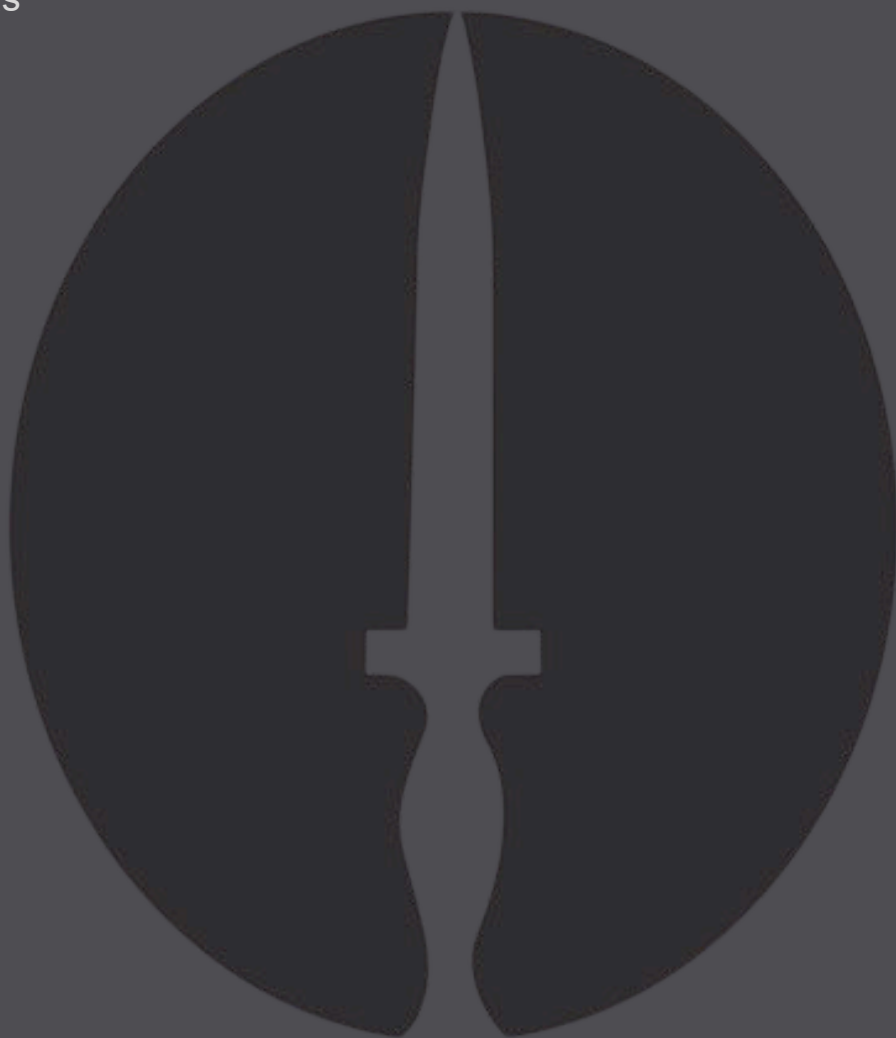


SPECIAL OPERATIONS JOURNAL

Editor: Christopher Marsh
Associate Editor: James Kiras

Included in this print edition:
Volume 6 Issue 2 (2020)





SOF Utilization in Contemporary Competitive Spaces

Major Craig A. Thompson

U.S. Marine Corps, Regional Affairs Officer - Europe and Eurasia

ABSTRACT

Russia's resurgent military power, its willingness to utilize force, and its assertive foreign policy in Moscow's perceived sphere of influence has quickly become a major U.S. security concern. Calculated and proactive efforts by U.S. SOF in Russia's near abroad, those missions which focus on bolstering societal resiliency, deterrence, and resistance capabilities, will deny Moscow uncontested access to these geopolitical territories in its near abroad and immediately impose cost on Russia. To be effective in these complex goals, U.S. SOF must utilize a more expansive and holistic view of Russian military history and strategy, as well as a macro whole of government approach to contest malign influences. Additionally, more resilient allies who are willing and aptly trained, outfitted, and supported are necessary to blunt Moscow's hybrid influence and resist a Russian occupation if necessary. These collective efforts will guarantee Moscow no quick or inexpensive victory and immediately allow the U.S. and her allies to compete with and impose cost on Russia.

KEYWORDS

Hybrid Warfare; Malign Influence; Contested Spaces; Special Operations Forces; Great Power Competition

“The last, but certainly not the least of my recommendations for the Ukrainian authorities is to provide more actions to boost our spirits. The stronger our nation, the easier it will be to negotiate with Russia. We need not only to defeat Russia's brutal propaganda, but also inspire in our people the hope for the better future that Ukraine surely deserves (2009, p. 19).”

-General Ihor Hordiichuk

INTRO/PURPOSE

Russia's resurgent military power, its willingness to utilize force, and its assertive foreign policy in Moscow's perceived sphere of influence has quickly become a major security concern in the region. “The annexation of Crimea and the airstrikes in Syria demonstrated that Moscow today is not only able, but also willing to pursue what it sees as its national interests, even in the face of strong international condemnation and on a global level. Russia is yet again a power to be reckoned with (Renz, 2018, p. 189).” However, conventional war, destruction of allied forces in Russia's “near abroad,” and delegitimization of NATO are not the only threat that Russia's contemporaneous military strategy presents. “In this war against the West, Russia has used a wide range of tools: spying and active measures, cyberwarfare, funding for anti-EU political parties, media campaigns and disinformation, support for nongovernmental organizations and pro-Russia paramilitary organizations, and military interventions against countries signing association agreements with the EU (Orenstein, 2019, p. 30).”¹

This fusion of Russia's military and nonmilitary capabilities, illustrated in [Figure 1](#) below, is employed proactively, often times before the Kremlin's adversaries even know they are being targeted. Therefore, the necessary effort to deter Russian malign influence must also include calculated countermeasures aimed at identifying, discouraging, or eliminating Russian diplomatic and economic pressure, low-intensity conflict, information war, and subversive elements. Additionally, efforts to contest this contemporary unconventional warfare strategy can only be effective if they are proactive and geopolitically accurate. These efforts must identify and target Russia's fusion of military and nonmilitary measures commonly employed during the "Covert Origin" phase of modern Russian military strategy. The proactive efforts of U.S. Special Operations Forces in these competitive spaces² can build resiliency, provide sufficient deterrence, and deny Moscow access into these vulnerable geopolitical areas in its near abroad; these efforts will promise Russia no quick or inexpensive victory.

This research effort investigated the methods and mechanisms used by Russia in the early phases of the 2008 Russo-Georgia war, as well as the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine. Although hostile, denied, and politically sensitive now due to Russian influence, prior to contestation these nations were governed by pro-Western U.S. partners. These two cases illuminate Russian unconventional warfare tactics and Moscow's use of subversion, surrogates, and broader hybrid warfare capabilities. In addition to the numerous and recently published books and articles on Russian strategy, policy, and recent activism, this research benefited tremendously from several first-hand investigative sources who were active in the Donbas between 2014–2015; I am forever indebted to them for granting me access to their repository of information and lessons learned. After dissecting Moscow's early actions into these conflicts, this research will offer a theory of SOF utilization in today's competitive spaces – areas where the Kremlin may already have interests and assets identified and potentially have forces already covertly employed.



FIGURE 1. Created utilizing diagrams in Gerasimov article dated 26 Feb 2013 (Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier) and first-hand investigative sources active in the Donbas between 2014–2015.

CASE STUDIES

Georgia

Whether or not Mikheil Saakashvili initiated the Russo-Georgian war by taking first kinetic action against the Russian-backed governments of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the trap that he fell obliviously into was crafted over many years of influence and cleverly designed to support Russia interests in Moscow's *near abroad*. In these post-Soviet countries, Russia pursues two main purposes, primarily among these is regaining political and economic dependence of the former bloc – a necessary geopolitical move to achieve great power recognition on the international stage. Secondly, Russia aims to delegitimize and limit the influence of Western institutions into their periphery. With a recovering economy after the rapid rise of global gas prices in the early 2000s and a resurgent military that benefited greatly from increased defense spending, Moscow took all necessary steps to block Georgia's path into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). "Russian leadership views [these Western Institutions] in strictly geopolitical and zero-sum terms, where territorial gains made by the West unavoidably compromises Russia's security and economy (Nilsson, 2018, p. 11)."

The August 2008 conflict was the first comprehensive use of military power against a former Soviet satellite. Even though it was marred by poor performance in nearly all categories of conventional warfare tactics, the Russo-Georgian war provided a new template for waging low-intensity conflict that Russia would revise to remarkable consequence in Ukraine in 2014. The fusion of Russian military and nonmilitary strategy varies from conflict to conflict but the template was initiated and refined by this short conflict in Georgia and is necessary to understand comprehensively (Kofman, 2018b: 14). In just five days, Russia deployed over 20,000 troops to secure the flashpoints in the Southern Caucasus, establishing military dominance almost instantaneously (Nilsson, 2018, p. 23). This fusion and the continuous pressure applied throughout the buildup, the military campaign, and the aftermath can be easily comprehended utilizing the acronym DIMES: diplomacy, information, military force, economic pressure, and subversion.

U.S. policy of aiding the successful democratization of faraway countries will never show as much commitment as Putin's "defense of Russia" and the survival of the Russian Federation. When it came down to the wire, Western support was rhetorical and provided little assistance outside of economic injects and international condemnation of Russia's "humanitarian" intervention into Georgia. With the main policy objective of Russia aimed at isolating Georgia from Western influence, Moscow "officially recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, which effectively removed any potential carrot associated with a potential reunification of Georgia" (Nilsson, 2018, p. 29) – a necessary prerequisite for Georgia's accession into Western institutions. For several years preceding the conflict, Russia would remind Tbilisi of their struggle for sovereign territorial control of these contested regions. Russian passports were issued to significant portions of this targeted population and fueled the Russian intervention narrative, one based almost entirely on humanitarian intervention for atrocities committed against Russia citizens in Moscow's *near abroad* (Nilsson, 2018, p. 24).

The Russian information warfare campaign took a different approach in this conflict. In previous contests, such as the second Chechen War, Russia was focused less on dominating the narrative and favored instead a media blackout approach to cause confusion. Although Russian information operations in the August War was an early incursion into the misinformation domain, it was during this conflict that Russia honed their mechanisms to control the narrative by “leveraging reporters, spokespersons, and news coverage meant to support the Russian position (Kofman, 2018b, p. 15).” Three themes dominated the Russian dialogue: integration with the West was destructive to Georgian society, culture, norms, and traditions; association with the EU would destroy the Georgian economy; and the “Georgian western-funded NGOs supporting democratization, reform, and openness are depicted as spies working for external forces, whereas international NGOs active in Georgia are presented as branches of foreign intelligence services (Nilsson, 2018, p. 45).” Tbilisi identified several mechanisms to counter Russian propaganda and misinformation but failed to broadcast the truth on Western integration. Russia’s practice of buying up media outlets and controlling the narrative in targeted populations was also a significant factor in its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine, and this practice continues today in nearly all Russian speaking areas in its near abroad.

Russia demonstrated its ability to fuse diplomacy and misinformation with military strategy; this fusion of military and nonmilitary pressure points leading up to and during the conflict displays an effective and contemporaneous example of unconventional warfare. At the end of Russia’s Caucasus Frontier 2008 military exercise in early August (which may have served as a snap exercise to move troops and equipment into close proximity of the brooding contestation), “the main body of Russia’s 58th Army was clearly on the Russian side of the Roki tunnel awaiting orders (Kofman, 2018a, p. 19).” Meanwhile, Tagliavini was being flooded with Russian media, irregular forces, and non-governmental organizations (NGO). Numerous paramilitary forces, such as the Vostok Battalion and Wagner were present and fighting at the onset of hostilities. Russia has consistently used a wide array of proxy forces to shape the conditions on future battlefields and against targeted population centers that are largely Russian speaking. These ambiguous proxy elements cause confusion and chaos while allowing Moscow to deny any involvement or wrongdoing. “Russia is effective at leveraging proxies to engage adversaries, and then pulsing conventional military power onto the battlefield with decisive effects (Kofman, 2018b, p. 14).” They achieved both of these coordinated efforts in the Russo-Georgian war, quickly securing South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and even some undisputed Georgian territory in proximity to the conflict zone.

With the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and a decline of oil production in key geographies, “an abundant flow of petrodollars spilled into Russia, allowing the government to raise public spending exponentially and contributing greatly to Putin’s image of a successful manager of the country (Gretskiy, 2019, p. 70).” With this influx of revenue, foreign debts were paid and reliance on Western trade minimized. This new-found wealth allowed Moscow’s elite to purchase key assets and real estate in neighboring countries and throughout Europe, increasing their economic influence abroad. It is widely believed that many of the aforementioned NGOs and news outlets promoting the Russia narrative are entirely funded by

Moscow (Nilsson, 2018, p. 39). Russia has the economic leverage to either impose sanctions, embargos, and hardship or, alternatively, offer military aid, economic integration, or trade deals as a reward for solidarity with Moscow. Prior to the 2008 conflict, as political infighting between Putin and Saakashvili escalated, Moscow banned imports of Georgian wine and deported migrants working in Russia; this economic pressure point starved the Georgian economy of the much-needed trade exports and worker remittances.

Finally, the subversive tactics utilized by Russia to prepare the disputed territories in Georgia paved the way for a swift Russian occupation of these contested spaces. “Russia’s military actions were accompanied with cyber-attacks against the Georgian government’s information outlets and against the Georgian media, an influx of mercenaries and ‘volunteers’ into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and an international disinformation campaign claiming that the initial Georgian attack had killed 2,000 South Ossetian civilians, a charge that justified a ‘humanitarian intervention’ by Russia (Nilsson, 2018, p. 24).” Russia sponsored NGOs,³ news media, and religious entities of the Russia Orthodox church took up positions in South Ossetia; these subversive elements stirred the local population with cries of nationalism and stimulated the fear of Georgia losing its coveted Orthodox conservative values. All of this destabilizing activity was ongoing prior to the conventional forces pouring through the Roki tunnel (Nilsson, 2018, p. 39).

Ukraine

After Ukraine’s pro-Russian President Yanukovych reversed his stance and discontinued interest in signing the European Union’s (EU) Association Agreement in the fall of 2013, Kiev’s Independence Square (which became known as Maiden Square and the epicenter of the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine) erupted with protest. Hundreds of thousands gathered peacefully calling for the removal of Yanukovych. Quickly the government response turned viciously violent, to which the protestors responded in kind. The battle raged throughout the winter and by late February 2014, the parliament gave the people what they demanded and Yanukovych was voted out of the presidency. This sudden geopolitical defeat prompted Russia to take immediate and drastic action. Pro-Russian demonstrations began immediately upon Yanukovych’s removal and within a week’s time, Russia annexed the entire peninsula of Crimea, and “in Eastern Ukraine, Russia supported a subversive political movement that grew into an armed insurgency (Treverton, Thvedt, Chen, Lee, & Madeline, 2018, p. 15).”

Although the annexation of Crimea was likely a rapid execution of an existing war plan, covert action and activities were evident prior to Crimea’s annexation by Russian conventional forces. The effects of this ambiguous and deniable strategy resulted in such surprise that a Ukrainian or Western response was impossible prior to facing a fait accompli. “These objectives had been facilitated by the progressive penetrations of Ukrainian security structures and the dismantling of communications and agent networks well before [the intervention] (Giles, Sherr, & Seaboyer, 2018, p. 19).” Similar to Crimea, covert special service operators were introduced into the pro-Russian oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk. However, instead of conducting covert actions to facilitate the reception of

conventional forces, these Russian Spetsnaz formed into detachments and stood up and commanded local militias. This ambiguous use of SOF and “the pattern of intervention and Russian denials sustained, and still sustains, perceptions that the conflict is a civil war, rather than an irregular war financed and commanded from outside (Giles et al., 2018, p. 19).” As outlined above with the Russo-Georgian war, the following analysis will use the DIMES acronym to highlight the more salient aspects of Russian unconventional warfare strategy that was utilized in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Yanukovych himself served as a political agent for the Kremlin; “he made the Ukrainian security service SBU change its focus from counterespionage against Russia to counterespionage against the USA (Bukkvoll, 2016, p. 28).” He also permitted a noticeable level of activity by both the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) within sovereign Ukrainian territory following his 2010 election to president. His pro-Russian government rarely acted, or even acknowledged, any of the reporting that was coming from the Ukrainian security services regarding the influx and influence by Russia figure heads and the pro-Russian movement metastasizing in the Donbas (Hordiichuk, personal communication, May 22, 2019). Additionally, many of the countries in the contested space between Russia and the West, including Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, “have been under the direct control of the Moscow patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, which deploys its priests to deliver political messages, particularly at election time ... Russia uses the church to emphasize conservative family values, anti-EU, and anti-US messages, and to encourage parishioners to vote for (pro-Russian) political parties that espouse these views, while emphasizing a common Orthodox culture in the lands in between (Orenstein, 2019, p. 86).”

Apart from the utilization of seemingly unaffiliated Russian troops in Crimea and forces already positioned in Sevastopol, a necessary requirement for Russia’s preemptive employment of nonmilitary forces, those which caused confusion, destabilization, delay, and lowered the economic costs of traditional military activism, “was its long-term maintenance of relationships with pro-Russian political forces and Russian speaking minorities in Ukraine (Nilsson, 2018, p. 20).” Pro-Russian “non” governmental organizations (NGO) were “tasked with projecting Russian *soft power* and promoting a Russian outlook on world affairs, and creating a monopoly of information vis-à-vis Ukraine’s Russian-speaking population through Russian-language media (Nilsson, 2018, p. 20).” Russia’s diplomatic meddling into Crimea was a combination of politics, religion, and NGOs that were funded and influenced by the Kremlin.

Russian state media takes advantage of the Russian speaking populations in its periphery – those formerly under the repressive control of the Soviet Union. “Russia state media creates an alternate worldview for its spectators. Many aspects of its virtual reality are distorted. Conspiracy theories abound. Enemies are identified and berated. Facts are covered up. Heroes – especially Russian president Vladimir Putin – are built up (Orenstein, 2019, p. 85).” By controlling the narratives through this Russian speaking medium, it is relatively simple to play the marginalized victim, create enemies, and foment an “us vs them” backing in Russia’s near abroad. This was certainly the case in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine following the removal of Yanukovych. “Russian public opinion

supportive of the annexation was fueled by fierce propaganda campaign in the Russian media, which – with few exceptions – portrayed the revolution in Ukraine as a Western plot executed by radical Ukrainian nationalists and fascist elements (Menon & Rumer, 2015, p. 84).” Russia has not toned down its misinformation campaign nor its attempted control over media outlets in Russian speaking enclaves in its near abroad. Through quiet subversive support to radical parties to deliberate sabotage of Western elections, the Kremlin continues to sow seeds of chaos in a calculated effort to undermine democratic institutions in Europe (Orenstein, 2019, p. 78).

Militarily “Russia recruited volunteers to fight in Ukraine and also deployed its own troops to prop up the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway republics when they looked like they might be defeated by the Ukrainian national government in 2014 (Orenstein, 2019, p. 42).” The Kremlin routinely made leadership decisions for these militias and routinely dismissed or killed ineffective or rebellious leaders within these ad hoc military organizations. Russia also sent “little green men” – seemingly unaffiliated troops without rank, insignia, or identifying characteristics – to annex Crimea. Although Russian Spetsnaz in Crimea focused primarily on covert action, the Spetsnaz-GRU units⁴ involved in the Donbas conducted special reconnaissance, aided the volunteer militias, engaged in sabotage, and, on rare occasion, were present, killed, and captured in direct action conflicts (Bukkvoll, 2016, p. 30).

As mentioned above, Russia’s unconventional warfare approach gave way to conventional war with large caliber artillery, rocket launchers, and tanks. After a disjointed hybrid effort failed pretty miserably during the first battle for the Donetsk Airport, regular Russian units were brought in to provide “technical support with air defense, electronic jamming, and artillery (Kofman, 2017, p. 2).” This is not to say that this marked the end of Moscow’s hybrid approach, nor its deceit or trickery. However, this initial invasion of conventional forces provided Russia and its proxies the decisive and overwhelming firepower that resulted in early territorial gains against Ukraine in the Donbas.⁵ Consequently, “direct military action sends a strong message to other countries that Russia is not afraid to use military force to exert control in its sphere of influence (Orenstein, 2019, p. 42).” Equally devastating is the message the international community has sent in response to Moscow’s revanchist foreign policy and contemporaneous military strategy – the international community is not willing to assume risk by utilizing military force to counter Russia’s expansionist efforts.

Economically, Ukraine was as reliant on Russia leading up to the 2014 invasion, as was Georgia preceding the Russo-Georgia War in 2008. As a small country bordering Russia, Ukraine was heavily reliant on Russia as one of its largest goods and commodities export countries. However, this is not to say that the trade relationship is an interdependent arrangement; consequently, this allows Russia to punish with trade sanctions or reward with economic aid and trade exemptions. For example, “Russia imposed a series of trade sanctions on Ukraine in 2013–14, declaring all imports from Ukraine ‘high-risk’ and justifying extensive scrutiny that effectively shut down trade for several weeks, among other more targeted sanctions on particular industries and companies (Orenstein, 2019, p. 84).” Consequently, when Yanukovich relented to Russia’s economic pressure leading up to the 2013 EU summit in Vilnius, Ukraine was rewarded for turning away from the association agreement with over 15 Billion (USD) in aid (Menon & Rumer, 2015, p. 77).

Russia is using economic dependence as a key pillar of its national security strategy and is likely to continue to do so as it competes against the EU and the West.

Finally, the subversive tactics utilized by the Russian intelligence services and special forces leading up to the annexation of Crimea and the asymmetrical war in the Donbas proved instrumental to the Kremlin's ambiguous low-intensity strategy. Russian Spetsnaz-GRU and intel operatives infiltrated into Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as much as a full month prior to the start of the anti-Kiev rebellions; these forces played a significant role instigating the insurgency in the Donbas (Bukkvoll, 2016, p. 29). These operatives gained access inside Ukraine covertly and through a myriad of means. Their covers ranged from religious clerics within the Russian Orthodox Church to artists, musicians, tourists, businessmen, and even government officials. Even the local government at the time of the attempted secession had several government officials that were operatives of the Kremlin. The Donbas was primarily ruled by crime syndicates and oligarchs who were sympathetic to Moscow and tied to them financially. Spetsnaz would routinely coerce local pro-Russian fighters at gun point, and would summarily execute them for insubordination or ineffective performance against the Ukrainian volunteers and its defense forces (Hordiichuk, personal communication, May 22, 2019). The levers into this region – diplomatic, cultural, military, and economic were deep-seated, numerous, and surreptitiously cultivated over an extended period of time.

SOF UTILIZATION THEORY

A broad take away from this analysis tells us that Russia, via asymmetrical advances, has deeply cleaved cultural, political, and economic ties into its periphery and will go to great lengths to sustain that influence and dependence with the strategic aim of challenging Western unity. Moscow has proven their ability to rapidly infiltrate SOF into these competitive spaces, using their Spetsnaz to increase the geopolitical strains and take the competition to crisis levels on their terms. If a fait accompli is achieved early in the conflict, the government and its allies will face a difficult impasse. "Accepting what Russia has done will not be easy, but to risk escalation to a full scale conflict by striking back is not easy either (Bukkvoll, 2016, p. 31)." To mitigate this proven capability and its potentially disastrous effects, planners and partner nations must be able to identify these targeted populations, analyze, and counter the Kremlin's levers by achieving parity of influence, and building resiliency in government and society – the best way to achieve deterrence is guaranteeing Moscow a prolonged and painful counterinsurgency fight. Resiliency starts with a powerful mind and courage to overcome fear. Local forces in competitive spaces must be trained and equipped in sufficient numbers and capability to build confidence; they must be able to absorb impact from Moscow and return to their original form. Cohesive societies and well-trained and supported militaries do not fold or defect when pressured externally – they remain resilient. Table 1 below depicts the numerous lines of effort necessary to build societal resiliency and achieve the necessary levels of deterrence against Moscow's influence campaign.

Education + Proper Target Selection + SOF Application = Resiliency

Education	Identification of Competitive Spaces	SOF Counter-Malign Influence Application	Resiliency
- Russian mil/non-military Fusion Strategy – “untemplated” - Asymmetric Warfare Toolkit - Subversion - Political Meddling - Economic Pressure - Low-Intensity Conflict - Threat of Force - Soviet History vs. Western Institutions - Buffer Zone / Space vs Time - Putin’s Statist and Revanchist Tendencies - AARs (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine) - Russian Identity and Metanarratives “Victimology” “Humanitarian” Assistance - Lawfare “Red Lines” from the Kremlin usually mean something - History of U.S. intervention from a Russian perspective; Serbia, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Syria	- Ethnicity and Language - Example, Narva, Estonia with 85%+ Russian Ethnicity - Economic Dependence - Diplomatic Influence - Populist and Nationalist Movements in Europe - Identify and Track: - PMCs - Political Saboteurs - Economic Levers - Military Advisors - Militias/Ad Hoc Forces - NGOs - Press/Media Outlets “Peace Keepers” - Snap Exercises - Criminal Organizations - Sympathetic Orthodox Churches	- Mil-to-Mil Engagements - Professionalize SOF/Security Services - Traditional Mission Sets: FID, FAS, CA, SR, and MIST - Info Ops: - Counter Metanarratives - Vocalize Rus weaknesses - Counter perception of Incapable or Corrupt Government - Expose Russian propaganda efforts = societal resistance - Strengthen Policing Functions - Prevent infil of saboteurs - Prevent arms support - Deterrence - Security Forces Capable of Denying Rus Proxy Forces Access to Competitive Spaces - Identify (Education + SR) flashpoints: - Media Outlet Monopoly - NGO Manipulation/Influx - Provocateurs - Demonstrations/Riots - Economic and Diplomatic Levers Utilized - Election Interference - PMC Infil - Victim Metanarrative	- Proud, Mentally Tough, and Confident - Guaranteed Insurgent Effort Against Occupying Force - Protracted Fight - High Cost and Conventional Force Application - Removes Deniability and “Victimology” Effect - Parity Through Social Cohesion - International Support is a Force Multiplier - Technology and Western Support is a key factor: “A good small Soviet military will never defeat a good big Soviet Military (Polyakov, personal communication, May 22, 2019) - Psychological Defense of the Population

TABLE 1. List containing many of the variables relevant to the SOF Education-Selection-Application theory. Derived from numerous open-source books, articles, and interviews with several first-hand investigative sources who were active in the Donbas between 2014–2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Counter-Russia experts and researchers, as well as retired Ukrainian intelligence officers and SOF operators, emphasize a number of efforts and points in logic that will help planners think more clearly about how to properly employ U.S. SOF against Russian malign influence in Moscow’s near abroad:

- *Do not underestimate the breadth and depth of Moscow’s influence via surrogate and proxy forces.* “Russia provides direct assistance to paramilitary organizations in EU member states and places its spies within these organizations, giving Russia an armed base of operations within Europe (Orenstein, 2019, p. 41).” Also, be cautious of Russia’s expansive espionage efforts – some experts believe that spying efforts today are equivalent to that witnessed during the Cold War. Through direct communication with EU officials, Mitchell Orenstein’s colleagues in Brussels “make it clear that officials believe that Russia hears everything that goes on in Brussels – even in closed meetings of top EU officials. There are no secrets (Orenstein, 2019, p. 32).” Operational security and counter intelligence efforts are of utmost importance, even when participating with our European allies.
- *Study the societal conditions* in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk that allowed for Russian occupation and compare those sociopolitical trends within today’s contested spaces. Russia already has great political, economic, and military influence in Armenia and Belarus, with each hosting Russia military bases or large-scale annual exercises. There are certain to be enclaves

and territories into which Russia is already deeply cleaved, and Moscow is likely already prepared to add them to the growing list of breakaway territories that they will support decisively by any means necessary, up to and including military occupation.

- *“Be careful about targets.* It is worth noting, for instance, that the first target of Russian operations is the Russian people (Treverton et al., 2018, p. 90).” Coincidentally, according to the Kremlin, the Russian population extends to any geographical location where ethnic Russians are living irrespective of whoever claims governance over them. Consequently, familiarity of areas that are likely to be targeted by Russian contemporaneous strategy remains of utmost importance: language, culture, infrastructure, local politics, governing institutions, terrain, external influences, resiliency level, etc.
- *Investigate the extent of Russian ownership of media outlets of former Soviet States* – and more importantly counter the narrative, expose the misinformation, and find a louder channel to broadcast the truth to the Russian speaking populations in Moscow’s near abroad. Russia is at the top of their game with respect to information warfare, and they have a monopoly on the media outlets inside of Ukraine and likely many other Russia speaking enclaves along their periphery. Partner nations must improve their information operations, isolate known shell media outlets owned by Russia, and develop a counter narrative to repair the psychological damage that has already been done in the minds of Russian speaking citizens in Moscow’s near abroad.
- *Don’t lose sight of the forest.* “Ukraine was decided by large-caliber artillery, MLRS systems, and tanks; not innovative hybrid approaches (Kofman, 2016, p. 11).” Proxy forces shaped into a conventional Army who imitate and are reinforced by the Russian Army is simply an ambiguous and expendable conventional force. General Ihor Hordiichuk, Ukrainian Spetnaz commander who fought against the Russian backed separatists in 2014, argues that “without Russian artillery and air power, the contest could be over in months⁶ (Personal communication, May 22, 2019).” Transnistria after the collapse of the Soviet Union, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and Donetsk and Luhansk from the summer of 2014 to present all have seen the eventual application of conventional Russian military operations – precisely what Moscow is good at, well-exercised in, and equipped and funded to do. U.S. forces must be prepared to counter Russian escalation dominance in its back yard.
- *Numbers matter ... capability matters, and they both build resiliency.* As was the case in Ukraine, if the local defense forces are outmanned, outgunned, ill prepared, unequipped, and unsupported to fight an enemy of Russia’s caliber, they will be psychologically defeated before first contact. The likely eventuality is another frozen conflict and another contested territory in Russia’s sphere of influence.
- *Get ahead of the misinformation campaign.* Military Information Support Teams (MIST) should be fully integrated within an overall FID/FSA mission for permissive environments, as well as incorporated with UW frameworks operating in hostile, denied, and/or politically sensitive areas. The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats found that the best way to counter Russian information warfare and misinformation is with a proactive and outspoken dialogue of the

challenges confronting the targeted populations. This approach has been successful in minimizing Russian interference in both French and German political discourse and “has been shown to be highly effective in raising public awareness and decreasing potential targets’ susceptibility to information operations (Treverton et al., 2018, p. 89).”

- *Understand Russia’s toolkit of unconventional warfare – don’t template it.* Although particular characteristics may feel similar from case to case, Russian strategy is likely to vary widely in subsequent application. Identifying vulnerabilities and existing levers that tie back to the Kremlin will template different courses of action that Russia is likely to use against their potential adversaries. For instance, in Ukraine, propaganda and a virtual monopoly on Western Ukrainian media outlets served as a recruiting mechanism for Russian Spetsnaz while damaging the fighting spirit of the Russian speaking Ukrainian force through dialogue of a hopeless, outmatched, and unsupported force. In other instances, it may be a combination of entirely different aspects of Russian UW strategy.
- *“Know everything,”* says General Hordiichuk. Succinctly and impactfully phrased, Gen Hordiichuk strikes a chord that reverberates a tone of Sun Tzu; “If you know your enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles (Tzu, 1910, p. 3–18).” It is imperative that specialized teams operating in Russia’s sphere of influence study it all; Soviet history, former Bloc culture, ethnic and language divides, politics, frozen conflicts, European institutions, lessons learned from our partner nations, as well as Russia’s narrative, misinformation campaign, and revanchist foreign policy tendencies.
- *Timing is a function of initiative and creativity.* Decisive and imaginative steps must be taken to identify and establish a presence in today’s competitive spaces – lest they become occupied by the Kremlin and thus contested spaces. “Whoever is first in the field and awaits the coming of the enemy, will be fresh for the fight; whoever is second in the field and has to hasten to battle will arrive exhausted. (Tzu, 1910, p. 6–1).”

In summary, calculated and proactive efforts by U.S. SOF in Russia’s near abroad, those missions which focus on bolstering societal resiliency, deterrence, and resistance capabilities, will deny Moscow uncontested access to these geopolitical territories in its near abroad, immediately imposing cost on Russia. To be effective in these complex goals, U.S. SOF must utilize a more expansive and holistic view of Russia military history and strategy, as well as a macro whole of government approach to contest malign influences. Additionally, more resilient allies who are willing and aptly trained, outfitted, and supported are necessary to blunt Moscow’s hybrid influence and resist a Russian occupation if necessary. These collective efforts will guarantee Russia no quick or inexpensive victory and immediately allow U.S. and her allies to compete with and impose cost on Russia and its strategic efforts against the West.

Notes

1. For more on Russia Unconventional Warfare Strategy see Bartles article “Russia’s Indirect and Asymmetric Methods as a Response to the New Western Way of War” in Special Operations Journal Volume 2, 2016 – Issue 1.

2. For the purpose of this article, competitive spaces are the areas along Russia's periphery that Moscow perceives to be in their sphere of influence, of interest to state survival, or areas of ethnic Russians that Moscow is obligated to protect from suffering, maltreatment, or poor governance.
3. Russia's Ministry of Science and Education funds the Russkii Mir foundation, an organization (among others such as the International Eurasian movement and the Gorchakov fund) that is believed to be responsible for the influx of pro-Russian NGOs in Georgia in 2008 and remains active in Russia's near abroad to this day.
4. Reports from Ukrainian observers identify anywhere from three to four combined SOF battalions active in the Donbas during the height of the conflict. "These units have contained roughly 250–300 fighters each, and have been provided to the theater of operation on a rotational basis among the seven Russian Spetsnaz GRU brigades. They have operated in groups of 10–12 individuals, and worked closely with GRU SIGINT units (Bukkvoll, 2016, p. 30)."
5. Ukrainian forces quickly massed sufficient combat power to contest the initial Russian invasion. They expelled Russian proxies from Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and Mariupol, liberating two-thirds of the territories initially captured by the Russians and their proxy forces. At great cost, the Russians were successful in repelling Ukrainian offensive operations in Luhansk, Llovaysk, and Debaltsevo. Ultimately, Russia failed to establish "Novorossia," and agreed to sign the Minsk protocol in September of 2014 – settling for a stalemate in the Donbas (Polyakov, personal communication, May 22, 2019).
6. Leonid Polyakov, Former Deputy Minister of Defense for Ukraine from 2005–2008, suggests a similar timetable – he estimates that the occupied territories in the Donbas would not stand for more than a week or two without Russian support. (Polyakov, personal communication, May 22, 2019)

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

REFERENCES

- Bukkvoll, T. (2016). Russian special operations forces in the war in Ukraine - Crimea and Donbas. *Aleksanteri Papers - Russian Hybrid Warfare - Going beyond the Label*, 1, 25–32.
- Giles, K., Sherr, J., & Seaboyer, A. (2018). Russian reflexive control. In Anthony Seaboyer (Ed.), *Defense research and development Canada*. Kingston, Ontario: Royal Military College of Canada.
- Gretskiy, I. (2019). Russia's perspective on EU-Russia interdependence. In *From fostering interdependence to managing vulnerabilities*, 58–78. Tallinn, Estonia: International Centre for Defence and Security.
- Hordiichuk, I. (2009). *Challenges in relations between Russia and Ukraine over the next 10 years*. Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College.
- Hordiichuk, I. (2019). [May 22, 2019 interview between Craig Thompson (Author) and former SOF commander in Donbas].
- Kofman, M. (2016). Russian hybrid warfare and other dark arts. *War on the Rocks*, March 11.
- Kofman, M. (2017). Through a glass darkly: Three scenarios for Russian aggression in Ukraine. *American Enterprise Institute*, December.
- Kofman, M. (2018a.). The august war, ten years on: A retrospective on the Russo-Georgian war. *War on the Rocks*, August 17.
- Kofman, M. (2018b). Russian performance in the Russo-Georgia war revisited. *War on the Rocks*, September 4.
- Menon, R., & Rumer, E. (2015). *Conflict in Ukraine: The unwinding of the post-cold war order*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

- Nilsson, N. (2018). Russian hybrid tactics in Georgia. *Central Asia-Caucasus institute & silk road studies program*.
- Orenstein, M. (2019). *The lands in between: Russia vs. the west and the new politics of hybrid war*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Polyakov, L. (2019). [May 22, 2019 interview between Craig Thompson (Author) and former deputy minister of defense Ukraine].
- Renz, B. (2018). *Russia's military revival*. Medford, MA: Polity Press.
- Treverton, G., Thvedt, A., Chen, A., Lee, K., & Madeline, M. (2018). *Addressing hybrid threats*. Stockholm, Sweden: Swedish Defence University.
- Tzu, S. (1910). *The art of war*. Translated by Lionel Giles. London, England: The British Museum.