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RUSSIA ON THE NATURE OF FUTURE CONFLICT: IS THIS AN OPENING DISCUSSION OF RUSSIA'S NEW MILITARY DOCTRINE?

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Introduction

The 1983 *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary* of the Soviet Union stated that military doctrine “contains two closely interlinked and interdependent aspects—a socio-political aspect and a military-technical aspect.”¹ The socio-political aspect contains the greatest stability while the military-technical aspect encompasses matters directly pertaining to military organizational development and technical equipment. It helps determine the forms and methods for conducting operations.²

Likewise, the dictionary states that the character/nature of war is composed of socio-political and military-technical components (the 2007 *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Moscow: Eksmo, did not define the term). The socio-political aspect includes economic and socio-political causes, conflicts which led to war’s occurrence, class thrusts and political aims of belligerents, and the degree to which these aims are in conformity with social progress. This character of the socio-political component may change during a war’s course. The military-technical component of war’s character includes conventional and nuclear military hardware, the forms and methods of the conduct of military operations, and the scope, scale, and duration of war.³ While dated, the definitions offer most of the basic elements of these concepts today. Even though the article that follows is about the nature of future conflict, it should be kept in mind that the analysis is also about how Russian military authors may be sizing up their next version of military doctrine.

The **socio-political** aspect can be found in how the authors discuss the use of information in the media and political and economic discussions to inform or mislead/manipulate public opinion. This is accomplished either through social media or well-developed computer viruses that damage or corrupt economies or infrastructures. The **military-technical** aspect of war’s future character/nature occupies the bulk of the authors’ analysis. This focus is on advanced weaponry that is based on new physical principles and on space weapons and platforms. One author lists 18 trends to follow. Trends, course, help predict how future conflict might unfold, so his list is worthy of close consideration.

Two prominent authors from the General Staff Academy are profiled. The first author, General-Lieutenant Vladimir Ivanovich Ostankov, is a lead scientist at Russia’s Military Academy of the General Staff. He offered a straightforward approach with the absence of any anti-Western diatribe. The logic of his description of the nature of future conflict coincides not only with the tenets of Russian military thought but also with many of the points expressed in the presentations of General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov. The second author, General-Colonel V. B. Zarudnitsky, is the current head of the General Staff Academy. Like Ostankov, he focuses on the basic elements of Russian thought, although he does imply on several occasions that it is the West, along with extremists, that are the sources of future conflict.

The Assessments of Ostankov

¹ N. V. Ogarkov, editor-in-chief, *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1983, p. 240.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p. 792.

General-Lieutenant Vladimir Ivanovich Ostankov wrote that forecasting the nature of possible conflicts makes it possible to form an idea of the enemy and the type of military conflict to prepare for; the tasks needed to be resolved; and the particular force structure for this conflict. The early identification of new trends will cause changes in strategy. Further, technologies and military-political changes are what influence military art, the nature of military conflicts, and the employment of the Armed Forces.⁴

Ostankov described ten features of contemporary conflicts:

1. The use of social movements;
2. Nonmilitary measures;
3. The use of advanced weapons of all kinds (hypersonic, electronic warfare, precision-guided, and those based on new physical principles);
4. Affecting opponents to their entire depth in an information and aerospace confrontation;
5. Rapid maneuver and fire;⁵
6. Reduction in temporal parameters;
7. Strengthening of the centralization and automation of command and control (C2);
8. Participation of irregular armed formations and private military companies;
9. The use of indirect and asymmetric methods;
10. And, somewhat oddly, the “creation of a permanent war zone on the territories of the opposing sides.”⁶ Perhaps the comment is in reference to Syria and Ukraine.

Ostankov stated that a trend in future conflict will be an increased reliance on the comprehensive use of political, economic, information, and other nonmilitary measures. Political goals will be achieved with a minimum of armed action by undermining an opponent’s military and economic potential and disorganizing his state administration and military command and control. Targeted information will enable the dynamic support of internal opposition elements. These issues will be supplemented with military measures of a covert nature.⁷

He adds that military force has not disappeared. Rather, it will be used in conjunction with nonmilitary measures, adding weight to nonviolent means of struggle. New forms of military operations are appearing, to include:

- The disappearance of tactical and operational pauses in operations;
- A reduction in spatial, temporal, and information gaps between troops and C2 organs due to new information technologies;

⁴ V. I. Ostankov, “The Nature of Contemporary Military Conflicts and Its Influence on Military Strategy,” *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk (Bulletin of the Academy of Military Science)*, No. 2 2019, p. 30. Dr. Orenstein translated this article into English.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

⁷ Ibid.

- Remote, noncontact effects (e.g., use of robotics) as a main method of achieving goals;
- The erasure of differences among strategic, operational, and tactical levels and between offensive and defensive operations.⁸

Operations will no longer be independent but joint, “concentrating the efforts of large formations and tactical formations of all services and branches to achieve the assigned goal under a unified command.”⁹

When considering the importance of a unified command, the General Staff “decided to create military districts as interservice territorial operational-strategic formations.”¹⁰ These formations will repel forecasted threats in their areas of responsibility. Ostankov then noted the following:

A new form of employing military district troops (forces) was proposed—the strategic operation on a theater of military operations as a joint operation of large formations, formations, and military units of all services, branches, and special forces, conducted under the general leadership of the commander of the operational-strategic grouping of troops (forces) on the theater of military operations.¹¹

He stated that since U.S. operations have moved from preparing for noncontact warfare to the development of multisphere battle (probably a reference to the U.S.’s multidomain operations or MDO), such changes were necessary. The goal of U.S. operations will be to neutralize the Russian Armed Forces, which plan to confront U.S. and NATO forces near Russia’s border. The creation of wartime military districts was a way to resolve this problem, along with a 2013 decision to improve the system of territorial defense forces and headquarters. Further, an important place in armed struggles in the future will be played by new reconnaissance and global navigation resources, which will provide intelligence to C2 organs as required for strikes against targets in any region.¹²

New requirements will be generated for interservice recce-strike and recce-fire complexes and for weapons based on new physical principles. These latter weapons (hypersonic and laser weapons, for example) will decrease the past importance and use of nuclear deterrence. A new search will be conducted for various forms and methods of deterrence, which will include the implementation of a strategy of forward presence, based on military bases abroad.¹³ Perhaps for this reason Russia has continued to improve its presence in the Middle East and in Yemen with either its armed forces or private military companies.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 33.

Ostankov closed his article noting that a deterrence policy may be based on intimidation and unacceptable damage from hypersonic weapons in response to any large-scale aggression from an opponent.¹⁴ Looking to the distant future, he added that in 50 years, theaters of military operations will witness a struggle of robots, with tasks to destroy an opponents' military infrastructure and weaponry.¹⁵ Thus, his view of the nature of future conflict is that it will be one in which people will eventually be absent or only taking part in operations when the threat to life is minimal. Super-fast weapons fired from afar will dominate. Aleksandr Svechin's comment that each war has a special line of strategic behavior, the establishment of its own logic and uniqueness, and the absence of templating, holds true today.¹⁶

Ostankov thus signaled that in future conflict the socio-political aspect of war's nature will combine with its military-technical aspect. The socio-political aspect will witness an increased reliance on political, economic, information, and other nonmilitary measures. Political goals will aim to undermine an opponent's military and economic potential and disorganize his C2. Support to the effort will be offered by internal opposition elements and military measures of a covert nature. The military-technical aspect will witness new forms of deterrence due to the appearance of new weapons. Future weapons may enable combat without the use of humans until the threat to life is minimal.

The Assessment of Zarudnitsky

General-Colonel V. B. Zarudnitsky offered a slightly different discussion of current military affairs. He stated that the nature of armed struggle will depend on clashes of national interests and political goals; the state of the quantitative and qualitative parameters of existing forces and means; and the level of military art's development in the opposing sides.¹⁷ These are, in their essence, an expression of indicators among political, armed forces, and thought correlations between two sides. For example, advantages in the development of military art by one side can change the overall correlation of forces between the sides.

New weapons, Zarudnitsky states, will create a need for new forms and methods of military operations. The struggle to seize and hold territory will be replaced by the need to control critically important state structures and information technologies that can manipulate the protest potential of the population.¹⁸ Zarudnitsky listed five trends in the nature and content of future military conflicts and 18 trends in weaponry:

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁷ V. B. Zarudnitsky, "The Nature and Content of Military Conflicts under Contemporary Conditions and in the Foreseeable Future," *Voennaya Mysl' (Military Thought)*, No. 1 2021, p. 35. Dr. Orenstein translated this article into English.

¹⁸ Ibid.

- The increase in the role of nonmilitary measures, whose nature will be traditional-asymmetric-subversive. Information confrontation may provide an arena for total mind control. “Behavioral-type wars” will be researched.¹⁹
- The psychological struggle is increasing due to new information and communication technologies, changing its forms and methods. Psychological weapons are “aimed at the manipulation of society, the cultural medium, the national mentality, and the algorithms of the population’s behavior by using reflexive control.”²⁰
- There is an increase in the spatial and functional scope of armed confrontations. The principle of multisphericity is being introduced in a unified combat domain, using global strikes from different directions. This will require the use of a strategy of active defense, which takes into consideration measures for the **preemptive neutralization** of threats to state security.²¹
- There is an increase in the importance of the space domain and its support of reconnaissance, communications, and navigation. Weapons on space platforms will be a new means of conducting warfare and new forms are forecasted, such as anti-satellite combat, destruction of state infrastructure, orbital satellite battles, and so on. Efforts will be made to disorganize an enemy’s C2.
- The spectrum of armed struggle means will broaden, to include hypersonic, precision, electromagnetic, laser, infrasonic,²² cyber, information, C2, UAVs, autonomous naval systems, robotic complexes, and artificial intelligence (AI). Such systems will support decision-making. A comprehensive approach is now an objective necessity.²³

These five trends in the nature and content of military conflict will affect the forms of employing the Armed Forces. In the mid-term, weapons and military and special equipment (VVST) will emerge according to the following 18 trends:

1. Accelerated creation of the newest UAVs, with a broadening of their executable functions and of the air means of destruction;
2. Increase in missile flight speed to hypersonic;
3. Reduction of the conspicuousness of VVST models;
4. Improvement of automated systems of C2 carriers and weapons;
5. Increase in the range of target detection and destruction (without entry into the enemy’s air defense zone);
6. Development of space-based reconnaissance and C2 systems;
7. Formation of a unified information and C2 domain, with the help of space resources;

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

²² Generally, below the audibility range of the human ear. An infrasonic weapon would cause nausea and pain in humans. They have reportedly been used by some nations for crowd control.

²³ Ibid., p. 41.

8. Robotic space systems will conduct anti-satellite struggles and service space systems; weapons based on new physical principles will be created for space defense. This will shift space operations from support to combat;
9. Robotization of all spheres of armed struggle;
10. Development of AI for robotic systems, broadening the spectrum of their executable tasks and ability to operate autonomously;
11. Shift from the principle of “command and control of a robot” to the principle of “assigning tasks to a robot:”
12. Introduction of technologies for employing robotic military systems in groups;
13. Improvement of various precision, control, and self-homing means of destruction and intelligence, targeting, radio-electronic warfare, air defense systems, and systems for the struggle against cruise missiles and UAVs;
14. Increase in the level of automation of VVST;
15. Shift from fire destruction of an enemy to the use of comprehensive effects against opponents;
16. Equipping combat ships with long-range “ship-to-shore” and “ship-to-ship” precision weapons;
17. Creation of underwater robotic military systems, including strategic systems and systems for situational awareness;
18. Introduction of AI units capable of self-learning and analysis of large amounts of information for employment in various fields—from reconnaissance and C2 of weapons to strategic forecasting and decision-making.²⁴

AI has been a key ingredient in the development of many of these trends, helping condition promising forms of employment of the Armed Forces. Zarudnitsky stated that AI will move the strategic operations of general-purpose forces and strategic deterrence operations to global military campaigns. This is a concept similar to General Lieutenant Vladimir Slipchenko’s comment 20 years ago about the imminent move from strategic to planetary operations. Zarudnitsky added the following:

The blurring of the boundaries between the states of war and peace, and the employment of hybrid combinations of nonmilitary and military methods to achieve strategic results require the further improvement of asymmetric methods of reacting to challenges and threats to Russia’s national interests. Changes in the methods of starting and in conducting military operations will be based on **preempting** the enemy by means of improving the forms and methods aimed at gaining and maintaining dominance in all spheres of confrontation, employing high-tech resources of armed struggle in different spheres, as well as dynamically conducting information and ideological confrontation.²⁵

Zarudnitsky ended his article quoting General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov, who had recently spoken (1 September 2020) at the General Staff Academy. Gerasimov noted that a timely

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 43-44.

determination of the nature of future warfare is required and that the military-scientific complex “must concentrate its main efforts on the rapid development of military art.”²⁶ Both successes and failures must be studied. Thus, returning to the beginning of Zarudnitsky’s article and interest in military art, Gerasimov’s focus on thought and military art (and not on national interests and politics) indicates how important the concept is to the nature of conflict. After all, “thought is the first to enter battle.”

Zarudnitsky appeared to be more specific about the military-technical aspect of the nature of future conflict than Ostankov. He underscored a few aspects of the socio-political concept when discussing the five trends in the nature of future conflict, noting that nonmilitary measures would increase, and their nature will be traditional-asymmetric-subversive. Information confrontation may provide an arena for total mind control. Psychological struggles will increase and be aimed at manipulating cultural media and national mentality. However, his 18 trends, focused on military-technical issues, signaled where his real interest is concentrated.

Conclusions

Both authors used the concept of the nature of contemporary military conflict in the titles of their presentations. Did their analyses coincide with the definition of the nature of war? It appeared that they did, as there were clear references to both the nature of war’s socio-political and military-technical components in each presentation. Of course, the socio-political component is less ideological today, due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism along with it, but the expanded use of nonmilitary forms of struggle, which have a strong socio-political character, has been a constant theme supported by many military officers, to include General Staff Chief Gerasimov. Russia still maintains a distrust of the West and a suspicious attitude, which, to some extent, borders on paranoia. For that reason, there is a strong attempt by the Kremlin to use information confrontation’s manipulation and misinformation components and conduct a constant information-psychological attack against the West.

With regard to the military-technical aspect of the character of war, this is where Russia appears to be placing its money. Putin himself offered a clear picture of what new weaponry Russia will develop a few years ago with his presentation on several new forms of missiles and torpedoes. With new VVST Putin feels Russia can deter other nations with devices other than nuclear ones. He likewise appears more willing to take risks that might not result in a nuclear exchange.

Thus, the articles of these two officers at the General Staff Academy appear to offer current Russian thinking on war’s future nature. These are issues for other nations to study and take into consideration, since Russia’s leadership appears willing to either employ these assets or threaten their use. It appears that lessons learned in Syria, Crimea, and Yemen (with private military companies) have been contagious and improved the Kremlin’s confidence in the nation’s ability to field an impressive military capability. What they have learned from these encounters will be

²⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

further developed when their new military doctrine is published, whose aspects coincide nicely with those that explain the probable character of future conflict.