

Getting Gerasimov Right

Charles K. Bartles

On 26 February 2013, chief of the Russian General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov published “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations” in *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier* (VPK) (*Military-Industrial Courier*). In this article, Gerasimov lays out his perspective—and the prevalent view in Russian security circles—of the recent past, present, and expected future of warfare. This article was published about a year before the Maidan protests that set in motion the events leading to the eventual annexation of Crimea and Russian-sponsored insurrection in eastern Ukraine.¹ The chain of events that followed the Maidan protests could in no way be foreseen by Gerasimov, but his article is often cited in the West as “Gerasimov’s Doctrine” for the way Russian forces conducted its operations.

In this vein of Western thinking, Gerasimov’s article is often interpreted as proposing a new Russian way of warfare that blends conventional and unconventional warfare with aspects of national power, often referred to as “hybrid warfare.” This article will attempt to put Gerasimov’s article, which was written for a Russian audience, in context for U.S. readers to explain some allusions that are sometimes missed or misunderstood.

The Russian Chief of General Staff

For background, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff is often equated with the Russian General Staff, but this is a great understatement of the Russian General Staff’s importance. The Russian chief of the General



(Photo courtesy of the Press Service of the Russian Defense Ministry)
Chief of the Russian General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov

Staff has far more authority than any flag grade officer in the U.S. military. He is responsible for long-term planning duties equivalent to both the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense and the unified combatant commanders. In addition, he has oversight of strategic transportation equivalent to that of U.S. Transportation Command, force doctrinal and capabilities development, and equipment procurement for all branches of the Ministry of Defense. He even has an inspector-general-like function for ensuring that General Staff standards and regulations are adhered to.

Also, although the chief of the General Staff does not have operational control of the force, he does have day-to-day control (in peacetime) of the *Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye* (Main Intelligence Directorate, commonly known as GRU), which is a directorate of the General Staff, and several strategic assets including the Russian airborne, which functions as a strategic reserve.

In the hierarchy of the Russian government, there are uniformed officers serving in positions technically above the chief of the General Staff, but

arguably none of these assignments are as prestigious.

Elaboration on Strategic Foresight

In general, it is a duty of the Russian general staff to use foresight to develop the theory and practice of future war. This is the context in which Gerasimov's article is written. The use of the term "foresight" in the article's title is not coincidental, and the term has a specific military definition in the Russian lexicon:

Foresight (military) is the process of cognition regarding possible changes in military affairs, the determination of the perspectives of its future development. The basis of the science of foresight is knowledge of the objective laws of war, the dialectical-materialist analysis of events transpiring in a given concrete-historical context.²

In Russian military thought, foresight is directly linked to military science, with military science being the science of future war.³

The General Staff takes a rather academic approach to the endeavor of military science, including the use of a peer-review-like process that functions by opening debates on ideas through the publication of articles in various outlets, including professional journals. There are several often-used outlets for the military's academic discussion and debate, most notably the journal *Voyennaya Mysl* (VM) (*Military Thought*), which is published by the General Staff. Gerasimov chose to publish this article in VPK, a different, but also commonly used journal for such ideas. The VPK is a private newspaper, owned by the quasi-government-controlled Almaz-Antey company, which focuses on the military and military-industrial complex matters. VPK also serves as a frequent venue for top military leaders to inform the force, tout successes, and propose reforms.

This particular article, like other such articles by senior military leadership, was likely published in the VPK in order to reach a much larger audience than the rather dry VM. The intended audience for Gerasimov's article may not even be in the Russian armed forces,



(Photo by Efremlukatsky, Associated Press)

Hundreds of thousands of protesters poured into the streets of Ukraine's capital, Kiev, 8 December 2013, toppling a statue of Soviet-era leader Vladimir Lenin and blocking key government buildings during escalating protests against the government. Gen. Valery Gerasimov has stated that the greatest dangers to Russia are so-called "color revolutions."

but instead in Russia's senior political leadership. Russia has powerful militarized intelligence and security services that compete with the Ministry of Defense for resources. Gerasimov's article may have been intended to send a message that the Ministry of Defense can meet Russia's current and future threats, an important message in a resource-constrained environment.⁴ No matter what reason the article was published, it is important to keep in mind that Gerasimov is simply explaining his view of the operational environment and the nature of future war, and not proposing a new Russian way of warfare or military doctrine, as this article was likely drafted well before the start of the Maidan protests.

The Russian Narrative of the United States and Forced Regime Change in the Post-Soviet Era

For U.S. readers, Gerasimov's linking of the Arab Spring and "color revolutions" (and in later comments, the Maidan Movement) with military capability development may seem odd. In order to put his comments in context, it is necessary to look at the Russian view of warfare and forced regime change as it has developed since the end of the Cold War.

In the Russian view, transgressions against the post-Cold War international order began with the partition of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, when Russia was at her weakest. While the Western narrative of

"Traditional" Approach for Achieving Political-Military Goals

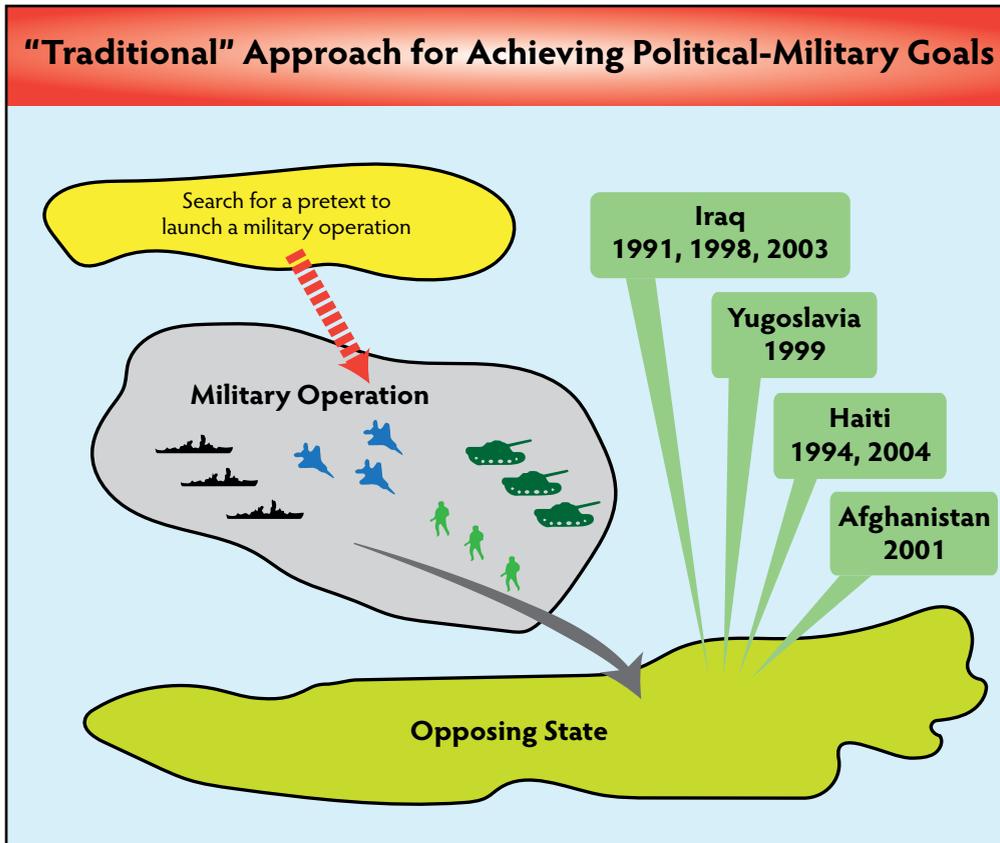


Figure 1. Adapted from a briefing given by Gen. Valery Gerasimov during the Russian Ministry of Defense's Third Moscow Conference on International Security¹³

is that most Russians still resent this U.S./ NATO action.

Thus, it is no surprise Russia justified many aspects of its Crimea annexation on the lessons learned and precedents set by the West in Yugoslavia, which led to the eventual independence of Kosovo.⁵ Additionally, post-Kosovo, the most obvious U.S. regime change operations occurred in Afghanistan and Iraq. Russia views those operations as having been very similar to the Kosovo operation. In the Russian view, the pattern of U.S. forced regime change has been as follows: deciding to execute a military operation; finding an appropriate

NATO's Yugoslavia intervention is one of military action to prevent mass genocide, Russia has a much different view. Most Russians generally view the NATO bombing campaign as having been illegal because it was conducted without the approval of the UN Security Council and believe that Serbia was simply being punished for engaging in counterterrorism operations, albeit with some excesses. The most egregious sin, from the Russian view, was the partitioning of Yugoslavia. This action set a precedent for external actors to make decisions about the internal affairs and territorial integrity of sovereign nations alleged to have committed some wrong. It is important to note that Russia was dealing with its own Islamic insurgency at the same time in the North Caucasus. This may have caused Russian concern about a similar NATO action taking place inside Russia. One consequence of Western intervention resulting in the destruction of Yugoslavia

pretext such as to prevent genocide or seize weapons of mass destruction; and finally, launching a military operation to cause regime change (figure 1).

However, Russia believes that the pattern of forced U.S.-sponsored regime change has been largely supplanted by a new method. Instead of an overt military invasion, the first volleys of a U.S. attack come from the installment of a political opposition through state propaganda (e.g., CNN, BBC), the Internet and social media, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). After successfully instilling political dissent, separatism, and/or social strife, the legitimate government has increasing difficulty maintaining order. As the security situation deteriorates, separatist movements can be stoked and strengthened, and undeclared special operations, conventional, and private military forces (defense contractors) can be introduced to battle the government and cause further havoc. Once the legitimate

government is forced to use increasingly aggressive methods to maintain order, the United States gains a pretext for the imposition of economic and political sanctions, and sometimes even military sanctions such as no-fly zones, to tie the hands of the besieged governments and promote further dissent (figure 2).

Eventually, as the government collapses and anarchy results, military forces under the guise of peacekeepers can then be employed to pacify the area, if desired, and a new government that is friendly to the United States and the West can be installed (figure 3).

This theory may sound far-fetched to U.S. ears but is a very common view throughout the former Soviet Union. This narrative also sheds some light on the Russian government's hostility toward NGOs.⁶ Though there are usually no allegations of NGOs being directly or indirectly controlled by foreign governments, most Russian reporting on NGOs purports that they are simply being funded because they have an objective to influence a particular government in a given way, or to just cause general instability. An interesting aspect of these allegations is that the Central Intelligence Agency (a favored scapegoat for any Russian misfortune) is no longer typically mentioned; the usual culprits (in the new narrative) are the U.S. State Department and United States Agency for International Development (USAID).⁷

From a Russian military perspective, this new Western way of war has many implications that can be easily identified in Gerasimov's article and Russia's current military doctrine. In the past, the primary threat of foreign-forced regime change has come from an army storming across the border. In contrast, today,

the threat is coming increasingly from more indirect and asymmetric methods. This change in the nature of the threat to Russia's sovereignty is causing Russian military development to increasingly focus on obtaining improved capabilities to counter those asymmetric and indirect threats.

The means required to implement these capabilities will be as diverse and asymmetric as the threats they are intended to counter and could come in the form of undeclared conventional forces, peacekeepers, special operators, Cossacks, private military companies, foreign legionnaires, biker gangs, Russian-sponsored NGOs, and cyber/propaganda warriors.⁸

Hybrid War, the Nature of War, and Models

Probably the most misunderstood aspect of Gerasimov's article is the idea of "indirect and asymmetric methods" that has been interpreted by the West as hybrid war. Of note, there is a general consensus in

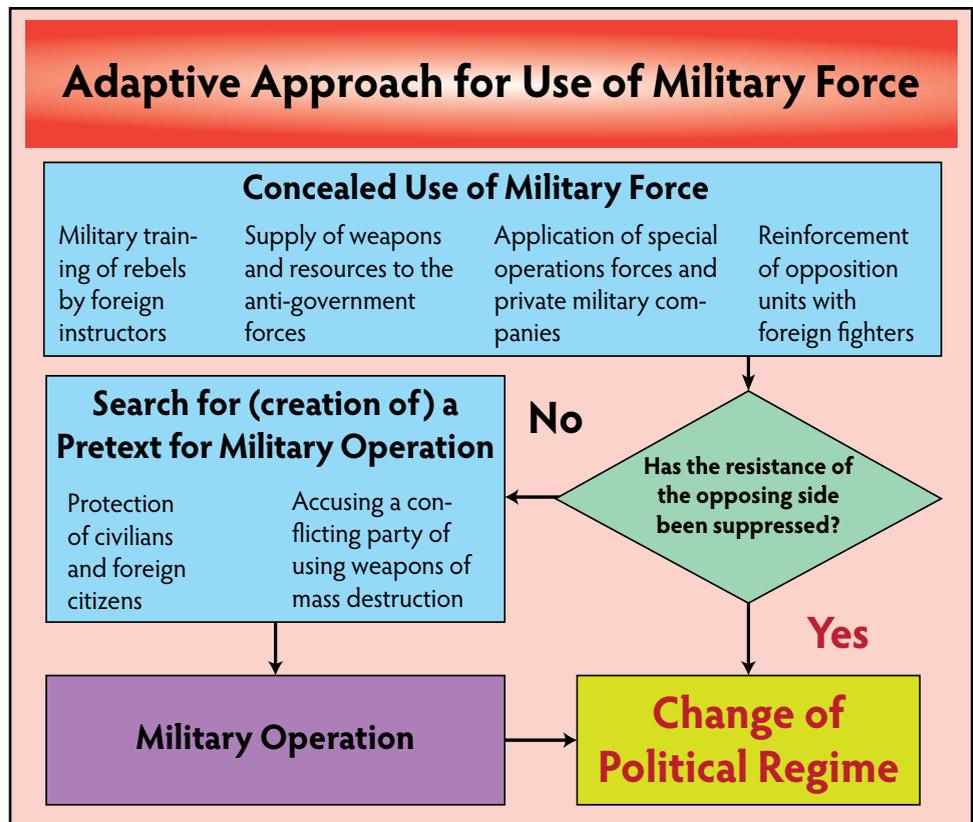


Figure 2. Adapted from a briefing given by Gen. Valery Gerasimov during the Russian Ministry of Defense's Third Moscow Conference on International Security¹³



Figure 3. Adapted from a briefing given by Gen. Valery Gerasimov during the Russian Ministry of Defense's Third Moscow Conference on International Security¹³

Russian military circles that hybrid war is a completely Western concept as no Russian military officer or strategist has discussed it, except to mention the West's use of the term, or to mention the West's use of hybrid warfare against Russia.

The Russian military has been adamant that they do not practice a hybrid-war strategy. Moreover, there have been many Russian commentaries that state this concept is nothing new, that the aspects of hybrid war mentioned by Western analysts have been practiced since warfare began.

However, it is difficult to compare the terms because there is no recognized definition for the terms, either in Russia or the West. Undoubtedly, there is some overlap about what these terms likely mean, but it is clear that hybrid war refers to a much narrower scope of activities than the term "indirect and asymmetric methods." One example that clearly illustrates the difference in the terms is the Russian

understanding of the previously discussed color revolutions and the Arab Spring. The view that NGOs are the means of an indirect and asymmetric method of war makes it very clear that Gerasimov is talking about something very different than the Western notion of hybrid war.⁹

One of the most interesting aspects of Gerasimov's article is his view of the relationship on the use of nonmilitary and military measures in war. The leveraging of all means of national power to achieve the state's ends is nothing new for Russia, but now the Russian military is seeing war as being something much more than military conflict. As the graphic from Gerasimov's article illustrates (figure 4), war is now conducted by a roughly 4:1 ratio of non-

military and military measures. These nonmilitary measures include economic sanctions, disruption of diplomatic ties, and political and diplomatic pressure. The important point is that while the West considers these nonmilitary measures as ways of avoiding war, Russia considers these measures as war (figure 4).

Some analysts in the West, having read Gerasimov's article and viewed current Russian operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, have created models for a new Russian way of warfare. Although these models may be useful analyzing past actions, not much stock should be put in them for predicting the nature of future Russian operations. In Gerasimov's own words, "Each war represents an isolated case, requiring an understanding of its own particular logic, its own unique character."¹⁰ He is saying that there is no model or formula for understanding the operational environment or the exercise of national power in every war scenario. Each instance of a problem will be looked upon as a

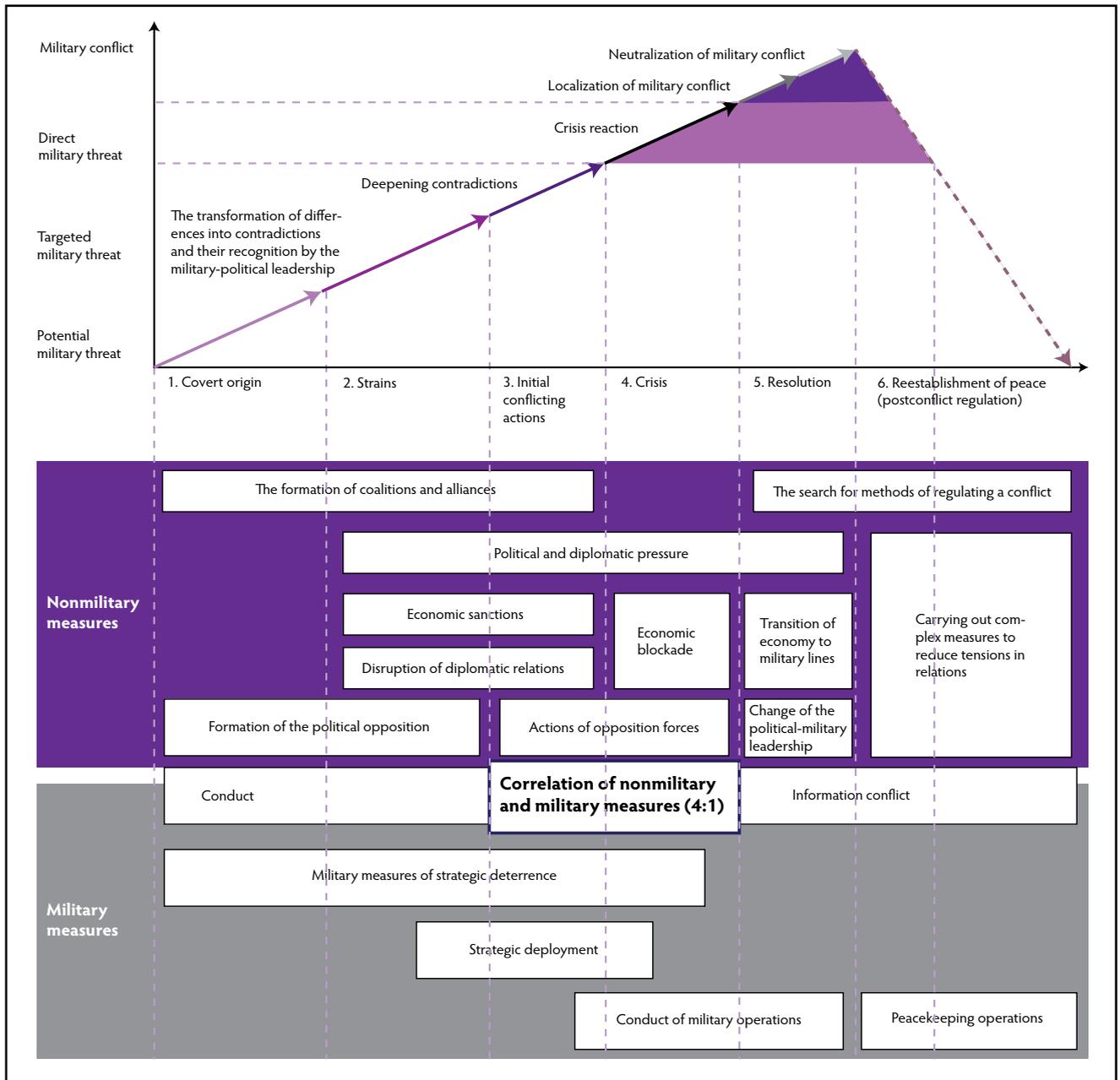


Figure 4. Graphic from Gerasimov article in *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, 26 February 2013, translated by Charles Bartles

unique situation that will require the marshalling of the state’s resources in whatever way is necessary.

Although Russia may respond similarly to two different situations, this is not an indicator of a specific formula for action, rather it just means the similarity of the situations required similar responses. At the tactical level, models and formulas are essential for determining the correlation of forces needed for victory, but

at the operational and strategic levels, a much different approach is required (figure 5).

The U.S. Threat to Russian Strategic Deterrence Capabilities

A cornerstone of Russia’s national security policy is the concept of strategic deterrence. Russia’s theory of strategic deterrence is based upon the premise that

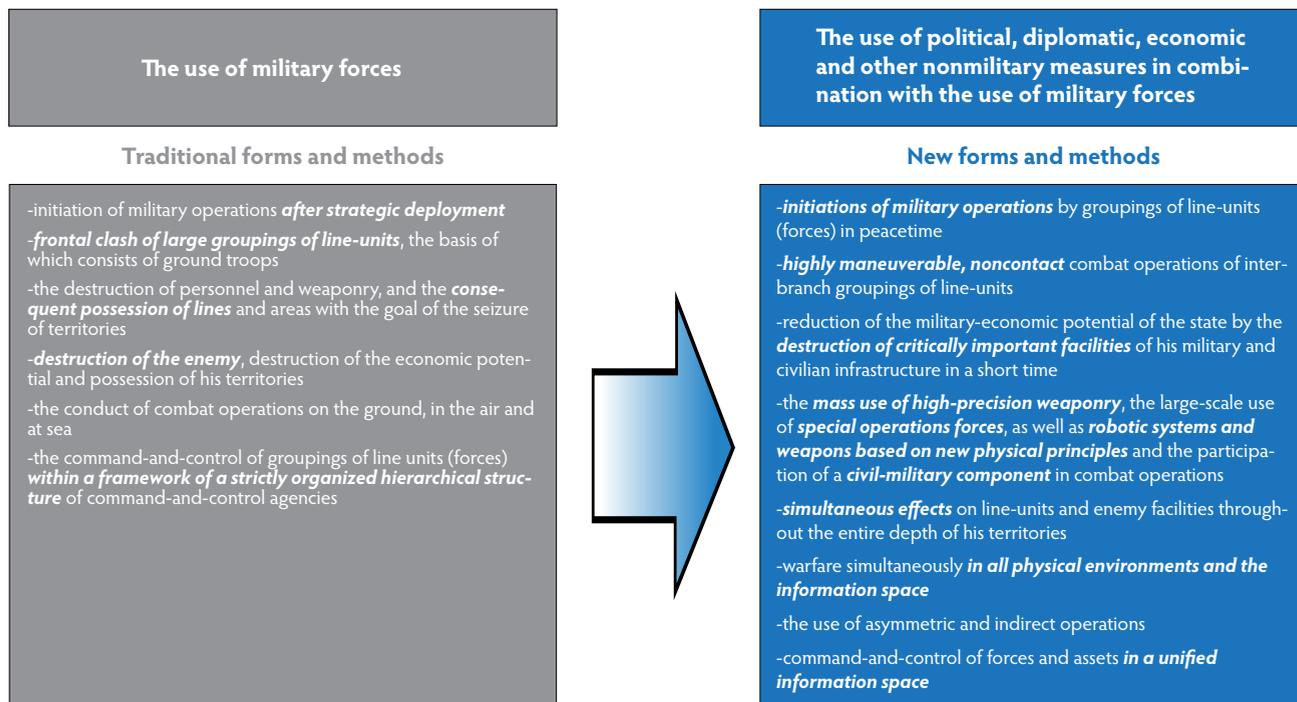


Figure 5. Graphic from Gerasimov article in *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, 26 February 2013, translated by Charles Bartles

the threat of a mass employment of primarily strategic nuclear forces will cause such an amount of damage to an aggressor's military and economic potential under any circumstances that the cost of such an endeavor will be unacceptable to the aggressor. Even in the worst of economic times, Russia has been able to rely on her strategic nuclear forces for such strategic deterrence.

However, after NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia, Russia saw NATO's interference with what it perceived as an internal matter in Yugoslavia as something that might be replicated in its own breakaway region, Chechnya. In response, Russia incorporated the concept into its 2000 Military Doctrine of "de-escalation" that says if faced with a large-scale conventional attack it could respond with a limited nuclear strike.¹¹ In the past, the relatively weak condition of Russia's conventional forces required Russia to change the conditions for the use of strategic nuclear forces as a strategy for deterrence, but the parity and deterrence value of nuclear forces was never questioned. The combination of the United States' development of the anti-ballistic missile defense and Prompt Global Strike (capability to conduct a precision strike on any target in the world in less than hour) programs in the 2000s changed this status quo of

parity for the first time. Russia believes that a combination of these two programs would severely degrade Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent, especially with the addition of hypersonic weapons.¹²

Other Salient Observations of Note

Gerasimov's view of the future operational environment is in many ways very similar to our own. Like us, he envisions less large-scale warfare; increased use of networked command-and-control systems, robotics, and high-precision weaponry; greater importance placed on interagency cooperation; more operations in urban terrain; a melding of offense and defense; and a general decrease in the differences between military activities at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

Interestingly, despite some very similar views, he and his staff are approaching these problems in some very different ways. Russia is experimenting with some rather unconventional means to counter hostile indirect and asymmetric methods, but Russia also sees conventional military forces as being of the utmost importance.

At a time when the U.S. military is cutting back on heavy conventional capabilities, Russia is looking at a similar future operational environment, and doubling

down on hers. While the United States increases its special operations forces (SOF), Russia is keeping her SOF numbers relatively static and is entrusting her conventional forces to perform many SOF functions, not by necessity, but by design.

The biggest difference in how Gerasimov perceives the operational environment is where he sees threat and risk. His article and Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine make apparent that he perceives the primary threats to Russian sovereignty as stemming from U.S.-funded social and political movements such as color revolutions, the Arab Spring, and the Maidan movement. He also sees threats in the U.S. development of hypersonic weapons and the anti-ballistic missile and Prompt Global Strike programs, which he believes could degrade Russian

strategic deterrence capabilities and disturb the current strategic balance.

Conclusion

Gerasimov's position as chief of the General Staff makes him Russia's senior operation-strategic planner and architect for future Russian force structure and capability development. In order to execute these duties, the individual in that position must have the foresight to understand the current and future operating environments along with the circumstances that have created those environments and will alter them. Gerasimov's article is not proposing a new Russian way of warfare or a hybrid war, as has been stated in the West. Moreover, in Gerasimov's view of the operational environment, the United States is the primary threat to Russia. ■

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Notes

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13. Dr. Anthony H. Cordesman attended the Russian Ministry of Defense's third Moscow Conference on International Security on 23 May 2014. While in attendance, Cordesman was able to take pictures of Gen. Valery Gerasimov's slide presentation. A few of the presentation's key slides (figures 1, 2, and 3) have been substantially recreated to accompany this article. Cordesman later produced a report on the conference that includes a broader selection of not only the slides presented by Gerasimov, but a selection of materials presented by other participants. The report is titled "A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US and the West." It may be viewed in its entirety at the Center for Strategic & International Studies website, accessed 20 November 2015, <http://csis.org/publication/russia-and-color-revolution>.

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Russia and the "Color Revolution"

A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US and the West (Full Report)

By: Anthony H. Cordesman

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