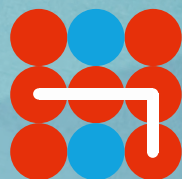


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The concept of hybrid war in Russia: A national security threat and means of strategic coercion

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The hybrid war concept offers a general framework for explaining threats towards Russia, and legitimizes Russia's actions as necessary counter-measures to actions taken by the West. According to this perception, Russia is only mitigating and preventing conflicts, rather than activating and aggravating them – writes assistant professor and holder of the Mannerheim Chair of Russian Security Studies Katri Pynnöniemi.

Introduction

This Strategic Analysis traces the origins and meaning of the hybrid war debate in Russia. While the concept of hybrid war remains an under-developed, haphazard collection of conspiracy and other pseudo-theories, the debate around it illuminates core assumptions about external threats towards Russia.¹ The Strategic Analysis argues that **the roots of the later hybrid war debate lie in the characterization of modern warfare as the integrated use of military force and non-military activities.** The interpretation of hybrid war as a tool used against Russia also fits within the pre-existing typology of threats towards Russia. The latest turn in this debate frames hybrid war as a form of strategic coercion, underlining the importance attached to this concept, notwithstanding its limited analytical value.

Modern warfare in Russia's Military Doctrine: A comparison

Russia's 2010 Military Doctrine describes modern warfare as entailing "the integrated utilization of military force, and forces and resources

of a non-military character".² The 2014 edition of the Military Doctrine defines in more detail this nexus between military and non-military activities. Accordingly, **modern warfare consists of "a coordinated use of armed forces and political, economic, information and other non-military activities, together with the exploitation of the protest potential of the population and the use of special forces"**. The same paragraph also lists "the use of externally funded and run political forces and social movements", and the "use of indirect and asymmetric methods"³ as characteristics of modern warfare.

Along with these new elements, both editions list traditional features of modern warfare (e.g. the massive use of military technology, selectivity and a high degree of destruction, increasing the speed and depth of hostilities). However, it is important to bear in mind that neither the 2010 Doctrine nor the revised version in 2014 articulate a "coherent or preconceived"⁴ hybrid war *doctrine*. As suggested by Kofman and Rojansky, the elaboration of the characteristics of modern warfare is simply "Russia's attempt to catch up conceptually to the realities of modern war with which the United States has been grappling for over a decade in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere".⁵

1 For a more detailed description of this debate, see Katri Pynnöniemi and Minna Jokela, "Perceptions of hybrid war in Russia: Means, targets and objectives identified in the Russian debate", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol 33, Issue 6 (2020): 828-845, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2020.1787949.

2 Cited in Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "A Closer Look at Russia's 'Hybrid War'", *Kennan Cable*, No. 7 (April 2015): 2.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no7-closer-look-russias-hybrid-war>. Last accessed 14 May 2021.

3 Russian Military Doctrine, Approved by Russian Federation presidential edict, December 25, 2014, www.scrf.gov.ru/security/military/document129/. Last accessed 14 May 2021.

4 Kofman and Rojansky, "A Closer Look at Russia's 'Hybrid War'", 3.

5 Ibid.

From the viewpoint of subsequent debate on 'hybrid war', the key article in the 2010 Doctrine clarifies for what purpose informational and political means are used in a conflict. It states that one of the characteristics of modern warfare is "early implementation of information warfare measures to achieve political goals without the use of military force, and subsequently, in the interests of forming a favorable reaction of the world community to the use of military force".⁶ However, this particular paragraph is not included in the 2014 version of the Doctrine. The idea appeared later in a modified form when Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov described what he called 'hybrid methods':

"Their content includes the achievement of political goals with minimal armed effect against the enemy, mainly by undermining economic and military potential, by informational and psychological influence, by active support of internal opposition, partisan and sabotage methods of conducting an armed struggle."⁷

This speech signalled Russia's official take on hybrid war although, as suggested above, the characterization of modern warfare in the 2010 Military Doctrine included similar elements even at that time.

The change that took place in this debate in 2014 concerned the nexus of military and non-military activities being framed as a hybrid war against Russia, rather than an analytical problem to be resolved. This shift is particularly evident in the expert discussion, where the hybrid war concept describes attempts to undermine Russia's sovereignty, civilizational originality and

status as one of the great powers.⁸ Hybrid war is described as a set of disruptive and constructive actions, the ultimate purpose of which is to achieve "self-disorganization and self-disorientation of the target state".⁹ The scale of disruptive actions is determined by an "algorithm"¹⁰ (a model for action), and ranges from long-term operations aimed at splintering Russia's cultural-philosophical traditions, to the shaping of public perceptions and decision-making capacity during the crucial phase of the conflict. Constructive actions, on the other hand, are viewed as defensive measures aimed at enhancing the integrity of Russia's society and the consolidation of a positive image of the country.¹¹

Thus, in this context, the concept of hybrid war is synonymous with the "controlled chaos" theory, the concept of "colour revolutions", and pseudo-scientific conspiracy narratives (e.g. the Dulles Plan), which allegedly explain the US-led political warfare against Russia.¹² This interpretation is recycled and repeated in newspaper articles and in the context of Russian academic debate. In official documents, the 2015 national security strategy identifies the US and the EU as being responsible for "countering integration processes and creating seats of tension in the Eurasian region", particularly in Ukraine,¹³ whereas the 2014 military doctrine uses more ambiguous language in this regard.

The typology of threats

As argued above, the integrated use of military and non-military activities is seen as both a strategic-level threat to Russia, and as a tool that can be used in shaping the security environment in accordance with Russia's strategic interests. A cursory examination of the core assumptions of Russia's strategic

6 Russian Military Doctrine, Approved by Russian Federation presidential edict, February 5, 2010. Translation published at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_militaryDoctrine.pdf. Last accessed 14 May 2021.

7 Valerii Gerasimov, "Организация обороны Российской Федерации в условиях применения противником «традиционных» и «гибридных», 19-23методов ведения войны", *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk*, no. 2 (2016): 20.

8 Pynnöniemi and Jokela, "Perceptions of hybrid war in Russia", 830-831; see also Gudrun Persson, "Russian thoughts on hybrid war and colour revolutions", *Russian Studies Series* (2020), <http://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=625>. Last accessed 14 May 2021.

9 Aleksandr Bartosh, "цель и механизмы модели управляемого хаоса", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 27, 2013, http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2013-09-27/6_chaos.html. Last accessed 14 May 2021.

10 Aleksandr Bartosh, "Одкб в прицеле цветных революций", *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 11, 2014, http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2014-04-11/1_odkb.html. Last accessed 14 May 2021.

11 Bartosh, "цель и механизмы модели управляемого хаоса"; Bartosh, "Одкб в прицеле цветных революций".

12 Alan Dulles was the director of the CIA, but the 'Dulles Plan' originates from the Brezhnev-era film and novel *The Eternal Call*, which features a villain called Alan Dulles. Like similar conspiracy theories, the Dulles Plan is taken as evidence of a plot to destroy the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation. Eliot Borenstein, *Plots against Russia. Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 88-89; see also Ieva Bērziņa, "Weaponization of 'Colour Revolutions'", *Journal of Political Marketing* (2019): 1-14, DOI: 10.1080/15377857.2019.1678905.

13 Russian National Security Strategy, Approved by Russian Federation presidential edict, December 15, 2015.

security environment shows that the perception of external threats has remained remarkably consistent since the early 2000s.

In an article published in 2003, the late president of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, Army General Makhmut Gareev, outlined **three types of threats towards Russia**.¹⁴ The first category includes **threats that undermine Russia's political independence (sovereignty), and consequently its status as a great power**. The second group of **threats stems from the existence of nuclear weapons and their potential use against Russia**. The third group of threats is multifaceted, including **the rapid development of the military technosphere, and violation of the balance of forces near Russia's borders**. The perceived threat in both of these cases relates to the fear that Russia is lagging behind its main rivals in technology development, which undermines its ability to project military power globally and in the regional sphere.¹⁵ Interestingly, this typology remains unchanged in subsequent articles published between 2003 and 2019. The most significant change relates to the first group of threats. In the 2003 article, this group is defined as follows:

“... a long-term policy of certain international forces and powers aimed at depriving Russia of its independence, interfering in its internal affairs and in its economic and other national interests.”¹⁶

The 2007 article is dedicated to an elaboration of Russia's new Military Doctrine (published three years later in 2010). In this context, Gareev emphasized that military and non-military threats should be understood as an integrated whole. The article enumerates the first group of threats in more detail:

“It is an unfriendly policy and includes efforts by certain international forces and states to violate the sovereignty of the Russian Federation, and discriminate against its economic and other interests: various forms of political and informational pressure and subversive actions, as was the case in Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and other countries; territorial claims against the Russian Federation along almost the entire perimeter of its borders [...] Hence follows such a defence task as the prevention, localization and neutralization of such threats by political, diplomatic, economic, informational and other non-military means, relying at the same time on military power.”¹⁷

Gareev returned to this theme in 2013, perhaps in anticipation of the new Military Doctrine (published in December 2014). According to him, a massive geopolitical shift had occurred in the world, completely changing the alignment of forces, as well as the nature of threats, and duly requiring new forms and methods of counteracting these threats.¹⁸ The first group of threats, according to Gareev, derives from “information and other subversive actions, the creation of *controlled chaos* in order to provoke various kinds of unrest in the opposing countries, to overthrow undesirable power structures from within and disrupt the internal stability of the state, as was done in Libya, and recently in Syria”.¹⁹ A year later in 2014, referring to Russia's military operation in Crimea, Gareev argued that Russia should be proud of it [the operation], but at the same time, should learn the necessary “lessons required to improve the alignment of the soft power, political, diplomatic and information means, and subsequently the efficiency of the entire system of *strategic deterrence*”.²⁰ This brings us to the latest phase of the debate in the context of which hybrid war is interpreted as a means of strategic coercion.

14 Makhmut Gareev, “Doklad prezidenta Akademii Veennyh Nauk, Generala Armii M. A. Gareeva”, Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk, no. 2 (2003): 10.

15 Gareev, “Doklad prezidenta”, 10.

16 Gareev, “Doklad prezidenta”, 10.

17 Makhmut Gareev, “Структура и Основное Содержание Новой Военной Доктрины России”, Voennaia mys' no. 3 (2007): 4-5.

<https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/11853158>. Last accessed 14 May 2021.

18 Makhmut Gareev, “The character of modern military and non-military threats to the safety of Russia and the organization of the country's defence”, Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk (2013): 4.

19 Gareev, “The character of modern military”, 4. Emphasis added.

20 Makhmut Gareev, “Velikaja pobeda i sobytija na Ukraine”, Vestnik Akademii vojnyh nauk, no. 2 (2014): 10. Emphasis added.

Hybrid war as a means of strategic coercion

In Russian military parlance, strategic deterrence (*strategicheskoe sderzhivanie*) incorporates a set of offensive and defensive, nuclear, non-nuclear, and non-military tools which, taken together, resemble a “combined strategy of containment, deterrence, and coercion”.²¹ It “provides a unifying model for aligning the perceptions of the military-political threat environment with the state’s instruments of national power, intended to shape that environment positively for Russian interests”. In other words, **the term ‘deterrence’ in the Russian context refers to a broad set of activities aimed at war prevention (or ‘containment’ in Western parlance) and, in a narrower sense, to inducement or intimidation (*ustrashenie*) in respect of a fear of the consequences (e.g. the fear of nuclear weapons usage), which denotes deterrence through coercion.**

Lastly, the Russian term *prinuzhdenie* expresses “coercion in the form of compellence to change

adversary behavior”.²² This last term has recently appeared in the context of the hybrid war debate. The argument is that **“hybrid war” is a form of strategic non-military coercion (*prinuzhdenie*), consisting of economic sanctions, cyberattacks, information and other operations.** These Western activities aim to undermine Russia’s political system, to provoke conflicts in its neighbourhood, and to challenge the country’s status as one of the leading powers of the multipolar world.²³

The conceptualization of hybrid war as a means of strategic coercion underlines what is at stake from the Russian perspective. **The nexus of military and non-military means of coercion is elevated to the level of a strategic threat for Russia.** At the same time, this habit of assigning new meanings to the concept of hybrid war also reveals that the research on non-military means of deterrence is relatively underdeveloped.²⁴ Further research is required to establish how the perception of threats is linked to the conceptualization of modern warfare in the Russian context.

21 Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, “Russian strategic deterrence”, *Survival*, No.4 (2016):7, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1207945.

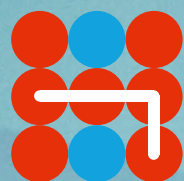
22 Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Jeffrey Edmonds, “Russian strategy for escalation management: evolution of key concepts”, CNA Research Memorandum, (April 2020): 5-6, <https://www.cna.org/centers/cna/sppp/rsp/escalation-management>. Last accessed 14 May 2021. See also Bruusgaard, “Russian strategic deterrence”, 8.

23 Aleksandr Bartosh, “Новый вид сдерживания”, *Voenno-Promyshlenniy Kur’er*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/59962>. Last accessed 14 May 2021. Aleksandr Bartosh, “Вычисляем будущие конфликты”, *Voenno-Promyshlenniy Kur’er*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/60450>. Last accessed 14 May 2021.

24 A similar argument is presented in Bruusgaard, “Russian strategic deterrence”.

Author

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