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Russian Strategic Culture after the Cold War
The Primacy of Conventional Force

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In late February 2014, the Russian Federation invaded Crimea, and subsequently annexed this part of Ukrainian territory. Similar Russian assertiveness had been observed earlier, for example in the invasion of Georgia in 2008. Although it was not the first time Russia had shown international aggression in the post-Soviet area, the invasion of Crimea re-arranged the European security system and increased the tension between NATO and Russia. This level of military tension had not been seen since the Cold War and has taken European security along a path presumably no one wants. Subsequently, the Russian use of military force sparked a vivid debate on how to interpret the Russian actions.

Thus, it is important to understand the perceptions of Russian decision-makers and the military community on the use of military force, in other words, the Russian strategic culture. This article will argue that Russian strategic culture emphasizes conventional force.[1] Additionally, the initial period of the war is central, where

[1] The definition used here is more specific than the common understanding of conventional warfare as merely warfare without the use of weapons of mass destruction. The narrower definition of conventional

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preparations, secrecy and deception are designed to enable an unhindered deployment of a conventional force. These enabling factors may be misinterpreted as expressions of a new Russian way of warfare. However, on the contrary, the complete period after the Cold War shows a continuing inclination to the use of conventional force.

This article avoids exclusively analyzing one prominent individual conflict, for example, the recent interventions into Ukraine. Instead, it will study Russian conflict behavior over time, and thus reduce the influence from idiosyncratic factors on the outcome of the analysis. Culture, as a shared and exchanged phenomenon, shapes the actors within a group and induces continuity. Thus, individual conflicts are less suited to unlock the latent strategic culture of a country's strategic community. Rather, several cases over a longer timespan will, to a larger degree, elucidate the systemic components of an entity's strategic culture. Accordingly, this article looks at three cases spanning a large part of the post-Cold War period: *The Second Chechen War, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War* and *the 2014 Invasion of Crimea*. These cases are examples of Russian Armed Forces conducting military operations in a conflict to which Russia is a *primary* party. The 2014 Rebellion in Donbas, on the other hand, is largely conducted through a proxy, and, consequently, reduces the causal relationship between Russian strategic culture and its conflict behavior. The origin of the pro-Russian protests and rebellious events of 2014 in Donbas is not clear; however, several authors point to locally and popularly based protests against the central Ukrainian authorities, accelerated and exploited by Russia.[2]

warfare, used in this article, is the application of military power, by a state actor, to destroy another state actor's armed forces or to occupy its territory. The objective is to exert its own will on the opponent by influencing its government. This is achieved through dominating the opponent's armed forces. Conventional warfare is usually characterized by mass deployment of forces, intensive violence, and decisiveness. Conventional forces are the category of forces best suited to conduct conventional warfare. Irregular warfare is largely a contrast to conventional warfare and is characterized as "[a] violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population." Eric V. Larson, Derek Eaton, Brian Nichiporuk and Thomas S. Szayna, *Assessing Irregular Warfare* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2008), p. 10. This kind of warfare often exploits asymmetric and indirect approaches, especially when faced with a stronger opponent. In some circumstances, irregular warfare might be targeted at the opponent's conventional armed forces. However, then the warfare will be asymmetric and protracted, where the infliction of casualties and disruption of military activities are the tool to degrade the opponent's will to continue the conflict. Irregular forces are forces that are best suited for irregular warfare.

[2] See Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in Borderlands* (I.B. Tauris & Co: London, 2016); Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva and Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA,

That is, Russian authorities reacted to a window of opportunity, adapting to an unfolding situation, and thus allowing less room for a course of action strictly according to Russian strategic culture.

1999 Second Chechen War

The 1999 Russian invasion of Chechnya was allegedly prepared and planned in advance. In July 1998, a large exercise, involving 15,000 servicemembers and several ministries and agencies, was conducted in North Caucasus. The scenario of the exercise involved "mass attacks by 'bandit' formations and individual terrorist attacks," clearly a preparation for a potential new operation in Chechnya.[3] Despite the exact timing of the decision to go to war is not known, some authors speculate that it was already made in May 1999,[4] or even in March.[5] The sheer size of the invasion force does also indicate that preparations were made weeks or months before the start of the operation. A notable detail in the lead-up to the invasion is the lack of clear ultimatums, threats or other signals aimed at the Chechen authorities. The labelling of Chechnya as a "terrorist state" and the invasion as a "counter-terrorist operation" effectively closed the Chechen opportunity to negotiate or make concessions.[6]

What is similar in the two Russo-Chechen wars is the primacy of conventional forces. Arguably, the Russian counter-terrorism operation can even be said to be based primarily on conventional military force, at least initially. However, the Russian counter-terrorism operation was partly an invasion, and partly a counterinsurgency operation, thus inherently combining conventional operations and irregular counterinsurgency methods. The campaign, by its purpose, needed to extensively

2017); Andrei Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's last stand: the sources of Russia's Ukraine policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2015): pp. 279-303.

[3] Olga Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2001), p. 37.

[4] See Quentin Hodgson, "Is the Russian bear learning? an operational and tactical analysis of the second Chechen war, 1999-2002," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 26, no. 2 (2003): pp. 68-69.

[5] See Robert B. Ware, "A Multitude of Evils: Mythology and Political Failure in Chechnya," in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, ed. Richard Sakwa (Anthem Press: London, 2005), pp. 79-115.

[6] James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2007), p. 112; Mark Kramer, "The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia's War in Chechnya," *International Security* 29, no. 3(2004): p. 12.

combine conventional and irregular activities. However, during the campaign, local militias were used in conventional roles and did not contribute to the war effort by creating advantages through their asymmetry; they were often merely auxiliary forces boosting the conventional army.[7]

Lack of Russian emphasis on utilizing effective irregular methods and non-military measures is telling of their cultural susceptibility to the primacy of conventional force. Firstly, the Russian federal authorities did not favor a political process to influence the Chechen population and to capitalize on the gains on the battlefield; they merely presented demands,[8] and subsequently installed a loyal puppet regime through the Kadyrov clan.[9] This shows little appreciation for taking advantage of the full spectrum of measures available. Secondly, there were few collateral damage considerations; on the contrary, the use of indiscriminate and massive firepower, more appropriate for conventional warfare, was one of the most central means to subdue the population.[10] This indiscriminate use of force can easily have been counterproductive because the Chechen culture emphasises blood feuds and revenge. In cases of excessive use of force, impacting civilians, originally passive Chechens may have become culturally obliged to seek revenge on the Russians. However, Miakinkov argues, based on his study of the Second Chechen War, that the success of the Russian punitive version of counterinsurgency is "not only theoretically plausible but realistically feasible."[11] Still, the choice of method indicates a preference for conventional force. Obviously, the Russian Armed Forces addressed many of the lessons identified in the First Chechen War and improvements were implemented. For example, the Russians determined that they would avoid entering urban combat in a new war. This decision was based on both the desire to avoid a second catastrophe similar to the New Year's Eve attack on Grozny in 1995, and to exploit the Russian advantages in long-range firepower, again showing an emphasis on conventional approaches to an irregular conflict.[12] These examples indicate a Russian desire to apply conventional force, also in

[7] Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars*, pp. 43-44.
[8] Martin Malek, "Russia's Asymmetric Wars in Chechnya since 1994," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 08, no. 4 (2009): pp. 94-95.
[9] Eugene Miakinkov, "The Agency of Force in Asymmetrical Warfare and Counterinsurgency: The Case of Chechnya," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 5 (2011): p, 664.
[10] Miakinkov, "The Agency of Force," p. 674.
[11] Miakinkov, "The Agency of Force," pp. 673-674.
[12] Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars*, p. 38.

counterinsurgency operations. E. Miakinkov argues the Russians' number one lesson in the First Chechen War was the importance of creating conditions to allow for the use of massive and indiscriminate firepower on the Chechens. When successful, both the rebels and the Chechen population would be subdued through protracted and unbearable destruction.[13]

According to the Russians, the most important condition that allowed for the Russian use of force in the second war was the ability to control the domestic opinion. They attributed the failure in the first Chechen War to the Russian public's moral unwillingness to accept the brutality and casualties of the war. In particular, the deaths of thousands of Russian conscripts increased the pressure from the public opinion to end the war.[14] During the first war the press had considerable access to the combat zone. Both Russian and Western reporters were embedded with Russian units and the rebels. However, in the Second Chechen War both the press and the information available to the public were strictly controlled. Therefore, Russian authorities could effectively portray the campaign as necessary to neutralize terrorists, and to reduce the impact of high casualty rates. This led to a more permissible public opinion in Russia.[15] Another important measure to alleviate the domestic opposition was the introduction of contract soldiers, the *kontraktniki*, and locally recruited militia. The death of a *kontraktniki* or a Chechen militiaman would not create the same emotional reaction in Russia as the death of a young and forcefully conscripted regular soldier.[16] Thus, the Russian behavior in the Second Chechen War points to a strategic culture that emphasizes brute conventional force, and where information operations, targeted at the domestic Russian population, were used to allow this massive use of conventional force.

2008 Russo-Georgian War

During the night between 7 and 8 August, the Georgian president Saakashvili ordered his troops to advance towards Tskhinvali to halt a Russian invasion and to stop

[13] Miakinkov, "The Agency of Force," p. 674.
[14] Miakinkov, "The Agency of Force," p. 665.
[15] Hodgson, "Is the Russian bear learning?" pp. 75-76; Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars*, pp. 62-64.
[16] Miakinkov, "The Agency of Force," 665-666.

the shelling of Georgian villages by South Ossetian forces. The Georgian forces started the operation with a heavy artillery attack on Tskhinvali, lasting through the night.[17] However, there are controversies surrounding the validity of the claim that Saakashvili merely reacted to a Russian threat. W. Richter, one of the contributors to the EU's facts finding mission, claimed Georgian forces had planned and prepared for an offensive operation into South Ossetia for some time. Thus, a possible Russian invasion was used as a pretext for the Georgian operation.[18] In this perspective, the Russian invasion was indeed a reaction to Georgian aggression, and not the other way around. The simultaneity of the two attacks makes it difficult, at least within the scope of this article, to establish which party attacked first. However, irrespective of who attacked whom, this article concludes the Russian Armed Forces had planned and prepared for the invasion. By the morning of 8 August, Georgian forces had seized parts of Tskhinvali, but the advancing Russian forces forced them to withdraw during the next day. At this point Georgia faced a full-fledged Russian invasion, including large, mechanized forces, attacking through South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and into Georgia proper.[19]

From then on, the Russians advanced with little opposition into Georgia. Gori, a strategically placed town south of South Ossetia, and several towns along the Black Sea coast were seized.[20] Large parts of the Georgian Army retreated to the city of Mtskheta, a natural defensive position controlling access to Tbilisi, and prepared for a last stand.[21] Although a cease-fire agreement, brokered by the French President N. Sarkozy, was accepted 12 August, the Russian advance continued and several violations of the cease-fire occurred later. For example, about 20 Georgian soldiers were taken prisoner 19 August, along with US Army jeeps, in the Georgian town of Poti.[22]

It is disputable whether Russia provoked the 2008 Russo-Georgian War; however, it is certain that Russia made preparations for a war with Georgia during the

[17] Johanna Popjanevski, "From Sukhumi to Tskhinvali: The Path to War in Georgia," in *The Guns of August: Russia's War in Georgia*, eds. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (M. E. Sharp Inc: New York, 2009), pp. 150-151.
[18] Wolfgang Richter, "Initial Military Operations during the War in Georgia in August 2008," *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, issue 10 (2009): pp. 6-7.
[19] Popjanevski, "From Sukhumi to Tskhinvali," p. 152.
[20] Popjanevski, "From Sukhumi to Tskhinvali," pp. 152-153.
[21] Pavel Felgenhauer, "After August 7: The Escalation of the Russian-Georgian War," in *The Guns of August: Russia's War in Georgia*, eds. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (M. E. Sharp Inc: New York, 2009), pp. 174-176.
[22] Felgenhauer, "After August 7," pp. 176, 178-179.

spring and summer of 2008.[23] President Medvedev admitted to Russian preparations for war during a TV interview; he explained that he foresaw the Georgian operation and stated, "so we prepared for that, and as a result of our preparations the operation was a success."[24] Russia was preparing its operation by the pre-deployment of forces within Georgia and along the border. An alleged Georgian military build-up within Abkhazia, though not confirmed by the United Nations Observer Mission to Georgia (UNOMIG), was used as a pretext for an increase of Russian peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia.[25] Additionally, South Ossetian security forces were bolstered by volunteers from Russia.[26] But most importantly, the *Kavkas*-2008 exercise conveniently placed a large Russian force, partly the same force used in the invasion, along the border of Georgia. In fact, the exercise itself was framed by a scenario where Russian forces would assist Russian peacekeepers within Georgia in a peace enforcement operation. The exercise included 8,000 servicemembers, 700 armored vehicles, 30 aircraft and elements from the Black Sea Fleet.[27] Illustratively, through the latter half of July, Russian paratroopers were guarding the northern entrance of the strategically important Roki tunnel on the border to South Ossetia.[28]

Finally, and maybe most tellingly, a Russian battalion of railway troops was conducting maintenance and repair on a 54 km stretch of railway in Abkhazia that was later used in the invasion.[29] This railway contributed significantly to the speed and logistical support of the Russian advance through Abkhazia and into Western parts of Georgia. Undoubtedly, Russia was prepared for war at the outbreak on 7 August.

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[23] Popjanevski, "From Sukhumi to Tskhinvali," pp. 153-155; Martin Malek, "Georgia & Russia: The 'Unknown' Prelude to the 'Five Day War'," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2009): pp. 227-232.

[24] Felgenhauer, "After August 7," p. 166.

[25] Popjanevski, "From Sukhumi to Tskhinvali," pp. 145, 150.

[26] Roy Allison, "Russia resurgent? Moscow's campaign to 'coerce Georgia to peace,'" *International Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2008): p. 1147.

[27] Carolina V. Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, "Russia's war in Georgia: lessons and consequences," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no. 2 (2009): pp. 405-406.

[28] Andrej Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008," in *The Guns of August: Russia's War in Georgia*, eds. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (M. E. Sharp Inc: New York, 2009), pp. 71-72.

[29] Allison, "Russia Resurgent?" p. 1151.

This leads to another question regarding the lead-up to the war. Did the Georgian government receive a warning of the impending military action, or was the Russian operation launched without the intent of giving Georgian authorities the opportunity to yield to Russian interests? In the period of escalating violence in South Ossetia prior to the Russian attack, it is difficult to find examples of Russian threatening acts communicating large-scale use of military force directed towards Georgian authorities. The Russian violation of Georgian airspace above South Ossetia with four Su-24s on 8 July, openly admitted by Russia after the expected Georgian protest, is one of few relevant examples of pre-war signaling of major military operations.[30] Also, the Russian lack of interest in Georgian cease-fire offers, first the unilateral cease-fire on 7 August to defuse the tense situation in South Ossetia, and then the offer on 10 August when Georgia was in danger of getting overrun completely,[31] shows little emphasis on intra-conflict negotiations. Overall, Russian behavior resembles precautions to assure initial penetration of Georgian defenses. A lack of last-minute warnings and political initiatives that could reveal the intent and scope of the invasion were combined with effective preparations. In particular, the repair of the railroad and the *Kavkas*-2008 exercise were specific actions to assist tempo and penetration of a conventional force.

The nature of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, with the combination of an intra-state and inter-state conflict, meant that irregular forces were present during the hostilities. There were separatist militias both in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Additionally, a large group of North Ossetian volunteers joined their South Ossetian brethren in the build-up to the war, and, finally, two battalions of Chechen militiamen fought alongside Russian forces in South Ossetia.[32] During the critical hours of 7 to 8 August South Ossetian irregular forces were defending Tskhinvali against the Georgian assault. This resistance enabled the Russian main force to get through the Roki tunnel where a relatively small Georgian force could have blocked the Russian advance. Thus, the presence of a small South Ossetian force, using asymmetrical methods such as hit-

[30] Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications* (Strategic Studies Institute: Carlisle, PA, 2011), pp. 19-20.
[31] Popjanevski, "From Sukhumi to Tskhinvali," pp. 150-151; Misha Dzhindzhikhashvili, "Russia expands Georgia blitz, deploy ships," *Associated Press*, 10 August 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20080811225805/http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080810/ap_on_re_eu/georgia_south_ossetia.
[32] Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military*, pp. 42-43.

and-run tactics and the use of civilian clothing,[33] harassed and delayed the Georgian operation. Accordingly, under the assumption that the South Ossetian defense of Tskhinvali was designed and directed by the Russian leadership, the initial phase of the conflict shows an example of effective exploitation of irregular warfare methods. However, an equal or even more likely explanation of these events is that the South Ossetians were not influenced directly by Russian command, but their effort just happened to coincide with the Russian operational need to delay Georgian countermeasures at the Roki tunnel. On the other hand, Russian forces were using irregular units to solve conventional tasks. For example, militia forces in South Ossetia were used in mopping-up operations and in other auxiliary roles;[34] in Abkhazia, militia forces, supported by Russian forces, seized the Georgian stronghold of the Kodori Gorge, illustrating such conventional tasks.

The Russian strategic vulnerabilities presented by the Roki tunnel and the Caucasian mountains, which constituted a natural barrier on the northern border of Georgia, increased the strategic risk of launching the Russian invasion. Additionally, the dispersion of Russian forces and the possibility of countermeasures from Georgian partners, most notably the USA, would also incur risk to the Russian war effort. In a short-term perspective, such countermeasures could be supplements of weapons and intelligence, or threatening maneuvers conducted far from Caucasus. In a long-term perspective, the very unlikely, but still plausible, event of introduction of NATO-forces into the conflict could become catastrophic to Russian interests in the region. In a protracted conflict between Russia and Georgia that scenario was not perceived as impossible, at least not by Russian authorities.[35] It is important to note that the size of the Russian force used in the invasion, probably 40,000 servicemembers or more,[36] was a considerable portion of the combat ready Russian forces. Consequently, the speed and resolution of the Russian invasion, both the decision to initiate military operations and the operations themselves, can be explained by risk-management considerations.

[33] Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military*, pp. 42-43.
[34] Cohen and Hamilton, *The Russian Military*, pp. 42-43; George T. Jr. Donovan, *Russian Operational Art in the Russo-Georgian War of 2008* (Strategic Studies Institute: Carlisle, PA, 2009), p. 14.
[35] Allison, "Russia Resurgent?" p. 1165.
[36] See Felgenhauer, "After August 7," p. 173; Tor Bukkvoll, "Russia's Military Performance in Georgia," *Military Review* 89, no. 6 (2009): p. 57.

It seems that the Russians used deception and secrecy to reduce the risk of effective countermeasures to the invasion. The apparent Russian preference to avoid clearly stating their intentions, for example through a clear escalation of force, indicates they value secrecy and deception for risk-management purposes. Also, the lack of compliance with the cease-fire agreement and continuous military operation far beyond their officially stated strategic objective – protecting Russian peacekeepers and avoiding a South Ossetian genocide – reduced the Georgian ability to act to comply with Russian demands. When the Russian invasion was launched, conventional forces continued their advance until the Georgian ability to resist was neutralized; no potential Georgian concessions seemed able to alter the Russian military progress.

Russian Invasion of Crimea, 2014

One perspective on the Russian invasion of Crimea is that it was mainly covert and without the use of significant conventional force.[37] This article will argue that the Russian invasion of Crimea was conducted as a conventional invasion, and that it was "bloodless" due to the vulnerable strategic situation of Ukraine. That is, the lack of resistance did not originate from a Russian covert mode of operations, but from the extraordinary strategic realities Ukraine was facing. Despite Russian forces being unmarked, they mostly used Russian uniforms, Russian equipment, and would easily expose their Russian nationality through interaction with the Ukrainian forces and civilian population; thus, there could be no doubt for the local Ukrainian forces or central authorities that the unmarked troops were Russian soldiers.[38] For example, in the meeting of the UN Security Council 1 March 2014, the Ukrainian UN Permanent Representative claimed "[Russian] troops were already in country and their numbers

[37] See Ben Connable, Jason H. Campbell and Dan Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2016), pp. 19-20; Dave Johnson, *Russia's Approach to Conflict – Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defence* (NATO Defense College: Rome, 2015), p. 8, http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=449.

[38] See Anton Lavrov, "Russian Again: The Military Operation for Crimea," in *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, eds. Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (East View Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2014), p. 173.

were increasing, constituting an act of aggression."[39] However, the intentions of the Russian invasion force would be harder to discern.

The Russian operation, which started to enter Ukrainian territory on 24 February, was primarily conducted by conventional forces operating overtly. Naval infantry from the Russian base at Sevastopol appeared in the city of Sevastopol on 24 February, and in Yalta on 25 February.[40] On the morning of 28 February, Russian military transport and attack helicopters entered Crimea, and simultaneously, Russian forces equipped with APCs and light utility vehicles seized key military and political installations and infrastructure.[41] From 6 March, and especially after 12 March, mechanized forces with artillery and air-defense support started to cross the Kerch strait at the eastern tip of the Crimean Peninsula.[42] With some exceptions, the literature does not indicate Russian forces in civilian clothing, Ukrainian uniforms, or mainly operating hidden. A notable exception are the gunmen, allegedly Russian special forces operators, seizing Crimean government buildings in Simferopol on 27 February.[43] In addition to the Russian conventional forces, there were several pro-Russian militias operating in a way that portrayed them as locally led and loyal to the Crimean authorities. However, they were operating alongside Russian conventional forces, unable to disguise the existence of a Russian invasion, and they were most likely playing a supplementary role in the invasion.[44] Indeed, a covert invasion presupposes that the bulk of the invading force needs to be unrecognized by the defender; obviously, the simple measures of removing badges and flags did not fool the Ukrainians. Thus, despite the lack of Ukrainian resistance, the Russian invasion of Crimea relied primarily on overt and conventional military force.

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[39] United Nations, "Security Council Meeting Report 7124," Meeting about the situation in Crimea, March 01, 2014, ref. S/PV.7124. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/spv7124.phpf.

[40] Kofman *et al*, *Lessons from Russia's Operations*, p. 7.

[41] Kofman *et al*, *Lessons from Russia's Operations*, p. 9; Lavrov, "Russian Again," pp. 164-165.

[42] Kofman *et al*, *Lessons from Russia's Operations*, pp. 9-10; Lavrov, "Russian Again," pp. 171-172.

[43] Kofman *et al*, *Lessons from Russia's Operations*, p. 8.

[44] Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in the war in Ukraine – Crimea and Donbas," in *Russia and Hybrid Warfare: Going Beyond the Label*, eds. Bettina Renz and Hannah Smith, (Kikimora Publications: Aleksanteri Institute University of Helsinki, Helsinki, 2016), p. 28, https://www.google.no/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0ahUKEwiO38_1yIvXAhVNKFAKHYExAGMQFggguMAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.stratcomcoe.org%2Fdownload%2Ffile%2Ffid%2F4920&usg=AOvVaw2HUcl2dQ3JTA8CEjs1yQaT.

The lack of a Ukrainian forceful response was more a result of the strategic situation than any uncertainty about the reality of a Russian invasion. Firstly, Russia's implied threat to invade or punish mainland Ukraine if they intervened in Crimea, amplified by the Russian 40,000 men strong exercise along the eastern borders of Ukraine, created a Ukrainian aversion against military action. Additionally, the memory of Georgia's hotheaded actions in the prelude to the 2008 Georgian War, creating a Russian pretext for the war, was probably a serious consideration for the Ukrainian leadership.[45] Uncertainty about the Russian intentions created a fear of unnecessary escalations in case the Russian intervention was limited or temporary. Secondly, the chaotic state of the Ukrainian polity, and thus the ineptitude of the political and military leadership to show resolve, reduced the ability to present a forceful and united response to the Russian invasion. Thirdly, the Crimean authorities, population, and locally deployed military units were largely acting compliantly or passively in the face of the Russian invasion. A general dissatisfaction with the Ukrainian government and cultural bonds to Russia in large parts of the population created a permissive environment for the Russian invasion force.[46] Thus, the Ukrainian willingness to halt the Russian invasion by force seemed impotent, and this was mainly caused by the strategic realities. The Ukrainian authorities did also order their forces in Crimea to refrain from any active resistance.[47]

It is reasonably to say that a Russian "declaration of intervention" at the start of the invasion of Crimea would probably not provoke a military response from NATO.[48] After all, NATO did not get militarily involved in the conflict in Donbas, which did not transition into a *fait accompli*. Also, an internal insurgency in Crimea or Donbas would be potentially less risky for NATO to get involved with than the direct confrontation with the Russian Federation. Aiding the Ukrainian government in fighting a local insurgency would probably be more acceptable to NATO-countries than a military conflict with an opponent armed with nuclear weapons. In other words, if Russian involvement was ambiguous, the probability of NATO intervention could be higher. In the end, the West settled on a policy of political condemnation and targeted sanctions.

[45] Kofman *et al*, *Lessons from Russia's Operations,* pp. 23-24.
[46] Anton A. Bebler, "Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict," *Security Policy Library,* issue 1-2015, (The Norwegian Atlantic Committee: Oslo, 2015), pp. 11-15, http://www.atlanterhavskomiteen.no/files/dnak/Documents/Publikasjoner/2015/Spb_1-15.pdf.
[47] Lavrov, "Russian Again," p. 166.
[48] See Bebler, "Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict," p. 5.

The Russian information operation was primarily targeted at a Russian domestic audience.[49] The strategic communication included messages that were meant to portray the interim Ukrainian government as illegitimate and the result of an illegal and "fascist" coup. The Euromaidan was described as a pro-Western and nationalist movement, threatening the Russian population in Ukraine, and especially in Crimea.[50] Another part of the information operation was the Russian denial of the deployment of its forces to Crimea. This Russian denial continued until Putin acknowledged the involvement of Russian forces on 17 April.[51] At that point, the need to show accountability for the security of the Crimean population overrode the effort of disguising the extent and intent of the invasion. After all, one of the main narratives was that the people of Crimea needed to become part of Russia to protect them from the "fascist" government in Kiev. Again, Russia used information operations, at least partly, to justify the use of substantial conventional force.

As mentioned above, the strategic situation was the primary factor pacifying the Ukrainian forces in Crimea; the Russian official denial of the invasion played a minor role. If the Ukrainian forces had believed their opponents were local paramilitary groups, the consequences of using force against them would be lesser. Thus, it is unlikely that the initial Russian denial of the invasion was aimed at deceiving Ukraine and the West of the actual existence of Russian military operations in Crimea. A more likely explanation is to avoid disclosure of the exact timing and intent of the invasion. At the outset of the invasion, Russian forces severed communications between the Ukrainian forces in Crimea and their superiors in mainland Ukraine, thus contributing to the chaos and uncertainty within the Ukrainian chain of command. However, this was done either through the physical cutting of landlines by Russian special forces, or the interception of electromagnetic signals, especially cell phone services, conducted by ship-based electromagnetic jamming originating in the Black Sea.[52] That is, these

[49] Kofman *et al*, *Lessons from Russia's Operations,* p. 12.
[50] Bebler, "Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict," pp. 13-14; Kofman *et al*, *Lessons from Russia's Operations,* pp. 12-13.
[51] Geir Flikke, "A Timeline for the Conflict and War in Ukraine," *Security Policy Library,* issue 4-2015, (The Norwegian Atlantic Committee: Oslo, 2015), pp. 17-18, http://www.atlanterhavskomiteen.no/files/dnak/Documents/Publikasjoner/2015/Sikkerhetspolitisk%20Bibliotek/NR%204-15%2014.%20august.pdf.
[52] Kofman, et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations,* p. 10.

operations focused on the physical and electromagnetic domain, evidently within the scope of conventional warfare. The obscuration of the intent and disposition of an invasion force, through denying their existence in critical phases of an operation, is part of the traditional Russian concept of *maskirovka*.[53] It is to "mislead (…) the enemy with regard to the presence and dispositions of troops and military objectives."[54] That is, *maskirovka* reduces the opponent's ability to disrupt or avert an attack. This article does not refute that the Russian information operations included an effort to blur the existence of an invasion. On the contrary, it is a trademark of Russian operations.[55] However, it argues that the so-called "plausible deniability" by itself had marginal effect on the local Ukrainian forces' will and ability to resist. Still, it was able to create some confusion about the intent of the Russian forces, and consequently contributed to an unimpeded advance in the operation's vulnerable preliminary phase.

The decision to "bring Crimea back into Russia" was allegedly made on the night of 22 February in a meeting between Putin and other Russian top leaders.[56] Already three days later, the Russian Armed Forces initiated a large so-called "snap exercise" involving 150,000 soldiers from the Western Military District. The stated purpose was to inspect force readiness. From this mobilization of forces, selected units were redirected towards the Crimean theater. *Spetsnaz* and airborne infantry forces had been deployed even earlier.[57] Subsequently, forces were deployed close to the eastern border of Ukraine as a diversion and a threat, facilitating the invasion of the peninsula. Eventually, a force of 30,000–40,000 soldiers was massed at the Ukrainian eastern border. Another "snap exercise," involving 65,000 soldiers, was conducted a few weeks later in the Central Military District.[58] These "snap exercises" show a remarkable Russian ability to mobilize large forces in a short timeframe. Consequently, Russian decision-makers are able to adequately react to eventualities, pursue contingency plans when appropriate, and conduct show of force when needed. The rapid build-up of

[53] Kristin V. Bruusgaard, "Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul," *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (2014): p. 83.
[54] Bruusgaard, "Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul," p. 83.
[55] Johnson, *Russia's Approach to Conflict*, p. 1.
[56] BBC, "Putin reveals secrets of Russia's Crimea takeover plot," *BBC*, March 9, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226.
[57] Kofman *et al*, *Lessons from Russia's Operations*, pp. 7-8.
[58] Heidi Reisinger and Aleksandr Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War Below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence," in *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats*, eds. Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen, (NATO Defense College: Rome, 2015), p. 118, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/185744/rp_105.pdf.

conventional forces constitutes a threat of sudden and overwhelming use of force to a potential opponent; thus, this kind of "snap exercises" is an effective coercive instrument. For example, as Russian forces gained control of the Crimean Peninsula, the Russian force at Ukraine's eastern border created an effective deterrent, contributing to the pacification of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in Crimea. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether the invasion of Crimea was premediated long beforehand, the fact that a large exercise in 2013, *Zapad*-2013 (West-2013), had rehearsed operations along the eastern border of Ukraine indicates that a major conflict with Ukraine was one of the Russian contingencies at the time.[59] Thus, the Russian invasion of Crimea seems, at least in part, to be launched on the basis of comprehensive preparations.

Russian Strategic Culture

Most states' armed forces plan for contingences. In case of invasion, international crisis or mobilization, a campaign plan usually exists. One of the central similarities in the three cases is the Russian preference for not only planning, but also preparing for specific contingencies. The most prominent example is the Russian use of large-scale exercises, both to train for specific events and to deploy forces close to a potential area of operations. Before the Second Chechen War and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, large exercises, rehearsing operations similar to the corresponding war, were conducted during the period leading up to the outbreak of hostilities. In conjunction with the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the 2014 Invasion of Crimea, large "snap exercises" facilitated the deployment of forces used in the conflicts.

The concept of foresight is central in Russian military thought. The ability to forecast armed conflicts, how they will be conducted and their likely outcome, is fundamental to the Russian strategic community.[60] This corresponds to the Russian preference for mathematical and scientific approaches when planning and executing

[59] Reisinger and Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare," 119 note.
[60] Timothy Thomas, "Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric – and Putin-Led," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28 (2015): pp. 451.

military operations.[61] This in turn leads Russian strategists to put confidence in predicting armed conflict. Consequently, the Russian Federation has the habit of planning, and even preparing, for potential conflicts. However, this does not mean the decision to use military force is made beforehand; still, the Russians will appear somewhat prepared when the decision is eventually made, which, tellingly, was true in all three cases.

In all three cases of Russian conflicts presented in this article, there were no ultimatums or large-scale show of force immediately before the outbreak of hostilities; the vulnerable initial phase of the military operation was concealed by *maskirovka* rather than disclosed by one last warning. The lack of adherence to cease-fire agreements during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War was another possible act of *maskirovka*. Russian forces continued their operations and seized additional Georgian territory after the cease-fire; thus, the Russians used deception to further strengthen their position on the ground.[62] While some covert military activity could be expected after the agreed cease-fire, continued large-scale maneuvers, seizing new ground, indicates a lack of emphasis on political factors. Russian forces bluntly continued military operations in violation of a cease-fire they had agreed to. Again, considerations with regard to the effective use of conventional forces seem to take primacy. Interestingly, the same approach was used in Donbas in connection with the first Minsk cease-fire agreement in 2014; Russian military operations continued after the implementation of the cease-fire agreement, thus improving the Russian military situation.[63] Additionally, so-called plausible deniability, exercised by Russian authorities during the Crimean invasion, is yet another example of *maskirovka*. The denial of the Russian invasion, concealing the intent of the apparent Russian presence on the peninsula, contributed to the general chaos and indecision in the Ukrainian forces. However, the Ukrainian lack of resistance derived primarily from the strategic and political situation rather than the lack of information. Also, it was not the first time Soviet or Russian forces had used similar methods; in the initial phase of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, 700 Soviet paratroopers, mostly Soviet Muslims dressed in Afghan uniforms, seized key buildings and infrastructure in

[61] Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces* (Foreign Military Studies Office, US Army: Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2016), pp. 38-58.
[62] Felgenhauer, "After August 7," pp. 176, 178-179.
[63] Thomas, "Russia's Military Strategy," p. 456.

Kabul. [64] Thus, the Russian use of deception and secrecy is not showing the metamorphosis of the Russian Armed Forces into something new; rather, it is a persistent supporting activity, aimed at inserting a conventional force into the area of operations.

The primacy of conventional force characterizes all three cases of Russian military operations. Looking at the invasion of Crimea, what appears to be a fundamental shift in the Russian emphasis away from conventional force is, in fact, a continuation. Despite the "bloodless" consequences, the invasion was mainly conducted with overt and conventional forces. In the Second Chechen War, the Russian Armed Forces chose an approach of punitive, massive and indiscriminate firepower to subdue the insurgents. They could have chosen an approach similar to Western COIN doctrine, emphasizing irregular forces and methods, and non-military elements, but they did not. Finally, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War was clearly a predominantly conventional invasion. Another interesting aspect, regarding the relationship between conventional and irregular forces, is the inconsistency in exploiting the asymmetry and advantages of each category. For example, in both the Second Chechen War and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Russian irregular forces were used to bolster the conventional forces, conducting conventional tasks, and thus assigning tasks to irregular forces to which they are less suited. Additionally, the Russian habit of targeting their domestic audience with propaganda, facilitating for major military operations, is an indication of the primacy of conventional measures. The negative impact of casualties and the moral stigma of offensive conventional operations is also present in Russia; however, Russian authorities uses information operations to facilitate for conventional operations rather than choosing different methods. In the Second Chechen War, the Russian information operations were predominantly aimed at lessening the emotional impact on the Russian population. Measures, such as control of media and denying the scale of casualty rates, allowed the use of massive and indiscriminate firepower more associated with conventional warfare.

As a side note, the Russian emphasis on conventional warfare is also recognizable through the "new look" reforms starting in 2008. Beyond bureaucratic

[64] Nicu Popescu, "Hybrid tactics: neither new nor only Russian," European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2015, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert_4_hybrid_warfare.pdf.

improvements, the "new look" reforms aimed at increasing readiness and procuring modern equipment for Russia's conventional forces.[65] As of 2018, the Russian Armed Forces was largely successful in modernizing their stocks of military hardware. Massive investments enabled that an estimated 59.5 per cent of all conventional equipment, such as fighter aircraft, main battle tanks and artillery pieces, were classified as modern by the end of 2017.[66] It seems that conventional capabilities are also prioritized when it comes to Russian government spending.

Conclusion

Then, combining the preference for preparations, *maskirovka*, and conventional force points to a Russian strategic culture where pre-emption and strategic surprise is paramount. First, specific planning and preparations assures favorable conditions, and then *maskirovka* is used to conceal these preparations and to achieve a strategic advantage in the initial vulnerable phase of an operation. Finally, the primacy of conventional force enables a rapid and decisive intervention. This results in a Russian inclination to strike first. The Russian geography and history can perhaps explain this inclination. S. R. Covington argues that in addition to Russian aspirations of being a major power, there is also a sense of strategic vulnerability. The Russian border is almost 60,000 km long, which means that the Russian Ground Forces, regardless of its size, will never be able to mount a continuous defense along the border.[67] Additionally, Russian strategic culture is greatly shaped by the experience of the 1941 invasion by Nazi-Germany. The unpreparedness of the Red Army and the devastation that followed the invasion have created a desire to never fight another war on Russian soil.[68] Thus, in

[65] See Mikhail Barabanov, "Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia," in *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, eds. Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (East View Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2014), pp. 91-123; Roger N. McDermott, "The Brain of the Russian Army: Futuristic Visions Tethered by the Past," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 1 (2014): pp. 4-35; Bettina Renz, "Why Russia Is Reviving Its Conventional Military Power," *Parameters* 46, no. 2 (2016): pp. 23-36.

[66] Richard Connolly and Mathieu Boulègue, *Russia's New State Armament Programme* (The Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, 2018), 7-8, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russia-s-new-state-armament-programme-implications-russian-armed-forces-and-military#.

[67] Stephen R. Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare* (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs: Cambridge, MA, 2016), pp. 13-15, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/Culture%20of%20Strategic%20Thought%203.pdf.

[68] Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought*, p. 37.

Russian strategic culture, there is no clear relationship between a defensive war and a defensive strategy. To defend itself, Russia will likely use its military forces offensively, and, if possible, pre-empt and surprise the opponent.[69]

As stated earlier, it is important to have a framework to interpret Russian conflict behavior if one wants to understand Russian international conduct and intentions. Though, the purpose of this article is not to understand *why* or *when*, but *how* Russia uses military force. That is, to explain Russian conflict behavior in instances where the decision to use military force is already made. Contrary to Western expectations, in Russian strategic culture final warnings and diplomatic advances will become less likely closer to the outbreak of hostilities. Additionally, the use of military force will likely be forceful and conventional in character. These inclinations in Russian strategic culture are crucial to understand when analyzing Russian conflict behavior; a failure to grasp the cultural difference between Western and Russian perceptions of military force can lead to grave failures in crisis management.

[69] Covington, *The Culture of Strategic Thought,* pp. 13-17.

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