



Research Division

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How Russia fights

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Until this year's renewed aggression on Ukraine, over-reliance on catchy labels such as "hybrid war" has led many observers and decision-makers to under-appreciate (if not disregard completely) one undeniable fact: that over the last 20 years, the Kremlin has achieved its key strategic goals mainly through kinetic military means.

Notwithstanding a weak tactical performance, Russia won the 2008 "August war" against Georgia in only five days and successfully imposed its own regional settlement. In 2014, the annexation of Crimea, while supported by the promotion of favourable socio-political conditions, was carried out and secured militarily; even more so in the Donbas campaign, where Russian propaganda suffered from serious limitations. Finally, the role of the Russian military in Syria beginning in 2015 was evident, albeit frequently reduced solely to the use of the Aerospace Forces.

Notably, and besides obvious differences linked with the specifics of each theatre, the military interventions that Russia has conducted since 2008 display a consistent *modus operandi*. An analysis of these experiences can help illuminate what Russia is doing today and might do in the future, thus enabling NATO to fine-tune its posture on the Eastern flank. This *Policy Brief* draws on an expanded research project regarding Russia's approach to war, as well as on a wealth of Russian-language military essays and commentary – deliberately highlighting the way the Russian military thinks of and practises war *on its own terms*.

Territorial control and the centrality of ground operations

Russian operations have developed principally within the conventional military spectrum and owed their relative success especially to the efforts conducted in the land domain. This is true for all three mentioned cases – including Syria, notwithstanding an unprecedented air campaign. The latter, in fact, was carried out within a broader inter-service campaign that centred on ground operations. Even though Moscow deployed a relatively low number of its own ground troops, it took *de facto* control of Assad's army via a thick web of "advisers", enabling thorough control over the planning and execution of land operations.¹

Russia's emphasis on the land domain can be explained from different angles. First, geography. The territorial contiguity of Ukraine and Georgia with the Russian Federation, as well as the cross-border road and rail links inherited from Soviet times make invasion by land more viable. Moreover, in the case of Georgia, the mountains separating the North Caucasus from the South complicated the mission of the Russian Aerospace Forces, back then scarcely serviceable; emphasis on land was therefore required.

Second, there is the state of the armed forces.² Ground

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1 V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik genshtaba vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerii Gerasimov: 'My perelomili khrebet udarnym silam terrorizma'", *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 26 December 2017.

2 For an overview, R. Connolly and C. Sendstad, "Russian rearmament",

troops have not been prioritized in the Russian State Armament Programmes, but the materiel base they inherited from the Red Army was in a better state than those of the other services. Since they could be modernized more efficiently (time- and cost-wise), the Russian ground troops quickly became more operation-ready than their counterparts at sea and in the air. The latter have both been suffering from the inability of the Russian defence industry to deliver on time, as well as from the longer timeframes required to professionalize their personnel.

The third factor is operational requirements. This was plain to see in the case of the first Ukraine war in 2014, when Russia attempted to limit its (apparent) involvement in order to achieve plausible deniability and ensure better escalation control. Intensive air strikes and wide-ranging naval manoeuvres would have run counter to such objectives. More generally, since 2008 Russia seems to have pursued victory by territorial conquest. There is no inherent reason for this to be the default objective of any of the Russian campaigns. The possibility of alternative approaches is attested to by Moscow's original attempt to solve the long-standing "Ukraine problem", in February 2022, by decapitating the regime –

– speaking of the enduring relevance of old methods and contemplating how new technologies can serve the continuation of a pre-existing military *modus operandi*.⁴

Concentration of capabilities and operational manoeuvre

Russian operations have shown a consistent attempt to concentrate manpower, hardware, and firepower through operational manoeuvre, in order to achieve (quantitative) asymmetric advantages over enemy forces and obtain shock effects.

In the "five-day war" of 2008, Russia enjoyed undisputed numerical superiority over Georgia in terms of both military personnel and hardware. The Russian armed forces took full advantage of this by implementing high-intensity operations centred on massed artillery fires and the aerial dropping of dumb bombs with disproportionate payloads. Troops were manoeuvred along multiple operational axes, severing Georgia in half and preventing the reorganization of the adversary's operational lines or any push-backs.⁵

During the first Ukraine war, Russia consistently demonstrated its ability to rapidly deploy, manoeuvre, and concentrate capabilities to outnumber and crush the adversary. Between August and December 2014, the number of Russian troops in the Donbas more than doubled, enabling them to easily overcome a highly dysfunctional Ukrainian military. This fact is even more significant considering that many of those troops were drawn with little forewarning from groupings based on the other side of the Federation. Operational encirclement and the concentration of personnel and fire-power were also the hallmark of two pivotal battles won by the Russians in southeast Ukraine, at Ilovaisk and Debaltsevo.⁶

In Syria, too, Russian operations emphasized manoeuvre, mass, and the achievement of breakthroughs.⁷ Virtually all Russian accounts underscore the shock-oriented nature of the operations conducted, highlighting the high volume of disruptive fires and the staging of simultaneous, converging, in-depth ground attacks. Flagrant examples of this war-fighting style are the battles for Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo. There, breakthroughs

4 For example: V.A. Vinogradov, "O tendentsiyakh v kharaktere i sposobakh vedeniya operatsii v krupnomasshtabnoi voine", *Voennaya Mysl*, No.10, 2013, pp.25-29. The author discusses some features of contemporary (large-scale) conflicts but, *de facto*, the type of operations described bear scarce or no novelty.

5 T. Bukkvol, "Russia's military performance in Georgia", *Military Review*, Vol.89, No.6, 2009, pp.57-62.

6 M. Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's war in Ukraine*, New York, Osprey, 2019.

7 T. Thomas, "Russian lessons learned in Syria: an assessment", MITRE Center for Technology and National Security, 2020.

Moscow still holds the 20th-century belief that it is with the infantry's boots on the ground that wars are won

There is strong evidence suggesting that Russia's emphasis on territorial conquest and, consequently, on land operations is rooted in a specific strategic culture. Russian military writings speak extensively of the enduring, pivotal role of ground troops in contemporary warfare. While Western doctrine has broadly shifted in favour of air power and special operations, Russian military thinkers continue to discuss how to best harness the power of heavy artillery fires and human mass.³ Apparently, Moscow still holds the 20th-century belief that it is with the infantry's boots on the ground that wars are won. Such an approach also surfaces in discussions on future war: instead of reflecting on how military doctrine and structures should evolve to meet the changing character of war or fully benefit from technological innovation, Russian military thinkers often take the opposite perspective

Problems of Post-Communism, Vol.65, No.3, 2018, pp.143-160.

3 J. Norberg and M. Goliath, "The fighting power of Russia's armed forces in 2019", in F. Westerlund and S. Oxenstierna (ed.), *Russian military capability in a ten-year perspective – 2019*, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), Stockholm, 2019, p.60. See also C.K. Bartles, "Preparation and conduct of military actions in local wars and armed conflicts", *Russian Studies*, No.3, NATO Defense College, Rome, 2018.

were achieved by concentrating mechanized assault detachments reinforced by engineering units armed with flamethrowers. Direct and indirect artillery fire and air strikes along the whole depth of the enemy line backed the assaults.

While such *modus operandi* played out well in the theatres above, performance has been much less impressive in 2022. This points to three lessons. First, Russia's capability to manoeuvre and concentrate its armed forces diminishes as they gain operational depth. While Russia's in-country, even long-range military logistics deserves to be recognized and will serve well in the case of territorial defence operations, Russia's (ground) logistics is patently unfit for sustained, high-attrition, expeditionary operations. Second, Moscow's attempt to wage war along the entire Ukrainian border not only exacerbated the aforementioned logistical problems; it also hindered the objective of concentrating capabilities and achieving overwhelming mass and fire-power in given sectors. This has given Ukrainian forces the chance to resist and, by keeping control of their internal lines, regroup and push back.

Thirdly, and relatedly, the scope of the Russian aggression was too wide to succeed in this type of operation, considering the number of troops at Russia's disposal. The number of active personnel in the Russian armed forces exceeds Ukraine's by some 700,000.⁸ However, given the typical (moral, material) advantages of the defender, for a high-intensity manoeuvre operation of that kind to succeed along such a wide frontline would probably require a numerical strength closer to that of the Red Army (5 million in the late 1980s).

The Russian elite was well aware of these limitations, yet it went all in, pursuing a war-fighting style reminiscent of the 20th century. One possible explanation for the extreme consistency of the Russian way of war over time, even at the cost of underperformance, lies once again in strategic culture. Indeed, a diachronic analysis of Russian military writings, debates, and drills elicits a clear, enduring preference for operational manoeuvre and the concentration of forces; the appropriateness of such kind of *modus operandi* is sustained by reference to Russian military traditions, irrespective of or despite changes in the character of war.⁹

High rates of human and physical destruction

The Russian General Staff plans operations on the assumption that the opponent's physical elimination

is the safest way of winning a war. Such belief brings about a war-fighting style characterized by very high levels of attrition and the attempt to inflict the most widespread and irreversible damage onto the enemy.

The destructiveness of Russia's military campaigns is a well-documented fact that does not require restating here. Instead, attention should be drawn to one specific aspect of such a highly destructive approach, namely the lack of a clear-cut differentiation between counter-force and counter-value targets. While the primary target of the Russian troops are their military counterparts, the breadth of Russian strikes, actions, and retaliatory attacks has tended to escalate quickly in previous conflicts to include civilians and civilian infrastructure. There are multiple possible reasons for this.

One might point to objective explanations. On the one hand, such a *modus operandi* might support the war-fighting effort by multiplying the psychological effects of conflict. Widespread horror and destruction might convince the enemy government to surrender or the population to refrain from joining the resistance. Yet Russian military publications show no consistent proof of this way of thinking. Also, even if that were the ultimate motive, the only example of success for such a technique (on the population) would be Syria; in Georgia and Ukraine, during and after the wars, Russian actions have done nothing but further alienate governments and ordinary citizens from Moscow.

On the other hand, the impact of Russian operations on civilians might be attributable to technical factors – e.g. the lack of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) and deficiencies in the targeting systems used by Russian troops, which make collateral damage unavoidable. There is contrasting evidence on this point. Studies on the Georgia war do not elaborate on that aspect at length, while there are examples of relatively accurate Russian targeting capabilities during the 2014/15 campaign in the Donbas. In Syria and again in Ukraine today, the usage ratio of PGMs against “dumb bombs” appears to be minimal – yet these figures might be indicative of employment choices, rather than of an actual lack of capabilities.

In fairness, Russian commentators have complained about problems with the national missile industry, as well as with the organization, direction, and control of (ground) fires.¹⁰ However, the Russian military de-

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8 “Russia and Eurasia”, The military balance 2022, Vol.122, pp.164-217.

9 I.N. Vorob'ev and V.A. Kiselev, “Otechestvennaia voennaya teoriya: istoriya i sovremennost'”, *Voennaya Mysl*, No.8, 2013, pp.28-42.

10 M.V. Samorodsky and S.V. Morozov, “Development problems of mis-

bate also communicates a lack of affection for PGMs and accuracy in general. Discussing the lessons learned from Syria, K.A. Trotsenko noted that “[i]t would be irrational to waste aviation resources or a precision-guided weapon on [such an adversary], as it would simply scatter in all directions after adjustment fires.”¹¹ The enemy he was referring to was organized in regular-irregular formations operating in thin networks that took advantage of internal lines of communication – which is not too different from the way Ukraine sometimes organizes its resistance. Hence it is not surprising that Russia is adopting countermeasures similar to those deemed necessary in Syria: massed, continuous bombings (from the air, ground and sea), across the entire frontline – rather than precision strikes. High rates of

civilian casualties and destruction are an accepted by-product of this preference for destructive war-fighting.

Relatedly, it is worth noting that the Russian notion of counter-insurgency (COIN) has nothing in common with the West’s.¹² Again, the Syrian case helps shed some light in this regard. While

that scenario offered the ideal context to elaborate on COIN, Russian analysis virtually lacks any references to that. With the exception of a few notes on terrorist tactics, the Russian military has found confirmation of and followed a well-known operative script based on open, conventional military action. Some writings mention the conduct of “humanitarian operations” (*gumanitarnye operatsii*) but even this should not mislead the reader, as they merely qualify as (fire-heavy) combat operations in an urban environment.

Overall, it therefore seems that the high rates of civil-

ian casualties and destruction are firmly anchored in the country’s peculiar way of war, and in the beliefs concerning “appropriate” war-fighting that inform the military elite’s decision-making.

Conventional over “hybrid”

This *Policy Brief* discussed three of the many consistent features of Russia’s military campaigns over the period 2008-2022. None of these consistencies speaks the fancy language of “hybrid warfare”. On the contrary, when pursuing strategic goals of primary importance, Russia has preferred the swift employment of conventional military force, following a *modus operandi* reminiscent of the past century. Such a way of war is rooted in a slow-to-change strategic culture that, while providing Russian military leaders with ready-made war-fighting recipes, also exposes them to failure whenever conditions on the ground do not match their preconceptions. This partly explains Russia’s under-performance in the latest iteration of the Ukraine war.

Still, the Russian military machine remains a powerful one. In the (remote) case of a Russian attack on NATO, Western armies might not be fit for fighting such a high-intensity war of attrition.¹³ While the reinforcement of Allied contingents along its Eastern flank is welcome, NATO should not limit itself to that. Against this kind of adversary, two lines of reform might be more beneficial. On the one hand, the development of a system of deterrence by denial that would prevent incurring the costs of aggression at all. This might require bringing to permanent readiness a larger number of NATO forces, as well as a rethinking of the nuclear posture. On the other hand, NATO could promote an extensive territorial defence system that would disproportionately raise the costs of occupation, in case deterrence were to fail. *Inter alia*, exposing more citizens to basic military training might serve the purpose. In parallel to these two lines of reform, continued development of long-range precision strike capabilities and special forces able to infiltrate enemy lines will grant further edge.

“sile and artillery weapons on the ground forces”, *Voennaya Mysl*, Vol.29, No.4, 2020, pp.130-139.

11 K.A. Trotsenko, “Hostilities in Syria: just an incident, or an advance in methods of conducting combined-arms combat?”, *Voennaya Mysl*, Vol.30, No.1, 2021, p.84.

12 O. Pochiniuk, “S uchetom siriiskogo opyta”, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 27 May 2019.

13 C. Crane, “Too fragile to fight: could the US military withstand a war of attrition?”, *War on the Rocks*, 9 May 2022.



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