

## The Russian General Staff’s “Foreseeable Future”: Destructive Fires to Destructive Influence

By Tom Wilhelm  
OE Watch Commentary

In a valedictory article in the Russian Ministry of Defense’s *Military Thought* journal, the head of the Russian General Staff’s Military Academy, General-Colonel V.B. Zarudnitsky, gave guidance to his researchers regarding their work on conflicts in the foreseeable future. In particular, he noted that Russian military theoreticians need to expand the notion of victory by destroying an enemy with fires to destroying an enemy with influence.

Zarudnitsky’s article is a complete work in the General Staff’s terms. It is a forecast based on trends with historical analysis and reference to the categories of the “forms and methods” to be worked out in military theory. Russian military leadership adheres to this framework when testing and advancing ideas. It provides them a kind of reliability and accountability in doctrine. Zarudnitsky’s article notes five trends. First, he highlights the expansion of non-military measures in conflict and hints at an almost secondary role for conventional forces. Related to this, the second trend describes the importance of psychological warfare “aimed at manipulating society, the cultural environment, national mentality, and algorithms of population behavior using the methods of reflexive control.”

A third trend is the spatial and functional scope of armed confrontation. Writing for a military muscular with conventional firepower, Zarudnitsky warns that such a conventional outlook will require modification: “The scale of so-called non-contact wars will expand” and direct contact “combat operations...will acquire a short-lived character...” in a framework of “multi-domain capabilities in a single combat space.” Zarudnitsky’s “conventional military actions, strictly distributed across physical domains, are replaced by multidimensional ones, conducted simultaneously in all spheres of confrontation.” The fourth trend is the importance of outer space. Zarudnitsky exhorts a “proactive study” of military operations there, claiming that space is a critically vulnerable area for the United States and NATO. His fifth trend is the expansion of the kinds of weapons systems in development, theoretical or otherwise. He catalogs hypersonic, precision-guided, laser, infrasonic, and cyber weapons; command information systems, unmanned aerial and autonomous marine vehicles, military robotics, and artificial intelligence for decision support and command and control. He notes that all this is leading to a transition from considering victory to be the “physical destruction of an enemy only by fires, towards a functional influence-based” approach.

Based on this forecast from the head of the Russian General Staff’s Military Academy, this article can be seen as a document to organize research for current Russian military doctrine and an accelerant to drive those military forms and methods off the doctrinal drawing boards and into the operational environment within, as Zarudnitsky says, the “foreseeable future.”

“This comprehensive approach toward influencing the adversary is becoming an objective necessity in modern warfare, unlike in wars past when defeat was achieved exclusively by fires.”



Emblem of the Russian General Staff.

Source: Public Domain

**Source:** V.B. Zarudnitsky, “Характер и содержание военных конфликтов в современных условиях и обозримой перспективе (The Nature and Content of Military Conflicts in Today’s World and in the Foreseeable Future),” *Military Thought* (The Russian Ministry of Defense’s journal of military theory), No.1 2021

*In our view, complex information-influence activities in military conflicts of the future will acquire paramount importance in the interests of creating the most favorable conditions for the achievement of the objectives. The trend in the development of information warfare is manifested not so much in the information technology aspect as in the improvement of the forms and methods of information and psychological influence on both the personnel of the armed forces as well as the population of the adversary country. Its intensity, scale, and duration are increasing. In the interests of researching potential methods of information influence on the social strata of a state adversary in the militarily advanced countries, scientific research is being carried out to develop the foundations of conducting “behavioral-type” warfare.*