Defense: Evolution of Views

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Analysis of military history shows that such a critical form of combat action as the defense was often underestimated with the result that armies were ill-prepared for it. Combat practice has on many occasions shown the erroneousness of views downplaying the role of the defense. As a rule, warring sides had to repulse enemy attacks on an ever growing scale and for increasing periods. Troops had to look for effective methods of preparation and conduct of the defense at the cost of heavy losses, correcting the mistakes that were made in military theory. The Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 was not an exception in this regard.

Despite the fact that a number of advanced, forward-looking concepts of the military art evolved in the early 1930s (in particular, the theory of operation in depth), clearly insufficient consideration was given to the theory of preparation and conduct of defensive operations. As A.A. Svechin pointed out, the Red Armyns disrespect for the defense resulted from failure to understand the dialectic relationship between the offensive and the defensive. "He who cannot defend himself will not be able to mount a successful offensive," he stressed. "It is critical to use firm defense in order to prepare an effective offensive; an offensive operation needs a good foundation to build on." The opinion of this outstanding military expert, however, was ignored.

The initial period of the Great Patriotic War showed how dangerous it was to underestimate the importance of the comprehensive development of the theory of preparation and conduct of defensive operations since some theoretical propositions proved simply untenable—in particular, the concept of point-of-resistance or line defense. Offensive operations were strongly impaired by omissions and shortfalls in the theory of antitank and antiaircraft defense, engineer organization and development of position, and camouflage, concealment, and deception, especially in exercising command and control. At the same time there were no instructions or guidelines concerning the specifics of preparation and conduct of defensive operations at the initial period of war in the event of a surprise attack mounted by the enemy. The main shortfalls and omissions in that regard were taken into account at the first initial stage of the war, and gradually rectified. Nonetheless, the Red Army had to pay a heavy price of millions of lives for that.

The concept of the defensive operations that emerged by the end of the war on the whole conformed to the basic requirements of the time. The defense of combined arms units acquired the form of a complex, multi-layered system, the outcome of the operation hinging on effective and closely interrelated functioning of elements thereof. Its structure, however, was not as yet finalized while some matters of defense operation were dealt with intuitively, based on practical combat experience. There was a need for their thorough analysis and substantiation in theory.

In post-war years, the theory of preparation and conduct of defensive operations was developed further, based on the definition of the possible character and methods of warfare. The following outstanding military leaders made a major impact on elaboration of the theory and practice of the defense: Marshals of the Soviet Union G.K. Zhukov, M.V. Zakharov, and A.A. Grechko, and Army Generals A.V.Gorbatov and A.S. Zhadov. In their views, they relied above all on extensive military experience as well as trends in the evolution of the international military-political situation. At the same time, however, there were subjective views that ignored objective factors, oftentimes coming into conflict with them, which, as a rule, had highly negative consequences. In some instances, illconceived decisions by the country is top political leadership resulted in that the time tested principles of defense organization were rejected or ineffectual methods of its preparation and conduct were adopted. Thus, the proposition that mobile defense was not a special form of defensive action held back the development of methods of its organization and conduct for years, while the decision to reduce the forward defense area, which was made in the late 1980s (for political considerations), made it impossible for troops to perform many of their defensive missions.

By the late 1940s, the military academic establishment came to the conclusion that the defense should be unified in its objectives and methods of conduct, based on close interaction of static and mobile defense. At the same time, I.N. Vorobyev, a well known military expert, stressed that the concept of "unified defense" effectively ruled out any alternative scenarios except rigid, positional forms of defense operations.²

The basic form of organization of all defensive lines was the battle tested trench system. Improvement of operational disposition consisted above all in changing the structure of its elements and increasing the depth of their disposition.

Just as in the Great Patriotic War, a special emphasis was placed on organization of continuous fire delivery on attacking enemy forces with priority given to close range effective engagement in holding defensive positions. The main defense organization principle—a combination of firm defense and flexible maneuver—also remained immutable. Maneuver, however, was essentially subordinated to positional forms of action. It was basically designed to ensure an effective holding of defensive positions by concentrating defending forces and to regain lost positions by mounting counterattacks and counterstrokes. The advent of nuclear weapons necessitated a clear-cut definition of their role and place in the defense system as well as a revision of old methods of preparation and conduct of defensive operations. From 1954 until the mid-1980s, they were regarded as the main asset of warfare. In the late 1950s-early 1960s, the objective of the defense was to foil an enemy attack through effective engagement with nuclear weapons. In the second half of the 1960s, however, a more realistic view prevailed and troops began to be prepared for conduct of operations, including defensive operations, both with and without the use of nuclear weapons.

It has to be said that some elements of operational disposition, which had far from outlived their usefulness yet, were discarded: Subsequently, they had to be restored as a matter of urgency. This applies, among other things, to artillery groups which were abandoned in the early 1960s—on one hand, following a sharp reduction in the number of artillery systems and the increasing defensive area, and on the other, under the impact of views by a number of military expects who believed that it was inexpedient to create such formations in nuclear warfare.

The system of defensive lines (areas) and positions underwent the most substantial modification of all. We believe that inclusion of a second (intermediary) area forward of FEBA into the tactical zone was a rather dubious decision. Reference to the Great Patriotic War in this case is hardly appropriate since at the time the tactical zone of defense was taken up by first-echelon corps divisions and inclusion of a second line was well justified. Therefore, defense zones were restored without taking into account changes that had occurred in the situation, as a result of which their functions were misrepresented.

Official enforceable legal documents of the 1950s have a pronounced trend to avoid setting rigid intervals between defensive lines, which opened great scope for creativity. The early 1980s, however, were marked by an opposing trend: Field manuals and instructions began to set fixed rules on disposition of elements of defensive lines, areas, and positions.

In the 1970s-early 1980s, formation of the command and control system, constituting the organizational/technical basis for command and control of troops in a defensive operation, was finalized. Forms and methods of antitank action were developed further. The traditional method of engaging tanks by direct gun fire in combination with massed artillery fire from closed positions underwent some qualitative changes owing to the wide use of antitank guided weapon systems. In appraising the evolution of methods of antitank warfare and its increased role in an operation and combat, military experts came to the conclusion that in terms of its impact on the character of combat action, it was outgrowing the tactical framework and emerging as a major operational factor.³

In the late 1980s, priority of defensive operations over offensive operations at the initial period of war was proclaimed. These views on the balance of the defense and the offense—even though they were adjusted somewhat so as not to downplay the role of the latter—were still in place in the 1990s. One of the most

important tasks of the military art was to work out recommendations on ways of achieving the sufficient level of firm and active defense amid powerful fire and EW impact by enemy forces, considerable general superiority in assets and forces, and the massed use of commando forces.⁴

At the same time, the growing mobility of troops in the defense required effective EW and fire impact on the enemy not only in the forward area but also at distant approaches. New elements were to be created in the operational disposition of troops: integrated reconnaissance and strike and reconnaissance and fire complexes.

Maneuver acquired a combined airland character. Highly active and mobile methods of conducting the defense became a prerequisite for a successful defensive operation. At the same time positional firmness did not lose its relevance. Nonetheless, today, effective holding of lines, positions, and areas is, rather, a prerequisite for highly mobile action in the entire area of defense since contact with the enemy can occur not only along the front edge but also on enemy occupied territory or behind our lines. At the same time, the rapid development of precision weapons sharpened the contradiction between the need for force maneuver and the difficulty of accomplishing it. In this context, it was recommended to undertake maneuver only as an absolute necessity since the operational firmness of the defense was at stake.⁵

Official recognition, in the late 1990s, of mobile defense as a special form of defensive operation considerably expanded the scope of capability of defending troops. Whereas in the past, mobile defense action was usually divided into two phases: active (combat action to hold intermediary areas) and passive (retreat to new positions), now the basic premise was that combat action will be conducted with growing intensity.⁶

At the same time, it is not as yet the case that the views on operational defense have been brought in line with the requirements arising from the possible use of precision and other state of the art weapon systems. We are only seeing the first stage in addressing this problem, which is complicated by serious economic difficulties and the fact that there is insufficient capability to test the validity of theoretical propositions in practice, in the course of exercises and war games.

Domestic military thought has oftentimes overemphasized the importance of revolutionary breakthroughs in changing warfare methods, as opposed to gradual evolution of the military. Granted, improvement of military theory in general and defensive theory in particular is impossible without revolutionary changes. Yet, it is critical to ensure continuity between the past, the present and the future. We believe that an effective defense theory as well as military science in general can only emerge on the basis of a balanced combination of revolutionary ideas and reasonable conservatism. Whereas changes in views on methods of preparation and conduct of combat operations, especially with advanced weapon systems, can and should be

based on revolutionary changes, new propositions of military theory, with their subsequent enshrining in the law, in combat training should be introduced on a gradual, step by step basis, after a thorough analysis of each step as to its expediency and viability.

Moreover, in looking for effective ways of defense organization in new conditions, it is essential to use the positive elements of past experience. Of course it is important to take a critical view of it, under no circumstances using it in a purely formal way in the present-day situation. It should not be forgotten that historical experience is an indispensable basis for further advancement of military theory and practice and that its effective tapping will help deal with topical problems, including in preparation and conduct of defensive operations, more expeditiously and effectively.

NOTES:

- 1. Quoted from: Voennaia mysl', No. 4, 1998, p. 36.
- 2. Ibid., No. 9, 1990, p. 35.
- 3. Ibid., No. 3, 1981, p. 29.
- 4. Ibid., No. 8, 1991, p. 21.
- 5. Ibid., No. 3, 1992, pp. 22-23.
- 6. I.P. Vorobyov, Printsipy obshchevoyskovogo boya, VAF, Moscow, 1992, p. 417.