



## The RUSI Journal

ISSN: 0307-1847 (Print) 1744-0378 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rusi20>

# The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare

Rod Thornton

To cite this article: Rod Thornton (2015) The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare, The RUSI Journal, 160:4, 40-48, DOI: [10.1080/03071847.2015.1079047](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2015.1079047)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2015.1079047>



Published online: 04 Sep 2015.



Submit your article to this journal



Article views: 254



View related articles



View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rusi20>

# THE CHANGING NATURE OF MODERN WARFARE

## RESPONDING TO RUSSIAN INFORMATION WARFARE

ROD THORNTON

**While Western militaries recognise the logic and necessity of ‘irregular warfare’ in their military operations, the manifold aspects of irregular fighting have yet to be mastered fully. Information warfare, for example, appears to be a tool more capably employed by Russia, to the detriment of NATO. Rod Thornton explains how and why Russia has ‘won’ in Crimea by affording subversive information campaigns primacy in its military operations. Acknowledging the twofold constraints of international law and co-ordination that face Western governments seeking to play the same game, Thornton nonetheless expounds how the West might better pursue asymmetry in the security realm.**

For several years now, the phenomenon of ‘irregular warfare’ (principally of the counter-insurgency variety) has been the main focus of major Western militaries and their doctrine centres. In accordance with such a focus, the armies of these militaries have become smaller, more agile and better equipped to deal with the likes of Al-Qa’ida, the Taliban and Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS). In this context, the study of ‘regular warfare’ against opponents from developed states appears to have been neglected.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the militaries of the US and the UK have taken their eyes off this conventional-warfare ball. In contrast, the military of one country has clearly been thinking very seriously about the conduct of conventional warfare between developed states, and that country is Russia.

The results of this deliberation are evident today in Ukraine, and may later extend to other theatres, notably the

Baltics, Georgia and Moldova. There has been a major change in the way the Russian military regards the conduct of its regular warfare campaigns – from the strategic to the tactical perspectives. Indeed, what has been called a ‘new generation of warfare’ (*voina novogo pokoleniya*) has been developed. Central to this concept is the use of information.

Russia ‘won’ in Crimea recently through a campaign based principally on information warfare. This is now not only seen by the Russian military as a force multiplier, but also as a war-winning tool. NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Philip Breedlove, has rightly noted that Russia is now waging ‘the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare’.<sup>2</sup>

A pressing imperative therefore presents itself. Western governments and their armed forces have to respond to these Russian successes through

their own use of information. Any such responses should, of course, be suitable and sound in nature. Unfortunately, as this article will show, responses so far have been neither. Instead, they appear to represent a twenty-first-century equivalent of ‘Maginot Line thinking’.<sup>3</sup>

### The Drivers of Change

It is instructive first to discuss why the Russian military felt it necessary to adopt this new thinking. The literature on change in military organisations suggests that ‘major change’ only comes about through a defeat in war or through significant civilian intervention.<sup>4</sup> In Russia’s case, it was the result of a combination of both. The 2008 war with Georgia was perceived to be something of a ‘defeat’ in terms of the failings it highlighted and the problems that were self-evident to senior military officers. It was Vladimir Putin, however, who was the chief critic of this poor performance and who became the main driver of change, aiming to create a military that



Local residents carry a Russian flag in Simferopol, Crimea, March 2014. Courtesy of AP Photo/Ivan Sekretarev.

would be a much more effective lever of Russian power on the international stage.<sup>5</sup>

Some analysts have suggested that Putin needed a more powerful military to help him in a process of empire-building.<sup>6</sup> This, however, is rather simplistic. A more cogent explanation is that Putin wanted to stop both himself and Russia – as he and his advisers saw it – from being pushed around by Western powers, in particular by the US. As Andrew Kuchins and Igor Zevelev argue, in Russia, ‘an enduring belief exists that [the country] is a great power and must be treated as such’.<sup>7</sup> However, the West has not obliged. ‘They’, as Putin put it, ‘are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner’.<sup>8</sup> The Cold War seems, in Russian eyes, to have simply moved on to a new phase.<sup>9</sup> The ‘colour revolutions’ exemplified the problem for Putin and the Kremlin. Countries in Russia’s traditional sphere of influence were being turned away from Moscow by regime changes that put in place pro-Western governments. In Putin’s view, these revolutions had been organised and financed in Western capitals. Moreover, the logical extension of blaming Washington and its allies for these ‘revolutions’ was that Putin – and Russia

– would be the next in line. Indeed, in the Kremlin there is the ‘conviction that the West intends to bring about regime change in Russia’.<sup>10</sup> Such thinking may appear dark, yet it is perfectly understandable if one accepts that there is a belief in the Kremlin, and in Russia more generally, that ‘international politics is essentially a Darwinian or Hobbesian competition’.<sup>11</sup>

It was with this ‘competition’ in mind that, following the war with Georgia, Putin set in train a series of reforms within those state structures that could contribute to a strengthening of Russian power on the international stage – including the military.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Putin was able to ensure that the reforms would mesh and complement each other across the range of structures involved due to the ‘power vertical’ system that operates in Russia.<sup>13</sup> In this, Putin maintains a highly centralised, top-down system of control where he ‘directly manages the government’<sup>14</sup> – assisted by a ‘loyal support group’,<sup>15</sup> known as the ‘collective Putin’.<sup>16</sup> This consists of a close cohort of advisers and members of the Russian elite who have benefited – mainly financially – from having Putin in power. His authority is further enhanced by the grip he has gained over the

Russian media, its output being almost universally in his favour.<sup>17</sup>

### **Hybrid Warfare**

Having been instructed to reform, from 2010 the Russian military began to debate what would be the best way forward. With the ‘colour revolutions’ in mind, the Russian Ministry of Defence analysed (in print and at conferences<sup>18</sup>) how the West had – seemingly – gone about ‘nurturing regime change by using political, economic or military support to selected groups, covert action and information operations’.<sup>19</sup> This analysis identified the concept known as ‘hybrid warfare’ or ‘ambiguous warfare’ (‘non-linear warfare’ in Russian parlance<sup>20</sup>) as the method employed by the Western powers to achieve their aims. The idea of hybrid warfare (growing out of work on the concept of asymmetric warfare) had been given form and substance most notably by Frank Hoffman in the US,<sup>21</sup> and is seen, in essence, as a form of warfare characterised by ‘blurring’. At its most basic level, the aim is to generate a situation where it is unclear whether a state of war exists – and if it does, who is a combatant and who is not.<sup>22</sup> A feature of hybrid warfare is that the modes of conflict overlap and meld.

Thus, the ‘battlespace’, such as it is, can be shaped on one level by conventional operations and irregular activities and concurrently, at a higher level, by the application of background political and economic pressures. The energetic employment of cyber-warfare lends itself well to such hybrid efforts, while opinions of both supporters and opponents can be moulded by information operations. Ideally, the various inputs into a hybrid-warfare campaign will be closely co-ordinated and controlled by a central guiding authority.<sup>23</sup>

Moscow has openly accused Washington of conducting such hybrid warfare against Russia during the ‘colour revolutions’. A reflection of Russia’s longstanding suspicion of the US role in post-Soviet satellite states, Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, charged that such techniques were used to ‘chang[e] the regimes in the states that pursue a policy Washington does not like’.<sup>24</sup> He blamed the US for using ‘financial and economic pressure, information attacks, proxy intensification of pressure along the borders of the state in question as well as propaganda and ideological influence through externally financed non-governmental organisations’.<sup>25</sup> ‘Is this not’, he asked rhetorically, ‘a hybrid process and not what we call war?’<sup>26</sup>

The Maidan events in Ukraine in 2014 furthered Moscow’s perception that it was at war: that is, ‘in a permanent state of conflict’ with the US and its allies.<sup>27</sup> Its chosen battleground was the former Soviet states, which Moscow wanted to bring back into the fold or, at the very least, destabilise in order to ‘show who is boss in Russia’s backyard’.<sup>28</sup> This was a Hobbesian rationale writ large and very much redolent of Cold War thinking.<sup>29</sup>

### Integration

‘Drawing lessons from different Allied operations’ as part of the reform process,<sup>30</sup> Putin’s military then embarked on an attempt to ‘reverse-engineer’ a Russian version of the hybrid-warfare measures that the Kremlin saw as being used against the country. As Kristin Ven Bruusgaard observes, ‘Despite heavily criticising such Western practices, Russia clearly adopted and refined

these elements in its own planning for modern military operations’.<sup>31</sup> The end result has been a completely new doctrinal approach. Russian ‘operations’ now reflect the ‘integrated use of military force and political, economic, informational and other non-military measures’.<sup>32</sup> As the head of the Russian military, General Valery Gerasimov, put it, ‘the very “rules of war” have changed’.<sup>33</sup>

This integration is at the heart of hybrid warfare. If military activities can be used in complete concert with other state levers of power, then they will be much more effective than if they were merely the sum of their parts. However, such integration is difficult to achieve, but Russia has successfully refined this element, thereby moving the hybrid-warfare concept beyond what was possible in the (perceived) Western variant. Of course, the process of integration is considerably eased in Russia by the central guiding authority that Putin exercises in the aforementioned ‘power vertical’ system. The consolidation of power around Putin has a ‘disciplining effect within the Russian bureaucracy’ that allows for a ‘comprehensive approach’ to government functions. The degree of integration this facilitates thus means that the Russian version of hybrid warfare can be very effective.<sup>34</sup>

This was clearly demonstrated in the operation to seize Crimea, which more than amply confirmed the Russian ability to ‘[integrate] military tools with more unconventional tools ... on the “battlefield”’.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Russian troops managed to take control of Crimea without firing a shot. This is what Sun Tzu would call the ‘acme of skill’ – the subduing of an enemy without any fighting. It was nevertheless a departure for a Russian army once doctrinally wedded to the use of destructive firepower. It was also reliant, in its success, on remarkable troop discipline; again, something that is not usually associated with the Russian armed forces.<sup>36</sup> The way in which these forces operated in Crimea was thus a ‘real novelty’.<sup>37</sup>

It should be remembered, however, that Russian forces were at the spearhead of a much larger hybrid-warfare campaign in Crimea – with Ukraine

subject to various manifestations of Russian pressure for some time prior to any Russian troops leaving their barracks on the peninsula. The ground had already been prepared before any Russian forces were committed.<sup>38</sup>

A year before the Ukraine crisis, the nature of this process of preparation was discussed in an article in a Russian military journal, *Voennaya Mysl’ (Military Thought)*. In describing this ‘new generation of warfare’, the article outlined eight phases, ‘the first four of which entail non-military, covert and subversive asymmetric means to reduce the enemy’s morale and willingness to take up arms’ – thereby rendering the violent use of military force unnecessary.<sup>39</sup> This process has variously been described as the ‘internal decay’ of the enemy,<sup>40</sup> ‘freezing society from within’,<sup>41</sup> and an intention to ‘paralyse an opponent’.<sup>42</sup>

Such ‘subversive asymmetric means’ are designed to generate defeatism in two ways: either the adversary’s government, military and population are passively persuaded that Russian occupation is not something to be feared – indeed, it is to be welcomed – or they become convinced that opposing such an occupation is futile and will lead to unimaginable destruction. The former relies on presenting a positive image, the latter on inculcating fear. The principal tool in engendering both is information warfare. In the new Russian military mindset, information warfare enables wars to be won without a shot being fired.

### Information Warfare

Western militaries tend to look upon what they refer to as ‘information operations’ merely as an adjunct to their campaign plans. In contrast, for Russian military thinkers, information now has ‘primacy in operations’, while ‘more conventional military forces [are] in a supporting role’.<sup>43</sup>

The Latvian analyst Janis Berzins observes how this new Russian emphasis on information has changed the focus in today’s major conflicts from ‘direct destruction to direct influence, from a war with weapons and technology to ... information or psychological warfare’. He further highlights the centre of gravity that is now a target – people’s minds:<sup>44</sup>

Thus the Russian view of modern warfare is based on the idea that the main battlespace is in the *mind* and, as a result, new-generation wars are to be dominated by information and psychological warfare [with] the main objective [being] to reduce the necessity for deploying hard military power to the minimum necessary, making the opponent's military and civil population support the attacker to the detriment of their own government and country.

As Berzins makes clear, from the Russian perspective, 'modern warfare' is to be fought in the mind – and information will be the principal tool in this fight, creating a version of reality that suits political and military purposes at all levels of warfare. The information is disseminated via, for example, television stations, websites, social media and even the leafleting of individual homes. Veracity is not necessary – indeed, as Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of the Putin-leaning *Russia Today* satellite television station and website, asserted when describing Russian media output: 'There is no objectivity – only approximations of the truth by as many different voices as possible'.<sup>45</sup> It is thus not the quality of information that is important in Russian information warfare, but the quantity.<sup>46</sup> If enough outlets spread Russian propaganda at a sufficient rate then, seemingly, wherever any individual (civilian or military) in a target country obtains information – be it from a television station or through rumour on the street – he or she will be receiving the Russian version of it, or one of a number of versions at least. Moreover, these versions are lent extra mileage by making them as interesting as possible, often in the form of conspiracy theories, which gain much greater traction – and therefore more influence – than the mundane.<sup>47</sup>

For such a tumult of information to be truly effective, of course, it all has to be controlled; it has to be the result of 'the synchronous execution of messaging'.<sup>48</sup> This is where the 'power vertical' system is key: it is 'control of the media by the Russian power elite [which] has ensured the systematic control of narratives'.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, of

course, direction comes from the very top: as NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (STRATCOM COE) puts it, in Russian information-warfare campaigns, 'control is exerted directly by the Presidential Administration'.<sup>50</sup>

The highly professional and voluminous output of Russian propaganda that is currently evident is the result of years of significant worldwide investment. Turning Russian state-controlled media outlets into tools of information warfare has been part of the Kremlin's perceived need to 'compete' in the 'permanent war' in which it considers itself to be involved. New Russian television stations, broadcasting in both Russian and local languages, have recently been established across the world. They are at the front and centre of Russia's information-warfare 'blitzkrieg'. Indeed, as noted in a report by NATO's STRATCOM COE: 'One cannot underestimate the role of the mass media in executing Russia's foreign policy goals'.<sup>51</sup>

### **Compatriot Russians**

The Russian information output is designed to influence minds. However, the subjects must be reasonably receptive in the first place. Moscow is fortunate in this respect in that the now-independent states that were once part of the Soviet Union contain a significant number of ethnic Russians, as well as Russian speakers. These Russian minorities in places such as Ukraine, the Baltic States, Moldova and Georgia are the principal focus of Moscow's current information-warfare campaign.

Russian law labels these individuals as 'Compatriots Living Abroad',<sup>52</sup> and they are seen as requiring the protection of Mother Russia. While Moscow may have altruistic motives for providing such protection, the presence of these minorities does also provide a convenient excuse for Russia to interfere in the internal affairs of these states, an interference in which Putin is all too ready to engage.

The first goal of the information-warfare campaigns is to instil in these 'compatriot Russians' what has been called a 'soft loyalty' to Russia through an emphasis on cultural, linguistic and

ideological links. The plan is that this 'may evolve into a more formal relationship in future, if or when needed'.<sup>53</sup> The second goal is to instil fear among these target groups that their host government will one day turn on them. Messages are sent out that 'leverage historical memory'. Particular emphasis is put on the nature of the Nazi tyranny suffered during the occupation of countries including Ukraine and the Baltic States during the Great Patriotic War – and on the fact that the Red Army came to the rescue of those under this tyranny. Moscow's message today is that the current governments in these countries also have their 'Nazi' elements, and so it may be better for compatriot Russians to seek protection and 'think about a future joint destiny with Russia'.<sup>54</sup> Having succumbed to such influences, it is intended that compatriot Russians then become channels of communication themselves. As the 'multipliers of desired information, attitudes and behaviour', they should set about convincing their non-Russian neighbours to adopt the same thinking.<sup>55</sup> The primary goal is for local populations in the targeted countries, be they Russian-speaking or not, to protest against the governing authorities, and for Moscow to be able to use any subsequent clampdown by these authorities as an excuse for setting up local vigilante squads to provide 'protection'. These squads may, of course, contain Russian special forces in civilian clothes or unmarked uniforms – or they may not; the situation may be 'blurred'. The end-game comes when those influenced by the information campaign seek a 'humanitarian intervention' by Russian troops or ultimate safety by joining Russia itself. Ideally, though, in Kremlin thinking, this would be achieved via the ballot box through the 'clever manipulation of local politics'.<sup>56</sup> Russia thus obtains a new piece of territory through not much more than the passage of information.<sup>57</sup>

There will, of course, be those compatriots abroad or native inhabitants of the former Soviet states targeted by Moscow who reject the Russian media message. In the integrated system, though, any such waverers can be persuaded by activities intended instead

to build psychological pressure. The open massing of troops on borders or an increased number of incursions by Russian military aircraft or naval vessels can prove influential. ‘Terrorist’ bombing campaigns or street demonstrations, both organised by Moscow, can add to the mix.<sup>58</sup> In addition, cyber-warfare can be used to generate its own psychological effects. A Russian distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack in 2007 on Estonia’s networks proved just how vulnerable modern economies can be to such tactics,<sup>59</sup> and sent a clear message from Moscow: ‘this is what we can do if you cross us’. In the face of such pressure, there will be those who submit to fear and who even come to view Russian occupation as a better alternative than going to war with Russia. For these people, reverting back to Moscow’s rule would seem preferable to living in a country devastated by conflict.<sup>60</sup>

### *‘Contactless war’ is crucial in preventing Western intervention*

Of course, the most recent principal targets of this type of campaign have been the audiences in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Indeed, ‘the Russian media has systematically cultivated a feeling of fear and anxiety in [both] the ethnically Russian and non-Ukrainian populations of Ukraine’.<sup>61</sup> Other post-Soviet states are being lined up for the same treatment. Today, ‘Russian media dominate in the Russian-speaking communities of Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, the Baltic states and also the former USSR republics of Central Asia’.<sup>62</sup> It is the Baltics, though, that represent a special target. Estonia and Latvia have large Russian minorities and Lithuania is vulnerable because it separates Russian forces in the Kaliningrad enclave from Belarus and the rest of Russia.<sup>63</sup> Russia’s information-warfare campaign *vis-à-vis* these Baltic States is very slick, with Peter Pomerantsev observing that in Estonia, for instance, ‘huge parts of [the] population live in a separate reality created by the Russian media’.<sup>64</sup>

### Contactless War

Russia’s information campaigns are thus supposed to remove, as far as possible, displays of ‘hard military power’ from modern warfare, with ‘war’ becoming something fought ‘at arm’s length’ without the need to engage with an adversary’s forces.<sup>65</sup> This ‘contactless war’ has many advantages.<sup>66</sup> Obviously, in terms of costs – both financial and human – it is beneficial. However, contactless war is also crucial, from a Russian perspective, in blurring the lines sufficiently to prevent intervention by Western powers on behalf of the states targeted. In this way, Russia can negate the significant advantage held by the US and its NATO allies in terms of their conventional military forces, mostly in the technological realm. If Moscow can achieve its aims without any ‘contact’, then there can be no justification for Western intervention. True to the concept of asymmetric warfare, Russian military theorists want to turn what is a US strength (its firepower and technological sophistication) into a weakness (rooted in the requirement that its use is properly justified). This approach was manifested in the extraordinary fire discipline of Russian forces in Crimea and the use of the infamous ‘little green men’ in Ukraine (the ‘plausibly deniable’ Russian troops in unmarked uniforms).

This aspect of deniability is also important in terms of the wider international audience to which Moscow wants to appeal. In the ‘Hobbesian struggle’, allies are essential. Moscow has such allies among, for instance, the other BRICS countries (Brazil, India, China and South Africa), some of which seem all too ready to accept Russia’s version of events with regards to Ukraine.<sup>67</sup> However, to keep these states on board, Moscow must give the impression that it is ‘law abiding and “doing the right thing”’.<sup>68</sup> Of course, as evidence inevitably accumulates to show that Russian forces are, indeed, operating within Ukraine, the nature of Russia’s information message will have to change<sup>69</sup> – possibly to an emphasis on Russia’s ‘responsibility to protect’ its ‘compatriots’ in other countries. It should be expected that the Russian information-warfare campaign would be flexible enough to react adroitly to any such changes in circumstances.

### Responses to Russian Information Warfare

Russia has shown it can occupy whole slices of another state’s territory using no more than information warfare, deniability and a few highly disciplined special forces. The Russian military, supported by a substantial information-warfare infrastructure, has employed the tenets of hybrid warfare remarkably skilfully. Such activities have, of course, to be countered by NATO and the EU to ensure Moscow cannot use these tactics so easily in future. As NATO STRATCOM COE puts it, ‘analysis of the Ukraine conflict suggests that NATO and the EU must adapt to the new reality where information superiority, as opposed to military power, is becoming increasingly important’.<sup>70</sup> If today ‘the main battlespace is in the mind’, it must be considered how Western powers and institutions engage in this arena.

The first option, censorship of the Russian media message, is widely dismissed across the EU and in the US. As John Whittingdale, the UK’s current secretary of state for culture, media and sport, stressed in 2014: ‘There is nothing Russia would like more than to be able to say the West is censoring [it].’<sup>71</sup> The second alternative would be for Western powers, through NATO, to employ their own counter-information-warfare campaigns to match those of Russia. However, this would be futile, not least because NATO’s members are, for the most part, liberal democracies whose governments are expected to remain wedded to the truth in the information they provide to both domestic and international audiences. Moreover, they have a free media acting as the fourth estate to ensure that the truth is told. When it comes to conducting information-warfare campaigns, this predilection for the truth can be something of a handicap, allowing for the projection of only one narrative amid the welter of counter-narratives produced by Russian outlets. Furthermore, Western efforts to promote this singular message have been underwhelming. As the UK parliamentary Defence Committee was recently told, ‘although the BBC Russian Service was available, it was only online and was in no way a counterweight to

the propaganda channelled through Russian Television'.<sup>72</sup> One outlet tucked away on a website is no answer to a Russian information-warfare 'blitzkrieg'. There is similar reluctance, for instance, in Washington, to use the Voice of America radio station in an 'overtly propagandistic role'. Meanwhile, in the Baltic States the attempts to counter Moscow's 'information war' are seen as 'uncoordinated and weak'.<sup>73</sup> The basic problem across the board is that liberal democracies have an inherent distaste for producing anything at the strategic level that resembles propaganda or could be classed as psychological warfare.<sup>74</sup> In fact, one of the reasons that the Russians concentrate so much on their information-warfare output is that they know it cannot be countered effectively; indeed, they have shown a 'readiness to stoop to methods the West cannot emulate without sulllying itself'.<sup>75</sup> As Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss point out, the Russians are thinking asymmetrically: 'Feeling itself relatively weak, the Kremlin has systematically learnt to use the principles of liberal democracies against them'.<sup>76</sup>

This asymmetry in willingness and abilities does not, however, mean that no action has been taken by Western powers. In January 2014, NATO set up a Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga as a direct consequence of the Russian information-warfare campaign in an attempt to counter Russia's significant advantage in this realm. Yet even this body recognises that it is difficult for the West with its free media 'to compete with the forceful, synchronised messaging of the Russian government'.<sup>77</sup>

For its part, the EU is discussing sponsoring its own Russian-language channel as 'The truth is the best weapon the EU has'.<sup>78</sup> However, doubts remain as to how much impact a single channel can have; indeed, this channel 'needs to find a way to counter Moscow's grip on the Russian-language airwaves or its target audience will never hear [the truth]'.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, it will always be difficult for any collective of states – whether NATO or the EU – to agree on the nature and content of information campaigns, not least due to disagreement over what exactly the 'truth' is and

how best to present it. As one Estonian military officer concerned with NATO's information operations put it, 'if we want to counter Russian propaganda ... we have to unite our lines and speak with the same voice'.<sup>80</sup> However, there is no such unity in these international organisations and thus the idea of NATO producing its own 'synchronised messaging' remains a pipe-dream. Therefore what collectives such as NATO will always lack is what makes Moscow's information assault so effective: a truly integrated approach.

The major threat to Western interests anywhere in the world is not terrorism, it is the threat posed by information warfare such as that recently conducted by Russia. It has achieved clear results and this success can be repeated. As NATO finds it almost impossible to react effectively in a symmetrical fashion to this threat, it has felt the need to resort to more traditional means. Yet the responses seen so far are redolent of 'Maginot Line thinking' – in other words, these are responses that are better suited to the 'last war'. Unlike the Russian military, NATO is still putting the use of military force ahead of information warfare because – as an institution – it knows no other way of reacting.

The US and the UK have, for instance, decided to send a small number of (non-combat) troops to Ukraine.<sup>81</sup> This, though, is a naive move that does no more than play into the Kremlin's hands. The message that Moscow can now send out to those who would support its actions is that while Russia is not sending any of its own troops over the border into Ukraine (officially, at least), the US and UK are doing so – and from thousands of miles away. Under such circumstances, it raises questions as to who the aggressor really is. It is an easy sell for the information-warfare-savvy Russians.

There is talk, too, of NATO responding both by beefing up the rapid-reaction forces currently on standby to be sent to the Baltic States and by holding more exercises there.<sup>82</sup> This, though, raises the question of to what exactly they are supposed to 'react'. Russian troops, while they might one day mass near the Baltics to apply psychological pressure, are unlikely to cross any borders, at

least not overtly. Indeed, Russia's 'new generation of warfare' is specifically designed to achieve results without the need for any such crass action that might, in turn, provide an excuse for NATO (or others) to interfere – thereby paralysing both the target country and those that might come to its defence. Moreover, one aim of the Russian information-warfare campaign has always been to 'sow discord' within NATO.<sup>83</sup> 'Russia', as the former head of Polish special forces, Roman Polko, says, 'is mercilessly using NATO's weaknesses in order to play its own game'.<sup>84</sup> Of prime importance to Russia is to prevent the invocation of Article V by avoiding the trigger for 'an armed attack' on any one NATO state.<sup>85</sup>

### *Russian information warfare is designed to 'sow discord' within NATO*

This weakness of Article V has been recognised – with the UK parliamentary Defence Committee one voice among many calling for the word 'armed' to be removed:<sup>86</sup>

NATO must resolve the contradiction between the specification in Article 5 that a response should be to an 'armed attack' and the likelihood on the other hand of an 'unarmed attack' (such as a cyber attack or another form of ambiguous warfare). NATO must consider whether the adjective 'armed' should be removed from the definition of an Article 5 attack.

Most NATO states are, however, unlikely to agree to this – again showing the weakness of a multinational body. They will not want to engage militarily with Russia just because one of their number might be subject to a (plausibly deniable) 'form of ambiguous warfare', however disruptive.

Thus, such debate over rapid-reaction forces and Article V merely facilitates Moscow's information-warfare campaign. It should be remembered that NATO's offer of military assistance to the Baltic States is also an offer to fight a

war – a very destructive one – on their territory. Such an offer may well have the effect of stoking fear among both Balts and compatriot Russians, once again providing potential grist to Moscow's information-warfare mill.

### 'Going Asymmetric'

The best means of countering Russian actions regarding Ukraine and the Baltics is in all likelihood not military in nature at all. Western powers need to 'start thinking about security in a much more sophisticated way'<sup>87</sup> and 'to craft a response as subtle as the onslaught'.<sup>88</sup> They need to employ their own asymmetric approach and turn what appears to be a Russian strength – the 'power vertical' – into a weakness. If the individuals in the 'collective Putin' are targeted with sanctions that limit their personal wealth, damage their companies

and hinder their ability to move freely around the world, then these individuals will put pressure on Putin to rein in his efforts to 'compete'.<sup>89</sup> Russian aggressive behaviour should thus be toned down as it seeks to avoid its own 'internal decay'. Such sanctions have been tried already, of course, if only half-heartedly. However, they could yet prove to be the answer. As *The Economist* puts it: 'It is long past time for every Russian parliamentarian and senior official to join the sanctions list'.<sup>90</sup> These are the only 'minds' that need to be influenced by multinational bodies such as NATO and the EU; here is the centre of gravity that needs to be targeted in order to truly stymie Russia's hybrid-warfare campaign. NATO should be using its technological capabilities to track the business interests of these acolytes of Putin and to disrupt them by any means possible. Of course, if this

avenue is to be pursued then there are some legal matters that will need to be addressed in order to make it effective. The West must adjust to the situation in which it now finds itself in relation to Russia – a 'permanent', hybrid war. The goalposts have to be moved. General Gerasimov has said that the 'rules of war' have changed; thus, the Western powers must change their own rules and adopt a 'new thinking' of their own. ■

*Rod Thornton works in the Defence Studies Department of King's College London. He originally served in the British Army and later studied Russian at university. He is the author of Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the Twenty-First Century (Polity Press, 2007) and of several monographs and articles about the Russian military.*

### Notes

- Over the last ten years or so the academic literature devoted to 'warfare' has been dominated by the issue of counter-insurgency. Gian Gentile has remarked, for instance, that the study of counter-insurgency in the US military has become central 'dogma' to the exclusion of the study of regular warfare. See Gian P Gentile, 'Let's Build an Army to Win All Wars', *Joint Force Quarterly* (No. 52, January 2009), p. 31. Military doctrine centres followed this trend. The UK's Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) has also produced key publications without any emphasis at all on the nature of future state-on-state war. See 'Strategic Trends Programme: Future Character of Conflict', Ministry of Defence (MoD), 2010, <[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/33685/FCOCReadactedFinalWeb.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/33685/FCOCReadactedFinalWeb.pdf)>, accessed 15 July 2015. See also Bettina Renz, 'Russian Military Capabilities after 20 Years of Reform', *Survival* (Vol. 56, No. 3, June/July 2014), pp. 70–71.
- John Vandiver, 'SACEUR: Allies Must Prepare for "Hybrid War"', *Stars and Stripes*, 4 September 2014, <<http://www.stripes.com/news/saceur>>
- allies-must-prepare-for-russia-hybrid-war-1.301464>, accessed 15 July 2015.
- In the 1930s, the French army constructed the Maginot Line fortifications running along the country's border with Germany. Based on experience from the First World War, it was thought that such a structure would halt any future invasion by Germany. It did not.
- See Deborah D Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
- See Bettina Renz and Rod Thornton, 'Russian Military Modernization: Cause, Course, and Consequences', *Problems of Post-Communism* (Vol. 59, No. 1, February 2012), pp. 44–54.
- See Matthew Kroenig, 'Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War', *Survival* (Vol. 57, No. 1, February/March 2015), pp. 53–54; Peter Apps, 'Russia Raises Military Clout With Reforms after Georgia War', *Reuters*, 27 February 2014; Con Coughlin, 'Putin Wants a New Russian Empire', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 September 2008; Lilia Shevtsova, 'Putin's Attempt to Recreate the Soviet Empire is Futile', *Financial Times*, 8 January 2014.
- Andrew C Kuchins and Igor A Zevelev, 'Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity in Change', *Washington Quarterly* (Vol. 35, No. 1, Winter 2012), p. 147.
- Cited in NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (STRATCOM COE), 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', Report No. 3, 2014, p. 8.
- Kroenig, 'Facing Reality'.
- Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, 'Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul', *Parameters* (Vol. 44, No. 3, Autumn 2014), p. 87; BBC Monitoring, 'Analysis: What's New in Russia's Latest Military Doctrine', 9 January 2015.
- Kuchins and Zevelev, 'Russian Foreign Policy', p. 147.

- 12 Fred Weir, 'Oligarchs Out, "Siloviki" In: Why Russia's Foreign Policy is Hardening', *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 February 2015.
- 13 Andrew Monaghan, 'The Russian *Vertikal*: The Tandem, Power and the Elections', Russia and Eurasia Programme Paper 2011/01, Chatham House, June 2011, <[https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/19412\\_0511p\\_pmonaghan.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/19412_0511p_pmonaghan.pdf)>, accessed 15 July 2015.
- 14 *Moscow Times*, 'Putin Strengthening Power Vertical Report Says', 22 May 2013.
- 15 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 7.
- 16 Brian Whitmore, 'The Sick Man of Moscow', Radio Free Europe, 12 March 2015, <[http://www.rferl.org/archive/The\\_Power\\_Vertical/latest/884/884.html](http://www.rferl.org/archive/The_Power_Vertical/latest/884/884.html)>, accessed 15 July 2015.
- 17 See Monaghan, 'The Russian *Vertikal*'.
- 18 The general quality of the study and debate within the Russian Ministry of Defence in regard to future warfare is high. See, for instance, the review undertaken by S G Chekinov and S A Bogdanov, 'The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War', *Military Thought [Voennaya Mysl']* (No. 4, 2013), <[http://www.eastviewpress.com/Files/MT\\_FROM%20THE%20CURRENT%20ISSUE\\_No.4\\_2013.pdf](http://www.eastviewpress.com/Files/MT_FROM%20THE%20CURRENT%20ISSUE_No.4_2013.pdf)>, accessed 15 July 2015. See also Mark Galeotti, 'The "Gerasimov Doctrine" and Russian Non-Linear War', Moscow's Shadows Blog, 6 July 2014, <<https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>>, accessed 15 July 2015; Dmitry Gorenburg, 'Countering Color Revolutions: Russia's New Security Strategy and its Implications for US Policy', Russian Military Reform Blog, 15 September 2014, <<https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2014/09/15/countering-color-revolutions-russias-new-security-strategy-and-its-implications-for-u-s-policy/>>, accessed 15 July 2015.
- 19 Ven Bruusgaard, 'Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul', p. 83.
- 20 Roger McDermott, 'Myth and Reality: A Net Assessment of Russia's "Hybrid
- Warfare" Strategy since the Start of 2014 (Part 1)', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Vol. 11, No. 184, 17 October 2014).
- 21 Frank G Hoffman, 'Hybrid Warfare and Challenges', *Joint Force Quarterly* (No. 52, 2009), pp. 34–39.
- 22 James N Mattis and Frank Hoffman, 'Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars', *Proceedings* (Vol. 132, No. 11, 2005).
- 23 Frank G Hoffman, 'Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars', Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007, p. 8.
- 24 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the XXII Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, Moscow, 22 November 2014', <[http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/24454A08D48F695EC3257D9A004BA32E](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/24454A08D48F695EC3257D9A004BA32E)>, accessed 15 July 2015.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Stephen Blank, 'Russia, Hybrid War and the Evolution of Europe', Second Line of Defense, 14 February 2015, <<http://www.sldinfo.com/russia-hybrid-war-and-the-evolution-of-europe/>>, accessed 15 July 2015.
- 28 *The Economist*, 'Putin's War on the West', 14 February 2015, p. 4.
- 29 Kroenig, 'Facing Reality'.
- 30 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 3.
- 31 Ven Bruusgaard, 'Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul', p. 83.
- 32 BBC Monitoring, 'Analysis: What's New in Russia's Latest Military Doctrine'.
- 33 Galeotti, 'The "Gerasimov Doctrine" and Russian Non-Linear War'.
- 34 Ven Bruusgaard, 'Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul', pp. 87–88.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 36 See Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine'.
- 39 See Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War'.
- 40 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, April 2014, p. 5.
- 41 Paulius Gritenas, 'Zygmantas Pavilionis: Barbarians Already Inside the Country, Not Just at the Gates', *Lietuvos Rytas [Lithuania Morning]*, 4 December 2014, cited by BBC Monitoring.
- 42 House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two – NATO', HC 755, Ninth Special Report of Session 2014–15, October 2014, p. 17.
- 43 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 3.
- 44 Berzins, 'Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine', p. 5. Emphasis added.
- 45 Cited in *Guardian*, 'The Guardian View on Russian Propaganda: The Truth is Out There', 2 March 2015.
- 46 Peter Pomerantsev, 'How Putin is Reinventing Warfare', *Foreign Policy*, 5 May 2014.
- 47 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, 'Russia and the Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money', *Interpreter*, Institute of Modern Russia, 2014.
- 48 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 13.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

- 52 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 10.
- 53 Agnia Grigas, 'Anatomy of Russia's Information Warfare in the Baltic States', *Delfi*, 29 December 2014.
- 54 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 12.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 Coughlin, 'Putin Wants a New Russian Empire'.
- 57 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 22.
- 58 Allison Quinn, 'Experts See Dark Plot in Spate of Mystery Bombings in Ukraine', *Moscow Times*, 25 February 2015.
- 59 BBC News, 'Estonia Hit by "Moscow Cyber War"', 17 May 2007.
- 60 Ven Bruusgaard, 'Crimea and Russia's Strategic Overhaul', p. 85.
- 61 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 20.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 63 Russian troops actually guard the borders of Belarus with Kaliningrad and Ukraine.
- 64 Pomerantsev and Weiss, 'Russia and the Menace of Unreality', p. 4.
- 65 Chekinov and Bogdanov, 'The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War', p. 13.
- 66 Berzins, 'Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine', p. 5.
- 67 Zachary Keck, 'Why Did BRICS Back Russia on Crimea?', *Diplomat*, 31 March 2014.
- 68 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 24.
- 69 Igor Sutyagin, 'Russian Forces in Ukraine', RUSI Briefing Paper, March 2015.
- 70 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 4.
- 71 Josh Halliday, 'BBC World Service Fears Losing the Information War as Russia Today Ramps up Pressure', *Guardian*, 21 December 2014, p. 9.
- 72 House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two – NATO', p. 28.
- 73 Chris McGreal, 'Vladimir Putin's "Misinformation" Offensive Prompts US to Deploy its Cold War Propaganda Tools', *Guardian*, 25 April 2015.
- 74 *Ibid.*
- 75 The Economist, 'Putin's War on the West'.
- 76 Pomerantsev and Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality', p. 4.
- 77 STRATCOM COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine', p. 4.
- 78 Charlotte McDonald-Gibson, 'Europe Mulls a Russian Language TV Channel to Counter Moscow Propaganda', *Time*, 19 January 2015.
- 79 Kashmira Gander, 'EU Could Launch European TV Channel to Combat "Aggressive" Russian Propaganda', *Independent*, 1 January 2015.
- 80 Valentina Pop, 'Nato Colonel Sheds Light on Russia "Psy-Ops"', *EU Observer*, 22 January 2015, <<https://euobserver.com/foreign/127174>>, accessed 15 July 2015.
- 81 FoxNews, 'US Sending around 600 Paratroopers to Ukraine to Train Troops', 11 February 2015, <<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/02/11/fighting-rages-on-in-ukraine-ahead-peace-talks/>>, accessed 15 July 2015; Patrick Wintour, 'Britain to Send Military Advisers to Ukraine, Announces Cameron', *Guardian*, 24 February 2015.
- 82 Ewen MacAskill, 'NATO to Announce 4,000-Strong Rapid Reaction Force to Counter Russian Threat', *Guardian*, 5 September 2014.
- 83 The Economist, 'Putin's War on the West'.
- 84 Delfi, 'Former Polish Special Forces Commander: Polish Soldiers Would Defend Lithuania', 16 March 2015.
- 85 Michael John Williams, 'Russia's New Doctrine: How the Kremlin Has Learned to Fight Tomorrow's War Today', Center for European Policy Analysis, 9 May 2014, <<http://cepa.org/content/russia%E2%80%99s-new-doctrine-how-kremlin-has-learned-fight-tomorrow%E2%80%99s-war-today>>, accessed 15 July 2015.
- 86 House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Towards the Next Defence and Security Review: Part Two – NATO', p. 41.
- 87 Sam Jones, 'Ukraine: Russia's New Art of War', *Financial Times*, 28 August 2014.
- 88 The Economist, 'Putin's War on the West'.
- 89 Vladimir Kara-Muza, 'Russia and the Baltics: Once Friend, Now Foe', *World Affairs* (January/February 2015).
- 90 The Economist, 'Putin's War on the West'.