



# FPRI Russia's Strategic Beliefs Today; the Risk of War in the Future

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February 14, 2017

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*Abstract: Russian President Vladimir Putin believes that offense-dominant military practices hold significant advantages in contemporary interstate conflict. Either through non-linear means or through the use of advanced conventional weaponry, the Russian Federation has begun to act as if those who attack first and decisively have the upper hand in war. In such an environment, interstate war is more likely as misperception and misjudgment can more easily spark conflicts that both sides feel compelled to initiate.*



Russian President Vladimir Putin  
(Kremlin.RU)

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Spring 2017 | 1

doi: 10.1016/j.orbis.2017.02.008

In February 2016, NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, speaking to the Foundation Institute for Strategic Studies in Krakow, Poland, suggested that the best way to manage the current military risk in Eastern Europe was to commit to rapidly reinforcing NATO's Eastern border in the name of deterrence. He said, "A modern, effective deterrence means having the resources—and the political resolve—to convince an adversary that the costs of an attack are disproportionately high, and that such action would be a mistake. Deterrence will only come from a sufficiently robust and multinational forward presence, backed up by swift reinforcements."<sup>1</sup>

The concrete expression of this developing NATO philosophy is found in NATO's Rapid Reaction Spearhead Force and NATO Response Force—credible deterrent elements designed to react to the earliest provocations on the Russian frontier. However, does this "rapid reinforcement" project decrease the likelihood of conflict or does it promote a misguided spiral to warfare? A careful reading of evolving Russian military doctrine and strategic beliefs would suggest the latter.

When trying to gauge the likelihood of war between, and among, states and the value of deterrence, international relations experts long have considered the impact of *beliefs* regarding the value of offensive action. Generally, the argument goes, when leaders believe that offensive military action holds an advantage over defensive action (whether that advantage is based on technology, doctrine, geography, élan, mobilization rates, or some other factor), war is more likely because conquest is comparatively easy. Leaders feel pressured to act first and decisively or they themselves may suffer the consequences of an adversary's attack. Alternatively, if leaders believe that defensive technologies or strategies are superior, this pressure is reduced and war is less likely.<sup>2</sup>

This insight is especially relevant to the current foreign and military policy of the Russian Federation and its susceptibility to traditional deterrence. Indeed, recent Russian writing and behavior have clarified that key national security decision makers in Russia now believe that *offense* holds primacy of place in the world of twenty-first century conflict. While the new thinking is often couched in defensive language and is not explicitly outlined in doctrine, the underlying Russian rationale for the utility of coercive force in international politics is one based on the *dominance of the offense*.

A line of argument that Russian thinking is offense-dominant does not take as its premise an inherent aggressiveness in the Russian leadership (as many explanations seek to imply that Russia's actions are dictated by Vladimir Putin and Putin alone). Nor does it rely on an ideological explanation for recent Russian military behavior (neo-Eurasianism, for example). Rather, the beliefs in offense

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Vershbow, "A Strong NATO for a New Strategic Reality," *NATO.int*, March 4, 2016, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_128809.htm?](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_128809.htm?).

<sup>2</sup> The clearest explanation of ideas that have come to be collectively referred to as "offense-defense theory" can be found in Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies*, Summer 1995, pp. 660-691. Offense-Defense Theory was matured and clarified in Steven Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), see, esp. ch. 6. It is from this second source that I take most of the propositions regarding its causal effects.

dominance are found in shifting attitudes regarding the utility of new methods of military force and ultimately, the vulnerability of any state that chooses not to exploit these technologies and methods. If true, this shift in Russian thinking poses real challenges for Western military strategists—especially those promoting peace through traditional deterrence. With a lower threshold for conflict, deterrence will become more difficult; compellence and coercive diplomacy more risky, and uncertainty will dominate in an already unstable relationship.

### Defining Offense Defense Balance and Why Should We Care?

The concept of Offense Defense Balance was first systematically explored in the 1970s as scholars considered the implications of an anarchic world on the initiation of warfare.<sup>3</sup> Absent supra-national governance, theorists suggested that war could be sparked by rational fears of conquest—fears that would be exacerbated if the most effective route to national safety was through offensive action. The balance between offense and defense was to be found in answering two questions: how much “defense” must one buy in order to offset a given investment in “offense” by one’s adversary? (If the ratio is greater than one to one, then investments in offense will predominate, and war is more likely.) And, secondly, given similar investments, which forces have the advantage in conflict? Forces on the operational and tactical offense or defense?<sup>4</sup> Again, if the tactical/operational offense has advantages, security is scarce and even powers that are not necessarily expansionist will have strong incentives to attack neighbors preemptively.

This concept is often used, for example, to help explain the outbreak of World War I, based on leaders’ beliefs that offensive action (charges by infantry and cavalry, and early, mass-mobilization) offered undeniable advantages in war.<sup>5</sup> The “Cult of the Offensive” spread to French, German, Austrian, Russian and British military thinkers and publics, encouraging each to seek early initiation of a war they all believed would be short and decisive, despite evidence that the rifled bullet, barbed wire, and machine-gun had rendered these methodologies obsolete.

In the 1980s, Steven Van Evera, a neo-realist international relations scholar, distilled the implications of offense-dominance into its war-causing effects. The most significant of these effects for the current international environment are those that suggest offense-dominance will lead to military expansion (for offensive and defensive purposes), violent and rapid response to military action, a tendency toward

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Jan. 1978, pp. 167-214. For an overview of the theory and its critics, see Michael E. Brown, et al., eds., *Offense, Defense and War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” pp. 187-188.

<sup>5</sup> Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 193-198. See also, Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security*, Summer 1984, pp. 58-102.

“first mover advantage” and a world in which *faits accomplis* are likely and are rewarded.<sup>6</sup>

### Contemporary Russian Strategic Thinking on the Offense/Defense Balance

Near the end of the Cold War and for much of the post-Cold War era, Russian strategic thinking (as evidenced by public statements, military behavior, and investment strategies) reflected a belief in *defense* dominance. That is, the Soviet, then Russian governments felt that truly significant threats to the state were few, and that the inherent advantages of defensive technologies (especially nuclear weapons), interior lines, geography, and Western behavior made it unnecessary to take dramatic risks or “move first” in confrontations with its adversaries.<sup>7</sup> During his 1988 speech before the United Nations, for example, then Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev announced a fundamental shift in Soviet military posture.<sup>8</sup> Gorbachev announced a unilateral reduction in Soviet military personnel of more than 500,000 and the decommissioning of many of the offense-focused units of the Soviet Military, including river crossing assault units and assault landing units. According to Gorbachev, “the meaning of our international efforts, and one of the key tenets of the new thinking, is precisely to impart to [the U.S.-Soviet] rivalry the quality of sensible competition in conditions of respect for freedom of choice and a balance of interests. [...] if the main component remains the arms race, as it has been till now, rivalry will be fatal.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the threat to the Soviet Union of continued arms racing outweighed the muted threat posed by external aggression.

This philosophy carried over into the post-Soviet era. There were continued reductions in Russian conventional forces, given the overall window of strategic safety perceived by the Russian leadership.<sup>10</sup> While drawing down conventionally,

<sup>6</sup> Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 119-121. The other implications of offense dominance, Van Evera argues, include the increased significance of windows of opportunity, fewer and less successful negotiations, greater secrecy in foreign and defense policy, more damaging policy errors and intensified arms racing.

<sup>7</sup> The 1997 National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, for example, was explicit in limiting the scope of the country’s military ambition and suggested that, “Russia does not seek, ‘parity in armaments and armed forces with the leading states of the world.’” See Richard F. Staar, “Russia’s New Blueprint for National Security,” *Strategic Review*, Spring 1998, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, “Address by Mikhail Gorbachev 43rd U.N. General Assembly Session,” [http://astro.temple.edu/~rimmerma/gorbachev\\_speech\\_to\\_UN.htm](http://astro.temple.edu/~rimmerma/gorbachev_speech_to_UN.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Gorbachev, “Address by Mikhail Gorbachev 43rd U.N. General Assembly Session.” For more on this decision from a U.S. perspective at the time, see comments by then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney in *Soviet Military Power 1989: Prospects for Change* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 1989), pp. 4-5. While acknowledging Gorbachev’s efforts, Cheney reflected the suspicion that U.S. leaders felt regarding the “reversible” nature of Soviet disarmament.

<sup>10</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, “From International Institutionalism to Revolutionary Expansionism: The Foreign Policy Discourse of Contemporary Russia,” *Mershon International Studies Review*, 1997 p. 250.

Russia relied on a policy of “realistic deterrence,” using nuclear weapons to “inflict destruction upon any aggressor state or any coalition of states in order to repulse a nuclear or large scale conventional war.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, given a reliable strategic nuclear arsenal, Russia could afford to act defensively as limited NATO ambitions and military technology favored defensive arms. This is not to say that Russia lacked interest in influencing world affairs, but these were largely limited to areas of the Commonwealth of Independent States and “certain strategic regions of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

In effect, this belief system placed significant downward pressure on the likelihood of interstate war between Russia and any of the other great powers. And while Russian post-Cold-War disarmament was driven largely by economic decline, it was abetted by a belief that military offenses against Russia would likely fail.

As Vladimir Putin assumed the Russian presidency in December 1999, Russian foreign policy continued to reflect a period of perceived strategic safety from external assault.<sup>13</sup> While the later years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency were characterized by diplomatic disenchantment and resistance to NATO expansion, this confrontational relationship was rooted in conventional military weakness, but practical nuclear parity. Thus, there remained a continued faith in defensive military power. Putin's first public pronouncements on foreign policy suggested a shift away from the confrontational politics of the later Yeltsin years (to include the conflict over NATO involvement in Serbia), towards a more pragmatic approach based upon core interests on its territorial periphery, as well as a reliance on a survivable nuclear deterrent.<sup>14</sup> The aim of this policy was to provide domestic space for consolidating Russian authority and capacity within the Russian state.

### The New Cult of the Offensive

This situation has changed dramatically since 2003 as Russian military thinkers have become more sensitive to their own military deficiencies, and far more importantly, political vulnerabilities. Both of these factors have undermined Russian confidence in the strategic defensive and have bolstered offense-dominant ideas. In fact, Russian strategic thinking under President Putin has come to be dominated by a belief in the vulnerability of a defensive posture and the advantage of the *strategic offensive*. This latter philosophy is reflected in the 2015 national security strategy, military strategies of 2010 and 2014. It is grounded in the developing Russian

<sup>11</sup> Staar, “Russia's New Blueprint for National Security,” p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> “Russian National Security Blueprint,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 26 Dec 1997, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Kulhanek “Putin's Foreign Policy and the Founding of the NATO-Russia Council,” *Central European Journal for International Security Studies*, Dec. 2010), p. 142, [http://static.cejiss.org/data/uploaded/13835988606132/Kulhanek-Putins\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](http://static.cejiss.org/data/uploaded/13835988606132/Kulhanek-Putins_Foreign_Policy.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Gaddy and Fiona Hill, “Putin's Agenda, America's Choice: Russia's Search for Strategic Stability,” *Brookings Policy Brief*, April 2002, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2002/05/russia-gaddy>. See also, Mark Galeotti, “Putin's Russian Legacy,” *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Jan. 2004, p. 53.

understanding of the “non-linear” nature of twenty-first century warfare. Russian military exercises, investment decisions and military actions since 2008 have borne out this assertion.

The shift in thinking can be broken down into two primary arguments for a new era of offense dominance. 1.) nuclear weapons alone no longer guarantee state security due to technical vulnerabilities and new forms of warfare that attack a state’s willingness to resist, and 2.) non-linear warfare and advanced conventional weapons decisively have shifted the balance in favor of the side that strikes first in a conflict.

### **New Forms of Warfare and the Vulnerability of Defense**

In the view of Russian strategists, the security environment of the twenty-first century has made reliance on nuclear deterrence less viable as an exclusive basis for sound strategy. The first challenge to the nuclear balance is a high-technology one. Russian military doctrine suggests that ballistic missile defense (BMD), cyber efforts to undermine Russian command and control, and the conversion of U.S. ICBMs to conventional strike missions, all create uncertainty in the defensive value of nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup> While current BMD programs are limited in scope, Russian strategists suggest they hold the potential for “scalability” as technical investment today pays dividends in the future which may allow the United States to attack an adversary with impunity. Moreover, U.S. advances in precision strike and cyber likely prompted a shift in Russian declared nuclear doctrine to include “first use,” in the case of non-nuclear attacks which threaten the existence of the Russian state.<sup>16</sup> As early as 2007, Vladimir Putin, during his remarks to the Munich Security Conference, suggested that U.S. ballistic missile defense made mutual deterrence uncertain, and therefore,

we should react to this. How? Either the same as you and therefore by building a multi-billion dollar anti-missile system or, in view of our present economic and financial possibilities, by developing an asymmetrical answer.<sup>17</sup>

A secondary argument contends that while nuclear weapons continue to hold centrality of place in Russian security doctrine, they are seen as increasingly vulnerable to uncertain *political will*. This is primarily due to the “Russian leaders”

<sup>15</sup> Roger McDermott, *Russia’s Strategic Mobility: Supporting “Hard Power” to 2020?* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2013), pp. 22-23. See also, “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2014,” <http://www.theatrum-belli.com/the-military-doctrine-of-the-russian-federation/>.

<sup>16</sup> “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2014,” see, para. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Putin, Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, Feb. 10, 2007, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138\\_type82912type82914type82917type84779\\_118123](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123). It is possible that news reports of the development of a Russian long-range nuclear torpedo could represent a response to ballistic missile defense. See, “Russia reveals giant nuclear torpedo in state TV ‘leak,’” *BBC*, Nov. 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34797252>. Just as likely, however, is the expansion of its own doctrine of non-linear warfare.



perception that the United States and its allies have adopted a methodology of offensive inter-state conflict and regime change often identified as “non-linear” or “hybrid” warfare.<sup>18</sup> This methodology uses coercive information operations, diplomatic pressure, economic tools, special forces, intelligence organizations, and often high-tech military force, to create chaos within a target state, undermine the ability of the target to control its own population and ultimately resist a coordinated military assault.<sup>19</sup>

The Russian security establishment has interpreted the so-called color revolutions of the 2000s in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, as well as U.S. operations in Libya and Syria, as examples of regimes toppled through the use of these methods. The implication is that the Russian Federation could be the next target of non-linear war, and that in such a case nuclear weapons hold little deterrent value. The Russian Military Doctrines of 2010 and 2014 both explicitly identify as a primary military threat “attempts to destabilize the situation in individual states and regions and to undermine strategic stability.”<sup>20</sup> Internally, the Doctrines expressed caution about, “attempts to change the constitutional structure of the Russian Federation by force (and) the undermining of the sovereignty and violation of the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.” Indeed, President Putin has embraced this line of argument, exhorting Federal Security Service officers to greater vigilance in March of 2015.. This was necessary allegedly because, the United States is “using their entire arsenal of means for the so-called deterrence of Russia: from attempts at political isolation and economic pressure to large scale information war

<sup>18</sup> The content of the Kremlin-organized 2014 Moscow Conference on International Security, which included presentations by the Russian Foreign Minister and Chief of the General Staff was specifically based on this notion of Western indirect warfare. See Anthony Cordesman, “Russia and the ‘Color Revolution’: A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the U.S. and the West (Key Briefs),” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 28, 2014, [http://csis.org/files/publication/140529\\_Russia\\_Color\\_Revolution\\_Summary.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/140529_Russia_Color_Revolution_Summary.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Valeri Gerasimov, “The Value of Science in Foresight,” *VPK News*, Feb. 27, 2013, <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>. In Gerasimov’s words, “(Non-Linear warfare involves)... military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces. The open use of forces—often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict... The very ‘rules of war’ have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.

<sup>20</sup> “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” Feb. 5, 2010. Reproduced by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia\\_military\\_doctrine.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf). The 2014 version of the Military Doctrine, [http://malaysia.mid.ru/web/embassy-of-the-russian-federation-in-malaysia/press-release/-/asset\\_publisher/rAwX0ikSv3ua/content/29-06-2015-the-military-doctrine-of-the-russian-federation](http://malaysia.mid.ru/web/embassy-of-the-russian-federation-in-malaysia/press-release/-/asset_publisher/rAwX0ikSv3ua/content/29-06-2015-the-military-doctrine-of-the-russian-federation).

and special services operations.”<sup>21</sup> Putin told the officers he was especially concerned about Western NGOs and special operations to destabilize Russia during the Russian presidential election campaign of 2016-2018. Putin’s statements underscore the level of Russian concern regarding the impact of color revolution “technology” on the Russian regime and the regime’s ability to use traditional methods (including nuclear deterrence) to defend itself from this vector of assault.<sup>22</sup>

Non-linear warfare doctrine, Russian security professionals have posited, is inherently *offensive*. During the 2014 Moscow Security Conference of 2014, Russian Defense Minister Sergi Shoigu told the audience that the color revolutions were being used by the West, “as a form of low-intensity combat to acquire the natural resources of countries suffering socio-economic problems. Shoigu even extended his analysis well beyond the conference’s geographic scope to include Venezuela, where he identified purported foreign-backed opposition groups seeking to overthrow the country’s legitimate government.”<sup>23</sup>

Exacerbating the destabilizing nature of this new form of conflict, non-linear warfare imposes disproportionate costs on the defender. The types of tools typically associated with non-linear war (economic sanctions, special operations forces, blackmail campaigns, and the like) are easy to fund and difficult to defend against. Thus, in a world of scarce resources, states that do not pursue offensive hybrid strategies are likely to suffer disproportionate costs at the hands of those who do.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Putin, *Speech before the Board of the Federal Security Service*, March 26, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49006>.

<sup>22</sup> The 2010 Military doctrine expanded the circumstances under which nuclear weapons could be used to defend the state—from a retaliatory doctrine to one in which it could respond to conventional attacks which threaten the existence of the Russian state. However, it is hard to imagine a circumstance in which an internal revolt (allegedly sponsored by external powers) credibly meets the threshold of nuclear release.

In 2011, following Russian parliamentary elections, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed serious concerns for the conduct of the election and called for a full investigation of the outcome, setting off alarm bells among the Kremlin inner-circle. See Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, “Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2015, p. 173. Putin was convinced that Clinton’s words were a signal to Western agents in Russia to instigate another Color Revolution. Putin said, at the time, “She set the tone for some actors in our country and gave them a signal. They heard the signal and with the support of the State Department began active work.” See Steven Lee Meyers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2015), pp. 396-397.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Weitz, “Moscow Security Conference Highlights Russian Fears of Colored Revolutions,” *Jamestown Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 2, 2014, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=42454&cHash=fe7d156efd0814c2b2d19cc354de2be8#.VqurgMdsz9A](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42454&cHash=fe7d156efd0814c2b2d19cc354de2be8#.VqurgMdsz9A).

<sup>24</sup> A.N. Belsky and O.V. Klimenko argue that the defense against “Color Revolution” politico-military strategies is likely to involve a whole-of-society effort, improving the welfare and political consciousness of the entire population and thus inoculating them from the manipulation of the adversary—a very costly endeavor in any society. See Belsky and Klimenko, “Political Engineering of Color Revolutions: Ways to Keep Them in Check,” *Military Thought*, Sept. 2014, pp. 27-29.



Russian adoption of the “non-linear” strategy of warfare of which it has been so publicly critical has been well documented in its operations in Crimea and the Donbas region of Ukraine, and suggests that it has embraced the offensive value of ambiguous military action, even in the shadow of Western retaliation.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in July 2015, Russian Defense Minister Shoigu ordered the military to initiate “major research” into the causes and mechanisms of the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space while the U.S. Congress has ordered U.S. intelligence agencies to report on what they have identified as Russian manipulation of European domestic political processes.<sup>26</sup>

### **Advanced Conventional Weapons and Offense Advantage**

The second strand of the argument regarding the contemporary advantages held by the offense over defense camp focuses on the more traditional understanding of warfighting—far more salient if the first holds true and nuclear deterrence is no longer a reliable guarantor of state survival. According to the Chief of the General Staff, Valeri Gerasimov,

Long-distance, contactless actions against the enemy are becoming the main means of achieving combat and operational goals. The defeat of the enemy's objects is conducted throughout the entire depth of his territory. The application of high-precision weaponry is taking on a mass character. Weapons based on new physical principles and automatized systems are being actively incorporated into military activity.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, long-range strikes and network attacks across the entire spectrum of targets, especially using precision-guided munitions, have transformed the character of conflict. Wars can be brought to rapid conclusion via massive bombardment and application of the range of coercive capabilities. In a discussion of contemporary firepower, Col. (ret.) V.I. Litvenenko and Rear Admiral (ret.) I.P. Rusanov have argued that unlike earlier eras, these strikes are less about the

<sup>25</sup> For a representative sample of the many articles exploring Russia's use of non-linear warfare, see Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, “A Closer Look at Russia's Hybrid War,” *Kennan Cable*, April 2015, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no7-closer-look-russias-hybrid-war>; Hall Gardner, “Hybrid Warfare: Iranian and Russian Versions of “Little Green Men” and Contemporary Conflict,” *NATO Research Paper*, Dec. 2015, pp. 1-16.

<sup>26</sup> “Russian Military to Order Major Research to Counter Color Revolutions,” *RT.ru*, June 19, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/politics/268378-russian-military-color-revolutions/>; Peter Baker and Steven Erlanger, “Russia Uses Money and Ideology to Fight Western Sanctions,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/08/world/europe/russia-fights-vests-ukraine-sanctions-with-aid-and-ideology.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/08/world/europe/russia-fights-vests-ukraine-sanctions-with-aid-and-ideology.html?_r=0).

<sup>27</sup> Gerasimov, “The Value of Science in Foresight.”

destruction of the enemy, and more about breaking his will through crippling blows to morale and through imposing unacceptable losses.<sup>28</sup>

This principle has been borne out in recent Russian military upgrades focusing on long-range strikes, and in fact, has been demonstrated in Russian use of force in Syria. Russian re-armament and reform since 2008, for example, have achieved the ability to conduct targeting and precision strikes at distance via air, sea and land-based assets.<sup>29</sup> The fruits of this program were displayed vividly in Syria during the first week of October 2015 as ships of the Caspian Sea Flotilla launched as many as 26 cruise missiles to strike targets in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

A supporting proposition in the context of conventional military technology suggests that the likelihood of war is further exacerbated by the advantage given to “first movers” in a conflict. According to Litvinenko and Rusanov, “Firepower application against the enemy must be based on the principle, ‘first to detect, first to use firepower. This is the ground rule for capturing, holding, and exploiting initiative for gaining and maintaining firepower and information superiority in a present-day engagement.’”<sup>31</sup> The efficacy of precision strike in dismantling command and control networks, the tremendous damage inflicted by anti-ship cruise missiles and the destructive value of computer network attack tools all support this contention. The side that strikes first in a high-intensity environment strikes hardest. The re-introduction of a regime of “surprise inspections” throughout the Russian military was designed specifically to take advantage of this characteristic of modern warfare.<sup>32</sup> Russian joint and combined exercises between 2009 and 2014 saw rapid Russian mobilization move quickly into offensive strikes under an umbrella of threatened use of nuclear weapons—often transitioning to nuclear escalation.<sup>33</sup> Through its reform efforts and intensive regime of multi-theater training, “Russia’s Armed Forces were most likely capable of launching large-scale conventional high-intensity offensive joint inter-service operations with support from other government agencies in Russia’s military organization or, to put it simply, to conduct big war-fighting operations with big formations.”<sup>34</sup>

Corollary to the emphasis on operational speed is the requirement for strategic speed in the decision to go to war and take the initiative. In this regard, the Russian establishment has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to execute “unexpected moves,”

<sup>28</sup> V. I. Litvinenko and I. P. Rusanov, “Basic Trends in Firepower Employment in Modern Day Operations (Combat Actions),” *Military Thought*, Oct. 2014, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Jakob Hedenskog and Carolina Vendil Pallin, eds., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten Year Perspective 2013* (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2014), pp. 60-61.

<sup>30</sup> Corey Willow, “Russian Missile Tech Is Getting a Much-Needed Workout in Syria,” *Fortune*, Dec. 2, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/12/02/russia-working-out-missiles/>.

<sup>31</sup> Litvinenko and Rusanov, “Basic Trends in Firepower Employment,” p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> Johan Noorberg, *Training to Fight: Russia’s Major Military Exercises, 2011-2014* (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2015), pp. 24-25.

<sup>33</sup> Noorberg, *Training to Fight*, p. 61; Gustav Gressel, “Russia’s Quiet Military Revolution and What it Means for Europe,” *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, Oct. 12, 2015, [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/russias\\_quiet\\_military\\_revolution\\_and\\_what\\_it\\_means\\_for\\_europe4045](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/russias_quiet_military_revolution_and_what_it_means_for_europe4045).

<sup>34</sup> Noorberg, *Training to Fight*, p. 62.

and catch adversaries flat-footed. Some Western analysts have suggested this has much to do with Putin's background and mindset, including the closed political process he has developed, but the record of such moves precedes Putin, and in fact, is to be found in Russia's 2010 publication, *Military Doctrine*.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the Russian military and government has postured itself to react more nimbly at the strategic and operational levels. The establishment of a "National Control Defense Center," in Moscow in 2015, as well as the creation of a "Special Operations Command," sought, primarily, to centralize defense decision making and achieve offensive decisive speed in the full spectrum of warfare.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, for Russian offense-dominant thinkers, geography no longer holds the level of defensive value it once held. Russian strategy has long relied on a belief that the massive Eurasian expanse provided a defensive advantage of its own character.<sup>37</sup> However, recent thinking has tended to discount the value of space, given the evolved nature of conflict. For Litvenenko and Rusanov, new high-precision, long range weapons have made possible the simultaneous destruction of enemy critical targets "throughout the full depth of his operational disposition."<sup>38</sup> That is, distance is irrelevant if the weapons are arriving from space, for example. Moreover, if the conflict is of a non-linear sort, the conflict is designed to impact not only the enemy armed forces, but the society as a whole, shaping the reaction of the population to produce a political outcome congruent with the aims of the military operation.<sup>39</sup> In either methodology, offense-dominant strategies have been able to discount the relevance of defense-in-depth.

<sup>35</sup> On Putin's style of conflict initiation, see Kimberly Marten, "Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine," *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2015, pp. 189-204. The 2010 Military Doctrine clearly states that future conflicts will be characterized by the reduction of the time for preparing to conduct military operations; and that command and control speeds must be accelerated.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the National Control Defense Center, see Andrew Roth, "Vladimir Putin's massive, triple-decker war room revealed," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 21, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/21/vladimir-putins-massive-triple-decker-war-room-revealed/>.

On the establishment and purpose of the Russian Special Operations Command, see Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's New Tip of the Spear," *Foreign Policy*, May 8, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/05/08/russias-new-tip-of-the-spear/>.

<sup>37</sup> Although Russian and Soviet Armies have at times favored offensive strategies, each has recognized the strategic value of geographic distance and trading space for time. See William C. Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia: 1600-1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 206-207.

<sup>38</sup> Litvenenko and Rusanov, "Basic Trends in Firepower Employment," p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> Gressel, "Russia's Quiet Military Revolution," p. 6. Gressel is quoting Russian academician Mikhkhail Barbanov, a theoretician of non-linear warfare.

## **Propositions on the Primacy of Offense**

**1) Non-linear warfare** allows nuclear powers to undermine other nuclear powers and avoid retaliation by avoiding thresholds for exchange while retaining a credible nuclear deterrent. Attackers can undermine even strong opponents while avoiding punishment.

- a. Non-linear warfare imposes **disproportionate costs** on the defense as it focuses on all aspects of society. (Defense must be strong everywhere, Offense must only be strong at the point of attack)

**2) Non-nuclear military technology** has developed in such a way as to favor conventional offensive action (precision long-range strike, cyber attack, “weapons based on new physical principles”).

a. **First movers are advantaged.** High-technology conventional weaponry favors the actor that strikes first. For example, Cyber warfare favors the initiator of an attack, not the defense. Missile technology favors the offensive strike, not the defensive shield. Mobility, Stealth, “non-contact” warfare all favor the first to move.

b. Preparation for moving first requires **higher readiness to act**, which in turn requires a unified actor—giving advantage to small groups of decisionmakers.

c. **Strategic depth means less** (geography is no longer a defense). New strike methods mean that the country is vulnerable everywhere to conventional attack.

## Conclusion

Given Russian beliefs in an offense-dominant world, there are some practical steps that NATO and its allies can and should take to either dampen the likelihood of conflict, or alternatively, to increase its ability to fight and win should fighting break out.

First, and perhaps most importantly, NATO must avoid the temptation to repeat the failures of Dunkirk and the Maginot Line. That is, while it is well and right that NATO develop and field a credible forward deterrent force, it must avoid using that force in such a way that it becomes a tempting target for pre-emptive offensive action. Placement of anything other than trip-wire forces in the Baltic States is likely to act less as a deterrent and more as an operational inducement to offensive action on the part of a Russian military in a crisis situation.<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, the placement of heavy reaction forces beyond immediate operational vulnerability (perhaps south of Augustov, Poland, south of a line between Kaliningrad and Belarus, along major traffic arteries) would be less provocative and would allow operational flexibility for effective counter-attack in a free-flowing, mobile conflict.

Secondly, improving domestic resilience in likely target countries must be a priority effort in comprehensive deterrence. Building economic, social, informational, and government capacity in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will help deter and defeat Russian efforts to undermine the will of these countries to resist Russian influence. While good-governance measures may seem beyond the scope of a military alliance, government capacity to resist malign influence may be central to reducing the likelihood of future conflict on NATO's eastern flank. Moreover, NATO should consider funding and organizing "national resistance" capabilities in each of the Baltic States, to include: mass mobilization systems, rapid-reaction elite forces to combat "little green men," combat engineering capability and training in partisan conflict.

Diplomatically, NATO should support re-negotiation of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty to ensure a balance of Russian and NATO forces available to influence events both in the Baltic and Caucasus regions. While Russian internal mobility has improved dramatically with the post-Georgian war military reforms, offense-dominant thinking can be muted with smart limits to forward-postured forces. Additionally, given Russian writing involving the utility of tactical nuclear

<sup>40</sup> It is clear that Baltic State leaders would prefer heavy forces to be permanently stationed on their territories, however, NATO Readiness Action Planning has to date considered only trip-wire and rotational forces for deployment to the theater. See Eoin Micheál McNamara, "Securing the Nordic-Baltic region," *NATO Review*, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/security-baltic-defense-nato/EN/index.htm>.

weapons to pursue “de-escalation” in a crisis situation, NATO should push for negotiations to restrict the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the defense-dominant strategic posture of the Russian Federation was a boon to the United States and its European security agenda. NATO expansion was only possible in a world in which the Russian Federation felt that its under-investment in military technology and personnel would not lead to its destruction as a state. However, this war-dampening dynamic has been replaced by a set of strategic beliefs of a very different character. Key Russian thinkers, including most importantly Vladimir Putin, now conclude that offense-dominant military practices hold significant advantages in contemporary interstate conflict. Either through non-linear means or through the use of advanced conventional weaponry, the Russian Federation has begun to act as if those who attack first and decisively have the upper hand in war. *Faits accomplis*, appeals to Russian “compatriots” abroad, and long-range precision strikes are now to be pursued in an environment of deadly ambiguity. In such an environment, interstate war is more likely as misperception and misjudgment can spark conflicts that both sides feel compelled to initiate.

