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Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich (L) gives a wink to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin during a signing ceremony after a meeting of the Russian-Ukrainian Interstate Commission at the Kremlin in Moscow, 17 December 2013.

Looking for Little Green Men: Understanding Russia's Employment of Hybrid Warfare

by Tony Balasevicius

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Introduction

In February 2014, anti-government protesters toppled the Ukrainian government of Viktor Yanukovich. Shortly thereafter, pro-Russian separatists began seizing infrastructure in Crimea while systematically occupying territory in the eastern part of the Ukraine. As it would later be revealed, many of these supposed separatists were, in fact, highly trained Russian Special Forces personnel wearing no insignia, the so-called “Little Green Men.” The precision with which these operations were carried out shocked many Western analysts. Not only for the speed at which events unfolded, but also for the efficiency with which the Russians were able to coordinate and execute the numerous operations they had in play.¹

What was remarkable about the annexation of Crimea and subsequent fighting in Eastern Ukraine was the fact that Russia's conventional military forces, which traditionally lead such operations, played only a supporting role. Even Russia's high-profile Special Forces, which organized much of the resistance, secured key infrastructure, and established many of the checkpoints that sprang up throughout the peninsula, were not the decisive element in this conflict. In the end, it was the extensive and well-coordinated use of intelligence, psychological warfare, intimidation, bribery, and internet/media propaganda that undermined and eventually collapsed Ukrainian resistance.² The end result was a clear and overwhelming victory achieved by what some are referring to as Russia's “New Generation Warfare.”³

In adopting “New Generation Warfare” as a doctrine, the Russians have embraced hybrid warfare as a strategic tool. In the process, they have shifted the focus of conflict away from operational level conventional military campaigns and into the strategic realm. In so doing, they have redefined the concept of the battlefield and re-established the importance of national level strategic planning and coordination.



Lt. Col. Stephen Capehart, the battalion commander for 1st Battalion, 68th Armor Regiment, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, climbs onto his Abrams on a range in Adazi Military Base, Latvia, 14 April 2017. LCol Wade Rutland, the commanding officer 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, prepares to mount the Abrams as well.

Russia's success with "New Generation Warfare" means that they will likely continue refining and using this doctrine to achieve their strategic aims. With Canada ready to deploy a battle group into Latvia as part of NATO's 5,000-strong rapid reaction force, it will need to understand how this doctrine works, and what its impacts may be. This article will look at the basic components of Russia's "New Generation Warfare" and provide an overview of its underlying philosophy. However, in order to do this, it is important to first examine and understand the theory of hybrid warfare, and how it seeks to defeat an opponent.

Frank Hoffman and the Western Concept of Hybrid Wars

The Western view of hybrid warfare has been heavily influenced by Frank Hoffman, a Research Fellow at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory.⁴ In a 2007 monograph entitled *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Hoffman laid out the key principles that have come to define Western perceptions of hybrid war. In this work, he defined hybrid wars as incorporating "...a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorism acts, including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder."⁵ He described this form of warfare as blurring the lines between different types of

conflict, those who fight them, and the technologies that are used.⁶ In this respect, Hoffman saw the world entering a period when multiple types of warfare would be used simultaneously by flexible and sophisticated adversaries.⁷

Hoffman believed: "The future does not portend a suite of distinct challenges with alternative or different methods but their convergence into multi-modal or Hybrid Wars."⁸ He emphasized that units operating in such an environment would be hybrid in both form and application. As an example, he pointed out that future conflict would include hybrid organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas, employing a diverse set of capabilities. Additionally, he envisioned states shifting their conventional units, to irregular formations, and adopting new tactics, as the Iraqi *Fedayeen* did in 2003.⁹ Hoffman also highlighted the fact that although these activities could be carried out by the same, or separate units, they would usually be operationally and tactically coordinated within the main battlespace by one headquarters to achieve synergistic effects.¹⁰

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One of Hoffman's most critical observations pertained to how hybrid wars would function in terms of the interaction between regular and irregular elements. He revealed that historically, many wars had seen both regular and irregular elements fighting; however, these elements traditionally operated in different theaters

and/or in different formations. He hypothesized that in the future, this may no longer be the case. In fact, he declared that it would not be unusual for the irregular element to become operationally decisive, rather than just being relegated to the traditional role of a secondary player.¹¹

Hoffman's ideas regarding the simultaneous use of multiple forms of warfare, the employment of state level hybrid war, hierarchical political structures employing decentralized cells, and the emergence of the irregular element as a *decisive*, or at least, an *equal* partner in conflict have all played out in Russia's "New Generation Warfare" doctrine. Yet, these ideas are rooted at the tactical and operational level, and alone, they do not fully explain the efficiency or success of recent Russian operations.¹² To better understand Russian achievements with its hybrid warfare model, it is important to understand how those activities were coordinated at the *strategic level* as part of a well-developed doctrine focused upon achieving a single political objective. In seeking to better appreciate this aspect of Russian operations, it may be beneficial to examine the Chinese view on this subject.¹³

China's View of Unrestricted Warfare

Traditionally, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) relied on a "Peoples War" doctrine, along with an emphasis upon numerical conventional force advantage to offset the technical superiority of its perceived opponents. However, as it started looking at power projection capabilities in the 1980s, the Chinese realized they needed to modernize both their force structure and doctrine.¹⁴ The stunning victory of the American-led coalition in the first Gulf War against Iraq gave

the Chinese an opportunity to study best practices in modern military operations. From the PLA perspective, the conflict demonstrated that the balance in warfare had shifted heavily in favor of smaller, high technology forces.¹⁵

They were particularly impressed with the American use of new technologies, such as networked computers, precision-guided munitions, Global Positioning System (GPS), global telecommunications, and unmanned aerial vehicles.¹⁶ They realized that these capabilities gave the Americans an unprecedented degree of information about the opposing forces, and they believed this played a vital role in their subsequent destruction. As a result, PLA analysts started seeking ways to overcome this informational advantage.¹⁷

The result was a two-step process. First, the PLA embarked upon a program to become more technologically enabled by acquiring advanced equipment and weapon systems. However, they also looked at options to mitigate the advantages given to a high technology enemy.¹⁸ Part of this later effort bore fruit in February 1999, when two PLA Air Force colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, published a book entitled *Unrestricted Warfare*.

The thesis of their work was based upon the idea that there was little value in directly confronting American operational excellence on the battlefield. As a result, the focus of conflict needed to move away from conventional warfare. They argued this could be done by broadening the idea of conflict to include the various elements of national power. The authors reasoned that advances in technology and weapons, globalization, and the diffusion of state power had combined to create the needed conditions for this new form of warfare.¹⁹ Moreover, they suggested that



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New recruits to the Chinese People's Liberation Army during field training.

those involved in the planning and conduct of warfare had generally viewed the non-military domains as little more than accessories that serve military requirements. As a result, the development of the modern battlefield, as well as possible changes in strategy and tactics, had been limited to that one domain.²⁰

The authors understood that developing a strategy involving a number of different domains would require integrating a complex mix of information and resources. This process would start with producing a detailed knowledge of the strengths and limitations of one's own national security capabilities. Armed with this information, a country would be able to superimpose "political and military factors on the economy, culture, foreign relations, technology, environment, natural resources, nationalities, and other parameters to draw out an 'extended domain'."²¹ Once the strategic requirements (resources) were in place for this "extended domain," a nation would be able to create the battlefield of battlefields.

In theory, the creation of the battlefield of battlefields would allow one to reduce the impact of superiority in one (military) battlefield by forcing an opponent to deal with many battlefields simultaneously.²² They termed the synthesis of these ideas "modified combined war that goes beyond limits."²³ A key pillar of this concept is to exploit the benefits of "combinations" in types of

"In theory, the creation of the battlefield of battlefields would '...reduce the impact of an overwhelming advantage in a specific (military) battlefield.'"

organizations and among the various domains of national power.²⁴

In this respect, the authors reasoned that the key to victory on the battlefield of battlefields was understanding and coordinating the effective use of four specific types of combinations: Supra-National Combinations (combining national, international, and non-state organizations to a country's benefit), Supra-Domain Combinations (combining battlefields and choosing the main domain), Supra-Means Combinations (combining all

available means, military and non-military, to carry out operations), and Supra-Tier Combinations (combining all levels of conflict into each campaign).²⁵

Integrated within the idea of combinations was the use of eight principles that they outlined as follows:

- Omni-directionality;
- Synchrony;
- Limited Objectives;
- Unlimited Measures;
- Asymmetry;
- Minimal Consumption;
- Multi-dimensional Coordination; and
- Adjustment and Control of the Entire Process.

Three of these principles are of special interest to the West in attempting to understand state level hybrid warfare. These include Omni-directionality, Synchrony, and Asymmetry.²⁶

Omni-directionality – “is the starting point of ‘unrestricted war’ ideology and is a cover for this ideology..., there is no longer any distinction between what is or is not the battlefield. Spaces in nature including the ground, the seas, the air, and outer space are battlefields, but social spaces such as the military, politics, economics, culture, and the psyche are also battlefields. And the technological space linking these two great spaces is even more so the battlefield over which all antagonists spare no effort in contending. Warfare can be military, or it can be quasi-military, or it can be non-military. It can use violence, or it can be non-violent.”²⁷

Synchrony – [is about] “Conducting actions in different spaces within the same period of time... So many objectives which in the past had to be accomplished in stages through an accumulation of battles and campaigns may now be accomplished quickly under conditions of simultaneous occurrence, simultaneous action, and simultaneous completion. Thus, stress on ‘synchrony’ in combat operations now exceeds the stress on phasing.”²⁸

Asymmetry – “...No matter whether it serves as a line of thought or as a principle guiding combat operations, asymmetry manifests itself to some extent in every aspect

of warfare. Understanding and employing the principle of asymmetry correctly allows us always to find and exploit an enemy’s soft spots. The main fighting elements of some poor countries, weak countries, and non-state entities have all used ‘mouse toying with the cat’-type asymmetrical combat methods against much more powerful adversaries... Instead, the weaker side has contended with its adversary by using guerrilla war (mainly urban guerrilla war), terrorist war, holy war, protracted war, network war, and other) forms of combat.”²⁹

The fundamental precept derived from the idea of combinations used within the context of these principles is that there is no longer a distinction between *what is* or *is not* a battlefield. Along with the traditional battlefields normally associated with military operations (Air, Land, Sea, Cyber, and Space) everything from politics, economics, culture, to the national psyche may now become a possible battlefield. The key feature of this type of warfare is the ability to conduct, coordinate, and synchronize actions within these different battlespaces, which potentially *can*, and in many instances *should* occur at the same time.³⁰

The authors theorized that throughout history, military victories “...display a common phenomenon: the winner was the one who could combine well.”³¹ To highlight the idea of combining activities within multiple battlefields they introduced the concept of ‘simultaneously,’ and emphasized that it would play an increasingly important role in future operations.³² They reasoned that if a state could achieve a single full-depth, synchronized action



PLA soldiers on armoured vehicles equipped with anti-aircraft artillery, Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 3 September 2015.

Damir Sagolj/Reuters RTX1QV1G



PLA sailors line decks aboard PLA frigate *Hengshui* as it arrives at Pearl Harbour to participate in the multi-national exercise *Rimpac*, 29 June 2016.

across all battlefields, the paralysis caused to the enemy could be sufficient to decide the outcome of an entire war.³³ The authors provide an example of how such an operation might unfold as it links into the concept of combinations:

...by using the combination method, a completely different scenario and game can occur: if the attacking side secretly musters large amounts of capital without the enemy nation being aware of this at all and launches a sneak attack against its financial markets, then after causing a financial crisis, buries a computer virus and hacker detachment in the opponent's computer system in an attacking nation advance, while at the same time carrying out a network attack against the enemy so that the civilian electricity network, traffic dispatching network, financial transaction network, telephone communications network, and mass media network are completely paralyzed, this will cause the enemy nation to fall into social panic, street riots, and a political crisis. There is finally the forceful bearing down by the army, and military means are utilized in gradual stages until the enemy is forced to sign a dishonorable peace treaty.³⁴

In their analysis, Liang and Xiangsui suggested that *preparation for* and specific activities *related to* this form of conflict would likely occur well before the start of a formal declaration of war. Moreover, they saw the center of gravity focused upon creating social panic, leading to a political crisis. Once the crisis had developed sufficiently, conventional military force could be applied, but only to the extent necessary to achieve victory.

In developing this asymmetric approach, the authors concluded that asymmetry, which is at the heart of this type of warfare, should be used to find and exploit an enemy's soft spots. They asserted that poor countries, weak countries, and non-state entities have all used some type of asymmetrical combat methods against much more powerful adversaries as a means to level the playing field. This means that when a country faces a technologically superior enemy, the key to success lies in moving the fight from pure military operations to a much broader interpretation of warfare, namely, one that includes Financial Warfare, Cultural Warfare, Media Warfare, Technological Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Network warfare, to name a few.³⁵

By using such methods, a nation or non-state entity could minimize the impact of technological superiority and the associated increase in combat power that such advantages provide to a conventional military force. In so doing, a nation would make the enemy fight one's own type of war, which, if done correctly, would occur on a number of different and more complex battlefields than has previously been the case. Interestingly enough, this is exactly what the Russians are now doing in Eastern Europe.

How much the Russians have been influenced by Chinese thinking on the subject of hybrid warfare is difficult to ascertain. It is clear that many of the key concepts underlining *Unrestricted Warfare's* philosophy, particularly the ideas of coordination, synchrony, the 'battlefield of battlefields,' creating social panic leading to political crisis, and the judicious application of military force, have all been displayed in recent operations undertaken by the Russians. Also, much of this philosophy has been articulated in public statements by senior officials on how the Russians view the future of conflict within the context of "New Generation Warfare."

Russia's Doctrine of "New Generation Warfare" and the Future of Warfare³⁶

The Russian concept of "New Generation Warfare" was first introduced to the public in a paper published by General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the Russian General Staff, in February 2013.³⁷ In it, Gerasimov laid out a number of key principles behind Russia's thinking on the employment of modern/hybrid warfare. The first principle revealed was the idea that the world is now in a continual state of conflict. He asserts, "...in the 21st Century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace." He explains that the conduct of wars has changed as they are no longer declared and, having begun, they move in different and unfamiliar directions.³⁸ He extrapolates on this statement by saying: "This unfamiliar template refers to asymmetrical operations using a host of [strategic] capabilities to 'nullification of an enemy's advantages in armed conflict.'"³⁹

Gerasimov believes that the specific capabilities needed to affect change will include the use of Special Forces linking up with internal opposition groups throughout the target country to create an operational front that extends throughout the entire depth of the enemy's territory. These actions will be combined with information operations, cyber warfare, legal warfare, economic war, and any other activities that are directly linked to the designated strategic outcome. He points out that the entirety of these



Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov, 23 February 2017.

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DND photo RE2011-M089-004 by Corporal Mathieu St-Amour

A CF-18 *Hornet* launches for a mission at sunset during Operation *Mobile*, Trapani, Italy, 21 August 2011.



A T-72B1 tank crew of the Russian Airborne Troops 83rd Guards Air Assault Brigade on exercise in Primorye Territory, Russia, 16 February 2017.

activities would be initially selected, but constantly modified to meet the specific needs of a changing situation.⁴⁰

The Russians deem that such methods, employed and sequenced properly, can, in a very short period of time, throw a stable and thriving state into a web of chaos, humanitarian upheaval, and outright civil war, making it susceptible to foreign intervention.⁴¹ Although Gerasimov acknowledges that such events were not traditionally part of what would be considered wartime activities, he believes that they will now become typical of conflict in the 21st Century.

The idea of collapsing a state onto itself through social upheaval, even before a declaration of war, is an important part of “New Generation Warfare’s” underlying methodology. In this respect, Gerasimov postulates: “The very ‘rules of war’ have changed...[as] the focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.”⁴² The example he uses to illustrate his point is NATO’s role in Libya, where a no-fly zone and naval blockade were combined with the use of private military contractors working closely with the armed formations of the opposition.⁴³

Gerasimov also comprehends that new information technologies have allowed much of this change to occur. As a result, the information space has opened the door to the

widespread use of asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy, particularly through the use of influence operations.⁴⁴

Jānis Bērziņš, Managing Director for the Center for Security and Strategic Research at the National Defense Academy of Latvia, emphasizes this point. He asserts: “The Russians have placed the idea of influence operations at the very center of their operational planning and used all possible levers of national power to achieve this.”⁴⁵ He adds: “These levers include skillful internal communications, deception operations, psychological operations, and well-constructed external communications.”⁴⁶ Bērziņš explains that the Russians “...have demonstrated an innate understanding of the key target audiences and their probable behavior... Armed with this information they knew what to do, when and what the outcomes are likely to be.”⁴⁷

The Russians feel that these changes in the conduct of conflict have reduced the importance of frontal engagements by large conventional military formations, which they believe are gradually becoming a thing of the past. This belief is due to the fact that even if conventional operations are required to finish off the enemy, this would be done primarily by using stand-off operations (i.e., indirect and/or precision fires), throughout the entire depth of its territory.⁴⁸ The Russians perceive this shift towards irregular war and stand-off operations is blurring the lines between the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, as well as between offensive and defensive operations.⁴⁹

These ideas of future conflict have been formally articulated into what has become known as the eight phases of “New Generation Warfare.” These phases provide a good template for understanding how the Russians could conduct a state-level hybrid war. They are as follows:

First Phase: *deals with non-military asymmetric warfare (encompassing information, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic, and economic measures as part of a plan to establish a favorable political, economic, and military setup);*

Second Phase: *special [specific] operations are used to mislead political and military leaders by coordinated measures carried out by diplomatic channels, media, and top government and military agencies. This is done by leaking false data, orders, directives, and instructions;*

Third Phase: *is focused on intimidation, deceiving, and bribing government and military officers, with the objective of making them abandon their service duties;*

Fourth Phase: *destabilizing propaganda to increase discontent among the population. This is boosted by the arrival of Russian bands of militants, escalating subversion;*

Fifth Phase: *establishment of no-fly zones over the country to be attacked, imposition of blockades, and extensive use of private military companies in close cooperation with armed opposition units;*

Sixth Phase: *This phase deals with the commencement of military action, which is immediately preceded by large-scale reconnaissance and subversive missions. This includes all types, forms, methods and forces, such as special operations forces, space, radio, radio engineering, electronic, diplomatic, secret service intelligence, and industrial espionage;*

Seventh Phase: *combination of targeted information operations, electronic warfare operations, aerospace operations, continuous air force harassment, combined with the use of high precision weapons launched from various platforms, including (long-range artillery, and weapons that are based on new physical principles, such as microwaves, radiation, non-lethal biological weapons); and*

Eighth Phase: *roll over the remaining points of resistance and destroy surviving enemy units by special operations conducted by reconnaissance units to spot which enemy units have survived, and transmit their coordinates to the attacker’s missile and artillery units; fire barrages are used to annihilate the defender’s resisting army units by effective advanced weapons; airdrop operations to surround points of resistance; and territory mopping-up operations by ground troops.⁵⁰*

Each of these phases can occur in sequence or simultaneously, depending upon the specific situation. According to Gerasimov, this new doctrine manifests itself in the use of asymmetric and indirect methods, along with the management of troops in a unified informational sphere.⁵¹ Should the conflict escalate, these activities would be followed by the massive use of high-precision weapons, special operations forces, and robotics. If necessary, the next step would involve simultaneous strikes on an enemy’s units and facilities, as well as battle on land, air, sea, and in the informational space.⁵²

Strategic Thinking and the Coordination of State Tools

Notwithstanding the fact that there appears to be a number of similarities between *Unrestricted Warfare*’s philosophy and that of “New Generation Warfare” doctrine, it is clear that the Russians have taken significant steps towards creating the ‘battlefield of battlefields.’ Blurring the lines between strategic, operational, and tactical level operations while maintaining a unified informational sphere is almost impossible without the

ability to conduct and coordinate the various events within the different battlespaces in a strategically effective manner. In fact, some believe that it’s this ability to synchronize that has constituted the biggest change in recent Russian operations. Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, a Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies (IFS), states: “Experts have focused on the military novelties in the Russian approach—the use of asymmetric, covert, and otherwise innovative military tools. However, the real novelty in Crimea was not how Russia used its armed might (in terms of new military doctrine), but rather how it combined the use of military with state tools.”⁵³



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Russian heavy lift and strike helicopters on display in the Moscow area, 4 May 2017.



ITAR/TASS Photo Agency/Alamy Stock Photo HX4BTN

In Palmyra, Syria, sappers of the Russian Armed Forces International Mine Action Centre clearing the city's residential areas of mines, 22 March 2017.

It is this innovative integration and coordination of military and state tools that has allowed the Russians to seamlessly transition from peace to conflict. *Importantly*, if not *significantly*, very few international players understood what was actually occurring until it was almost all over.⁵⁴ Ven Bruusgaard believes that this ability to coordinate has been the key to Russian success so far. She states: "Since Putin came to power, there has been increased academic and policy debate on the coordinated use of state tools to reach formulated goals. This awareness has led to a large-scale formulation of strategies on how to pursue policy goals, and, most recently, to bureaucratic changes that have likely improved Russia's ability to use its policy tools in an integrated manner."⁵⁵

One of the more important of these bureaucratic changes has been the creation of the National Defense Coordination Center (NDCC), which reached initial operating capability in December 2014. The center has the task of coordinating 52 federal executive authorities and three state-owned corporations engaged in Russia's defence. This includes the armed forces, the Interior Ministry, the Federal Security Service, and the Emergencies Ministry.⁵⁶ One could argue that the concept of the NDCC goes back to the Chinese idea of creating the "extended domain," by integrating information that superimposes national interests and national security requirements onto the larger strategic situation map. If this is the case, it means that the Russians can now *create* and simultaneously *coordinate* their version of the 'battlefield of battlefields.'⁵⁷ More concerning is that they have changed the rules of the conflict game.

Conclusion

Russia's adoption and employment of "New Generation Warfare" has validated key theories of hybrid warfare. Operations in Ukraine have shown that the Russians have skillfully moved the center of gravity for conflict from the *operational level*, where conventional military forces play a predominant role, into the *strategic realm*, where the integration of strategic planning and the coordination of state tools becomes the critical denominator.

The devastating effectiveness of this form of warfare can be seen within NATO today. More than two years after the annexation of Crimea, the alliance has still not developed a coherent strategy to counter Russia's hybrid war activities in Ukraine. This inaction has created concern among some NATO members with respect to the Alliance's resolve to *protect*, while others have openly questioned its ability to *stand up* to the Russians.

Russia's success with "New Generation Warfare" means that they will continue refining and using this doctrine to achieve its strategic aims. Moreover, as time goes on, they will only become more effective as experience creates sophistication of both process and reaction. If Canada wishes to counter this type of warfare, it needs to understand what it seeks to achieve and how it is capable of accomplishing its goals. More importantly, it needs to develop an effective strategy to counter its multi-faceted capabilities. In this respect, we can no longer rely upon employing conventional solutions to unconventional problems, as we have done in the past.



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Russian soldiers on exercise in the Khatlon Region, Tajikistan, 30 March 2017.

REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo HN504X



Russian separatist commander Mikhail Tolstykh, known by the *nom de guerre* "Givi," walks past tanks taking positions near the Sergey Prokofiev International Airport during fighting with Ukrainian forces in Donetsk, Ukraine, 4 October 2014.

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