The transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 was a historical mistake of the Soviet period. Ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population in Crimea were under an imminent ultra-nationalist threat. Russia was not involved in the events in Crimea. The March 16 referendum on independence was legitimate, demonstrating the will of the people of Crimea. The Ukrainian soldiers voluntarily gave up their weapons and declared their allegiance to Russia. The Ukrainian government acts in the interests of the United States and other foreign powers. The Maidan movement was overrun by (violent) ultra-nationalists, and Ukraine's President overthrown in an illegitimate *coup d'état*, backed by the West. The pro-European population of Ukraine are the ideological descendants of Nazi supporters and fascists, and the Western countries, and especially the United States, were core orchestrators of the events in the Ukraine. The primary US motivation was the expansion of NATO and containment of Russia. The United States has been pressuring Europe to impose sanctions against Russia and is the driving force of a policy of containment against Moscow. The Russian policy is not a departure from previous Western interventions to change borders and create new political entities, such as in Kosovo.[24]

The Russian operations in Crimea represented, by all accounts, an efficient seizure of territory from another state, executed with speed and competence. The Ukrainian security services initially were unable to resist the attacks. With tens of thousands of Russian troops massed just across the border and the memory of the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia fresh in their minds, the leaders in Kiev were forced to weigh any possible military response against the likelihood of triggering an overt Russian intervention.

Hybrid operations become easier if the opposing force is perceived to be friendly and legitimate. Russia's Black Sea Fleet was historically based in Crimea; therefore, much of the population viewed its personnel as a friendly force. Crimea was distinct in that militaries belonging to two different states were based there. Both were viewed as legitimate by the population, their presence historically considered valid. Furthermore, the Crimeans had fewer economic reasons to fear, or protest against, annexation, as incomes, salaries, and pensions were substantially higher in Russia than in Ukraine. According to the World Bank, the gross domestic product per capita in Ukraine in 2014 was US$ 3,082.50, compared with US$ 12,735.90 in Russia. The history, identity, and economic links of Crimea to Russia were structural factors, reducing the likelihood of popular resistance and contributing to the ease of Russia's operation. Cultural proximity between the Russian and Crimea Russian troops and intelligence operatives, and the shared language, culture, and ethnicity of most Crimeans, gave the Russians advantages as an invading force. The Russian agents were able to blend readily among the Crimeans to organise or coordinate self-defence units. Paratroopers could pretend to be police or interior troops and conduct riot control against protesters. In short, the common language and culture allowed the Russian forces to rapidly insert themselves into the operating environment and take control of the peninsula. Furthermore, the Russian military could readily communicate with the sympathetic elements of the population to facilitate the takeover.

In Eastern Ukraine, Moscow initially encouraged an anti-government movement. It launched a political warfare campaign rather than sending Special Forces as a precursor to a conventional invasion. The objective was to destabilise southeastern Ukraine in order to increase control over the region, and if possible, convince the local authorities to accept a federal scheme. The Kremlin used a diverse network of political operatives, businessmen, criminal elements, and powerful oligarchs to oppose Ukraine's new government. The Ukrainian government inadvertently

escalated the conflict by arresting the protest leaders and sparking a separatist insurgency. The escalation continued as the protest movement turned to irregular warfare and Russia began conventional reinforcements with its own troops in support of the separatists.[25]

Protests in Eastern Ukraine against the new Ukrainian government that began almost immediately after the Maidan protests, prompted Yanukovych's flight from power. As stated earlier, the new government in Ukraine made three mistakes, which aided the separatists and Russians. The reaction to these moves, coupled with Russia's operation in Crimea, encouraged the mobilisation of both leftist and right-wing organisations in Eastern Ukraine, and their leaders, previously existing on the margins of Ukrainian political life, proclaimed themselves as "People's Mayors" and "People's Governors."[26] The opening events of the political turmoil in Eastern Ukraine closely followed the pattern of Crimea with the appointment of Russian citizens as Mayors/Governors in the cities of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kharkiv and Slovyansk. The protesters' actions were spontaneous and self-initiated, driven by public anxiety about the future after the victory of the Maidan movement in the capital. The public agitation and outcry appeared genuine and not disconnected from the country's political divisions. It is possible that some Russian citizens crossed the border to participate in these events of their own accord, but most protestors were local Ukrainians.[27] Most of the people in Eastern Ukraine had voted for Yanukovych and traditionally supported his political party, the Party of the Regions. They were upset by his removal and uncertain about Ukraine's political direction.[28]

The protesters seized the regional administration buildings in Kharkiv and Donetsk on March 1, took over the regional administration building in Luhansk on March 9, and demanded that a referendum be held on annexing the Luhansk Oblast (region) to Russia. The protesters' official causes included a referendum on federalisation, recognition of Russian as the second official state language, and a Customs Union with Russia.

The call for a referendum was apparently a bid to pressurise the Ukrainian government for devolution of more autonomy to the region. These individuals could be described as pro-Russian and certainly anti-Maidan oriented, but they were also obscure figures of little-to-no political significance in the country or the region, and could be characterised as local and regional political outsiders, adherents of extreme movements who exist on the margins of the political landscape.

The Ukrainian regional law enforcement cracked down on these People's Governors and, by removing them, inadvertently paved the way for a different set of leaders to take over the movement. By March 10, the local police managed to regain control of all the captured administration buildings in the three cities. Street clashes between pro- and anti-Maidan protesters continued for several days in the major cities. Meanwhile, the interim Ukrainian government appointed oligarchs as new Governors, assuming they would use their patronage networks to retain control and defend their own economic interests. The new appointees had ties with the Russian security services, military experience, and associations with business interests in Russia. Many were either local to the Donbas region or came from Crimea, likely at the behest of Russian intelligence in early March. The new leaders were more interested in mounting direct action and had the military experience to command a paramilitary force.

This change in leadership marked the true beginning of the separatist movement and the transition from political warfare to insurgency. Rather than wait to hold a referendum on the status of the regions, Commanders, such as Strelkov and his comrade Igor Bezler stormed the buildings of the local administration and proclaimed the territories under their control as republics. His actions prevented a restoration of order by the Ukrainian authorities, as occurred in Odessa and Kharkiv, where crackdowns ended the protests and the local elites chose to side with the national government. When Strelkov declared the Donetsk Republic (DNR), he

shifted the cause from federalisation to outright secession from Ukraine, which was always his personal intention.

From April 6 to 23, the separatists employed groups of armed men to capture and hold the administration buildings that were lost by the pro-Russian civilian demonstrators in early March. The separatists seized the main administrative building in Donetsk on April 6, overran an Interior Ministry rapid-response force at the Luhansk administration complex on April 11, and took the city halls in Slovyansk, Kramatorsk, and Krasny Liman on April 12. In Donetsk, the separatists seized the state security services building to gain access to 300 assault rifles and 400 handguns, enabling them to arm the fighters and further spread the insurgency. At this stage of the movement, the demands vacillated between autonomy within a federalised Ukraine and secession in order to join Russia. The proclamation by Strelkov of the DNR on April 7 marked a more concerted attempt to unify effort and command among the separatists behind a political structure. Pro-Russian separatists would declare a Luhansk People's Republic a few weeks later. Eventually, Strelkov took overall command and control of a large conglomeration of fighters called the South-East Army, becoming the leading political figure of the separatist movement. Although he was able to attract members of some pro-Russian organisations, including the East Front and Donbas People's Movement, Strelkov was unable to monopolise the use of force in the area. The local elites, who formed their own battalions, preferred to maintain their autonomy. Units such as the Vostok Battalion in Donetsk, headed by a former Commander of the Ukrainian Alfa Special Forces in the region, and Zarya in Luhansk, primarily comprising local residents, acted independently of Strelkov's South-East Army.

From April 15 to 23, Ukrainian Army and Interior Ministry forces mounted efforts to respond to the separatists. Most of the deployed units in the east were halted outside the captured cities by a handful of crude checkpoints and several pro-Russian civilian mobs. Russian citizens took

command of the separatist movement in mid-April, and they had Russian volunteers with them. The Ukrainian security forces were ineffective for two reasons. First, the Ukrainian Army existed largely on paper, with perhaps only 6,000 combat-capable troops available. Second, the Ukrainian Army Commanders spoke Russian and were disinclined to fight against fellow Russian speakers or order troops into civilian areas. The Ukrainian military was completely unprepared for the launch of combat operations. The local police in Donetsk, Luhansk, Slovyansk, and Kramatorsk were either intimidated by the separatists or defected to them. The Ukrainian soldiers and their Commanders were confused by the situation on the ground and did not know how to deal with the separatist forces that were accompanied by supportive civilian mobs. Many Ukrainian units retreated by April 23, and in one case, six Ukrainian airborne vehicles were captured by the separatists and local civilians without a fight. This handful of fighting vehicles and a self-propelled mortar were used by the separatists from April until June, when heavier conventional equipment was eventually supplied directly by Russia.

From late April to late May, the Ukrainian Army mounted a more deliberate campaign to contain the pro-Russian rebellion by securing key terrain around Donbas cities held by the separatists. The Anti-Terrorist Operation (the Ukrainian government's official name for its campaign against the separatists) was essentially a siege-warfare campaign, leveraging Ukraine's vastly superior numbers, artillery, and air power to steadily encircle and push out the separatists from fortified terrain. The objective of this strategy was to position the military for a decisive offensive against the rebel enclave, once Ukraine's national mobilisation, including the May 1 reintroduction of mass conscription for men had been completed. After taking the outlying cities, Ukraine's Army planned to isolate and besiege Donetsk and Luhansk.

Meanwhile, the separatists obtained short-range air-defence weaponry, presumably from Russia or possibly from stocks in Ukraine. In late April

and May, several Ukrainian military helicopters and fixed wing transport aircraft were shot down in the Donbas region. Russia apparently supplied the rebels with shoulder-fired and self-propelled Strela-10M short-range systems. The Russian forces massing on Ukraine's borders grew beyond 40,000, diverting Ukraine's deployments to its borders, defending cities such as Kharkiv, rather than to the conflict zone, because of the threat of a large-scale invasion. In the last week of April, the Ukrainian Army made probing attacks against the outskirts of Slovyansk. On May 2, a Ukrainian offensive made gains, seizing part of the city, with casualties on both sides and at the cost of two helicopters. In the subsequent weeks, fighting spread to other towns in Donetsk, with see-saw battles between government forces and the separatists in Kramatorsk, Slovyansk, and Mariupol.

Separatist leaders organised a referendum on May 11, without any discernible legal basis, in which 89 per cent of participants supposedly voted in favour of self-rule. Violence continued until the May 25, Presidential election, with several attacks by the separatist forces possibly aiming to disrupt the election. Ukraine's Presidential election was held on May 25, and Petro Poroshenko defeated the former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko. The next day, the first battle for Donetsk airport began. Over two days, Ukrainian forces fought separatist militants, who suffered heavy losses. Pro-Russian rebels said that more than 50 of their soldiers were killed. The Ukrainian Army was able to push the separatists out of Donetsk's international terminal with air strikes and a paratrooper assault. The battle was also the first of the conflict involving a "large group of volunteers from Russia who arrived to reinforce the separatists."[29] Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya's President, allegedly ordered the fighters from the "*dikayadiviziya*," or "savage division" to Ukraine. The first battle for Donetsk airport was also a turning point in that more Russian soldiers arrived to reinforce the separatists, but it proved a military disaster for the separatist fighters. Scores were killed at the airport and on the way back to

the city by friendly fire from the Vostok Battalion, which confused them for Ukrainian units, due to lack of communication among the disparate separatist forces.

The May 26 battle for Donetsk airport likely marked a departure point for the greater involvement of 'volunteers' from Russia to bolster the separatist ranks. The battle for Donetsk airport and Ukraine's subsequent offensive operations escalated the conflict vertically for Russia, resulting in the steady transition to conventional warfare. From June to August, the Kremlin supplied the separatists with mechanised equipment, armour, advanced munitions, and medium air defences. The strong air defence was effective; Ukraine's Air Force suffered so many losses that it was incapable of contributing in the conflict by mid-August. On July 17, Russian-backed militia fired a surface-to-air missile at Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, killing 283 passengers and 15 crew members, drawing increased global attention to the conflict.

Ukraine's forces were, however, still able to make some gains against the separatists. On July 5, the government recaptured several towns held by the separatists, including Slovyansk. As the fighting continued, the pro-Russian militants were pushed back into their strongholds of Donetsk and Luhansk after sustaining heavy losses. By early August, the government had recaptured about 75 per cent of territory previously held by the separatists. At this point, the rebels' outlook was dire. The Ukrainian forces had retaken much of the separatists' territory and were close to regaining border control and encircling them entirely. The republics of Donetsk and Luhansk were in danger of being split, as Ukrainian soldiers drove a wedge between them. Russia's strategy was failing, forcing Moscow to up the ante by launching a conventional invasion in August of 2014. Between August 14 and 24, armoured personnel carriers and other Russian military vehicles entered Ukraine. Russia continued to deny any involvement, despite at least 1,000 Russian soldiers supporting, the separatists at the time. Other figures place the number of Russian troops

moved into Ukraine at the time at 4,000. Russia continued to deny its involvement, but finally admitted to the presence of military personnel after Ukrainian troops captured 10 Russian paratroopers. The Kremlin claimed they had crossed the border accidentally. By the end of August, the separatists had resumed pressure on the Luhansk and Donetsk airports, and threatened Mariupol again. On August 24, Russia abandoned an effort to mix in conventional weaponry, such as tanks and air defence, in support of the separatist forces. Instead, it switched to conventional operations, invading with perhaps 4,000 regular troops (accurate figures are unavailable) and defeating Ukraine's military at the Battle of Ilovaisk. On September 5, in Minsk, Belarus, negotiators arranged a ceasefire between the Ukrainian and separatist forces, referred to as the Minsk I. Two days later, Russian-backed separatists seized Donetsk airport.

Although artillery skirmishes continued, both sides took a break to rearm, train, and consolidate between September 5, 2014, and January 13, 2015. In January 2015, Russia launched a second offensive, and following a second encirclement and defeat at Debaltseve, Ukraine signed the Minsk II ceasefire on February 12, 2015, on terms highly favourable for Moscow.

The Ukraine intervention displayed the range of tools at Moscow's disposal – from information and cyber war, though the use of proxies, to direct use of own forces. Proxies were a prominent feature as Russia supported an array of groups with pro-Russian agendas. In the early phases of the conflict, it sought to foment the rebels and assisted with 'volunteer' recruitment in support of the separatists. Russia relied on a range of actors with existing networks to influence Ukraine. Separatist soldiers were drawn from Russia and other post-Soviet states, tied together by nationalism. The Kremlin also employed a variety of paramilitaries. Organisations such as former members of the Chechen "Vostok Battalion," the Russian Orthodox Army, Night Wolves, Cossack paramilitaries, and Chetnik Guards operated in Ukraine and Crimea. The Wolves' Head Battalion, a

Cossack paramilitary that fought in Georgia in 2008, operated in Ukraine in lieu of Russian troops. Russia's information campaign was aimed at both the West and Ukraine, tuning the messaging for the intended audience. The Kremlin accused the West of meddling in Ukrainian and Russian affairs, while claiming Russia as a defender of democracy in Ukraine. It also claimed to act according to the people's wishes. Beyond justifying its involvement in eastern Ukraine, Russia threatened military action while insisting it wanted peace. Russia also denied its involvement in Ukraine while constantly reminding listeners about its military and even nuclear superiority as warnings. Domestic messaging focussed on NATO's threat and the West's plotting. Russia questioned the legitimacy of the government in Kiev, labelling it "fascist" and "Nazi".

In Ukraine and Russia, the concept of Novorossiya became a key aspect of the information campaign. Novorossiya, meaning "New Russia", was chanted by pro-Russian protesters and even mentioned by Putin. The term appealed to Russian nationalists seeking to return to a golden age of the Russian empire. It was also used as a historical justification for the separatists' actions. Novorossiya was used by the Donetsk and Luhansk republics when they created the confederation of Novorossiya and United Armed Forces of Novorossiya in May 2014. Beyond targeted messaging and propaganda, Russia also used cyber attacks as part of its information campaign. Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks targeted the pro-Maidan movement and Ukrainian government. The country was subjected to at least five cyber espionage attacks between 2013 and 2017. Attacks also targeted Ukraine's election system, delaying the results in October of 2014.

The new media facilitated the familiar tactics, and Russia was able to leverage the social media effectively during the conflict. Pro-Maidan pages on the two largest social-media platforms in Ukraine, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, were blocked, as they were hosted on Russian servers. The two services were also useful in recruiting for the separatists' cause.

The messages played to a Ukrainian vulnerability, for Ukraine's security forces' lack of capability was amplified by a lack of will to fight. Defections were common. Russia's tactic of bribing and intimidating soldiers was designed to coerce them into defections. The Ukrainian soldiers were subjected to a barrage of spam messages: "Your battalion commander has retreated. Take care of yourself;" "You will not regain Donbas back. Further bloodshed is pointless"; "Ukrainian soldier, it's better to retreat alive than stay here and die".[30] The tactic was effective; members of Ukraine's 25th paratrooper division from Dnipropetrovsk gave up their vehicles to the pro-Russian separatists. The Ukrainian soldiers were not well equipped, paid, or fed, and were asked to fight against their "own people." Throughout the intervention, Russia put political and economic pressure on Ukraine. Russia's political campaign began before the military operations. On December 17, 2013, Putin offered Yanukovych (still the Ukrainian President at the time) a lifeline amid the instability, taking advantage of Ukraine's financial vulnerabilities. The lifeline was in the form of a US$ 15 billion bailout and significant discounts on natural gas imports. Not only was the agreement an attempt to draw Ukraine back into Russia's orbit, it fed into the Kremlin's information operations by suggesting that closer ties to Russia would result in economic prosperity, while, in contrast, closer ties with the EU would compel Ukraine to address debt issues with austerity programmes unattractive to the Ukrainians.

Today, the separatist force continues to undergo consolidation and conversion into a conventional Army, equipped by Russia and supported by a capable contingent of Russian troops who serve as a quick reaction force. The conflict intensity is cyclical, largely quiet in the fall of 2015, with a ceasefire, then experiencing a strong uptick in artillery skirmishes and fighting in the winter and spring of 2016. Russia has achieved some of its political objectives in Ukraine and will lock in further gains if the Ukrainian leaders implement the political concessions they accepted under the Minsk II Accord.

Russia orchestrated a secession movement in the eastern regions as leverage to force Ukraine into accepting federalisation. It had ample military opportunity to invade Ukraine, defeat its forces, and conquer any eastern region if it so chose. In fact, even after having considerable time to organise, arm, and prepare, Ukraine was soundly defeated in August 2014 and February 2015 at the battles of Illovaisk and Debaltseve.

Russia's intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine involved a wide range of tools and methods to achieve its aims, and the success resulted from simultaneous application these of tools and methods, aided by historical connections between Russia and the regions. The information and political warfare, coupled with language and economic links were vital to the local support. The earlier deployment of troops in Crimea made the takeover seamless and bloodless; the effortless induction of additional troops was aided by the existing agreement between Russia and Ukraine.

Conclusion

Russia's intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine with the use of a wide range of tools and methods to achieve its aims, attained success by the simultaneous application of the tools and methods aided by the historical connections between Russia and the regions. The Russians were helped of the confusion and chaos in the Ukranian polity following the removal of the President by the Parliament; in addition, three decisions by the Rada became catalysts for the Russian population in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine to welcome the Russian intervention. The fears, apprehensions and expectations of the Russian population in these areas comprised the key to the success of the intervention: not only did they support it but also participated as separatists and military fighters. Information and political warfare, coupled with language and economic links were vital to the local support. The information war preyed on the anxieties of the Russian population in Ukraine and Russia about the expansion of NATO towards the Russian sphere of influence. Russia's control over TV networks and

high Russian content aided its cause. Better economic prospects with Russia compared to Ukraine convinced the local Russian population to move away and support the Russian intervention. The poor training and fighting capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces were substantial reasons for the loss of territory; the shifting of loyalty by some troops in the Crimea based on local affiliations and base locations added to the inability to resist. The existing deployment of troops in Crimea made the takeover seamless and bloodless; the effortless induction of additional troops was aided by the existing agreement between Russia and Ukraine. Russian military assistance was a major factor in the success of the separatists, and the Russian troops' actions in the battles of Illovaisk and Debaltseve sealed the fate of the region. The Russian actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine do not comprise truly classic hybrid war but are only a part of it, however, there is a need to learn lessons from the intervention. The West and NATO promised but did not deliver, and finally contributed to generating concerns and alarms in Russia. The Ukrainian polity and armed forces miscalculated and took wrong decisions and actions which contributed immensely to their defeat.

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