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ASYMMETRICAL ACTIONS TO MAINTAIN RUSSIA'S MILITARY SECURITY

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Abstract: The authors look at the essence, characteristics, and current trends in asymmetrical actions and their possible content in the practical efforts to maintain Russia's military security.

Keywords: asymmetrical actions, globalization, threats and challenges, terrorism, strategy of indirect actions, military security.

The geopolitical restructuring of the world today is accompanied by a worsening of differences between states in politics, economics, and ideology. In the view of many political scientists and military experts, competition for spheres of influence and possession of vital natural resources has long become a basic cause of armed conflicts and local wars breaking out in different regions of the world. This is borne out by the long history of human civilization and is an incontestable fact, even though many military and political leaders in countries that have advanced most in military and economic development (above all, the U.S. and its allies) are carefully concealing the true reasons for the armed conflicts they have initiated behind the screen of more decent purposes such as the need to spread "democracy," "protect the weak," or fight terrorism. The conclusions drawn by Professor A.M. Zayonchkovsky, Frunze Military Academy, in the early 1920s about the evolution of any war hold true today more than ever before. The scholar emphasized that the aim of any war was to "seize rich sources of fuel and divide up the world to distribute the products and obtain raw materials."¹

An analysis of the development trend in the geopolitical and military strategy situation across the world shows that humankind has failed in ridding itself of clashes of varying scale in the early half of the 21st century. The reason is the continuing existence of old centers of international power and emergence of new ones on the world scene and the desire of certain countries' leaders to resolve whatever economic, political, territorial, religious, ethnic, and other antagonistic differences arise by various forms of violence.²

The danger of catastrophic consequences of hostilities fought on a varying scale with the use of highly effective modern and next-generation weapons, not to say weapons of mass destruction, points to the need for nonmilitary measures of interstate confrontation to be employed more actively to end armed conflicts and local wars, and the role and significance of these measures continues to rise.

The range of challenges and threats of military and nonmilitary nature that pose a serious danger to Russia is broad enough and shows economic, political, environmental, demographic, informational, and technological trends. An analysis of their content gives substance to arguments that the significance of armed force in international relations has not diminished in this day and age and, conversely, exhibits an upward trend in some situations. Many political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, and military scholars believe that globalization is the underlying process that makes the world unstable and interstate relations uncertain.³

For the purpose of this paper, globalization is a geopolitical process reflecting the growing interdependence of countries and nations and a trend toward shared standards of behavior being adopted in all fields of the life of society. Evolution of contemporary geopolitical processes is an experience that shows globalization to be a natural and spontaneous phenomenon. It has a positive effect by intensifying links between countries and nations and allowing the more advanced countries' experience in the economic, political, and information fields to be borrowed by less developed countries. Globalization, though, has a major negative aspect as geopolitically the strongest countries (the U.S. and other Western countries, in the first place) are seeking to exploit the modern world's realities in their selfish interests disregarding the needs of the remaining participants in international relations.

This aspect is a subjective dimension of natural globalization processes and shows up in the geopolitical concepts of globalism predominant in a number of countries. For none other than this reason, the former U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, said that "the greatest challenge is that what is commonly termed globalization actually has a different name – the dominant role of the United States."⁴

In the last fifteen years, our world has been confronted with a series of globalization challenges – sustained, long-lasting, and cumulative. They take the form of trends in all (including military) fields of the life of society that have an effect on efforts to maintain any country's military security.⁵ A special point to be made here is that military security today depends on all other forms of security (above all, political, economic, and informational, to name but a few), and, at the same time, is a foundation they need to be built on.

An analysis of the effect globalization has on countries' military security brings out, reasonably enough, the unprecedented growth in the geopolitical, military, and strategic power of the United States of America. To remind, the U.S. military budget passed by Congress for the 2008/2009 fiscal year ran up to \$515.4 billion, and NATO's military spending, including the U.S. military budget allocations, in the same period reached \$900 billion. Compared with it, Russia's military budget approved for 2008 barely capped one trillion rubles.

As a result, with so much budget money to spend, the American government can set its armed forces the task of instantly "projecting U.S. military power" to any point of the globe. The world community is confronted with the fact that the raging financial

crisis regardless, the United States continues to race forward fast ahead of the rest of the world in military and economic development, and its army and navy can deliver a diversity of high-precision power strikes against any adversary in any point of the world, at any time, too soon for a potential adversary to learn about them but, as a rule, at the moment the strikes come.⁶

With the great majority of the world's countries today unable to challenge the powerful military globalization machine (primarily, the U.S.), the number of acts of terrorism, armed conflicts, and local wars has multiplied in recent years. Combined in a single antagonistic system, they bring forth a phenomenon military and political theorists call asymmetrical actions.⁷

These actions differ in content, duration, and forms and methods of manpower and weapons employment, but they are directly related to one another through reasons and causes of armed struggle – continuing policy of global hegemony by the force of arms by geopolitical powers exercising the greatest military and economic muscle (in the first place, the U.S. and its European NATO allies) and resistance put up to their hegemony by, as a rule, countries down below in economic, technological, and military development.

The asymmetry concept has been used in international relations in recent years with reference to the state of conflict between adversaries that are unequal in economic development and military power. Asymmetry in relations between countries is typically evidence of their paradox, with the weaker adversary capable of inflicting serious damage to, and even impose its will on, the stronger one, while the stronger adversary is not always able, for all its apparently greater superiority, to look after its interests and bend its weaker adversary to its will. The strategy of a weaker opponent's fight against its stronger adversary is, in fact, at the core of asymmetric actions (asymmetrical conflicts and local wars).

U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen addressing the Senators in 2000 spoke about the “superpower paradox,” a situation in which neither country can throw a challenge to the United States, but is capable to threatening it indirectly by “asymmetrical actions (conflicts)” in the form of “chemical, biological or even nuclear war.”⁸ In the wake of the acts of terrorism in the U.S. in 2001, the term “asymmetrical actions” has been used in relation to international terrorist organizations, particularly in anticipation of the danger of weapons of mass destruction falling into their hands and being used by them.

The successful start of the military operation by a coalition group of forces against Iraq in 2003 and its inability to end the war quickly in accordance with the original plans under which complete control was to be imposed on the country following the defeat of its armed forces was a result of asymmetrical actions. The war revealed an obvious disproportion between the opponents' power potentialities and the forms and methods of military operations they used. Political scientists and military experts describe the switch made by the Iraqi army and the local population to guerrilla tactics as an example of classical asymmetrical actions and tend to compare the content and military and political results of the war in Iraq more and more often with the war in Vietnam where the U.S. armed forces failed to place the country under their full control as well.

An analysis of the opponents' actions in guerrilla wars fought in different time periods in conditions of occupation, colonial rule, and movements for national liberation

gave political scientists and military experts reasons to put them in the class of asymmetrical actions in the 1960s already. It is possible, by identifying similar forms and methods of struggle in these conflicts, to label some of the key characteristics of asymmetric actions: unpredictable outcome of battles despite the obvious inequality of the opponents' forces, weapons, and potentialities; a strategy used by the weaker to look for the stronger adversary's soft spots and use outlawed methods of armed struggle; and the stronger adversary's inability to defend itself or destroy reliably the weaker adversary's troops (forces).

In a majority of this type of wars (armed conflicts), the weak adversary is unable to win a military victory over his strong opponent. But he succeeds, as a rule, in imposing the course and content of military actions that are to his advantage. To put it otherwise, asymmetrical actions help a weaker adversary occasionally to gain a political victory that, in fact, is the purpose for which force is used in the sense of the classical definition of war.⁹

Beginning in the 1960s, the asymmetry conception has been used to analyze the results of armed conflicts and local wars between developed and developing countries. Many foreign experts in international affairs, political scientists, and military experts have since studied and offered theoretical explanations for the paradox of asymmetrical actions and the forms and methods used in them.¹⁰ They made a special note in their studies that success in a military campaign fought in armed conflicts and local wars of this kind depends not so much on the opponents' power potentials as on the relationship between military and nonmilitary factors, that is, on the political, psychological, ideological, and informational components of the campaign. According to the researchers, support for the war aims by society in a country at war, that is, legitimization of war, is critical in winning victory. This is a decisive factor for both the stronger and weaker opponents.

In the years since the end of World War II, many movements for national liberation and anticolonial movements have resorted to guerrilla war strategies that helped them to wear down the opponent's will to persist in seeking victory, if not his strength, and to force him to make concessions. Mao Zedong's famous thoughts on the guerrilla war strategy and tactics¹¹ are surprisingly consistent with the reasons named by Henry Kissinger for the U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War (1964-1975).¹² Both politicians saw the protracted war that exhausted the U.S. for all its military superiority as the reasons for the victory won by the Vietnamese.

Vietnam succeeded by employing the "minor victories" tactics in which the Vietnamese avoided major head-on clashes with the American army and, in this way, managed to conceal their dispersed forces against the background of poorly disguised concentrations of U.S. troops and make them invulnerable for this reason. Besides, the local population supported the Communists they believed were fighting a just war of liberation against the American forces.

The weakest in the Vietnam War did well enough by escaping defeat. The strongest was to score victory to win the war. Henry Kissinger went as far as give a "formula" for the guerrillas' victory: "The guerrillas are winning until they lose; the regular army loses until it wins a decisive victory."¹³ He named yet another important factor behind victory – ability of each of the belligerents to provide security for the civilian population in the area of hostilities. This was frequently a challenge to be taken

on by a regular army fighting on foreign soil. In this sense, local guerrillas “are doomed to win – sooner or later.”¹⁴

Terrorism of the early 21st century is another version of asymmetrical actions because it is built on the logic of the weak fighting the strong. H. Münkler, a German scholar, argues that terrorism as a method of fighting for the weak, “has replaced guerrilla warfare that fulfilled this function for a long time in the 20th century.” Terrorism differs from guerrilla wars in its aggressive nature, smaller dependence on the local population, and heavy reliance on the economically advanced countries’ infrastructures in achieving its objectives. Modern-age terrorism is a variety of war in its classical understanding as a way to impose one’s will on the adversary by force, with only a major difference that terrorism “exploits asymmetry that terrorists who are much weaker technologically and organizationally than their many times more powerful adversary can make war on it.”¹⁵

The difference between guerrilla warfare and acts of terrorism lies in the terrorists using deliberately the paradoxical advantages of strategic asymmetry. Traditional guerrilla movements sought to achieve symmetry with the enemy and then defeat him in armed struggle.¹⁶ Groups of terrorists attempt to erode the adversary’s moral and psychological potential without entering into contact with its military machine. They aim their strikes at the most vulnerable targets in different countries just by “oozing” through all military cordons and security devices modern societies have invested so much in for the sake of their security.¹⁷

Desire to give consideration to the specifics of asymmetrical actions in international politics was recognized over the entire second half of the 20th century. In the first place, the states tried to modify the strategy of military operations because of the specifics of fighting relatively weak adversaries. In this sense, the following trends were predominant: employment of small, specially trained troops (forces) to do the fighting; preventive actions fought against irregular forces on the basis of agents’ reports; measures to expand contacts with, and conduct propaganda among, local populations the weaker adversary purported to defend, and military and material support given to groups of their followers in local society; and scale-back of combat operations and a shift to nonmilitary methods to put pressure of the weak adversary.

A more cautious, measured employment of armed force, desire to avoid direct military interventions and interference in internal conflicts raging in other countries, and more frequent application of indirect actions and nonmilitary methods of pressure was the general trend in asymmetrical actions in that period.¹⁸ Change also occurred in approaches to the negotiating process. In particular, a more flexible attitude was adopted toward the status aspects of negotiations – the adversaries no more had difficulty in agreeing on their informal equality. More attention was paid to the weaker side’s interest and to a search for balance of interests between conflict participants.¹⁹

Asymmetrical actions are different in quality today – new (nontraditional) weapons are used in armed struggle, along with unconventional forms and methods that are employed by both (weaker and stronger) belligerents, who make public directly opposite end goals of military campaigns. Even though the potential of countries at a lower level of economic, technological, and military development is much weaker than that of developed countries (such as the U.S. and its European allies), the less developed countries, however, are still capable of standing up to their more advanced adversary with

similar consequences and results. Regrettably, civilians, rather than the belligerents, as a rule, bear the greatest suffering and take the heaviest loss of life through violence.

Obviously, the terms “asymmetrical approach” and “asymmetrical actions” are close in substance to the concepts of “indirect actions” or “indirect action strategy” from the academic viewpoint. In his classical work, *Strategy: the Indirect Approach*, British historian and military theorist B.H. Liddell Hart set out his theory of indirect approach and retraced its employment since the earliest times over four millennia. “The history of strategy,” he writes, “is, in fact, a chronicle of employment and development of the indirect approach theory.”²⁰

The idea of fighting military action by indirectly destroying (routing) the enemy physically emerged in a roundabout way at the dawn of military art. As early as the 6th century B.C., Sun Zi, a famous Chinese statesman, military leader, and military scholar, set it forth in unambiguously clear terms in his military treatise, “The Art of War.” “War is deception,” he wrote. “Best of all is to vanquish a foreign army without a fight.” He made a special point that “he who fights well controls the enemy and gives him no chance of controlling himself.”²¹

Liddell Hart observed in his work that Napoleon was a great past master of indirect approach strategy who believed it to be “very rewarding to suddenly fall upon an unsuspecting enemy, to attack him unexpectedly, and rumble over him like thunder before he sees the lightning.”²²

A significant contribution to the theory of indirect action strategy was made by G.A. Leher, a Russian military researcher, who formulated its idea in the following clear terms: “Try to be strong where the enemy is weak – reveal your strong side and hide the weak one.” “[C]oherence in actions as a supreme ideal in strategy and tactics – fighting an operation and an engagement in the spirit of their inner integrity and consistency of actions”²³ he believed to be an important principle.

Significantly, wars fought through the 20th century did much to further develop indirect action methods. They have acquired a vast territorial scale that had strategy globalization as a consequence, with armed struggle spilling over to all continents, seas, oceans, and air space, and also led to the creation of a single armed forces control system. Indirect actions initiated improvements in methods large operational and strategic formation use to move their troops around; surprise and the time factor have grown in importance in achieving military objectives; new varieties of cutting and outflanking attacks have come into use; the role of very mobile formations of great striking power capable of rapidly developing a tactical success into an operational one has grown; the depth of simultaneous fire barrage against the enemy has increased; and operations to pursue and finish off large groups of enemy force have become a rule.

The indirect action strategy that had largely a secondary role in the past, with the “power strategy” dominating the battlegrounds in defeating the enemy by building up superiority in manpower and weapons, has moved to the foreground today, and skill in using it is becoming a sign of superior leadership. An army many millions strong, bristling with modern weapons and hardware, may suffer a bitter defeat nonetheless. This is what happened during the 1991 Gulf War, in which Iraq had a fourfold and twofold superiority in the number of divisions and artillery, and as many tanks as did the coalition (over 5,000 tanks on either side). Inevitably, however, it suffered a disastrous defeat

because its old, inflexible strategy of positional warfare was no match for new forms and methods of fighting a war.²⁴

In its new technological format, the indirect action strategy has a great diversity of forms and methods of military operations, including informational and remote (non-contact) warfare, and segmented, polycentric, electronic and fire, land and naval, aerospace, and, in the short run, anti-satellite operations. This is the kind of asymmetric strategy that the U.S. is following these days in attempts, as local wars and an analysis of its military conceptions show, to neutralize the enemy without resorting to arms (by indirect actions), in the first place, by its information superiority.

In its broad sense, information has been used since ancient time by generals to mislead the enemy, achieve surprise, intimidate the enemy by a show of force, bribe the opposing forces' leaders, and for other purposes. The methods in which these stratagems were used in battles, however, were mostly of "subsidiary" significance and rarely crossed the tactical bounds. Today, information operations (indirect actions) have reached a point in development where they can take on strategic tasks. Experience gained in local wars and armed conflicts in the past few decades shows that strategic information confrontation has a major role in disorganizing military control and state administration, and the air defense system, misleading the enemy, swaying public opinion the attacker's way, and inciting antigovernment demonstrations and other actions to erode the opponent's resolve to put up resistance.

The trends observed in changes in the threats to stability in the world, including Russia, call for the need to find an adequate response, both nonmilitary and military. To restrain and prevent aggression by any country (a coalition of countries) and maintain the Russian Federation's military security, it makes sense to take asymmetrical measures of systemic and comprehensive nature combining political, diplomatic informational, economic, military, and other efforts. As President of the Russian Federation, V.V. Putin said in his address to the Russian Federation's Federal Assembly on May 10, 2006, "We are to keep our eyes open on the plans and development trends of other countries' armed forces, and to know about their future developments. Quantity is not the end, however. ... Our responses are to be based on intellectual superiority. They will be asymmetrical, and less costly."²⁵

An asymmetrical approach to military security maintenance is, therefore, a combination of forms and methods of using forces and means that depend on the adversaries' unequal potentialities and allow confrontation or a direct armed clash with a potential adversary to be avoided (or their consequences mitigated).

The record of modern-day armed conflicts and local war shows that asymmetrical actions in the military field may include: measures making the opponent apprehensive of the Russian Federation's intentions and responses; demonstration of the readiness and potentialities of the Russian Federation's groups of troops (forces) in a strategic area to repel an invasion with consequences unacceptable to the aggressor; actions by the troops (forces) to deter a potential enemy by guaranteed destruction of his most vulnerable military and other strategically important and potentially dangerous targets in order to persuade him that his attack is a hopeless case. Implementation of the full range of asymmetrical measures to practically maintain military security will enable Russia's military and political leaders to be more flexible in responding to various critical situations.

An analysis of major military actions in the last decade of the 20th century, the specifics of wars and armed conflicts fought in the early years of the 21st century, and development trends in weaponry leads us to a conclusion that the U.S. and its NATO allies are relying heavily of “indirect action” conceptions, or, in our interpretation, “asymmetric approaches and measures,” during hostilities to strike at national security targets where their adversaries are most vulnerable.

Today, and more so in the future, forecasts are given for a steep rise in the impact of state-of-the-art highly effective weapons systems, including those based on new physical principles, on the course and outcome of wars, and for widespread employment of indirect, non-contact forms of commitment of troops (forces) and methods in which they are used in action. In consequence, seizing and holding enemy territory are not always needed, and are only undertaken if the benefits are greater than the “combat costs,” or if the end goals of a war cannot be achieved in any other way. The aggressor is unlikely to accept the results of defensive (direct) operations, or the consequences of asymmetrical actions seeking, as their main purpose, to inflict unacceptable damage to the enemy in other national security areas to offset or minimize his superiority in power.

Combining defensive operations undertaken to beat off aggression and asymmetrical actions relying on the efficiency of modern high-precision conventionally equipped strategic weapons systems, supported by subversive and reconnaissance groups is a persuasive enough factor for the enemy to cease military operations on terms favorable for Russia. This conclusion has a practical significance and relevance in view of the fact that the economy and infrastructure of any European country has a large number of objectives, some of them potentially dangerous, vital for the survival of its population and government.

Strategically important targets that, if destroyed, lead to unacceptable damage include the top government administration and military control systems; major manufacturing, fuel, and energy enterprises (steel and engineering plants, oil refineries, defense industry enterprises, electric power plants and substations, oil and gas production, accumulation, and storage facilities, life support facilities, and so on); vitally important transportation facilities across the adversary’s entire territory (railroad hubs, bridges, strategic ports, airports, tunnels, and so on); potentially dangerous objectives (hydroelectric power dams and hydroelectric power complexes, processing units of chemical plants, nuclear power facilities, storages of strong poisons, and so on).

Certainly, destruction of these objectives would have different effects on stabilization or termination of armed conflict – from significant damage to the aggressor’s economic potential, with its effect showing up at a later time, for example, in the event of damage to individual assembly shops of manufacturing plants, to consequences of a catastrophic scale that would follow immediately. A clear understanding by a potential adversary that military operations he launches may turn into an environmental and sociopolitical catastrophe instead of victory and attainment of the goals he sets himself would be an effective factor restraining practical actualization of threats to Russia’s security.

In practical terms, therefore, military measures to protect Russia’s national interests, and to prevent and repulse possible aggression have to combine direct (symmetrical) actions that include planning and conduct of operations with an ultimate purpose to defeat the enemy’s invading groups of troops (forces) and asymmetrical

measures that seek basically to inflict unacceptable damage to the enemy in other (nonmilitary) security areas.

Notes:

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