Hybrid war

BY STASH LUCZKIW

From Russia's perspective, it has never ceased to be under attack from the West, and the Ukrainian Revolution has only confirmed the West's determination to keep Russia down. In response, Moscow feels it must push back. But it order to be successful it needs to revert back to the tactics of multi-modal hybrid war.

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Russian tanks leave Red Square during a rehearsal for the Victory Day military parade in Moscow.

Shortly after the end of the Cold War an apocryphal anecdote made its way around US military circles. Two generals – one American, one Russian – met during one of the NATO partnership meetings at the alliance headquarters in Brussels. After establishing a friendly rapport, the American ventured to ask his Russian counterpart, "So tell us, what was your strategy in the event of a war?" The Russian smiled, "Our strategy was very simple: Brussels."

Although the Russian's reply was obviously meant in jest, it nevertheless conjured up what for many Western cold warriors was a nightmare image: thousands of Soviet tanks rolling across the plains of West Germany, into the Low Countries, overwhelming the West so fast that it had no choice but to launch a nuclear attack.

The nightmare was based on the reality of three million troops arrayed along the Warsaw Pact's side of the Iron Curtain, with more than 50,000 tanks (about three times as many as NATO had).

Fortunately for Europe, the game of chicken known as the Cold War came to an end. Since the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany and the subsequent absorption into NATO not only of many Warsaw Pact countries but even the three ex-Soviet Baltic Republics, any such massive incursion into Western Europe is simply unrealistic. The legacy Russian army has been degraded, a modicum of cooperation and integration into the Western capitalist system established, and new threats have appeared on the horizon in the form of non-state terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda.

As a result, the American military presence in Europe has diminished significantly and European nations have curtailed their military spending. Rather than confronting Moscow with bellicose posturing, countries like Germany and Italy, which rely heavily on Russian natural gas, have tried to embrace Russia and integrate it into various international organizations – NATO included.

In light of the disappearance of an overt Russian threat, such an approach would seem reasonable. However, recent events in Ukraine have awoken those who would argue against Europe lowering her guard. The argument is based on the understanding that a massive Russian invasion (which in our times would occur with tanks, air power and heavy artillery) is a historical anomaly – and so is the notion of Russia fully at peace with its neighbors and colonies. This view holds that Russia is now waging a "hybrid war" not only on Ukraine, but also, by extension, on Europe and the West – which are seen by Moscow as trying to suppress Russia's right to reassert itself. What the West interpreted as victory in the Cold War was, from Vladimir Putin's point of view, merely a tactical retreat allowing the Russians to fight on terms more suitable to their strengths.

A cursory look at Russian history shows that from a far-flung medieval village developing under the Mongol yoke, Muscovy gradually expanded to become an empire that subjugated dozens of disparate nations and spanned nine time zones. By and large, it did not do this with lightning military campaigns (the way the Mongols, for example, did). Rather, Moscow's empire was achieved through a combination of patiently waiting for its neighbors to weaken – often expediting that process by inciting unrest and provoking minor skirmishes – then walking into a power vacuum. Such was the case with the tribes up to the Ural Mountains in the 15th century, most of Siberia in the 16th century, the Ukrainian Cossacks and Poland in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the Central Asian khanates in the 19th century.

Much of the rationale behind Russian expansion boils down to geography. According to *Stratfor*'s George Friedman, "Russia – modern, medieval or otherwise – cannot count on natural features to protect it… That leaves buffers. So long as a country controls territory separating itself from its foes – even if it is territory that is easy for a hostile military to transit — it can bleed out any invasion via attrition and attacks on supply lines. Such buffers, however, contain a poison pill. They have populations not necessarily willing to serve as buffers. Maintaining control of such buffers requires not only a sizable standing military for defense but also a huge internal security and intelligence network to enforce central control. And any institution so key to the state's survival must be very tightly controlled as well. Establishing and maintaining buffers not only makes Russia seem aggressive to its neighbors but also forces it to conduct purges and terrors against its own institu-

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Cossack-monarchists from the Black Sea, fighting for the independence of the self-proclaimed Transnistria Republic pose near the village of Koshnitsa with an icon picturing the late Russian Tsar and his family, April 24, 1992. The Cossacks have supported Russian-speaking nationalist guerrillas fighting against Moldovan forces.

tions in order to maintain the empire." As such, Russia appears to be in a state of permanent war – either against an external foe, or an "enemy within."

One of the glaring misconceptions of the post-Cold War era is that Russia has been calm since the end of World War II. Yet few people are aware that from 1945 to 1953 Moscow fought a brutal guerilla war against nationalist insurgents in western Ukraine. Throughout the "quiet years" of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev Moscow fueled wars in Korea, Indochina, Africa and Latin America almost continuously. Then in 1979 its troops invaded Afghanistan to prop up the pro-Soviet government they had installed a little more than a year earlier.

More recently, since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's military has been deceptively busy tending to its "enemy within" in attempt to stanch any further degradation of its "federation" (which those enemies consider a euphemism for colonial empire). The Transnistria conflict broke out in 1992. In 1993 there was an attempted parliamentary coup, which President Boris Yeltsin promptly put down by firing mortars at the Parliament building. From 1994 to 1996, the Russian army was humiliated in the First Chechen War, which led to the de facto independence of Chechnya, notwithstanding the fact that the Russians had flattened Grozny with artillery. After a few years in which the Russian economy tanked and the oligarchs effectively took the reins of power, Putin launched the Second Chechen War in 2000, less than a year after becoming president. That war lasted for years before the Chechens could be considered pacified. While not a military operation, Putin also declared war on oligarchs, such as oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who dared venture into the political arena. Arresting Russia's most powerful oligarch in 2003 was the first offensive in a broad campaign to renationalize the energy sector.

After more than a decade of consistently receding power and territory, the tide turned for Russia in 2008 with the Russo-Georgian war, in which Moscow sent its troops into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where they claimed an ethnic Russian population was being threatened by Georgians. Beyond the conflicting claims of both parties, the invasion of Georgia was a clear signal to NATO that any further expansion to Georgia and/or Ukraine would be resisted with force.

A closer look at the evolution of military tactics over the course of Putin's 14 years in power, shows that Russia has steadily moved away from the "total war" mindset of a NATO-vs-Warsaw Pact confrontation to the notion of hybrid war, which is much more consistent with both Russia's historical modus operandi and the sensibilities and skills of its KGB-trained leader. What exactly is a "hybrid war"? In a paper entitled *Conflict in the 21st Century: the Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Frank G. Hoffman writes: "Hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder."

The current conflict in Ukraine is very much a hybrid war. In late February, less than a week after President Yanukovych had fled from Kiev, heavily armed Russian special forces – wearing no insignias, so as to offer Moscow deniability if things went wrong – took over administrative buildings in Crimea, propped up Sergey Aksyonov, a previously obscure businessman with connections to organized crime (his nickname was "Goblin") as leader and organized a farcical referendum. Within a few weeks, with almost no shots being fired, Putin presented the international community with a fait accompli: the Russian Federation was officially annexing Crimea.

Meanwhile, a similar scenario was being prepared in eastern Ukraine, although the context would be much more complicated for Russia due to weaker support among the population. Crimea is 60% ethnic Russian, whereas recent polls in eastern Ukraine show that 70% of the population prefer to remain in a unified, albeit more decentralized, Ukraine.

FILIPPO MONTEFORTE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Armed "little green men" assumed to be Russian spetznaz, but bearing no insignia, patrol outside a Ukrainian military base in Perevalnoye on March 13, 2014.

Russia is currently employing tactics that fit Hoffman's description of hybrid war perfectly: "multi-modal activities conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, [that] are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battle space to achieve synergistic effects." The modes include large conventional forces arrayed along the border combined with special forces and military intelligence inside Ukraine coordinating local recruits, saboteurs and agitators. Moscow has also engaged cyber-hackers and internet trolls to add a new dimension to an already vociferous propaganda campaign and is actively flirting with various nationalistic euroskeptic parties throughout Europe.

This approach to warfare is by no means new. It was used in Ukraine by the Bolsheviks during the civil war that lasted from 1919 to 1921. In a battle arena riven by chaos and internecine warfare, a few skilled agitators backed by a ruthless secret police can multiply the strength of an army immeasurably.

Perhaps the one truly new element in this contemporary manifestation of hybrid war is the cyber attack. In 2007, Russia was suspected of launching a massive cyber-attack on Estonia – already a NATO member – as punishment for relocating a statue dedicated to Soviet soldiers. There was some hushed talk of invoking article 5 of the NATO statute, which requires member states to come to the aid of any member state subjected to an armed attack, but of course it was easier to overlook the incident and not consider it an "armed attack."

Yet without having to knock out an entire communications network, the cyber element can merely amplify an already existing propaganda campaign. Indeed, in the Ukrainian crisis, the leaked telephone conversation has already proved to be an effective propaganda tool.

What makes the current situation in Ukraine pertinent to a broader understanding about how to defend the West is the fact that NATO will be forced to break a calcified mindset that envisions conflict in Europe as a catastrophic battle conditioned by the specter of mutually assured destruction. Images of tanks rolling into Prague and Budapest will be supplanted by "little green men" wearing masks, mingling amidst the local population. Indeed, if there is anything novel about the Ukrainian conflict, it is the fact that while ostensibly a civil war, Russia's involvement is actually a revanchist war of territorial expansion conducted not through

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A pro-Russian gunman stands guard as Denis Pushilin, the self-styled Chairman of the People's Republic of Donetsk, delivers a speech during a separatist rally in the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk, May 18, 2014.

invasion, but through insurgency. Traditionally, armed insurgencies spring up in order to expel an occupier.

On a political level Europe will also need to revive the debate between an accommodating "Ostpolitik" approach, which seeks to include Russia among the network of liberal democracies, and a confrontational "Evil Empire" approach, which strives to encircle and weaken Russia so it can't extend its buffer zones.

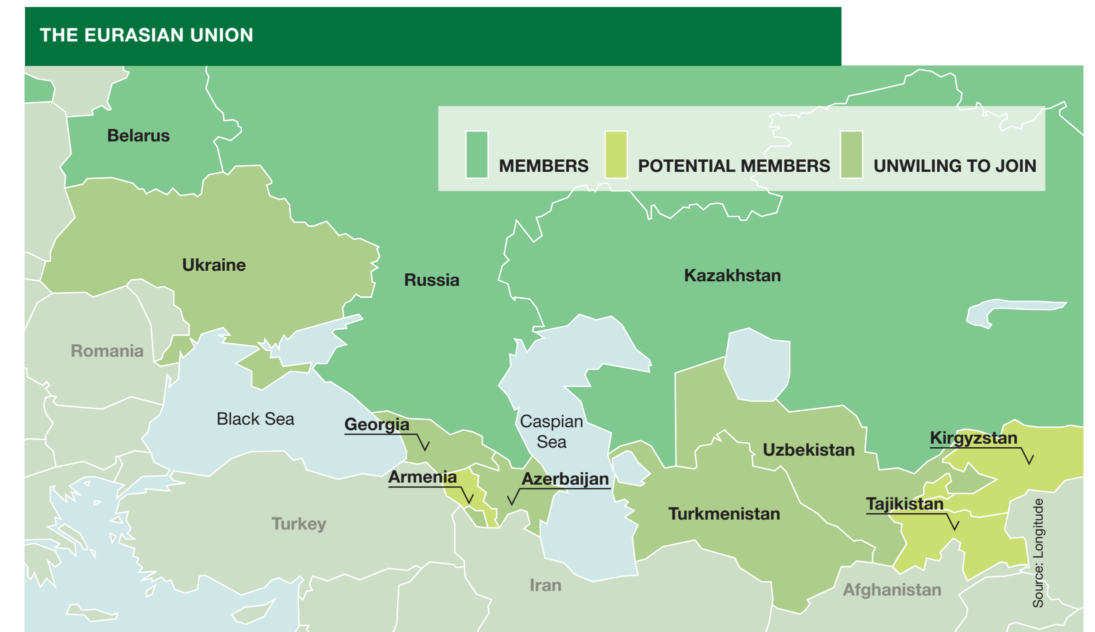
The Ostpolitik approach, first fleshed out by West German Chancellor Willy Brandt in the late 1960s, involved maintaining good relations with East Germany and the Soviet Union. The rationale was that collaboration and trade would do more to undermine Communist regimes than antagonism. Today such a policy is reflected in Germany through recent comments by former chancellors Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt, who have waxed apologetic for Russia's actions. There are also a number of anti-European nationalist party leaders, such as the Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party in Britain and Marine Le Pen's National Front in France, who have enthusiastically joined the ranks of Putin apologists.

The Evil Empire camp's most eloquent spokesman is Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US National Security Council Advisor to President Jimmy Carter. The strategy for arming the anti-communist mujahidin in Afghanistan – months before the Soviet Union even invaded – was Brzezinski's brainchild. On the day that Carter approved the CIA intervention, Brzezinski wrote to the President, "This is our chance to give Russia its Vietnam." While the Polish-born strategist has recently written that he feels Russia will eventually "conclude that the only path that makes sense is to become also a truly modern, democratic, and maybe even a leading European state," he has always been wary of Russia's expansionary instincts. In 1997, Brzezinski outlined a US strategy for Eurasia: "America's central goal should be to continue to expand the democratic European bridgehead. In the Far East, China is likely to be increasingly pivotal, and the United States will not have a Eurasian strategy unless a Sino-American political consensus is nurtured. In Eurasia's center, the area between an enlarging Europe and a regionally rising China will remain a political black hole until Russia firmly redefines itself as a postimperial state."

Putin has made it part of his strategy to fill in that black hole *without* relinquishing imperial ambitions. Russia's faltering attempt to establish its own Eurasian Union – which must include Ukraine if it is to be credible – ran aground when what started as a pro-European protest morphed into a revolution backed by the US and EU. As the Russians see it, they are merely pushing back against NATO's expansionist drive, which wants to embrace (or strangle) Russia as a "truly modern democratic state."

Yet there are ideologues within Russia who view liberal democratic ideals with suspicion, if not outright hostility. One of the more radical thinkers is Alexandr Dugin, who in 1997 wrote: "In principle, Eurasia and our space, the heartland of Russia, remain the staging area of a new anti-bourgeois, anti-American revolution... The new Eurasian empire will be constructed on the fundamental principle of the common enemy: the rejection of Atlanticism, strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us. This common civilizational impulse will be the basis of a political and strategic union."

These antagonistic strategies have existed under the surface throughout the post-Cold War decades of rapprochement. The latest Ukrainian revolution merely brought the antagonism to a head. Historian Timothy Snyder, who has written extensively on Eastern Europe in the 20th century, wrote in *The New Republic*: "By 2013… Moscow had ceased to represent simply a Russian state with more or less calculable interests, but rather a much grander vision of Eurasian integration. The Eurasian project had two parts: the creation of a free trade bloc of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, and the destruction of the European Union through the support of the European far right. Putin's goal was and remains eminently simple. His regime depends upon the sale of hydrocarbons that are piped to Europe. A united Europe could generate an actual policy of energy independence, under the pressures of Russian unpredictability or global warming – or both. But a disintegrated Europe would remain dependent on Russian hydrocarbons."



Here Snyder pinpoints a crucial element in the evolving hybrid war that has flared up between Russia and the West: gas and oil. Again, the tactic is not new. Since 2005, threats to cut off gas to Ukraine, which would thereby curtail the flow of Russian gas to Europe, have been a useful means of leverage over European politicians. For its part, the US has often tried to "engineer" the price of oil downward by pressuring its Saudi allies to increase output. It was exactly such a situation in the 1980s that contributed to the USSR's demise.

Snyder also accuses Russia of having established a marriage of convenience with many rightwing political organizations in Europe, particularly those opposed to the EU. The referendum held in Crimea was carried out with the help of Putin's extremist allies throughout Europe. "No reputable organization would observe the electoral farce by which 97% of Crimeans supposedly voted to be annexed," he writes. "But a ragtag delegation of right-wing populists, neo-Nazis, and members of the German party Die Linke (the Left Party) were happy to come and endorse the results. The Germans who traveled to Crimea included four members of Die Linke and one member of Neue Rechte (New Right). This is a telling combination."

According Anton Shekhovtsov, a researcher of the European far right, "Russia's rise as an anti-Western power is seen by the European extreme right as an amazing example of national sovereignty and self-determination. These ideas are most prominent in today's euroskeptic rhetoric of the extreme right parties based in the EU, 'a technocratic monster that only serves the interests of bankers' (Le Pen), from which, according to Geert Wilders of the Dutch far right Partij voor de Vrijheid, European nation-states should 'liberate' themselves. Forza Nuova [Italy's neo-fascist party] even calls upon Putin to destroy 'the Europe of technocrats.'"

From Putin's perspective, the attempt to undermine European unity and the transatlantic alliance only mirrors the West's continual efforts to undermine his own Eurasian ambitions, which are fundamentally a return to the status quo ante – i.e., before the tactical retreat of 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell.

So notwithstanding continued dialogue, trade and cooperation in some areas, it would be naïve for the US and EU to ignore the hybrid war now brewing. Moscow, for its part, has been systematically adjusting its posture under Putin's tenure to pull away from an unwinnable frontal confrontation and go with its historical strengths: patience, endurance, stealth and ruthlessness. The West is still well equipped to resist, and even give back in kind. But it must first acknowledge the obvious.

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