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Moscow's Aerospace Theory of Victory: What the West is Getting Wrong¹

Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky

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Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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

The article argues that it is impossible to grasp the evolution of the aerospace defense mission of the Russian military, or any other military innovation, if the analysis of doctrinal thinking and modernization trends is divorced from scrutiny of the impact of organizational-bureaucratic factors. The latter left the most significant imprint

on the course of this and other Russian military innovations, which were more often than not shaped by institutional parochialism, the personal ambitions of military leaders, and various inter- and intra-service competitions.

Offense-Defense Dialectics in Russian Air Defense

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Since the 1970s, despite its ongoing evolution, the SORASA concept has remained intact as the main frame of reference for operational planning and force employment against aerospace aggression in the Soviet-Russian military. The Soviet SORASA rested on three postulates: that systemic integration of defensive elements and offensive (strike) components is necessary; that the strike

component should encapsulate the offensive capabilities of services within and beyond the PVO Strany service: IA, RViA, Radio-Electronic Warfare (REB), Airborne Troops, nuclear and nonnuclear armed Long Range Aviation (DA), maritime and regular aviation carrying cruise missiles, and the missile capabilities of the Navy and Nuclear Forces; and that these assets would strike all of the adversary's means of aerospace aggression (missiles and airplanes, their bases, C4ISR systems, as well as missile-carrying submarines and air carrier groups) wherever possible (in flight, on the ground, and at sea).

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

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

Fait Accompli: Between the Lack of Intention and Insufficient Capabilities

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

See overleaf for information about the author.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Assessing a Russian *Fait Accompli* Strategy¹

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Abstract

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

Introduction

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

Perhaps surprisingly, this discussion need not focus on Russian strategic intentions, since intentions can be debated and change over time. Defense planners must consider vulnerabilities, and this means that capabilities matter, since they govern military options even as intentions can prove difficult to predict. Defense estab-

lishments logically seek to hedge against an uncertain future, but in the process tend to make ill-informed choices about where to focus their efforts and the likely fights they will face. This is because they privilege what they find most accessible, namely military technology and the military balance, over what matters: the opponent’s military thinking, political decision-making, and the historical logic of these scenario constructs. The *fait accompli*, as it has been used to describe a potential Russian strategy, is a proposition that can be evaluated without the need for a specific interpretation of Russian political intentions.

Fait Accompli as a Tactic for Territorial Revisionism

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

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