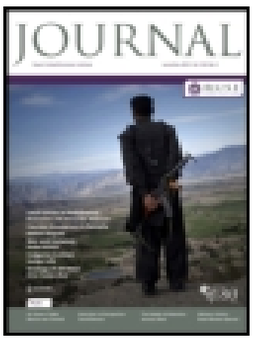

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THE RUSSIAN MILITARY'S NEW 'MAIN EMPHASIS'

ASYMMETRIC WARFARE

ROD THORNTON

The nature of the Russian military threat to Western interests needs to be reassessed. An examination of articles in Russian military journals shows that its senior ranks now see 'asymmetric means and methods' as their new 'main emphasis' in modern peer-state wars. Rod Thornton explains that for them, winning such wars through asymmetric means has become a key way to impose Moscow's will on other states. Remarkably, they seek to avoid the use of military violence.

When warfare is studied as a provider of strategic effect, the tendency is to consider how the use of military violence can best achieve that effect. But is military violence actually a necessary element in 'warfare'? Carl von Clausewitz pointed out that the 'true aim of warfare [is to] render the enemy powerless [and in turn] impose our will on the enemy'.[1] Imposing the will of one peer-state actor on another – in essence, bringing about its 'defeat' – need not necessarily involve the use of violence.[2] An enemy can be induced into defeat by non-violent means perhaps just as much as it can be bludgeoned into it using violence. It may take a little longer and a fair degree of subtlety might be needed, but the result would be the same. In today's world, with the technologies now available, it would appear to be easier than ever for states to impose their will on peer-state adversaries using *only* non-violent means. Moreover, it is also now apparent – however counterintuitive it may appear – that it can actually be a state's *armed forces* that act as a partisan proponent of these non-violent means of winning wars.

It seems that military organisations will have to adopt radical new approaches if they are to be a tool of statecraft that better serves state interests by using non-violent, rather than violent, methods. Today's Russian military is already considering these approaches. It has concluded that when it comes to strategic confrontations ('wars') between *peer* states, displays of overt force now have very little utility because more refined means have superseded them.

Western political and military circles have noted a change in the way that the Russian military looks at the conduct of warfare,[3] but it has tended to be packaged, perhaps inappropriately, as 'hybrid warfare'. That is, the principal Russian threat – the 'war' it is currently perceived to be waging against Western interests – is seen to come from a synergistic mix of both military and non-military activities. Such hybrid warfare means were first highlighted in Moscow's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and, since then, new targets for this form of warfare have been identified – the Baltic States in particular.

But care is needed not to focus excessively on this type of warfare. Following the intervention in Ukraine, the Russian military threat to Western interests is no longer coming from this hybrid warfare; it is in fact apparent in undertakings that have *no* active involvement operationally of military forces or of military violence. Such activities are part of the Russian military's stated preference – when it comes to ways of imposing its will on Western peer-state adversaries – to employ, not hybrid warfare, but *asymmetric warfare* (*asimmetrichnaya voina*). Last year, a report from the influential Russian Academy of Military Sciences delivered by its president, the now retired General Makhmut Gareev, summed up the new mindset: when it comes to this military's conduct of contemporary peer-state warfare, 'stressed' Gareev, 'the main emphasis [*glavnyi upor*] … must be placed on asymmetric means and methods of operation'.[4] And the evidence today is that this 'emphasis' is, indeed, being applied against specific targets at the strategic level: an adversary state's 'leadership and elites' (*rukovodstvo i elity*).[5]

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Pro-Russian protests in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine in 2014. Russia has been accused of using *agents provocateurs* to incite anti-Western sentiment in neighbouring countries. *Courtesy of Andrew Butko/Wikimedia*

What is Asymmetric Warfare?

The nature of asymmetric warfare is often misunderstood. It is about how the weak can generate effect in confrontations with stronger adversaries in attempts to 'level the battlefield'. Useful definitions of asymmetric warfare are, though, quite rare. Perhaps the best is that supplied by Steven Metz and Douglas Johnson, who describe it as:

> [A]cting, organizing, and thinking *differently* than opponents in order to maximize one's own advantages, exploit an opponent's weaknesses, attain the initiative, or gain greater freedom of action. It can be *political-strategic*, *military-strategic*, *operational*, or a *combination* of these. It can entail different *methods*, *technologies*, *values*, *organizations*, *time perspectives*, or some *combination* of these.[6]

'Asymmetric' in this instance does not mean smaller or unequal, but something which cannot be mirror-imaged. In warfare, it equates to the weaker party favouring techniques that cannot (or will not) be used by the stronger adversary. True asymmetric warfare methods are thus those that cannot be reciprocated.

Beyond ensuring that reciprocal action is not possible, practitioners of this form of warfare have three further basic aims: to seek and exploit the weaknesses of the stronger adversary; to try to turn the strengths of that adversary (on which it tends to rely) into actual weaknesses; and to attempt to manipulate the adversary into taking actions that suit the weaker party. This aspect of manipulation is important. The father of asymmetric thinking, Sun Tzu, made much of it in his seminal work, *The Art of War* (a source that Russian military analysts are currently referring to[7]). As Ralph Sawyer, one of the leading translators of Sun's work, stated, 'Sun Tzu's numerous principles might well be reduced to the fundamental one of *manipulating the enemy*'.[8]

Manipulation is perhaps the most important factor that needs to be understood by those Western defence and security analysts tasked with considering the implications of the actual threat currently posed by the Russian military. In this regard, one of the dangers represented by this 'main emphasis' on asymmetric approaches lies not so much in the immediate results of the asymmetric attacks themselves, but in the way that they will be designed to manipulate those being targeted into making inappropriate defensive responses – ones that actually suit Russian interests.[9] Exponents of asymmetric warfare traditionally seek to leverage their activities by creating cascade effects so that the results of any initial attack – whether at the tactical, operational or strategic level – are magnified by these inappropriate responses.[10]

The Origins of Russian Asymmetric Warfare

The emphasis on asymmetric approaches is reflected by the recent large number of articles in Russian military journals where the concept of asymmetric warfare has been discussed.[11] Recommendations for the most appropriate Russian way to conduct warfare against Western peer-state adversaries have centred on: 'asymmetric capabilities';[12] 'asymmetric approaches';[13] 'asymmetric actions';[14] 'asymmetric methods';[15] 'asymmetric operations';[16] and 'asymmetric responses'.[17] There is a significant push by prominent authors to extol the virtues of this form of warfare and to see it used well by the Russian military. Sometimes the word 'indirect' (*nepryamoy*) is used instead of 'asymmetric' (as in 'indirect actions' or 'indirect approaches', among others), but the two adjectives are used interchangeably.[18] Indeed, much of the thinking and vernacular prevalent in these articles is the same as that originally presented by Basil Liddell Hart

(an author often mentioned by Soviet and Russian military analysts) in his 1954 book, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*. In particular, the emphasis in these Russian articles[19] is that in the conduct of warfare there should be, as Liddell Hart expressed it, 'the predominance of the psychological over the physical'.[20] It is this predominance of the psychological element that allows these Russian authors to contemplate how Moscow's armed forces can employ asymmetric techniques to win wars against peer-state opponents while avoiding the use of military violence.

Russia realises that the anti-Western activities undertaken by its military have to be adroit

It should be noted that this use of asymmetric means by the Russian military is not being put forward as part of some strategy to merely cause harassment of Western interests; it is seen as a way of actually *winning* wars. The Russian military is currently 'viewing contemporary conflicts as winnable through a confrontation of asymmetric actions instead of direct confrontation'.[21]

Why are non-violent asymmetric warfare techniques being advocated? To answer this question, the first issue to examine is why the Russian military needs to engage in warfare against Western interests at all.

In Russian eyes, at least rhetorically, this is a defensive war.[22] Any military action undertaken would always be in response to NATO 'aggression'.[23] Moscow has come to see the West as a threat. NATO's expansion eastwards and its war with Serbia over Kosovo in 1999 (resulting in the subsequent redrawing of the map of Europe against Russian interests) were harbingers enough. However, it was perhaps the 'colour revolutions'[24] that came to represent the greatest threat to Russia and, more particularly, to the regime of President Vladimir Putin. If such revolutions – seen from the Kremlin's point of view to be controlled from Western capitals – could threaten administrations in Georgia (Rose Revolution in 2003), Ukraine (Orange Revolution in 2004) and Kyrgyzstan (Tulip Revolution in 2005), would Putin be the next victim? In the Hobbesian thinking prevalent in the Kremlin, it was self-evident that he would. Putin came to develop a 'visceral fear of instability'[25] – manifested most obviously around 2011–12 with anti-Putin street protests in Moscow and St Petersburg. Western governments, notably the US government, were seen as the instigators.

The chief vehicle seen to be generating these colour revolutions and the instability within Russia itself was a hybrid warfare campaign conducted by the West, and by NATO in particular. As Timothy Thomas puts it, 'Russian military officers [see] hybrid warfare as a tactic the West has used against [Russia] for some time'.[26] One very senior Russian general notes that Russian interests have been targeted 'for 20 years' through the use by 'the United States and other leading NATO countries of "hybrid warfare methods"'.[27]

With both Russia and the regime under threat by what was perceived as Western bellicosity, a response was needed. In Russian eyes, there was a need for defensive actions.[28] Thus, the Russian military has been called into action to target NATO and, in particular, its principal actor, the US, in the same way that Moscow feels that it has been targeted.[29] This defensive rationale for what may be seen as its own belligerent activities has been clearly enunciated by the Russian military in the writings of its analysts and officers.[30] The stated aim is to weaken potential opponents to undermine their capacity to threaten Russia and to then put Moscow in a better position to, at the very least, exert power and influence over their actions – if not, indeed, to win wars against them in the Clausewitzian sense through the total imposition of Russian will.

Russia realises that the anti-Western activities undertaken by its military have to be adroit: it cannot engage in outright hostilities with NATO forces. It seems that any minor conflagration that might lead to open warfare between Russia and NATO cannot currently be contemplated from Moscow's perspective. The reasons for this lie in both geopolitical and military spheres.

First, in terms of geopolitics, Alexei Arbatov, head of the Centre for International Security at Moscow's Institute of World Economy and International Relations, has summed up the current Russian thinking. He points out that the depth of economic interdependence in the world today among the leading states – including Russia – precludes any gains from conventional armed conflict between them. 'The likelihood', he wrote, 'of armed conflicts and wars between the great powers … is now as small as never before'.[31] Any conventional war with NATO would have an extremely negative economic effect on Russia, and, more particularly, on its ruling oligarchs.[32] This is principally because the Kremlin has an over-reliance on oil and gas exports to the EU,[33] and any war in Western Europe, even if limited, would likely end this trade, resulting, as Bobo Lo points out, in the loss of revenues that in effect keep both the Russian economy afloat and, by extension, Putin and his oligarchs in power.[34]

Any conventional war with NATO would have an extremely negative economic effect on Russia

This overall economic interdependence, according to Arbatov, means that the active use of 'hard military power' between states in the developed world has probably seen its day.[35] While he acknowledges that such power is still relevant in low-intensity/expeditionary warfare – for instance, in Russia's operations in Georgia (2008) and Syria (since 2015) – with peer-state adversaries, however, Arbatov sees the Russian armed forces now acting not so much as a provider of military violence but rather as 'an instrument of direct or indirect … leverage on other countries'.[36] The actual efficacy, therefore, of a modern military organisation (including Russia's) against peer-state adversaries in today's

interconnected world comes not, says Arbatov, in how it would actively employ the traditional hardware of warfare – such as guns, tanks, ships, aircraft and missiles – but in how it passively deploys them in non-conflict situations to create the 'leverage' that can enhance other, non-violent and more adroit means of generating strategic effect.[37]

This general idea within Russia about the limited use at the geopolitical level of conventional (let alone nuclear[38]) armed force has begun to resonate within the military, which is starting to favour the use of non-violent means to generate strategic effect in peer-state warfare. The writings of Russian military analysts and senior military figures indicate that in a conventional conflict with NATO – and despite recent (and perhaps overhyped) modernisation initiatives – their armed forces would face defeat, in particular because of technological inferiority. There is a general feeling of 'weakness' in relation to NATO's capabilities.[39] As two leading Russian military analysts make clear, 'The enemy [that is, NATO] has a superiority in armed struggle'.[40] Indeed, Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov acknowledges the relative weakness of his own forces compared with NATO's.[41] The overall sentiment in the Russian military is that any form of conventional war with NATO cannot, as things now currently stand, be countenanced.[42]

There is a general feeling of 'weakness' in relation to NATO's capabilities

Of course, within the military there is an understanding that it still must remain relevant as a factor in Russian foreign policy. It has to provide what Thomas Schelling called the diplomatic 'bargaining power' that comes from 'the power to hurt'.[43] However, it has to manifest 'hurt' from this position of weakness relative to Western/NATO adversaries. As such, new avenues have therefore had to be explored and new ways found of producing strategic effect on these adversaries, but which fall short of the involvement of military violence that might trigger an Article 5 response from NATO, which would embroil the Russian armed forces in a losing war.[44]

In 2008, Putin outlined avenues to be explored. He set in train the programme for the modernisation of the military that subsequently increased the viability of the Russian armed forces. While he was conscious of the need to create a stronger military to act (if nothing else) as an instrument of diplomatic leverage, he also understood the need to avoid excessive spending in what would probably be a vain attempt to try to match NATO capabilities. Putin thus made it clear that his armed forces were not just going to be given more military hardware: the country simply could not afford it. Russia, he said, 'should not … chase after quantitative indicators … Our responses … will have to be based on intellectual superiority. They will be asymmetrical, less costly'.[45]

In light of the above two influences – Putin's advice and the need to avoid violence – it can perhaps be understood why this military might come to put its main emphasis – in terms of creating both the 'power to hurt' and even to make contemporary conflicts winnable against Western foes – on the employment of non-violent asymmetric means and methods. Fundamentally, this military came to follow Liddell Hart's advice by seeking to '[weaken an adversary] by pricks instead of risking blows'.[46]

According to Thomas, this Russian military now has a 'General Staff [with a] reliance on non-military methods of thought' when it comes to the winning of wars.[47] Such reliance appears to be unique in the history of modern warfare.

Destabilisation

'Intellectual superiority', as Putin suggested, is key. It is central to any effective asymmetric warfare campaign. For while the militarily strong simply let their innate power defeat weaker opponents without too much thought, weaker parties engaged in competition with stronger adversaries are forced to think far more about how to deter, counter and, if necessary, defeat that adversary. As Clausewitz noted, 'the weaker the forces that are at the disposal of the supreme commander, the more appealing the use of cunning becomes'.[48]

Russian military journals devoted to the subject of asymmetric warfare indicate that this issue has been considered extensively. And theory has been turned into practice. Asymmetric warfare techniques are currently being used – as is by now well known in the literature on hybrid warfare – to internally destabilise Russia's adversaries, including individual states (such as the US) and international institutions (such as NATO and the EU).[49] Asymmetric methods have taken the principal strengths of these targets – that is, their democratic governance, their democratic principles and the unity of their collective institutions – and turned them into vulnerabilities.[50]

Asymmetric warfare techniques are currently being used to internally destabilise Russia's adversaries

The asymmetric means employed are principally in the information realm, with the foremost example being cyber warfare. These attacks are conducted mostly under the control of the GRU (*Glavnoe Razvedyvatel'noe Upravlenie*), the military's Main Intelligence Directorate (with support from other state agencies[51]). The targets of GRU attacks (GRU hackers often work under the name of 'Fancy Bear[s]' or the official designation of 'APT28'[52]) have included electoral processes in a range of countries (such as the US and, especially, states in Eastern Europe), attempts at gaining compromising material (*kompromat*) to use against prominent individuals and even exposing the medical records of iconic Western athletes.[53] Other means of information warfare are also applied: misinformation and disinformation are distributed widely across a number of media platforms; confusion is generated in many different ways; discord is sown; and tensions are raised. Undercover (and thus deniable) Russian military personnel are seemingly engaged in everything

from encouraging protest movements (as *agents provocateurs*[54]) to assassination attempts against leading political figures.[55] Elements of military power are also being used to create a sense of threat – for instance, sabre-rattling exercises near borders with NATO states and activity by air and naval assets aiming to intimidate.

This is all designed to destabilise and create weakness. The theory put forward by Russian military authors runs that the greater the degree of destabilisation engendered, the weaker the governing structures and internal bonds of the targeted state or alliance/community of states become. In turn, this increases Russia's ability, as an interfering external actor, to shape events to its liking.[56] Russia's desired outcomes have, of course, been recognised in the West. Ciaran Martin, for instance, head of the UK's new National Cyber Security Centre, recently summed up the aim of Russia's cyber activity, saying that it is designed 'to assert power and influence against the West'.[57] This is true, and is much the same goal sought by the Russian military's overall asymmetric campaign.

The Imposition of Will

This is the general theory of what is happening and it has traditionally been presented under the banner of 'hybrid warfare'. The novelty of this form of warfare is said to lie in the mix of means used. As a concept, hybrid warfare is understood and recognised by defence analysts in the West, but the Russian military is currently practising asymmetric warfare, not hybrid warfare. In the former, there is greater emphasis on exploiting differences: of using specific advantages enjoyed by the attacker to specifically target the strengths of an opponent in order to then turn them into vulnerabilities. In hybrid warfare, there is less thought put into exploiting differences. Asymmetric warfare, in a nutshell, may be said to involve greater nuance. As such, there needs to be a further level of understanding of the specific nuances that will be involved in any asymmetric campaign conducted by this military. In particular, appreciation is required about the exact ways in which it strives to weaken its adversaries and of how it seeks to ultimately impose its will on those it targets using asymmetric techniques.

One of the key objectives is to turn the strength of an adversary's leadership into its greatest weakness by gaining control of it

To develop this appreciation, there are many articles (as indicated earlier) available by Russian defence analysts and military officers, including Gerasimov.[58] However, for the sake of brevity and focus, it is useful to concentrate on one important example, written in 2015 by then Lieutenant-General Andrei Kartapolov.[59] He is currently commander of the Western Military District and until November 2015 was Deputy Chief of the General Staff. His responsibilities in this latter post included, for instance, control of Russian operations in Syria. It might be expected that this officer, to progress, would be steeped in the old-school study of the likes of 'deep battle' and tank-formation echelonment. However, this is not the case. It is notable that Kartapolov, in a special edition of the *Bulletin of the Academy of Military Sciences* devoted to future warfare, wrote about the Russian use of asymmetric warfare. Recognising his military's relative weakness – that it was not 'able to maintain equality with the American armed forces' – he advised that it would therefore have to make use of '"asymmetric" methods of confronting an adversary'.[60] This was to be done in order to 'enable the levelling [infinitive: *nivelirovat'*] of the technological superiority of the opponent' (which is clearly the US).[61] In his 'principles of asymmetric operations', he talks of the 'concentration of efforts against the enemy's most vulnerable locations (targets) [and the] search for and exposure of the opponent's weak points'.[62]

This search, notes Kartapolov, requires good intelligence. Reflecting Putin's call to use 'intellectual superiority',[63] Kartapolov says that 'the most important condition for the effective conduct of asymmetric actions is accurately identifying the most vulnerable weak spots of the enemy, the impact of which will produce maximum effect at minimal cost to one's own forces and resources'.[64] And, as he makes clear, the methods used to procure this 'maximum effect' have to involve, certainly at the strategic level, the use of 'instruments that are non-violent in character'.[65] Despite this restriction, he emphasises what can be achieved using asymmetric approaches: 'the use of indirect actions and methods [that is, asymmetric warfare] makes it possible to achieve the necessary *military* results, such as the demoralisation of the enemy, inflicting economic, political and territorial losses *without the explicit application of one's armed forces*'.[66] Certainly, according to Kartapolov, wars are, indeed, 'winnable' by his military merely through the employment of asymmetric techniques that do not involve violence.

The ability to win wars in this way comes about in the end, continues Kartapolov, because the degree of destabilisation induced will allow for the Russian military to be in a better position to impose its will on adversaries. As he notes, such adversaries can be weakened to the point where it becomes possible (echoing Clausewitz and his 'true aim of warfare') to 'impos[e] upon the opponent your … own will'.[67]

There is, moreover, and amid the general process of destabilisation, a specific target in terms of expediting the imposition of will. The target, notes Kartapolov, is the decision-makers: the individual civilian and military leaders in adversary states. If they can be manipulated, co-opted or coerced (often through *kompromat*), and made subject to Russian will, the results can be profound. Kartapolov emphasises this point, and in doing so perhaps sums up the entire logic of the current Russian asymmetric approach to peer-state warfare. He says that in 'modern conflicts' the 'goal is not the physical destruction of the opponent or state infrastructure, but rather the full subordination of its leadership and elites to [the attacker's] will'.[68] This is important

given that he is a highly influential senior Russian officer laying out what appears to be the way in which his military plans to win wars against peer-state adversaries.

And here is the *sine qua non* of the objectives of non-violent asymmetric warfare means employed at the strategic level: to turn the strength of an adversary's leadership into its greatest weakness by gaining control of it.

Degrees of Nuance

The subordination of these decision-makers to Russia's will could come about through co-option or coercion. But such individuals can, in theory, and as Thomas puts it, also be persuaded to 'voluntarily' act according to Moscow's bidding.[69] For subordination can come about in more subtle ways, and this is where such decision-makers can be made to act in line with Russia's wishes, without realising it.

In 2009, the military analyst V I Lutovinov provided a telling piece of advice, one that highlights the degree of psychological nuance to which the Russian military's current asymmetric approach aspires. He saw that, when it comes to winning wars in the modern era, '[I]nstead of straightforward occupation and the use of force, it is recommended that indirect approaches be used and efforts made to subdue the adversary to cooperation either by coercion or by allowing the adversary *to lead itself towards the desired direction*'.[70]

While it is a goal of Russian asymmetric warfare to weaken the target, Moscow's approach is to have much of this undertaken by the target itself. A significant aim is for the adversary to, in essence, and as Robert Seely expresses it, 'lure [itself] to its own defeat',[71] which would be the ultimate act of manipulation in warfare.[72]

This luring is best achieved through manipulating the decision-makers. The Russian military can achieve this by aggressively using asymmetric attacks to put the leadership and elites of a targeted state under constant pressure. The threat engendered necessitates a response from the target, which will have to enact defensive resilience measures to reduce instability. They will have, to some degree, to introduce what might be seen as a clampdown. Such a process will inevitably involve restrictions on individual freedoms, such as free speech, the internet, the media, minorities and extremist and protest groups. Surveillance measures will also increase. Democratic processes will suffer. Strengths (democratic freedoms) will then have become vulnerabilities because populations (who are used to such freedoms) will object to such restrictions and protest against their governments. Governments under Russian asymmetric attack will come to be viewed by many within their own populations as the enemy more so than the instigator of the activities that caused the restrictions – Russia.[73]

Much the same process would be at work against international institutions. The strength of the EU and NATO comes from the robust bonds uniting member states. Russian efforts are patently being made to break these bonds and to set individual states against each other by 'throwing [them] into uncertainty'.[74] In NATO's case, provocative indirect (for example, sabre-rattling) military activity by Russia will be expected. This would be designed, at least in part, to create discord by goading the Alliance into making decisions – for instance, troop deployments to the Baltic States or overseas interventions – with which many member states will not agree.[75] This would lead to disunity and, in turn, weakness. NATO is neither effective nor credible if it is not united. As a result, it might not be in a position to effectively counter any future large-scale Russian military action.

The destabilising activities of the GRU have much in common with the 'active measures' operations that the KGB conducted during the Soviet era

Much of the efficacy, therefore, of the Russian asymmetric campaign at the strategic level can be viewed as coming not so much from the original attacks, but rather from the subsequent effects they are designed to produce in terms of the defensive *decisions* taken by the leadership and elites in reaction. While such defensive measures might superficially seem effective, they can, in many cases, actually suit Russia's interests. Kartapolov's 'leadership and elites' are, to a degree, being subordinated to Russian will by a process whereby they are inveigled into weakening themselves by their own actions. The Estonian Internal Security Service is at the front line of the Russian threat and understands the situation, reporting that, 'information … clearly indicates that [the Russians] persistently try to find or create possibilities to create tension in Estonian society and to negatively influence this country's internal processes and foreign-policy decisions against our own interests'.[76]

Path Dependencies

At first glance, this aspect of Russian military thinking appears radically new – winning wars without the use of military violence. Although in scope and scale it is new, there are caveats. The word 'asymmetric' may be a fairly recent addition (certainly when used in such depth) to the Russian military lexicon, but the methods and aims it aspires to are not. Mindsets may be seen as already in tune with such means and methods, given the fact that there is actually a long history of this military, in the Soviet past, being thought of not only as a blunt and forceful instrument, but also as a more subtle tool to create strategic effect on stronger adversaries. As one analyst put it in 1987:

> The Soviet leaders … are aware of a cardinal lesson of history that no country can enforce its will by military power alone. Hence Soviet military power operates within the framework of a grand strategy which patiently employs intrigue, infiltration, terrorism, subversion, deception and propaganda to explore and exploit the human weakness of its opponents.[77]

Stephen Blank confirms that this aim of 'exploit[ing] human weakness' – in

other words to manipulate – has a long history. He notes that those Russian military writers who are now discussing 'information operations, which may encompass broad, socio-psychological manipulation … are comfortably in the mainstream of Russian military thought'.[78] There is therefore nothing new about the Russian military setting so much store by the manipulation of its enemies. In large part, it is continuing to use long-established methods of warfare. Kartapolov's readers would appreciate what he was calling for because he would be preaching to the converted.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the destabilising activities of the GRU have much in common with the 'active measures' operations that the KGB conducted during the Soviet era. These were defined as 'certain overt and covert techniques for influencing events and behaviour in, and the actions of, foreign countries'.[79] They ranged in the past from information operations to assassinations and even then included attempts to interfere with elections in the West.[80] There were also attempts 'to influence NATO's decision-makers',[81] to make a target 'inflict harm upon himself',[82] and were very much aimed at 'deceiv[ing] … the political elite'.[83] Overall, such active measures appear to be no different from those patently now being conducted by the GRU (which appears to be the successor to the KGB in terms of its ability to conduct such operations abroad on behalf of Moscow).

To summarise, techniques in use by the Russian military today under the banner of 'asymmetry' are not that innovative, but what *is* different is the capacity to make these means and methods generate profound strategic effect. The technologies available now, the way that societies are structured and the way democratic governments function give added current impetus to the employment of the asymmetric approach. In today's world, information plays a much greater role than ever before. There is more of it available to more people, its passage is swifter, its spread is wider, and reliance on it is greater. Information has become a great strength. But because it has become such a great strength, it has opened up increased opportunities for exponents of asymmetric warfare to, wherever possible, manipulate that strength and turn it into a vulnerability.

Conclusion

The Russian military, it is clear, feels the need to be 'at war' with Western actors across a broad spectrum. Its destabilisation campaign provides evidence of this. It is attempting to impose its will – to make this war winnable – using non-violent asymmetric warfare techniques as its current main emphasis in conflicts with peer states. Military violence may come later against Western targets but, as the situation now stands, its use seems to have been ruled out by the General Staff. And anyway, it does appear that the non-violent asymmetric route is proving quite successful. The Russian military has, to varying degrees and across different states and international institutions, exhibited the ability (in coordination, of course, with other Russian state agencies) to sow discord and create weakness. And it has also put in considerable effort to influence the decision-making of the targeted leadership and elites. This, after all, is the main aim of an asymmetric campaign. To repeat, as Kartapolov put it, the 'goal' of 'modern conflicts is not the physical destruction of the opponent or state infrastructure but rather the full subordination of its leadership and elites to [the attacker's] will'.[84]

Targeted states and international institutions certainly recognise that the Russian military's practices represent a threat. Defences are being raised and resilience measures are being enacted. It is noteworthy that in Russia itself, Putin has already put in place his own resilience measures. He has clamped down on democratic principles, on free media, on internet access and on the activities of Western NGOs. He has also set up a National Guard force to help maintain internal security. Putin has already gone a long way to ensure that Western agencies cannot achieve the same effects in Russia that the Russian military is trying to achieve in the West. Putin is denying reciprocity, the fundamental tenet in the conduct of asymmetric warfare.

Of course, introducing the same defensive measures in Western democracies is, as stated, extremely problematic. They may merely add to the weight of any Russian asymmetric warfare campaign rather than detract from it, and thus need to be thought through very carefully. If manipulation is, indeed, a crucial element in an asymmetric campaign, then such care is needed to avoid falling into the trap of doing exactly what Russia is trying to engineer. 'Intellectual superiority', as Putin once said, is needed. ■

Rod Thornton is an academic in the Defence Studies Department of King's College London and teaches at the UK's Joint Services Command and Staff College, Shrivenham. A former soldier, he has studied and lived in Russia. He is the author of Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the Twenty-First Century *(Polity Press, 2006).*

All translations are by the author and he takes responsibility for them.

Notes

1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 75.

2 Stephen J Cimbala, *Military Persuasion in War and Policy: The Power of Soft* (London: Praeger, 2002), p. 27.

3 See, for instance, Christopher S Chivvis, 'Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare": And What Can Be Done About It', Testimony to House Armed

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4 *Krasnaya Zvezda* [*Red Star*] 'Kak Razvivat' Sovremenniyu Armiyu?' ['How to Develop a Modern Army?'], 10 March 2016, p. 6.

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6 Steven Metz and Douglas V Johnson, *Asymmetry and U.S. Military Strategy: Definition, Background, and Strategic Concepts* (Carlisle, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), pp. 5–6. Emphasis in original.

7 See, for instance, S G Chekinov and S A Bogdanov, 'Voennoe Iskustvo Nachal'nom Etape XXI Stoletiya: Problemy i Suzhdeniya' ['The Art of War at the Beginning of the 21st Century: Problems and Opinions'], *Voennaya Mysl'* [*Military Thought*] (No. 1, 2015).

8 Ralph D Sawyer, *The Complete Art of War: Sun Tzu and Sun Bin* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), p. 31. Emphasis added.

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10 See Rod Thornton, *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

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12 V V Gerasimov, 'Tsennost' Nauki v Predvidenii: Novye Vyzovy Trebuyut Pereosmysleniya Form i Sposobov Vedeniya Boevykh Deistvii' ['The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations'], *Voyenno-Promyshlennyi Kur'er* [*Military Industrial Courier*] (No. 8, 26 February 2013), p. 3.

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14 V V Gerasimov, 'Rol' General'nogo Shtaba v Organizatsii Oboroni Strani v Sootvetstvii c Novym Polozheniem o General'nom Shtabe, Utverzhdennym Prezidentom Rossiiskoi Federatsii' ['The Role of the General Staff in Organising the Country's Defence in Accordance with the New Regulations of the General Staff Approved by the President of the Russian Federation'], *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk* [*Bulletin of the Academy of Military Science*] (No. 1, 2014), p. 15.

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16 S G Chekinov and S A Bogdanov, 'Asimmetrichnye Deistviya po Obespecheniyu Voennoe Bezopasnosti Rossii' ['Asymmetric Actions to Ensure the Military Security of Russia'], *Voennaya Mysl'* [*Military Thought*] (No. 3, March 2010), p. 16.

17 S V Kuralenko, 'Tendentsii Izmeniya Kharaktera Vooruzhennoi Bor'by v Voennykh Konfliktakh Pervoi Poloviny XXI Veka' ['Tendencies in the Changing Character of Armed Struggles in Military Conflicts in the First Half of the XXI Century'], *Voennaya Mysl'* [*Military Thought*] (No. 11, 2012).

18 Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'Asimmetrichnye Deistviya po Obespecheniyu Voennoe Bezopasnosti Rossii' ['Asymmetric Actions to Ensure the Military Security of Russia'], p. 19.

19 When reviewing Russian military writings on the subject of modern warfare, it is clear that overall the authors see that it will be dominated by what Chekinov and Bogdanov call 'psycho-information war'. See S G Chekinov and S A Bogdanov, 'Vliyanie Nepryamykh Deistvii na Kharakter Sovremennoi Voiny' ['The Influence of Indirect Approaches on the Character of Modern Warfare'], *Voennaya Mysl'* [*Military Thought*] (No. 6, 2011), p. 4. As Thomas expresses it, in Russian military thinking, 'information warfare and psychological warfare come in all forms and methods', see Thomas, 'Thinking Like a Russian Officer', p. 31.

20 Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 24.

21 Timothy Thomas, 'Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric – and Putin-led', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (Vol. 28, No. 3, 2015), p. 453.

22 See Gerasimov, 'Tsennost' Nauki v Predvidenii: Novye Vyzovy Trebuyut Pereosmysleniya Form i Sposobov Vedeniya Boevykh Deistvii' ['The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New

Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations'], p. 28.

23 See, in particular, Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'Voennoe Iskustvo Nachal'nom Etape XXI Stoletiya: Problemy i Suzhdeniya' ['The Art of War at the Beginning of the 21st Century: Problems and Opinions'].

24 Participants in the 'colour revolutions' have mostly used non-violent means, such as strikes, demonstrations and interventions, in protest against governments seen as corrupt and/or authoritarian. These movements generally adopted a specific flower or colour as their symbol. They have created strong pressure for change.

25 Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Baltimore, MA: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), p. 16. See also pp. 5 and 40.

26 Thomas, 'Thinking Like a Russian Officer', p. 4.

27 Kartapolov, 'Uroki Voennykh Konfliktov, Perspektivy Razvitiya Sredstv i Spocobov ikh Vedeniya. Pryamye i Nepryamye Deistviya v Sovremennykh Mezhdunarodnykh Konfliktov' ['Lessons of Military Conflicts and Prospects for the Development of Means and Methods for their Conduct. Direct and Indirect Actions in Contemporary International Conflicts'], p. 28.

28 Bettina Renz, 'Why Russia is Reviving its Conventional Military Power', *Parameters* (Vol. 46, No. 2, Summer 2016), p. 35.

29 Keir Giles, 'Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power', Chatham House Research Paper, March 2016, pp. 13–14.

30 See Thomas, 'Thinking Like a Russian Officer'.

31 Alexei Arbatov, 'Real and Imaginary Threats: Military Power in World Politics in the 21st Century', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 15 April 2013.

32 See Andrew Monaghan, 'The *Vertikal*: Power and Authority in Russia', *International Affairs* (Vol. 88, No. 1, Winter 2012).

33 Oil and gas revenues make up over half of the income of the Russian federal budget – 'most of it coming from Europe'. Danny Vinik, 'Chart: Russia is Insanely Dependent on Oil and Gas Money', *New Republic*, 23 July 2014.

34 Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder,* pp. 27–29.

35 Arbatov, 'Real and Imaginary Threats: Military Power in World Politics in the 21st Century'.

36 *Ibid*.

37 *Ibid*.

38 The lack of fungibility of nuclear weapons means that in the modern era, as Arbatov puts it, they have 'decreasing value as an "asset" of prestige, status and ability to influence international security'. See *Ibid*.

39 Roger N McDermott, 'Russia's Conventional Military Weakness and Substrategic Nuclear Policy', Foreign Military Studies Office, 2011.

40 S G Chekinov and S A Bogdanov, 'O Kharaktere i Soderzhanii Voiny Novogo Pokoleniya' ['On the Character and Content of New-Generation Warfare'], *Voennaya Mysl'* [*Military Thought*] (No. 10, 2013), p. 16.

41 Gerasimov, 'Tsennost' Nauki v Predvidenii: Novye Vyzovy Trebuyut Pereosmysleniya Form i Sposobov Vedeniya Boevykh Deistvii' ['The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations'].

42 Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'O Kharaktere i Soderzhanii Voiny Novogo Pokoleniya' ['On the Character and Content of New-Generation Warfare']; Maria Snegovaya, 'Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare', Institute for the Study of War, September 2015.

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44 See Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'O Kharaktere i Soderzhanii Voiny Novogo Pokoleniya' ['On the Character and Content of New-Generation Warfare'].

45 Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'Asimmetrichnye Deistviya po Obespecheniyu Voennoe Bezopasnosti Rossii' ['Asymmetric Actions to Ensure the Military Security of Russia'], p. 16.

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48 Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 203.

49 See, for instance, Janis Berzins, 'Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy', National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research, Policy Paper No. 2, 2014.

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63 Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'Asimmetrichnye Deistviya po Obespecheniyu Voennoe Bezopasnosti Rossii' ['Asymmetric Actions to Ensure the Military Security of Russia'], p. 16.

64 Kartapolov, 'Uroki Voennykh Konfliktov, Perspektivy Razvitiya Sredstv i Spocobov ikh Vedeniya. Pryamye i Nepryamye Deistviya v Sovremennykh Mezhdunarodnykh Konfliktov' ['Lessons of Military Conflicts and Prospects for the Development of Means and Methods for their Conduct. Direct and Indirect Actions in Contemporary International Conflicts'], p. 29.

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