

## Russia's Approach to Conflict – Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defence

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### Research Paper

ISSN 2076 – 0949  
(Res. Div. NATO Def. Coll., Print)  
ISSN 2076 – 0957  
(Res. Div. NATO Def. Coll., Online)

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### Introduction

NATO's traditional preparations for collective defence and its Article 5 commitments face a significant challenge in Russia's approach to conflict, which combines many well-known elements with modern concepts and capabilities in a holistic, multi-dimensional and flexible approach that targets perceived weaknesses of the Alliance. The Russian approach was initially labelled by some in the West after the start of the Ukraine crisis as "hybrid" warfare and treated as a new phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> However, it has gradually been recognised that the capabilities and methods used by Russia in its aggressive actions are not new or unique, although there are some innovations in their application.<sup>3</sup> One important innovation is exploitation of ambiguity, both of intent and attribution. The current Russian approach draws on longstanding Soviet and Russian practices – particularly *maskirovka* and deception to leverage perceived weaknesses – and historical military experience. Russian General Staff researchers recently made this point, writing:

*...it is mistaken to consider that the complex of such government-wide measures is something new or innovative; such actions have had their place in the entirety of the history of military art (interstate conflict), and naming them with terms such as "hybrid" and with prefixes such as "quasi," "neo," and so forth only testifies to the pretensions of various authors to the role of leading researchers in military science.<sup>4</sup>*

The Russian approach to conflict is based on a combination of: conclusions drawn from Moscow's perception of the evolution of military technology

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<sup>2</sup> "Hybrid" originated as a term to describe non-linear actions by non-state actors against state actors and gained widespread usage, referencing Hizballah approaches, after the 2006 Second Lebanon War. See, for example, I. Brun, While You Were Busy Making Other Plans – the Other RMA, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No 4, 535-565, August 2010, pp. 535-565 and O. Tamminga, Hybride Kriegsführung: Zur Einordnung Einer Aktuelle Erscheinungsform des Krieges, SWP-Aktuell 27, March 2015, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, O. Tamminga, Hybride Kriegsführung; also Kristen Ven Bruusgaard, Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul, *Parameters* 44(3) Autumn 2014, pp. 81-90; and H. Reisinger and A. Golts, Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War Below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence, NATO Defense College, *Research Paper 105*, November 2014.

<sup>4</sup> V. B. Andrianov and V.V. Loiko, Voprosy Primeneniia VS RF v Krizisnykh Situatsiiakh Mirnovo Vremeni, *Voennaya Mysl*, No. 1, January 2015, p. 68.

since the 1970s and of conflict since the end of the Cold War; new or adapted concepts derived from those perceptions; advanced technologies that Russia is now able to field in quantity; Russia's geostrategic position; and the unique circumstances of Russia's autocratic regime and the highly centralised and rapid decision making that it enables. In combination, these result in a Russian approach to conflict that is of broad scope (encompassing coordinated operations in the diplomatic, informational, cyber, military and economic dimensions), strategic depth (operating on the adversary's centres of gravity in all dimensions while defending its own), and of long duration (while operating on unpredictable extended or compressed timescales).

The Russian approach is geared toward achieving strategic aims without war (with a primary concern being to stay below NATO's threshold for reaction). However, it is backed-up by an increasingly capable, full-spectrum military poised to act when non-military means fail, to deter potential reactions to Moscow's border adventures, and to exploit opportunities for easy wins. Once the thin veneer of Russia's "hybrid warfare" is peeled back, its reliance on at least the leveraging, and potential employment, of full-spectrum conventional, unconventional and nuclear military capabilities is revealed. At bottom, Russia's reintroduction into Europe of power politics and great power competition enabled by military violence is its biggest innovation.<sup>5</sup>

## Elements of Russia's Approach to Conflict

Two phenomena have been very prominent in shaping the current Russian approach to conflict. The first is the "revolution in military affairs" brought about by parallel and inter-related developments in computerization and in air and space power. The second is the phenomenon of "colour revolutions," referred to by Russian military experts as examples of "controlled chaos" warfare methods.

## *The Revolution in Military Affairs*

Russian military leaders and theorists recognised as early as the mid-1970s the strategic implications of the potential combination of air and space power with emerging technologies such as precision guided munitions, drones and directed energy weapons, integrated with computer technologies. Then Chief of the General Staff Ogarkov and other experts saw these developments as a "revolution in military affairs" (RMA) leading to a future model of "air-space wars" conducted with reconnaissance-strike complexes (combining air and space power, computerised precision munitions, and automated command, control, communications and computer/intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems (C4ISR)).<sup>6</sup> The emerging capabilities and related concepts were not adopted on an operationally significant scale due to the conservatism of the Soviet military establishment, the stagnation of the Soviet economy and the limited high-tech capacities of the Soviet defence industry.<sup>7</sup> Similar obstacles to their adoption by the post-Soviet Russian military persisted into the early 2000s.

The Soviet military leadership, its confidence already undermined by its failure in Afghanistan, was therefore shaken by its observations of US employment against Iraq in the 1991 Operation DESERT STORM of precisely the reconnaissance-strike complex that Marshall Ogarkov had foreseen. As significant, the US methods enabled a 100-hour air campaign to paralyse what was then the fourth-largest army in the world, which was mostly armed with Soviet weapons and operated according to Soviet doctrine. Soviet military analysts observed the depth, precision and lethality of conventional precision-guided munitions in that conflict and concluded that the line between conventional weapons and tactical nuclear weapons was being blurred, if not erased.<sup>8</sup> These conclusions were reinforced for the post-Soviet Russian military leadership by the incipient global strike capabilities and "non-contact" military operations without land force employment demonstrated against Yugoslavia dur-

<sup>5</sup> See Mike Winnerstig, Marta Carlsson, Jakob Hedenskog, Anna Sundberg and Carolina Vendil Pallin, "Security Policy and Strategic Consequences," in Niklas Granholm, Johannes Malminen, and Gudrun Persson, eds., *A Rude Awakening: Ramifications of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine*, FOI-R-3892-SE (Stockholm: FOI, June 2014), p. 63 who assess that "The major consequences of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine for the European security order can be summarised in the following way: geopolitical struggle has returned with a vengeance and will not go away. In a direct way, this presents a fundamental challenge to the permanent formation of a liberal, rules-based security order in Europe."

<sup>6</sup> Mary C. Fitzgerald, Marshal Ogarkov and the New Revolution in Soviet Military Affairs, *Defense Analysis*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1990, pp. 167-191.

<sup>7</sup> M. Gareev, *Esli Zavtra Voyna?*, Moscow, VlaDar, 1995, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> Yu. V. Lebedev, I. S. Liutov and V. A. Nazurenko, *Voyna v Zone Persidskovo Zaliva: Uroki I Vyvody, Voennaya Mysl'*, No. 11-12, November-December 1991, pp. 109-117.



ing Operation ALLIED FORCE in 1999.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet and Russian military leadership saw as another outcome of the revolution in military affairs the looming obsolescence of large-sized land formations geared towards massive force-on-force engagements – the corollary requirement being to transition to more mobile formations possessing concentrated firepower, able to defend against “air-space attack” and fully integrated within the reconnaissance-strike complex that enables “non-contact” attrition and destruction of the adversary.<sup>10</sup> Progress in fielding such capabilities became possible as Russia reaped the benefits of high oil prices and broke down institutional barriers to military reform after the 2008 conflict in Georgia.

### *Full-Spectrum Military Capabilities*

Russia has succeeded in transforming the neglected and dysfunctional armed forces it inherited from the Soviet Union into an effective fighting force through a combination of sustained political will and massive financial investment. Capability shortfalls remain and economic decline is raising potential obstacles to sustaining the pace of military modernisation but Russia's plans through 2020 remain on track, with additional gains in readiness, mobility and firepower anticipated. Russia's military is increasingly able to support a range of options, including in non-linear/ hybrid scenarios, due to substantial ongoing progress in its military reform and modernisation plans. General Gerasimov has outlined priorities that include substantial modernisation of Russia's nuclear forces; continued development of high-readiness joint forces emphasising firepower and mobility; improved special forces capabilities; enhanced C3I; robotics; and layered air-space defence.<sup>11</sup> Like President Putin, he has also confirmed Russia's intention to retain

nuclear weapons under current and foreseeable circumstances even as the military pursues increased capability in long-range conventional precision strike.<sup>12</sup>

Substantial institutional, systemic and economic obstacles persist – and will be exacerbated by Crimea-related sanctions – but Russian military capabilities can be expected to improve gradually over the current planning and acquisition period to 2020.<sup>13</sup> The results of the improvements to date, as well as the shortfalls, are evident in Russia's operations in and around the Ukraine conflict, in Russia's increasingly challenging annual strategic exercises and the series of snap (surprise) exercises it has conducted since 2013. Of particular interest in the context of potential future crisis scenarios, Defence Minister Shoygu has said that the snap exercises are training to a benchmark for deployment of 65,000 troops over a distance of 3,000 kilometres within 72 hours.<sup>14</sup>

### *A Potential New Rung on the Escalation Ladder*

Economic, technological and industrial factors permitting, conventional precision-guided munitions may play an increasing role, along with nuclear weapons, in Russia's deterrent strategies. The Soviet Military concluded in 1991, on the basis of what it observed in the Gulf War, that conventional precision guided munitions (PGMs) could have effects previously achievable only with nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup> However, it was decades before the Russian military could field significant numbers of precision weapons. Advocates for widespread adoption of conventionally armed long-range precision weapons, such as then Deputy Minister of Defence Kokoshin, argued that over-reliance on nuclear weapons was dangerous to Russia's security as it could limit its options in a crisis.

<sup>9</sup> Sergey Sokut, Malaia Triada Pentagona, *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, No. 14, 16 April 1999, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Mary C. Fitzgerald, Advanced Conventional Munitions and Moscow's Defensive Force Posture, *Defense Analysis*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1990, pp. 171-178 and Yu. G. Sizov and A. L. Skokov, Znachenie Vysokotochnovo Oruzhiia v Sovremennoi Voine, *Voenmaya Mysl'*, No. 12, December 1992, pp. 37-42.

<sup>11</sup> V. Gerasimov, Nachal'nik Rossiskovo Genshtaba – Ob Osnovnykh Zadachakh Razvitiia Armii, *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 12 September 2014, <http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2014-09-12>

<sup>12</sup> V. Gerasimov, Pervoye Glavnoye Ispytanie: Yadernyi Arsenal Ostaetsia Vazhneshei Garantiei Natsional'noi Bezopasnosti, *Voenno-Promyshlenyi Kur'er*, 29 August 2014, <http://vpk-news.ru/print/articles/21648>.

<sup>13</sup> On this, see for example Jakob Hedenskog and Carolina Vendil Palin, Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2013, FOI, December 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Novosti, Shoigu Dolozhil Putinu, Skol'ko Voisk Mozhno Operativno Perebrosit' Na Rostoyaniye v Tri Tysiachi Kilometrov, 2 July 2014, <http://palm.newsru.com/russia/02jul2014/shoigu.html>

<sup>15</sup> Lebedev, Voina, p. 113.

Because of their ability to achieve strategic effects with conventional munitions, Kokoshin believed the new weapons should be differentiated from traditional conventional weapons and so labelled them “non-nuclear” weapons. Also because of their potential strategic effects, Kokoshin saw PGMs’ potential to augment nuclear deterrence at a point on the escalation ladder that he called “non-nuclear (pre-nuclear) deterrence.”<sup>16</sup> President Putin has validated this dual concept of long-range precision munitions providing for increased freedom of action in regional crises as well as augmenting strategic deterrence. He wrote in 2012 (just before his re-election to the presidency) that long-range conventional precision munitions (and eventually future weapons based on new physical principles) “are comparable to employment of nuclear weapons in results but more “acceptable” in political and military terms. In this manner, the role of the strategic balance of nuclear forces in deterring aggression will gradually decline.”<sup>17</sup>

Now that Russia has both the economic and technical means to field long-range conventional PGMs in substantial numbers, this long-standing concept, which may also include other elements related to a more western understanding of “conventional deterrence,” has been affirmed in the 2014 Military Doctrine.<sup>18</sup> Whether Russia’s military industry will be able to support the concept technically under post-Crimea sanctions is an open question.<sup>19</sup> In any case, Russia’s political and military leaders have indicated that strategic nuclear capability will remain the cornerstone of national security in the mid-to-long-term. Meanwhile, Russia’s propensity to field dual-capable systems in combination with its new thinking on the role of conventional precision-guided munitions in deterrence scenarios will contribute to am-

biguity and uncertainty, particularly in crisis scenarios. Additionally, Russian perceptions that the US enjoyed enhanced freedom of action in regional crises due to its dominance in this weapons category suggests the Russian military may see a particular role in regional scenarios for these weapons as their capabilities and fielded numbers increase.<sup>20</sup>

### *Key Enabler - Centralised Decision-Making and Modernised Command and Control*

Russia’s political and military leaders have placed priority on coordinated action across the government and military in support of national defence. This includes developing enhanced military command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems (C4ISR) to enable centralised command and control within a military “unified information space” integrated into a larger government “unified information space.” The important policy decision to empower the General Staff as the coordinating authority over other ministries and departments contributing to national defence (reportedly numbering around 50 but with the Federal Security Service, Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry for Emergency Situations at the top of the hierarchy along with MOD) entered into force along with other steps to enhance territorial defence in April 2013.<sup>21</sup> The National Centre for Direction of the Defence of the Russian Federation (NCDD), with subordinate centres in the military districts and administrative regions, is the General Staff’s tool for implementing that mandate. The NCDD was built on an accelerated timetable after the General Staff was given its expanded responsibilities and began 24/7 combat watch

<sup>16</sup> A. A. Kokoshin, *Politiko-Voennoe i Voenno-Strategicheskie Problemy Natsional’noi Bezopasnosti Rossii i Mezhdunarodnoi Bezopasnosti*, Vyshaia Shkola Ekonomiki, Moscow, 2013, pp. 213-223.

<sup>17</sup> V. Putin, *Byt’ Sil’nymi: Garantii Natsional’noi Bezopasnosti Dlia Rossii*, *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, No. 5708 (35), 20 February 2012, <http://www.rg.ru/2012/02/20/putin-armiya.html>.

<sup>18</sup> 2014 Russian Military Doctrine, 26 December 2014, paragraphs 26 and 32, <http://Kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> *Sovet Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii, O Strategii Natsional’noi Bezopasnosti SShA*, 25 March 2015, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/865.html>. In its assessment of the 2015 US National Security Strategy, the Russian Security Council concluded that US-led sanctions, including those preventing access to military arms markets, could complicate Russian production of high-technology systems.

<sup>20</sup> V. Selivanov, I.P. Machneva and Yu. D. Il’in, *Dolgosrochnoe Prognozirovanie Napravlenii Razvitiia Vysokotochnykh Boyepripasov*, *Voennaya Mysl’*, No. 4, April 2014, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Federal’nyi Zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 5 Aprelia 2013 g. N 55-F3, O Vnesenii Izmenenii v Otdel’nie Zakonodatel’nie Akty Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 10 April 2013, <http://www.rg.ru/printable/2013/04/10/akti-dok.html>. S. I. Skokov, L. V. Grushka, *Vliianiye Kontseptsii Setetsentrizma na Evoliutsii i Funktsionirovaniye Sistemy Upravleniia Vooruzhenymi Silami Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, *Voennaya Mysl’*, No. 12, December 2014, pp. 33-41. The concept and mandate for MOD coordination authority is as important, if not more so, than the NCDD itself, which is located on Frunze Embankment in Moscow and likely has an analogous hardened back-up facility elsewhere.





on a test basis from 28 March 2014, upgrading to full operational capability on 1 December 2014.<sup>22</sup>

General Gerasimov has said that the NCDD comprises two main centres, the centre for combat command and a centre for day-to-day operational coordination among the armed forces and all elements of government contributing to national defence. The NCDD also includes “other centres for direction of special questions.” The NCDD’s commanding two-star general and its duty officers are responsible to maintain situational awareness, assess developments and make recommendations in order to enable quick decision-making on employment of the armed forces by the political-military leadership.<sup>23</sup>

The establishment of the NCDD is part of Russia’s response to the demands of net-centric warfare, along with force-wide communications upgrades and heavy investment in C4ISR. It is an important enabler for Russia’s close coordination and integration of disparate tools at all levels of conflict.

### *Colour Revolutions/Controlled Chaos*

Moscow views the so-called colour revolutions (such as the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine) as coups catalysed and orchestrated by the US and the European Union in order to isolate Russia within a belt of hostile nations or area of instability. Russian experts see as the “technology of colour revolution”: the long-term foreign cultivation and financing of an internal opposition and general di-

visions within society; creation or co-optation of an opposition elite; foreign NGOs and outside agents advocating “globalisation” and “westernisation”; campaigns in support of democracy; and exploitation of elections. President Putin and other Russian leaders see these as the generic elements of foreign-orchestrated campaigns to create crises of legitimacy for Moscow-friendly regimes and to pave the way for their overthrow (“regime change”). Russian experts and leaders increasingly refer to this methodology as “controlled chaos” or as a “strategy of attrition and destruction.”<sup>24</sup> While the post-Soviet colour revolutions sparked this line of thinking, a growing number of Russian experts apply this concept retrospectively to the collapse of the Soviet Union - with a particular focus on the impact of the Helsinki Accords - bringing into focus the leadership’s belief that Russia is now the target of a similar campaign.<sup>25</sup> This view was officially expressed in March 2015 when the Russian Security Council assessed, as one threat arising from the 2015 US National Security Strategy, that there is a high probability that the US will use the “technology of colour revolutions” against Russia.<sup>26</sup> In both the post-facto analyses of the colour revolutions and the assessments of the current threat to Russia, the mindset of the populace (spiritual values, patriotism, belief in heroic traditions, remembrance of fallen defenders of the Motherland, regard for national history, readiness for self-sacrifice, etc.), in particular of the nation’s youth, is viewed as a main target of foreign influence and a key vulnerability to be defended.<sup>27</sup>

In response, Russia pursues its defence and security on

<sup>22</sup> Minister Oborony Rossii General Armii Sergei Shoigu Provel Ocherednoie Selektornoe Soveshchaniie, 31 March 2014, [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=11913366@egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11913366@egNews) and Na Boievoie Dezhurstvo Zastupila Operativnaia Dezhurnaiia Smena Natsional’no Tsentra Upravleniia Oborony Rossii, 1 December 2014, [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12002205@egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12002205@egNews)

<sup>23</sup> Nachal’nik Rossiskovo Genshtaba Raskazal Zhurnalistam o Zadachakh i Roli Natsional’no Tsentra po Upravleniiu Oborony RF, 1 November 2014, [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=11998309@egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11998309@egNews)

<sup>24</sup> Putin used the term “controlled chaos” in his published manifesto on future defence policy just prior to the 2012 presidential elections in V. Putin, Byt’ Sil’nymi. “Controlled chaos” is now in wide use among Russia’s military leadership and analysts as in A. N. Belskii and O. V. Klimenko, Politicheskie Tekhnologii “Tsvetnykh Revoliutsii”: Puti i Sredstva Protivodeistviia, *Voennaya Mysl’*, No. 9, September 2014, pp. 3-11. An extended analysis of the related, and somewhat interchangeable term “strategy of attrition and destruction” is in V. I. Vorob’ev and V. A. Kitslev, Strategii Sokrusheniia i Izmora v Novom Oblike, *Voennaya Mysl’*, No. 3, March 2014, pp. 45-57. While generally using these terms, Russian analysts recognise the western use of “hybrid” to identify similar phenomena. Russian experts tend to use “controlled chaos” and “technology of colour revolutions” to label actions directed against Russia or governments friendly to Russia, and refer to the same means and methods as part of “new forms of armed conflict” when discussing modifications to Russia’s approach to conflict/war.

<sup>25</sup> Vorob’ev and Kiselev, Strategii, also Oleg Vladykin, Voina Upravliaemogo Khaosa: Uroki Dlia Rossii, *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, 24 October 2014, <http://nov.ng.ru/concepts/2014-10-24>

<sup>26</sup> Sovet Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii, O Strategii Natsional’noi Bezopasnosti SShA, 25 March 2015, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/865.html> On the Soviet and later Russian view of the impact of the Helsinki Accords on the Soviet system, in particular with regard to the dissident movement and internal stability, see Jacques Andreani, *Le Piege: Helsinki et la chute du communisme*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2005 and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2005, pp. 186-194.

<sup>27</sup> See Belskii, pp. 7-8, Vorob’ev, p. 54 and the 2014 Military Doctrine, paragraphs 12, 13, 15 and 21.

the basis of what could be described as a “whole of nation” approach. The three-pillar national security sphere unites government, military and nation (populace) and is enacted in the 2009 National Security Strategy and supporting strategic documents, including the updated 2014 Military Doctrine.<sup>28</sup> This concept, which goes beyond the “whole of government” approach discussed in the West, is reflected in practice in the increasing centralisation of decision-making (and its physical manifestation in the establishment of the National Centre for Direction of Defence); the control of media and suppression of dissent; rhetorical and practical preparations to mobilise the government, economy, military and society for war; and the increasing militarisation of Russian society.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Iraq, Libya and Syria and the Synthesis of the RMA and Colour Revolutions/Controlled Chaos.*

Russian perceptions of the revolution in military affairs and of colour revolutions have converged on the basis of events in Libya and Syria, which were viewed as combining high-tech standoff approaches with covert means and political agitation. General Zarudnitskii, then Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff, has said that colour revolutions, particularly as conducted in Libya and Syria, represent “camouflaged aggression using new technology for destruction of undesirable states and their banishment from the political arena.”<sup>30</sup> Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov has said that the colour revolutions in northern Africa and the Middle East demonstrate that even “a successful state can in a matter of months or even days become an arena of brutal armed conflict, a casualty of international intervention, fall into the abyss of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe and civil war.”<sup>31</sup>

General Gerasimov sees the Libya/Arab Spring model as possibly “the typical war of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” in which the accent is placed on non-military means to achieve political and strategic objectives. In view of the combination of political-strategic and technological developments, the Russian CHOD has noted a fundamental change in the character of armed conflict to achieve political aims in which political, diplomatic, economic and other non-military means are employed in unison with military forces with the ratio of non-military to military means as high as 4-to-1. (See Figure 1) General Gerasimov envisions new forms and means of armed combat (combining the lessons of the RMA and the colour revolutions) with the aim of achieving political and strategic objectives under the cover of ambiguity. These include:

- the beginning of military actions by groups of forces during peacetime;
- warfare by high-manoeuve non-contact operations by joint groups of forces
- degradation of military-economic potential through quick destruction of critically important military and civilian infrastructure objectives;
- mass employment of precision weapons, special forces, robotics and weapons based on new physical principles, such as lasers and magnetic rail guns, and participation by paramilitary units;
- simultaneous action on enemy forces at all depths of the area of operations;
- armed conflict on all physical and informational space;
- employment of asymmetric and non-linear means; and
- direction of forces and means in a unified information space.<sup>32</sup>

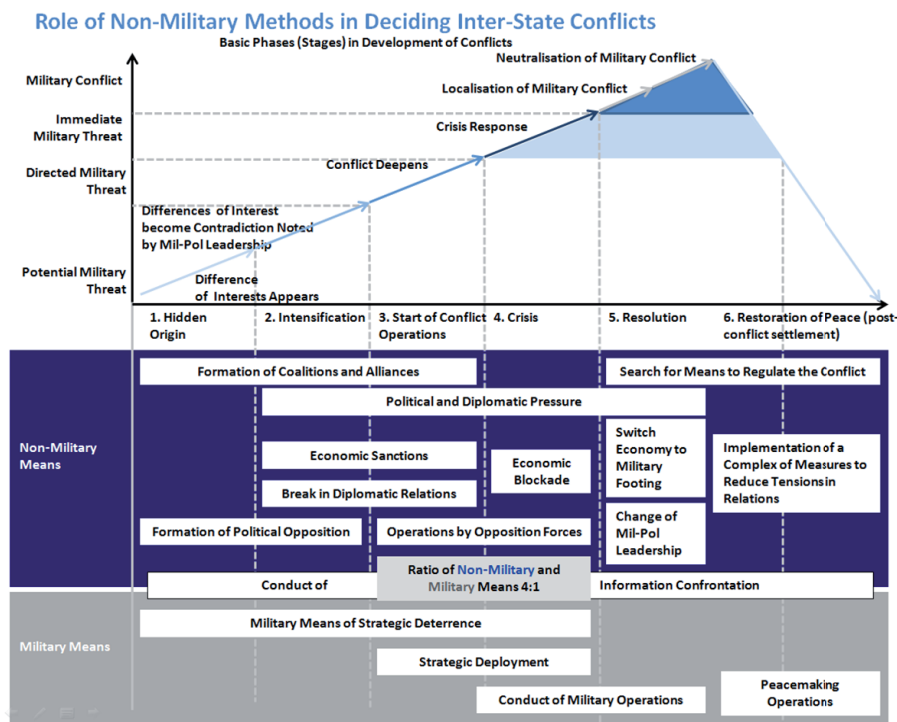
<sup>28</sup> S. I. Skokov, *Vliianiye Kontseptsii Setetsentrizma*, p. 37. This notion reflects, to an extent, some western analyses of Clausewitz’ “trinity of war” as interpreted in, for example, Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: a Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, New York, Dell, 1984.

<sup>29</sup> The successful formulation of an overarching strategy, apparent political-military elite consensus on the strategy and its effective communication by the leadership as an important underlying element of all of this is noted in Ven Bruusgaard, *Crimea and Russia’s Strategic Overhaul*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>30</sup> Zarudnitskii’s remarks during the 2014 Moscow International Security Conference, 23 May 2014, Ministerstvo Oborony Rossiskoi Federatsii: Podrobnnee, [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=11929774@egNews&\\_print=true](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11929774@egNews&_print=true). See also Vorobyov and Kiselev, p. 53 on and their assertion that “...Libya became the test range for conduct of the West’s first real combat operation of the world information-network war against an undesirable regime.”

<sup>31</sup> V. Gerasimov, *Tsennost’ Nauki v Predvidenii, Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kur’er*, 27 February 2013, <http://VPK-news.ru/issues/14626> This report of General Gerasimov’s presentation to the Russian Academy of Military Science in January 2013 (subsequently referred to by many experts as the “Gerasimov Doctrine”) previewed several elements of Russia’s operations against Ukraine and described (in greater detail than the military doctrine itself) thinking reflected in the revision of the Russian Military Doctrine published in December 2014.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



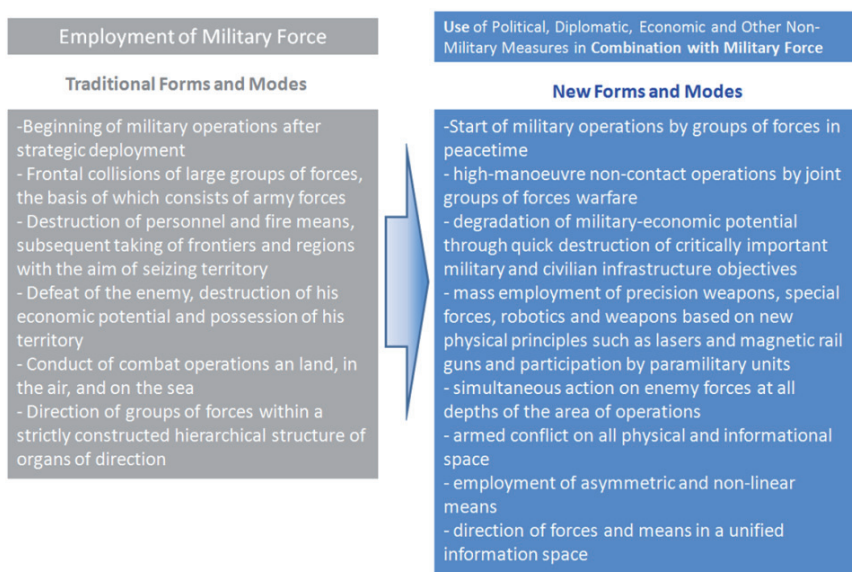
**Figure 1: Illustration on Crisis/Conflict Phases Accompanying General Gerasimov's Remarks to the Russian Academy of Military Science.** Translated by the author from V. Gerasimov, Tsennost' Nauki v Predvidenii, *Voenno-Promyshlennyy Kur'er*, 27 February 2013, <http://VPK-news.ru/issues/14626>

Gerasimov's analysis suggests a Russian perception that, while the notion of combining all elements of power to achieve strategic objectives is nothing new (as concluded by Russian General Staff analysts (above)), a qualitatively new level of effectiveness is enabled through ap-

plication of conceptually sophisticated modalities that increase the weight of political (non-military) elements by comparison with military, with effects in both dimensions magnified exponentially by new technologies. (See Figure 2)<sup>33</sup>

## The Changed Character of Armed Conflict

### Achievement of Political Goals



**Figure 2: Illustration on Characteristics of Modern Conflict Accompanying General Gerasimov's Remarks to the Russian Academy of Military Science.** Translated by the author from V. Gerasimov, Tsennost' Nauki v Predvidenii, *Voenno-Promyshlennyy Kur'er*, 27 February 2013, <http://VPK-news.ru/issues/14626>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

General Staff analysts subsequently elaborated a range of features of military actions, which appear to relate mostly to non-linear/hybrid means and are highly congruent with Russian approaches used in Ukraine, including:

- hidden, indirect character of the majority of conducted activities;
- decisive role of activities in the information space (namely the information campaign will have a leading significance, and in its interest it is necessary to plan all other activities);
- *maskirovka* of the actual aims of the conducted activities (officially declared aims intended to hide actual aims);
- increased role for inter-agency cooperation;
- direction of actions of participants by a unified organ of direction, which should include representatives of government structures.<sup>34</sup>

### *Application in Ukraine*

Russia employed a tailored package of these elements in its military response to the collapse of the Yanukovych government in February 2014.<sup>35</sup> This response represented the end of Russia's prolonged campaign to re-orient Ukraine eastward through non-military means (diplomatic/political-informational-economic) without use of force. The appearance of the "little green men" in Crimea and simultaneous deployment of substantial Russian combat forces on Ukraine's eastern borders was the beginning of a significant and rapid escalation to (undeclared) armed combat against the new government in Kiev and perceived efforts by "the West" to pull Ukraine from Russia's sphere of influence. This undeclared armed combat was conducted in parallel with continued non-military measures.

The fact of Yanukovych's flight as the trigger for escalation (already apparent but now confirmed by Putin's recent interview revelations) is significant.<sup>36</sup> It provides the starting point for transition and escalation from the years-long non-military phase of Russia's hybrid campaign against Ukraine through a brief period of quasi-covert and non-attributable military action and, subsequently, to open (yet still undeclared) military action.

It took four days from the transition starting point (22-26 February 2014) for Russia to decide a course of action and start to mobilise substantial conventional combat forces. This mobilisation took place under the guise of snap exercises in the Western and Central Military Districts.<sup>37</sup> One day after the start of mobilisation and with conventional military forces beginning to concentrate on Ukraine's eastern borders, the "little green men" began to appear in Crimea. Twenty four hours later, on 28 February, the green men had control of major government and military objectives in Crimea. This tactical-level military action enabled the strategic political operation of the rump sessions of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea to organise the subsequent referendum on becoming a Russian territory.

During the same period, conventional military forces continued to concentrate on the borders, likely with the intention to respond to any Ukrainian military actions against the Russian forces in Ukraine and to deter any potential reaction from outside Ukraine. This concentration of forces also subsequently provided the platform for the launching of the proxy war and separatist movement in eastern Ukraine and continues to menace Ukraine's border.<sup>38</sup> In addition to deploying substantial conventional combat forces in the Ukraine crisis, Russia appears to be leveraging its nuclear capability in order to deter outside military involvement.<sup>39</sup> President Putin highlighted Russia's nuclear capability in the context of the Ukraine crisis in August 2014 by saying that

<sup>34</sup> Andrianov and Loiko, *Voprosy Primeneniia*, p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> BBC News Europe, *Putin Reveals Secrets of Russia's Crimea Takeover Plot*, 9 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-3179622>

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> ITAR-TASS, *Putin Poruchil Minoborony Provesti Vnezapnuiu Proverku Sil Zapadnovo I Tsentral'novo Voennikh Okrugov*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 26 February 2014, <http://www.ng.ru/news/458940.html>

<sup>38</sup> The size of the force on Ukraine's border has fluctuated but remained substantial with an estimated 50,000 in place in March 2015 (and a reinforced Russian military presence in Crimea estimated at 29,000 and estimated 12,000 Russian soldiers supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine). Reuters, *Some 12,000 Russian Soldiers in Ukraine Supporting Rebels*: U.S. Commander, 3 March 2015, <http://article/2015/03/03/us-ukraine-soldiers-idUSKBNOLZ2FV20150303>

<sup>39</sup> A good précis of regional and global activity by Russian dual-capable aircraft in the context of the Ukraine crisis and the general downturn in relations with Russia can





Russia's "partners" "...should understand that it is better not to mess with us...I want to remind that Russia is one of the strongest nuclear powers."<sup>40</sup> He subsequently said that Russia had been prepared to take its nuclear forces to a state of alert over Crimea if necessary.<sup>41</sup> This confirmed impressions that had already formed among some observers that Russia was using its nuclear forces to send deterrent messages in relation to the crisis.<sup>42</sup> Even before Putin explicitly placed the Ukraine crisis in a nuclear context, Foreign Minister Lavrov had implied that Russia's nuclear deterrent umbrella now extends over Crimea as part of Russian territory.<sup>43</sup> Putin and Lavrov have both said that Russia may deploy nuclear-capable systems and nuclear weapons in Crimea.<sup>44</sup> Explicit nuclear-related messaging around the Ukraine crisis and potential reactions by the West to related regional instability have continued.<sup>45</sup>

After Russian forces seized key installations in Crimea on 28 February, it took an additional sixteen days to organise and conduct the referendum on unification with Russia. Putin signed the law annexing Crimea twelve days later. In total, it took 28 days from the start of escalation to a military phase of the operation against Ukraine until the finish with the formalisation of new facts on the ground – occupied and illegally annexed Crimea and a nascent proxy war in eastern Ukraine.

The implication of the Russian decision to respond to Yanukovich's departure with military force is that Moscow's perception of failure of a non-military non-linear/hybrid campaign can, in combination with a sufficient level of strategic interest and perceived opportunity, trigger a rapid escalation from the non-military to a military phase. Events around the Ukraine crisis also suggest that

Russia's approach to conflict includes preparedness to brandish its nuclear capability to shield aggressive conventional and unconventional military actions and to secure territorial gains acquired by aggression.

## Implications

In light of all this, it is clear that Russia's military leadership conceptualises the conflict spectrum as encompassing operations using non-military means (political, diplomatic, economic and informational) in conjunction with military means (kinetic, non-kinetic, conventional forces, special operations forces, paramilitary forces, non-nuclear (conventional long-range precision-guided munitions) and nuclear means).

These means and methods (which adapt lessons learned from prior military experience, colour revolutions, past Soviet and Russian experience with partisan warfare and armed resistance movements, Cold War Special Forces operations and espionage, Soviet-era political and economic subversion, etc) can be applied sequentially or simultaneously and in any combination without clear delineation between states of peace, conflict and war. The relatively narrow band of means and methods labelled as "hybrid" in the early months of the Ukraine crisis is not the initial but a later stage of undeclared conflict and, as demonstrated in Ukraine, one that can escalate rapidly to involve overt use of conventional and unconventional forces under the cover of a nuclear deterrent umbrella. The non-military non-linear hybrid segment is embedded within Russia's more broadly conceived and fully integrated conflict spectrum

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be found in Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix, *Qui Menace Qui? Les Raisons d'une "Nouvelle Guerre Froide."* *Strategie, Defense & Securite Internationale*, No. 112, March 2015, pp. 54-61.

<sup>40</sup> Remarks by President Putin at the All-Russian Youth Forum, 29 August 2014, <http://news.kremlin.ru/news/46507>.

<sup>41</sup> Jim Heintz, Putin: Russia Prepared Raising Nuclear Readiness Over Crimea, *AP News*, 15 March 2015, <http://apnews.myway.com/article/20150315/eu-russia-crimea-2859701388.html>

<sup>42</sup> Thomas C. Moore, The Role of Nuclear Weapons During the Crisis in Ukraine, The Lugar Center, 2 July 2014, [www://the.lugarcenter.org/newsroom-tlcexperts-8html](http://www.thelugarcenter.org/newsroom-tlcexperts-8html) and Adrian Croft, Insight – Russia's Nuclear Strategy Raises Concerns in NATO, Reuters, 4 February 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/02/04/uk-ukraine-crisis-russia-nuclear-insight-idUKKBNOL825A20150204>

<sup>43</sup> Bai Yang, Russia to "adequately respond" to aggression against Crimea: FM, Xinhua, 7 July 2014, <http://english.cntv.cn/2014/07/09/ARTI1404913903653838.shtml>

<sup>44</sup> Lavrov quoted in Sergei L. Loiko, Russia says it has a right to put nuclear weapons in Crimea, *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-nuclear-crimea-20141215-story.html> and Bill Gertz, Russia Deploying Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Crimea, *Washington Free Beacon*, 10 October 2014, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/russia-deploying-tactical-nuclear-arms-in-crimea/>

<sup>45</sup> Ben Hoyle and Michael Evans, Putin Threat of Nuclear Showdown Over Baltics, *The Times*, 2 April 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/europe/article4399757.ece>

and relies on the leveraging or actual employment of conventional, unconventional and nuclear forces. This concept is reflected in the full-spectrum capabilities that the Russian Armed Forces are building and the related strategies for their employment to achieve objectives.

This assessment offers one potential means to “de-mystify” the hybrid warfare threat that is part of the challenge facing NATO on its eastern flank. Russia’s approach to conflict undeniably includes political, diplomatic, economic, non-linear and hybrid means below the level of armed conflict which can be employed in a gradual campaign, exploiting ambiguity to achieve strategic objectives without military violence. However, the political, diplomatic and economic conflict tools do not operate in a vacuum and close examination shows that the credibility and effectiveness of the non-military phase of a non-linear or hybrid campaign rests to a large extent on credible military power and the potential use of military force.

Of equal significance, failure of the non-military phase of a non-linear or hybrid warfare campaign (as in Ukraine) can, under some circumstances, lead unexpectedly to rapid escalation into a military phase including unconventional, conventional and nuclear forces. It is significant that the most ambiguous and uncertain phase of Russia’s military operations against Ukraine marked the end of the purely non-military campaign and the beginning of a rapid transition to undeclared armed conflict employing the full spectrum military forces, with conventional military forces and nuclear forces functioning as a coercive means of deterrence.

This observation does several things. First, it helps to delineate the segments of the hybrid problem so that nations and relevant international organisations can identify where the weight of effort may lie at particular phases in such a scenario. Second, it highlights that, at its root, Russia’s approach to conflict, while undeniably including non-linear or “hybrid” elements, presents a recognisable defence and deterrence challenge consisting of a mix of unconventional, conventional and nuclear military forces. Third, in light of these preceding considera-

tions, it enables a focus on the importance of identifying the potential triggers for escalation, the related need to recognise the critically important transition period from political and asymmetric conflict to undeclared armed conflict and the extremely short time available to react within the brief transition period. These three factors – trigger, transition, and time – merit further study.

### *Instability and Unpredictability*

In the context of Russia’s disruption of the European security order, the resulting volatile conflict in Ukraine, and Moscow’s perception that it is encircled and politically already in conflict with the West, NATO faces an unstable and unpredictable security environment that could pose a direct challenge on short notice. General Gerasimov has noted that “the time for reaction to the transition from political-diplomatic means to the employment of military forces has been maximally reduced” and Russia’s re-posturing of governmental and military structures reflects this assessment.<sup>46</sup> Russia’s ability to coordinate military and other action according to its broad-spectrum approach to conflict is enhanced by the combination of its autocratic system, increasingly centralised decision-making, and improved government and military command and control. As demonstrated in its Ukraine operations and a series of large-scale snap exercises, Russia can initiate and carry out large-scale military operations within short timelines, or well-coordinated, small-scale operations at its discretion. President Putin has, over the last two years, centralised and restructured decision-making, tightened coordination among defence-related government bodies, and streamlined command and control in a way reminiscent of the Soviet World War 2-era STAVKA<sup>47</sup>. In some respects, he has placed the Russian state, government and populace at or near a war footing. General Gerasimov implied as much when he said that establishment of the National Centre for Direction of Defence makes the notion of a “combat alert” order meaningless as the NCDD maintains on a constant basis many of the steps toward readiness that, in the past, would have been necessary to take

<sup>46</sup> V. Gerasimov, General’nyi Shtab I Oborona Strany, *Voenna-Promyshlennyyi Kur’er*, 5 February 2014, <http://vpk-news.ru/print/articles/18998>.

<sup>47</sup> The STAVKA was the highest organ for strategic direction of Soviet Armed Forces during World War 2. See *Voennyy Entsiklopedicheskiy Slovar’*, *Voennoye Izdatel’stvo*, Moscow, 1986, p. 703; S. M. Shtemenko, *General’niy Shtab v Godiy Voiniy*, *Voennoye Izdatel’stvo*, Moscow, 1968, p. 29 and pp. 34-35 and J. Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941*, Frank Cass, London, 2001, pp. 602-603.



after an alert order.<sup>48</sup>

### *Ambiguity and the Blurring of the Line Between Peace, Conflict and War.*

General Gerasimov has described a blurring of the line between peace and war and the potential for a rapid outbreak of armed conflict. Based on what has been called the “Gerasimov Doctrine,” with its broad-spectrum approach to (often undeclared) conflict and war, the Russian leadership may already assess that Russia is in conflict with the West, and view itself as conducting operations at a stage something short of openly declared war. General Gerasimov himself has noted in particular the blurring of the line between states of war and peace.<sup>49</sup> From this perspective, the various diplomatic, economic, military and subversive measures that have been employed by Russia in the Baltic Region and increasingly in the Balkans, Black Sea and Mediterranean regions, could be interpreted as elements of a protracted campaign already underway.<sup>50</sup>

This would fit Russia’s priority aim - to achieve its strategic goals through actions, as the United Kingdom’s House of Commons Defence Committee has said, “designed to slip below NATO’s threshold for reaction.”<sup>51</sup> Moscow may calculate that this could be achieved through its broad-spectrum approach, placing emphasis on non-military means and leveraging the threat of force or actually employing carefully calibrated and timed military means. In this light, Russia’s desired course in a potential conflict would be, as Thomas Schelling suggested, “competition in risk-taking, a military-diplomat-

ic manoeuvre with or without military engagement but with the outcome determined more by the manipulation of risk than by an actual contest of force.”<sup>52</sup> However, as in the Ukraine crisis, Russia’s steadily improving full-spectrum conventional and nuclear capabilities could be poised to exercise other options as necessary, if the associated political and military risk is assessed as acceptable or manageable. It is this element of brinksmanship which makes the non-military elements of a hybrid campaign dependent on the threat of military violence.<sup>53</sup> As one expert assessment observed:

*It might be entirely possible that the Putin regime evaluates costs and benefit in a way different from what the West assumes. If so, a violent Russian advance towards NATO territory could no longer be excluded for the sole reason that the costs would exceed the expected gain for Russia.*<sup>54</sup>

### *Strategic Ambiguity and Collective Defence*

The strategic ambiguity created by the breadth of the Russian approach and the contradictory or unclear messages deliberately sent by Russia both within and among the various “fronts” of conflict can mask intentions, confuse adversaries, slow down their decision making and impede effective responses. Russia’s employment of non-linear and asymmetric means in conflict can compound strategic ambiguity by distorting operational timelines, making it difficult to discern patterns of aggression.

From this perspective, the various means applied against Ukraine by Russia in recent years - diplomatic, economic, and energy pressures; political subversion; cultivation of ethnic divisions - can be recognised post-facto

<sup>48</sup> Nachal’nik Rossiskovo Genshtaba Raskazal Zhurnalistam o Zadachakh I Roli Natsional’no Tsentra Po Upravleniyu Oboroniy RF, 1 November 2014, [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=11998309@egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11998309@egNews).

<sup>49</sup> V. Gerasimov, ‘Tsennost’ Nauki v Predvidenii.

<sup>50</sup> On this emerging view, see for example, NATO Allies Brace for Russia’s “Hybrid Warfare,” Agence France-Presse, 18 March 2015, <http://defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/03/18/nato-allies-brace-for-russias-hybrid-warfare/24979545> in which Lithuanian President Grybauskaitė is quoted as saying, “The first stage of confrontation is taking place – I mean informational war, propaganda and cyber attacks. So we are already under attack.” British Defence Secretary Fallon notes ongoing pressure on the Baltics and testing of NATO by Russia in Reuters, British Defense Minister Says Russia’s Putin Poses “Danger” to Baltic States, *The Moscow Times*, 19 February 2015, <http://themoscowtimes.com/article.php?id=516203> and on some key elements in the developing pattern of hybrid aggression in the Baltic region, Edward Lucas, Putin Targets the Baltics to Discredit NATO, *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 September 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/new/articles/SB2060829732521918478450458015979007686450>.

<sup>51</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two – NATO, 31 July 2014, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 166.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Frear, Lukasz Kulesa, Ian Kearns, Dangerous Brinksmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014, *European Leadership Network*, November 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Heinz-Kamp, Ten Strategic Consequences of the Ukrainian Crisis, *European Security and Defence*, September 2014, 15.

as elements of a long-term campaign toward Moscow's objective of reorienting Ukraine eastward with non-military means. The 48-hour long creeping encroachment of Russian military and security forces in the Crimean operation and rapid escalation of military operations in Ukraine's east were a crisis-induced action taken in a later crisis response phase of Russia's multi-dimensional campaign against Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. The key point is that the appearance of "little green men" or a similar phenomenon is not an early indicator but could mark the end of a non-military phase and beginning of rapid escalation. If the current state of play is evaluated through the "Gerashimov Doctrine" lens, the conclusion could be drawn that a state of non-military conflict already exists – providing a clearer view of emerging patterns and potential indicators of escalation.

### *Regional Considerations*

Russia also integrates regional elements into its comprehensive approach to conflict. While pursuing its region-specific goals, Russia will also opportunistically exploit regional instability or tensions to distract attention, strain solidarity and sap resources. This is another characteristic that sets Russia's comprehensive approach to conflict apart from other disparate and discrete hybrid challenges.

## **Conclusions**

The pattern that has emerged over the last several years of Russian aggression on its borders requires that NATO take steps to ensure its own defence. The Wales Summit decisions to implement the Readiness Action Plan and the Defence Investment Pledge are vital steps in that direction. A focus on Moscow's clear doctrinal statements in the context of its overall pattern of behaviour will help the Alliance to focus those efforts effectively and to adapt further as necessary. A closer examination of the lessons of the transition of Russian operations in Ukraine from political to armed conflict would be particularly useful in adapting NATO's deterrence and defence posture to meet new challenges. This could all be enhanced with studies of the rich archival and historical record of Russian and Soviet military practice as an instrument in achieving its security and foreign policy objectives. Without a full appreciation of the conceptual elements of the Russian approach to conflict, Allies could "be in danger of losing our edge, if not the competition, because we have been outflanked in the area of strategic and operational thinking."<sup>55</sup>

In practical terms, it is important to recognise that, contrary to NATO's aspirations toward a constructive relationship, Russia almost certainly views itself as being in, and conducting, conflict with "the West" at a level short of openly declared war. Among the many serious implications of this state-of-play are: the requirement to build comprehensive situational awareness from the tactical to the decision-making level; to adapt and enhance NATO indications and warning capabilities; to re-focus and enhance intelligence efforts; to adapt practices and procedures to cope with fast-developing situations; and to establish close practical cooperation with the EU and other relevant organisations that may play complementary roles in responding to hybrid threats.

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<sup>55</sup> John G. Hines and George F. Kraus, Soviet Strategies for Military Competition, *Parameters*, vol. 16 (Autumn 1986), p. 28.