

Chapter 5

“Hybrid Warfare” and Russia’s Ground Forces

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“Hybrid warfare” lacks a commonly agreed definition among Russia’s adversaries, and the potential for confusion is even greater when including Russia’s own understanding of the phrase. So when considering Russia and “hybrid”, the first task is to define or discard the term.

While widespread use of hybrid terminology has been linked in foreign writing to Russian doctrine, critics point out that it does not adequately or appropriately reflect Russian thinking about the nature of conflict, and hence the full range of options available to Russian planners. Occasional doctrinal references to asymmetric tactics and non-military means for reaching strategic goals do not mean that Russia has a preconceived hybrid-war doctrine or that this would account for the totality of Russian strategic planning.¹ In fact, Russian strategists use the concept of “hybrid war” to describe alleged Western efforts to destabilise adversaries such as Russia itself.²

Overall, current development of Russian conventional military organisation, equipment and doctrine is influenced by practical lessons from operations in Syria where these capabilities are employed, developed and tested, rather than by foreign notions of “hybrid warfare”. Examining assessments of lessons learned from Russia’s operations in Syria demonstrates clearly how exaggerating the centrality of hybrid warfare in Russian strategy is a distraction from continued Russian emphasis on preparing its regular forces for high-end, high-intensity conflict.³

Nevertheless Russia also effectively leverages interaction between conventional military forces and other implements of power. In this way certain Russian actions that fall short of all-out warfare meet the definition of “hybrid war” provided by Mark Galeotti, “a style of warfare that combines the political, economic, social and kinetic in a kind of conflict that recognises no boundaries between civilian and combatant, covert

¹ András Rácz, “Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist,” *FIIA Report 32* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2015).

² Ofer Fridman, “Hybrid Warfare or *Gibridnaya Voyna*? Similar, But Different,” *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 162, No. 1, 2017, pp. 42-49.

³ As for instance in Valeriy Gerasimov, “Po opytu Sirii” (Based on the experience of Syria), *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur’er*, 9 March 2016, http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_09_624.pdf.

and overt, war and peace.”⁴

It was noted immediately before Russia’s seizure of Crimea that Chief of General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov had identified the need for an “integral theory of non-direct and asymmetrical operations” to neutralise perceived threats to Russian security.⁵ The apparent facility with which this theory has been applied draws on a historically greater Russian willingness to embrace irregular, criminal, or subversive methods to achieve political effects during nominal peacetime.⁶

In this context the role of Russia’s ground forces is as one component, and not necessarily one that is actively used, in a mix of levers of power that are drawn on selectively to deliver political effect through their interaction. This paper therefore considers not only elements of those ground forces, but also the other groups and entities that can be brought together in this mix. The paper briefly describes first Russia’s regular military and paramilitary forces, and second the irregular or non-military elements also available for use. It then examines the interaction between these elements in three different scenarios: Crimea, eastern Ukraine and Syria.

Regular Forces

Battalion Tactical Groups

The primary form of Russian conventional ground force unit that has been observed to date supporting “hybrid” activity is the Battalion Tactical Group (BTG). BTGs are formations organised on an *ad hoc* basis to achieve optimal force construction in different combat conditions and scenarios. The ideal of BTGs stems from the Russian combined arms tradition in which armour, mechanised infantry, and mobile artillery are integrated under the same sub-command structure in order to achieve modularity, flexibility, and rapid destruction of the adversary’s forces. The initial concept was created in the midst of “New Look” military reforms in 2009, when outdated and hardly deployable conscript divisions were replaced with mainly regular-staffed readiness brigades. In addition, the deficiencies identified and lessons learned from the Georgian and Chechen

⁴ Mark Galeotti, “(Mis)Understanding Russia’s Two ‘Hybrid Wars,’” Eurozine, 29 November 2018, <https://www.eurozine.com/misunderstanding-russias-two-hybrid-wars/>.

⁵ Stephen Blank, “Signs of New Russian Thinking About the Military and War,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 11, No. 28, 13 February 2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/signs-of-new-russian-thinking-about-the-military-and-war/>.

⁶ Victor Madeira, *Britannia and the Bear: The Anglo-Russian Intelligence Wars, 1917-1929* (London: Boydell, 2014); Mark Galeotti, “Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-linear? How New Is Russia’s ‘New Way of War?’” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016, pp. 282-301.

conflicts proved that smaller self-sufficient force structures with autonomous command, communication, intelligence, and logistics capabilities were more effective in actual combat situations than Russia’s traditional order of battle by divisions. After nearly a decade of transformation, the BTGs are fully operationalised. Although statistics on the progress of military transformation in Russia are notoriously unreliable, it is reported that there should be 125 BTGs in total across the Russian Federation by the end of 2018.⁷

In the Russian military thinking Battalion Tactical Groups are understood as tactical assets whose role is defined by the scope of each mission. The role and utility of the BTGs have changed very little if at all since their original conception, and remain core combined arms formations designed to conduct high-intensity warfare, as opposed to being influenced by any shift in emphasis toward low-intensity or grey zone operations. Instead, a notable change is the BTGs’ enhanced capability to conduct deep battle, benefiting from increased operational autonomy. The BTGs are an instrument for conventional scenarios against peer or near-peer adversaries for territorial control; and this includes their successful employment in eastern Ukraine.⁸

National Guard (Rosgvardiya)

The National Guard of the Russian Federation (*Rosgvardiya*) is a paramilitary internal security force tasked with protection against hybrid threats including civil unrest, terrorism, and colour revolutions – all of which, according to established Russian notions of national security, are most likely to have been organised from abroad.

Established in 2016, *Rosgvardiya* merged a variety of internal security troops serving under different ministries and agencies. According to one assessment, private security companies responsible for the security of private and state entities are also integrated under the legal supervision of *Rosgvardiya* and serve as a strategic reserve to be mobilised in the event of internal crisis or an external territorial conquest. The overall strength of

⁷ Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, Modernisation of the Russian Ground Forces* (Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), pp. 26-40. Available at: <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Hot%20Spots/Documents/Russia/2017-07-The-Russian-Way-of-War-Grau-Bartles.pdf>; Charles Bartles and Lester W. Grau, *Russia’s View of Mission Command of Battalion Tactical Groups in the Era of “Hybrid War”* (Foreign Military Studies Office, 2018), pp. 1-13. Available at: https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/__key/docpreview-s/00-00-05-56-50/2018_2D00_06_2D00_11-Russias-View-of-Mission-Command-of-Battalion-Tactical-Groups-_2800_Bartles-and-Grau_2900_.pdf.

⁸ Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*; Charles Bartles and Lester W. Grau, *Russia’s View of Mission Command*; Nicolas Fiore, *Defeating the Russian Battalion Tactical Group* (Fort Benning, 2017). Available at: <http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2017/Spring/2Fiore17.pdf>.

Rosgvardiya is around 350,000-400,000 troops, while the affiliated PSCs employ almost a million security contractors in total.⁹

Although *Rosgvardiya's* notional purpose resembles that of a paramilitary police organisation such as the French Gendarmerie, it is in fact a highly militarised entity equipped with a full range of capabilities for inflicting mass casualties, and forms an essential part of not only territorial defence but external interventions such as pacification and control of potential occupied territories.¹⁰ While primarily a tool to deliver repressive violence in order to quell dissent, the National Guard should therefore not be considered in the same category as other notionally non-military levers of power, and instead possesses substantial capabilities to deliver kinetic effects.

Information Operation Troops (VIO)

After a long period in development, “information operations troops” (Войска информационных операций, or VIO) were announced as part of the Russian order of battle in February 2017.¹¹ These units were intended to fill a gap in Russian information operations capabilities, perceived during the armed conflict in Georgia in 2008. Their role has been widely misinterpreted in Western media as providing primarily a cyber capability. Instead, their purpose appears much more in keeping with the broad, Russian definition of information activities, of which cyber is just a component. Russian officers emphasise that in exercises and on deployment to Syria the VIO are in some cases using traditional psychological operations techniques, including loudspeaker broadcasts in foreign languages and leaflet drops.¹² But in addition, they are equipped with systems for intercepting, jamming, or spoofing civilian cell phone communications, including broadcasting content to smartphones. These capabilities are in use for disinformation, demoralisation and propaganda purposes not only in Syria and Ukraine, but have also

⁹ Zdzislaw Sliwa, *The Russian National Guard: A Warning or a Message?* (National Defence Academy of Latvia, 2018), pp. 1-29. Available at: <https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/RussianNationalGuard.pdf>.

¹⁰ Sliwa, *The Russian National Guard*.

¹¹ “Information Troops Set Up in Russian Federation MoD” [in Russian], Interfax, February 22, 2017, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/551054>.

¹² See Mikhail Klikushin, “Putin’s Army Demands ‘NATO Soldiers! Hands Up! Lay Down Your Weapons!’,” *Observer*, August 19, 2016, <http://observer.com/2016/08/putins-army-demands-nato-soldiers-hands-up-lay-down-your-weapons/>.

been tested against NATO servicemen in the Baltic States.¹³

The creation of the VIO underscores development in a long tradition of Russian emphasis on information support to ground operations. Although the *maskirovka* plan has always been an integral element of Russian operational orders, recently the role of information activities overall has become increasingly prominent in them. Although there is strikingly little information publicly available on the operating model of the VIO and their size or TOE, one assessment holds that their main function is to apply a combination of traditional propaganda, disinformation, psychological manipulation, and strategic communications.¹⁴ The evolution and further formation of the VIO is a notable topic of interest, to be followed closely in the near future as an indicator of how Russia is addressing the increasing importance of information and influence operations.

Special Forces and Intelligence Entities

The term *Spetsnaz* is an abbreviation of the Russian *Spetsialnogo Naznacheniya* (Special Purpose or “of Special Designation”). This is a generic term often applied to any non-conventional Russian unit, and as such covers a wide range of military and state security units with widely varying degrees of training and operational capability. Russia’s Army, Navy, National Guard and intelligence services all have their own “*Spetsnaz*” units, each with their own allocated range of tasks which can include engaging in or supporting ground hybrid operations.

While the total number of servicemen serving in different *Spetsnaz* branches is estimated being 17,000–18,000 in total,¹⁵ this number includes wide variations in skills and capabilities. Containing around 20–30% conscripts, most units are comparable to elite Western assault troops or specialised light infantry-type units, such as the UK

¹³ Keir Giles, “Assessing Russia’s Reorganized and Rearmed Military,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/03/assessing-russia-s-reorganized-and-rearmed-military-pub-69853>. For the most recent instances of use of similar techniques at the time of writing, see “Defense Ministry: Russia Sending SMS Messages Asking Residents of Ukrainian Border Regions to Appear at Nearest Military Units,” *Ukrainian News*, 27 November 2018, <https://ukranews.com/en/news/598565-defense-ministry-russia-sending-sms-messages-asking-residents-of-ukrainian-border-regions-to-appear>.

¹⁴ Lionel M. Beehner, Liam S. Collins, and Robert T. Person, “The Fog of Russian Information Warfare,” in *Perception are reality: Historical Case Studies of Information Operations in Large-Scale Combat Operations*, edited by Mark D. Vertuli and Bradley S. Loudon (US Army Press, 2018), pp. 40–43. Available at: <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/perceptions-are-reality-lsco-volume-7.pdf>.

¹⁵ Mark Galeotti, “Operational Situation,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* (IHS Markit, 2018), p. 12; Bukkvol, “Russian Special Operations Forces in Donbass and Crimea.”

Parachute Regiment or Royal Marines Commando (in the case of naval Spetsnaz), or the U.S. 75th Ranger Regiment.¹⁶ Only a small number of servicemen, estimated at 1,500-2,000, within the *Komanda Sil Spetsialnogo Naznacheniya* (KSSO – Special Operations Forces Command) and its regimental-sized operational arm, the 346th Brigade, are considered truly comparable with Western Tier 1 SOF.

The Spetsnaz nomenclature also covers internal security actors, such as the FSB units Alfa and Vypel, responsible for anti-terror operations and protection of strategic infrastructure respectively. In addition, the Foreign Intelligence Service SVR has its own special unit, Zaslou, responsible for VIP protection.¹⁷ These primary tasks would not bar any of these Special Forces units from conducting hybrid-like missions abroad. Nevertheless the primary actor responsible for special ground operations is the Main Directorate, GU (also referred to as Main Intelligence Directorate, GRU). The essential responsibilities of the GU are the provision of intelligence for the military- and political decision-makers, but also supervision of the Russian Ground Forces' special operation units.¹⁸ GU specialist training streams focus on a range of capabilities including political operations, military reconnaissance, sabotage, assistance to proxies, and elite infantry integrated with conventional units.

The reorganisation and reallocation of Spetsnaz units in all their various forms and subordinations is continuing at the time of writing.¹⁹

Irregular Forces

Private Military Companies (PMCs)

Russia's private military companies provide an important additional tool for prosecuting hybrid campaigns. In this respect they have three key advantages over conventional military forces that are part of the recognised chain of command. First, they are deniable, whether plausibly or implausibly. Second, as in so many areas of Russian business, this

¹⁶ Mark Galeotti, *Spetsnaz: Russia's Special Forces* (Oxford: Oxford Publishing, 2015), pp. 54-55.

¹⁷ Bukkvol, T. "Russian Special Operations Forces in Donbass and Crimea," *Aleksanteri Papers*, 1 (2016), pp. 13-17. Available at: https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Summer_2016/5_Bukkvoll.pdf.

¹⁸ Defence Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Military Power Publications, 2017), p. 74. Available at: <http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf>.

¹⁹ In December 2018, for instance, independent Spetsnaz companies were returned to the order of battle of one of the Western Military District's combined-arms armies. See "Return of Independent Spetsnaz Companies," Russian Defense Policy blog, 22 December 2018. Available at: <https://russiandefpolicy.blog/2018/12/22/return-of-independent-spetsnaz-companies/>.

illegality provides a means by which the state can exert leverage over these entities, by holding their owners and employees at risk of prosecution. Third, they are by their nature expendable: casualties among PMCs are more easily concealed, and will provoke less outcry when detected, than those among regular military forces especially conscripts.

Notional dissociation from the Russian state is aided by the fact that PMCs are illegal in Russia;²⁰ in fact the most prominent among them, the Wagner group, is headquartered in Argentina. Yet despite being illegal, PMCs such as Wagner are closely integrated with regular military and intelligence structures.²¹ Wagner employees have received regular military decorations for actions in Syria and elsewhere, and Wagner’s main training base at Molkino, in Krasnodar Territory in southern Russia, is shared with GRU Special Forces.

In this way PMCs are ideally suited to operations in Russia’s un-avowed conflicts, being cheap, expendable, deployable, and deniable even if implausibly. In particular, PMCs provide a means of taking risky opportunities, and the pattern of their use by Russia includes probing actions intended to establish the limits of tolerance by adversaries of Russia’s grey zone operations. Importantly, by using PMCs instead of regular forces for operations below the threshold of open conflict, Russia does not divert its core ground forces from their focus on preparations and training for unrestricted high-intensity warfare.

Proxies

Pro-Russian militias and irregular forces are an essential part of the Russian force structure in hybrid-type ground operations. A core component is made up of local collaborators who are either ideologically or financially motivated to take up arms in order to ease internal unrest and prepare the ground for a real or fictional separatist insurgency. These often engage with the local population by rallying mass protests, creating blockades and disruption, and by engaging others in so-called “self-protection units” that stand ready to assist Russian aims. In addition to tactical and operational objectives, proxy groups

²⁰ Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies: The Implications for European and Norwegian Security,” *FFI-Rapport*, September 2018.

²¹ James Bingham, “Private Companies Engage in Russia’s Non-linear Warfare,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* (IHS Markit, 2018), pp. 13-15. Shortened version available at: https://www.janes.com/images/assets/018/78018/Private_companies_engage_in_Russias_non-linear_warfare.pdf.

play a key political and information role by legitimising Russian initiatives to intervene.²²

Led or directed by Russian military intelligence officers, armed militias are integrated into centralised operational planning and conduct missions alongside regular troops, Special Forces and other security forces supported by cyber, information, and psychological operators. The success of proxy organisations, such as the extremist groups of Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics in Eastern Ukraine, is directly linked to Russia's capability in utilising vulnerabilities in already-present social, political, and economic relations.²³ In addition, the Donbas has been a testing ground for new state-controlled but notionally private initiatives, ranging from the Vostok Battalion, deployed in 2014, to a variety of other groups drawn from Cossacks, veterans and volunteers.

Other Non-State Entities

A further distinctive type of proxy activity in Russian contemporary land operations is the utilisation of non-government organisations, criminal groups, and commercial enterprises to support the achievement of strategic objectives. These include entities and networks that are in themselves hybrid, such as the Night Wolves organisation and Cossack groups, both of which function as non-state actors for outsourcing and supporting Russian military and paramilitary tasks.²⁴

Organised crime networks provide a further layer of access to specialist skills to carry out operations at arm's length from Russian state entities.²⁵ Russia can also call on business and businessmen. Commercial enterprises can provide the link between the state acting covertly and the proxies acting on its behalf, carrying out operational management of proxies by acting as an *ad-hoc* command structure.²⁶ Oligarchs can be called on to lend their personal influence and finances to the war effort. Financier

²² Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood* (Chatham House, 2016), pp. 36-37. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/agents-russian-world-proxy-groups-contested-neighbourhood>.

²³ A.J.C. Selhorst, *Russia's Perception Warfare: The Development of Gerasimov's Doctrine in Estonia and Georgia and Its Application in Ukraine* (Militaire Spectator, 2016), p. 153. Available at: <https://www.militairespectator.nl/sites/default/files/uitgaven/inhoudsopgave/Militaire%20Spectator%204-2016%20Selhorst.pdf>.

²⁴ Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*.

²⁵ Mark Galeotti, "The Kremlin's Newest Hybrid Warfare Asset: Gangsters," *Foreign Policy*, June 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/12/how-the-world-of-spies-became-a-gangsters-paradise-russia-cyberattackhack/>.

²⁶ Selhorst, *Russia's Perception Warfare*; Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine* (RAND Corporation, 2017), p. 49.

Konstantin Malofeev played a crucial role in the seizure of Crimea and destabilisation of the Donbas, and subsequently moved on to become an active agent of Russian influence in the Balkans. Similarly, former Russian Railways head Vladimir Yakunin is a vigorous supporter of Moscow’s interests and allies abroad, including efforts to mobilise Russian diasporas against their host nations.

In Russia, the Church too should be considered an arm of state power. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) played a key enabling role in the Syrian campaign, providing the Kremlin with a messianic *raison d’être* enabling it to operate from a position of moral-psychological comfort, engaging foreign political leaders, international organisations, and the main Christian denominations worldwide to legitimise Moscow’s policy, and sustaining domestic support for the operation and moral, morale, and psychological support for the Russian military on the ground. Further engagement of the ROC in future Russian “hybrid” ventures should be expected.

Case Studies

In three armed conflicts (Georgia, Ukraine and Syria) Russia has employed a blend of unconventional and conventional measures to deliver tactical, operational and strategic effect. But in each of the three, hybrid approaches were not an exotic departure for Russia but the implementation of constantly developing practice. Georgia was entrapped through disinformation and military intimidation into launching conventional hostilities that met Russian aims; eastern Ukraine saw a classic mix of covert operations and subversion and the constant threat (but only occasional use) of massive conventional overmatch, but backed by disinformation campaigns of new technological sophistication; and Syria saw a further refinement of Russia’s understanding of the power of influence based on thorough target audience analysis with much reduced and selective application of conventional force. Success for Russia in each conflict depended on the ability to blend conventional military operations with influence exerted through other arms of government and (in the case of Ukraine) the oligarchy and organised crime.

Especially in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, Russia succeeded briefly in preventing Western powers from assessing correctly what was happening, and for a much longer period succeeded in preventing a unified, coherent and effective response to the crises. Another principle that is common to both these conflicts, and to Russia’s intervention in Syria as well, is the demonstrated critical importance for Russia of combining hybrid measures with swift and effective movement of conventional military force to create a physical presence and ensure that adversaries and Western powers are

dealing with a *fait accompli*. In this context, another essential element in Russia's success is distorting the perception by other powers both of the sequence of events and of the time available for preparing and implementing an effective response.

Crimea

The military operation to seize Crimea in late February, when Russian troops without identifying marks seized government buildings and strategically important points in cities, and surrounded Ukrainian military sites, was only the culmination of preparatory measures undertaken using a wide range of non-military measures.²⁷ The active phase of preparations for the influencing operations had begun at the early stages of the Maidan protests in Kiev, with Russian-state owned media outlets (including in Crimea) promoting anti-Ukraine narratives and describing the illegitimacy of the new government. In addition, *Rosstrudnichestvo*, the agency responsible for Russian state relations with compatriots abroad, stepped up activity rallying local populations to protests, while a Kremlin-funded puppet "Russian Community of Crimea" issued a written appeal to Russia for military intervention.²⁸

Meanwhile, Russian proxies were preparing for the active phase of operations by regular forces. These proxies included Cossacks, primarily allocated a force protection role, and the Night Wolves corporation engaged in spreading disinformation, organising civil unrest, collecting intelligence, creating self-protection militias, establishing vehicle checkpoints and roadblocks, and blockading key points.²⁹ Their activities before and during the seizure of the peninsula indicated strongly that they were centrally coordinated during the planning phase,³⁰ and at least 11 members of the Night Wolves were awarded the campaign medal "For the Return of Crimea" as though they had been serving in the Russian Armed Forces.³¹

Subsequently during the overt phase of the intervention, Russia's regular ground forces interacted closely with these proxies. A number of KSSO operators pretended to

²⁷ Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, pp. 5-31.

²⁸ Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World*.

²⁹ Matthew A. Lauder, "Wolves of the Russian Spring: An Examination of the Night Wolves as a Proxy for the Russian Government," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Summer 2018. Available at: <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol18/no3/PDF/CMJ183Ep5.pdf>.

³⁰ Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, pp. 5-31.

³¹ Irene Chalupa, "Direct Translation: Meet the Ex-Convicts, Bullies, and Armed Bikers Who Helped Seize Crimea," Atlantic Council, 19 June 2014. Available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/direct-translation-the-kremlin-celebrates-secretly-the-ex-convicts-bullies-and-bikers-who-helped-itcapture-crimea>.

be local “self-protection units” during the seizure of the Crimean parliament in order to maintain the pretence that there was no Russian involvement, while elements of the 45th VDV Guards Independent Regiment in support provided security in the surrounding area. Proxies and information preparation of the area of operations, combined with the insertion of Special Forces, were key enablers for Russia to achieve the seizure of the peninsula with virtually no direct confrontation.

Eastern Ukraine

Russia’s ground operations in eastern Ukraine have involved a complex and variable mix of forces, including conventional regular units, proxies, paramilitaries, elements of *Rosgvardiya*, Special Forces and intelligence operatives.³² Conventional ground forces, while not always directly involved in the conflict, played a key role from its early stages. Moscow startled and alarmed the West by moving large amounts of its land forces quickly and effectively to the border with Ukraine. But for much of 2014-2016 the main role of those forces was then to sit on the border, augmenting and depleting as required in order to focus the attention of the West like a hypnotist’s watch while only small groups of Russian SOF actually conducted warfare inside Ukraine.

Russia’s cross-border combined-arms offensives of August 2014 and January 2015 introduced a dramatically new dynamic into the conflict but confirmed the role of ground forces as just one of many elements combining to achieve Russia’s objectives. In August 2014, regular forces formed in battalion tactical groups were required to prevent a catastrophic defeat of Russia’s proxies by the unexpectedly robust Ukrainian military. Close interaction with irregular forces was observed: the main role of the BTGs was to serve as spearhead combat units to take and hold ground while being supported by paramilitary guard forces responsible for securing flanks and logistical routes and screening the main force.³³ The January 2015 offensive in particular represented escalations of influence as much as of conventional war-fighting. It formed the backdrop to threats delivered by Putin during peace negotiations to escalate the conflict to unspecified levels if his demands were not met. Combined with a largely successful information campaign aimed at convincing the West that Ukraine was to blame for the failure to implement the Minsk protocols, this drove Russia’s interlocutors Angela Merkel and François Hollande toward

³² Bukkvol, “Russian Special Operations Forces in Donbass and Crimea”; Alina Maiorova ed., *Donbas in Flames* (Security Environment Research Center, 2017), pp. 67-82. Available at: https://prometheus.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Donbas_v_Ogni_ENG_web_1-4.pdf.

³³ Fiore, *Defeating the Russian Battalion Tactical Group*.

imposition of the Minsk II agreement and the ‘Normandy process,’ which continues to this day despite Russia’s failure to honour any of the Minsk II provisions.³⁴ Overall, Russia’s combining conventional kinetic activity with a sustained and multi-dimensional information campaign brought it success in ensuring a permissive environment for ongoing destabilising activity against Ukraine, protected by a notional ceasefire ensuring Russia’s baseline interests were protected.

Syria

Russian involvement in ground operations in Syria presented a further refinement of selective integration of regular military forces with irregular enablers, reducing the exposure of the main ground forces to combat to a minimum. Despite the deliberate rotation through Syria of as many Russian professional servicemen as possible to gather experience of operational conditions, the Russian approach strongly emphasised outsourcing of the actual fighting. Special Forces, artillery, forward air controllers and support units such as military police focused on enhancing the combat potential of Syrian government troops, and coordinating with Syrian and Iranian partners. In addition to regular forces and PMCs, Russia delivered to Syria a number of other irregular and paramilitary entities, including Muslim volunteer militias such as the Turan Battalion consisting of Turkish-ethnic volunteer fighters.³⁵ The combined use of regular, irregular, and private military forces, combined with heavy emphasis on partnership with local and especially Muslim forces, facilitated Russia’s approach to expanding the territory under government control: targeted engagement with communities to conclude localised peace agreements, with the alternative of devastating airstrikes. Russia’s “reconciliation centres,” designed to end fighting by granular engagement with local leaders, consequently achieved successes that would have been impossible if Russia’s presence had solely consisted of regular military forces.³⁶

³⁴ See James Sherr, “Geopolitics and Security,” in *The Struggle for Ukraine* (Chatham House, August 2017), pp. 11-13.

³⁵ Sarah Fainberg, “Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors, and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict,” in *Russia.Nei. Visions No. 105* (IFRI, 2017), p. 19. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/fainberg_russian_spetsnaz_syrian_conflict_2017.pdf.

³⁶ Tim Ripley, *Operation Aleppo: Russia’s War in Syria* (Lancaster: Telic-Herrick Publications, 2018). See also Sanu Kainikara, *In the Bear’s Shadow: Russian Intervention in Syria* (Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, 2018).

Conclusion and Outlook

In both declared and undeclared conflict, Russia will continue to make extensive use of non-state actors to perform a wide range of functions including information, intelligence, logistics, subversion and destabilisation, and combat activities. There are numerous reasons for this form of outsourcing, such as cost effectiveness, expendability of assets, a degree of deniability where required, access to specialised skillsets which may be under-represented in the regular forces, and the essential principle of ambiguity in the eyes of the adversary. But it also reflects the fact that Russia’s core Ground Forces are not undergoing a process of adaptation to wage hybrid warfare; instead, in hybrid conflict they are called on to perform their main task of engaging in high-intensity combat, only alongside a range of other state and non-state organisations and in a confrontation that remains ambiguous and grey.

The choice of hybrid methods as a route to achieving strategic goals may not necessarily be driven by weakness in areas that Russia’s adversaries consider fundamental for power generation and force projection. Instead, it may be an active choice based on a valid assessment of adversary vulnerabilities, and where influence is best exerted to achieve objectives at minimal risk of direct confrontation with peer powers.

One such vulnerability results from differing strategic cultures between the West and Russia or similar powers. These differences include greater willingness by Russia to accept risk, and to accept brief or protracted conflict as a means to further state aims, as evidenced in continuing operations in Ukraine and Syria.³⁷ Arms-length tools such as proxies and PMCs only enhance Russia’s higher acceptance for risk and a lower threshold for the use of force, be it military or non-military.

Russia’s embrace of unconventional and notionally non-military entities also means that it does not have the struggle with the problem of unlocking permissions and authorities to take specific offensive or defensive actions before a state of conflict formally exists. This lack of constraint on Russia’s organisations and agencies is reinforced still further by two additional factors. First, Russia believes that it is already in conflict with the West as a whole. Second, the moral foundations based in shared values and respect for rule of law which provide the basis for restraint by Russia’s adversaries do not and have never constrained Russia in the same way.

This also highlights a dangerous false premise guiding the approaches by many

³⁷ Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, “Syria Faces Perpetual War unless Russia Extends Ceasefire, France Warns,” *The Guardian*, 24 September 2018. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/24/syria-war-unga-france-warning-russia-extend-ceasefire>.

other states to confrontation with Russia overall: the notion that other states can choose whether they enter a war with Russia or not. This false premise underpins every action which simultaneously seeks to punish Russian hostility but also to “avoid escalation.”

The repeated pattern of success for Russia in utilising its integrated, “hybrid” approach suggests that it is likely to be attempted again in the future, since consistent Russian practice is to repeat a tactic for as long as it achieves its objectives. Russia’s conventional ground forces, whether they are actually employed or their use is merely threatened or implied, will continue to be a key element of this approach.