

The Institute for Statecraft

Think Piece: Current Russian Strategic Thinking

Interpreting and responding to current Russian military activity

We must not interpret what we see as a Russian revival of Cold War practices, nor look at the Crimean operation alone and think this is how Russia would inevitably manage war with the west, rather:-

- 1) There is no single model for conflict with NATO. Russia has a multi model approach. Hybrid warfare = little green men, plus big green tanks and big green missiles. It will depend on circumstances
- 2) Russian thinking is not fixed but very flexible. The General Staff (GS) is able to change and evolve, learn lessons, develop new capabilities and concepts. Today, this is a very dynamic organisation. They are asking for this new, evolving thinking on future war to be accelerated, just as they have a procurement system able to develop prototypes of new weapons (a lot easier than we can). NB, they have limited financial resources and are alert to the danger of bankrupting themselves as the USSR did. Nor do they have unlimited manpower as the USSR did. They are developing forces that need fewer men (missiles, drones, UGVs, two-man tanks etc). So:
- 3) Seizing and occupying territory is not the ultimate Russian objective, whereas for the Soviet Armed Forces it was. Their objective today is the destruction of our Armed Forces and war-fighting capability. If seizing territory is not necessary for this, then fine. “Retaking ground” does not mean “re-occupying territory”. The key issue is how our forces will be destroyed and how vital territory will be denied to us. We underestimate the danger of the Russian large scale deployment of hyper accurate long range missiles fired from safe territory protected by AA missiles etc..
- 4) We can and should act now and robustly to meet this threat. It is a current, not a future, threat.

The Russians are creating the new strategic conditions

- The current influence and disinformation campaign is *system* warfare, i.e. long term delegitimising of the political and social system on which our military strength and deployment capability is based.
- We cannot *deter* this current attack, only fight it. It is a pre-condition which is the baseline of a conflict. Denial, i.e. pretending that it is not happening or denying its significance, is not a sensible response
- The Russian Conventional military posture gives Putin a calculable military advantage over close neighbours, as well as deterring us.

- The Russian Missile posture gives Putin a calculable military advantage over the several potential regions/theatres of conflict
- Russia's Nuclear posture gives Putin an advantage over Europe

A fundamental, universally-held Russian belief is that Russia can only be secure at the expense of their neighbours' security. All the Russian leadership and military consider that other countries' security is secondary to, and must be subordinated to, Russia's.

Russia controls the strategic initiative today much more than an objective measure of Russian relative economic and military strength would indicate possible

They have created "Missile domes" – shields from under which they believe they can punch, using whatever weapons/forms of power they choose, either ambiguously or with hard force - This is the essence of what we call A2AD,

Russia is re-establishing its influence in areas they had lost since 1990. Look at their 'management' of Turkey to achieve a change in Turkish policy over only one year. NB. US and Europe were unaware, on the back foot, and did not support Turkey

All this makes perfect sense. It maximises Russian strategic options and maintains extreme strategic and operational flexibility, whilst denying that to us

This is the deliberate engineering of strategic conditions in Europe

All the fundamental principles of Russian military thinking are present.

- Strategic coherence - Russian thinking vs Western thinking (which lacks coherence)
- Strategic vulnerability – Russians expect to be surprised and are very vulnerable to being surprised, so expect them to act pre-emptively to counter surprise with surprise (they are more pre-emptive than we think)
- Concepts, training and equipment are coherent, combining to minimise our advantages and exploit our vulnerabilities¹
- The initial period of war will determine Russia's fate

¹ For example, Western forces are wholly dependent on Comms/IT; 15% of Russia's new budget (Rs 21 tn) is going to be spent on Electronic Warfare (EW) to offset Western strength

Their concept is to combine EW with cyber attack (eg injecting viruses to paralyse C2 systems) and destroy the western network-centric system. (NB Russia trying to develop its own equivalent network-centric system, which would render them vulnerable too to this tactic)

- We go to war with Russia as a whole, not just with the Russian military. They have been developing everything as a weapon, Cyber, energy, money, investment, dirty tricks, disinformation and other sorts of malign influence.

These principles drive Russian military thinking – *any shooting war must be finished very quickly* if it is to be successful, so their instinct will be to escalate to end the war more quickly, to constantly speed up the tempo of operations, not to let it slacken off.

These concepts are not experimental, but are now institutionalised within the GS, Interior Ministry and Intelligence organisations. These are now the lenses through which Russia's leaders and Generals will measure the security they have and need

They are totally consistent with Putin's political strategy, but not dependent on him and will outlast him. This is the strategic situation we will face for the next 25 years. Moreover, the "war" mindset is being pumped into the Russian population. It is one of the great successes of Putin's propaganda offensive.

Cold war instruments no longer work, nor can work.

- Russia will not agree to change its borders (eg give back Ukraine), or accept limits on the interior movements of its forces.
- Expect no agreement on the pullback of forces i.e. there is no Russian interest in withdrawing to create geographical separation between them and us, quite the contrary
- There will be no agreement to the cutting up of kit, or to any arms reductions etc. The West has nothing to offer to cut up in response

There is now a complete quantitative asymmetry² in Russia's favour between Russia and the West in terms of BMD and Russian missiles

Moving towards war

- Blitzkrieg is the first "hard" phase of the Russian pre-emptive strategic offensive
- To avoid being surprised, Russia thinks it must be able to pre-empt without long mobilisation i.e. Note the readiness of modern missile systems
- Russia has multiple scripts re how the war will start and evolve
- War can start anywhere and move anywhere, and demands a flexible approach

² Russia has 896 S400 west of the Urals (7 regiments each of 2 battalions), and the more common S300 PM2 is just as effective, compared to NATO's 24 BMD in Romania.

- So, Russia must be in charge of when and where the war will start, but today Russia does not know when or where this might be, so neither can we know.³
- Russia is now developing the internal capacity to switch forces from all over Russia to other regions quickly by train and plane.
- Success depends on the connections between strategic zones: the West, the Arctic, the Black Sea, the Far East etc

How might war be started?

The starting point assumes encirclement: Both Kaliningrad and Crimea are seen by Russia as being encircled by NATO. To defend Kaliningrad and Crimea, Russia must maintain air and sea LOCs to defend them properly

The West focuses on Russian - Baltic borders. Therefore, we have reinforced the area. But this is a Western tactical / operational consideration, whereas Russia thinks strategically⁴

Russia's 'strategic operation' is the break out concept. The Russian solution is to plan now for pre-emptive counter encirclement, i.e. isolating the areas of operations by creating much larger Zones of control⁵ under which Russia can operate. The conflict area of the Baltic states, Baltic sea, Poland constitutes one strategic-operational-tactical zone

The problem then is that enemy (i.e. our) formations are in the Russian rear. These NATO assets would therefore be attacked by missiles, as would NATO BMD. The example of their using Kaliber in Syria is instructive here.

When might war be started?

It is essential to understand the Russian psyche / culture / philosophy of pre-emption: i.e. Russia will initiate hostilities sooner than we expect, and a lot earlier than we would in similar circumstances. The operation will not start with little green men, which will give us a warning signal. They will do something we don't expect. Do not look at recent and current Russian operations as a template for the future.

There is, of course, an uncomfortable question to answer. If Russia sees itself as in decline and more able now to go to war now than in the future, does this push Russia to war? Compare the situation today to that in 1912 when the Russian Imperial Cabinet assessed that it would be better to fight

³ Note the undeclared exercise in Feb 2016, ref. war with Turkey developing into a war with NATO over Syria

⁴ Western law enforcement similarly fails to understand Chinese and Russian criminal attack, i.e. that it is simultaneously strategic and tactical, state sponsored and self-driven. It is just as much a weapon of hybrid warfare being waged against the West today.

⁵ Domes which we call A2AD, but A2AD is not a Russian concept. The Russian concept is not fixed, as the West sees A2AD, but flexible, linked with SF operations etc.

now, because by 1925 Russia would be too weak vis a vis Germany. Japan in 1941 drew the same conclusion re the US.

Russia is currently foreseeing that the West will make a technological leap in 2022-4, jumping to a new technological level in response to Russia's development.

Interestingly, just as we look at Russian equipment and ascribe our own thinking to explain it, as we have erroneously done with A2AD, when Gerasimov – a practitioner rather than a theorist - assesses Western equipment and concepts, he discusses them in terms of how they would be used in Russian thinking.

How might war be deterred?

Russia is not on a wartime 'ready to launch' setting, but they are developing and implementing concepts of conflict very different from those being thought about in Western countries.

We cannot deter this hybrid war, it is upon us and we can only fight it. In many ways, Western thinking about deterrence is so much fatal, historical baggage. We need to start looking at war prevention measures which we can employ today, during a crisis, or in the early stages of a shooting conflict. How to deflate Russia's confidence that they can succeed at each level, and thereby devalue Russia's defence spending and other tools as useable instruments of power.

Russia's challenge today cannot be managed with Crisis Management tools; we need strategic management, as we had in the Cold War. UK (and NATO) now need to resize upwards, but needs to resize its thinking first.

Nor is "dialogue" the panacea some in the west, stuck in Cold War thinking, believe it to be. To hold a dialogue with today's Russian leaders needs people who know how to talk to them, or it will make things worse. There will be no dialogue at all if we cannot back up our words with actions and demonstrate both our will and ability to stand up to Russia.

What we do need are lines of communication to get inside Russia's decision cycle and not allow the current line of the Kremlin leadership group think to fester unchallenged.

The West's problem – making an effective response

The West has not faced a strategic challenge for two decades, has got used to coping only with problems on a small scale, and has downsized both its thinking and its capabilities accordingly.

Consequently, we are currently focusing on matching a Russian tactical challenge, eg on the Baltic States border. Whereas the real challenges are how to revive our strategic thinking, prepare a strategic response, educate our populations and reorientate and reequip our forces.

Russia has an integrated strategic campaign. The West became infatuated with the "ambiguous" nature of the campaign in Ukraine and ignored the lessons of the old fashioned hard military operations. We "did not notice" that, for Crimea, Russia mobilised 120,000 for contingency operations in case the West responded militarily to the invasion and occupation.

Private – in Confidence

However, it is very difficult for us to match these challenges today because of the Russians' massive disinformation and distraction campaign: their long term programme to destabilise our society and undermine our populations' faith in our democratic political systems.

Bottom line: Can our Army be confident that it can fight a peer enemy such as Russia in current circumstances? In my assessment, it cannot. The RN and RAF are tactically more capable, but we (UK and NATO) lack the strategy to deal with the Strategic threat we now face

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