

Briefing Memo

Russia's Multi-layered Means of Conflict

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While Russia openly carries out military operations in Syria, it is also involved in military affairs elsewhere. It is widely believed in the West that Russia's approach in the conflict in eastern Ukraine involves military means, and the deployment of Russian fighter jets to Libya was also pointed out by the United States Africa Command in May 2020. In addition, there has been much reporting on Russia's non-military activities in the information space. As such, Russia's overarching approach to battles is often called a "hybrid warfare," which utilizes various tactics up until the point of formal warfare. This term is effective in that it captures the wide array of tactics that might potentially be used by Russia. However, several Russian strategy experts have expressed their concern that this term may obscure some of the details of Russia's approach (e.g. Bērziņš 2019, Galeotti 2019). This paper will provide an overview of the characteristics of Russia's multi-layered means of conflicts by classifying the application tactics of what is generally referred to as "hybrid" into several categories. Note that since there are no official information sources from Russia on this topic, this paper will conduct a fact-finding and interpretation primarily based on research analyses published in the West.

1. Social discourse space operations

Traditionally, Russia has provided mass media such as television broadcasting in the Russian language for the former Soviet states. Russian-speaking people who were not satisfied with the local broadcasting and social situations in countries outside of Russia welcomed such a service, and have naturally accepted and adopted the perspectives of Moscow. For example, in Ukraine, where the society is deeply divided, anti-Kiev and pro-Moscow sentiment among the residents increased in the southeastern regions where many Russian speakers live, a significant factor in causing the Ukraine crisis in 2014.

In the countries without significant Russian-speaking populations, information transmitted from Russia through the Internet in local languages has amplified social divides, in particular through social networking services (SNS), and stirred political crises in those countries. Prominent examples include the U.S. presidential election in 2016 and the French presidential election in 2017. The Trump camp carried out propaganda offensives involving fake news that inflamed social divide, and, according to the U.S. intelligence agencies' report, Russia stole emails from the Hillary Clinton camp and exposed their contents, making it easier for Trump to win. During the French presidential election, the conservative

candidate Marine Le Pen, who advocated against the EU and existing politics, exhibited a close relationship with President Putin and had a meeting with him in Moscow. Furthermore, fake news targeting presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron was disseminated, and Macron tightened relevant regulations after his victory, having viewed the Russian disinformation source as a problem. In 2016, fake news that “a Russian girl was assaulted by immigrant Muslims” was disseminated during the period leading up to the election in Germany that year. Authorities immediately denied such a claim, but the condemnation of the then administration’s immigration policy had already spread, distorting policy debates. The mechanism of SNS supplies users with information according to their preferences rather than from sources less preferred. Therefore, the users are more likely to reinforce their biased views by using SNS than by watching mainstream media, which is subject to restraint of objective verification and contains opinions from multiple sides of issues. If fake news that is not easily identified as of Russian origin spreads on SNS through automated accounts (e.g. “troll” and “bot” accounts), viewers of the content from these accounts end up strengthening their own existing prejudices and societal divisions worsen.

This strategy, termed an “influence operation” and “disinformation campaign” in recent years, employs new technologies. However, it has been pointed out the basic purpose and method of these tactics are in the same genealogy as “active measures” («активные мероприятия»), conducted by the KGB (Комитет Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti or Committee of State Security) during the Soviet era (Kuzio & D’Anieri 2018, Sasaki 2020).

The advantage of employing this strategy is that Russia can expect the unity of its targeted country’s society to be weakened and the foundation of hostile attitudes and behavior towards it, or the amplification of room for its intervention without the financial and human cost of a military operation and the risk of a military conflict. However, as a disadvantage, if Russia is identified as the source of such disinformation, it will likely spark calls for retaliation. In addition, the effectiveness of the strategy will decline as the opponent’s society becomes accustomed to the technique or strengthens defensive measures.

2. Proxy forces

If a social divide in a country becomes a serious issue and the call to destroy existing systems intensifies, separatist movements may occur. Since the Kremlin can indirectly command and use these movements, such groups are called “proxy forces” in this paper.

Such a movement grew in 2014 as a separatist and independence movement in Ukraine. The Crimean Peninsula traditionally has many residents of Russian descent who were strongly dissatisfied with the treatment they received in Ukraine. These people could easily support a position that the peninsula should be returned to Russia, having originally been part of it. They were influenced by the media, which was to some extent promoting this discourse. In February of that year, political change occurred in the capital Kiev and the rumors about the repression against the Russian language spread, boosting the momentum

of voices advocating for separation from Ukraine. Local proxy forces then took power by replacing the prime minister with Sergey Aksyonov and followed the procedure to hold a referendum. Based on its results, the Russia Federation annexed the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol. As described later, military units under the command and control of Moscow also worked in the movement, but the major factor that enabled Russia's annexation was an environment in which proxy forces were able to politically manoeuvre.

Similarly, in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, ongoing since April 2014, the main actors are local proxy forces. The social divide within Ukraine is deep, and the movement against Kiev intensified in the regions where Russian is the dominant language. While the movement calmed in the Odessa Region in the southwestern and the Kharkov Region in the northeast, it developed into an armed conflict in some parts of the Donetsk Region and the Luhansk Region. The movement was led by anti-Kiev, pro-Moscow Ukrainian residents and proxy forces led by Russian activists such as Igor Girkin (also known as Igor Strelkov), which became anti-government forces with the support from Moscow.

The Malaysian Airlines plane crash in July 2014 was reportedly due to surface-to-air "Buk" missiles brought from Russia. It seems that proxy forces with little combat experience misidentified the plane as a Ukrainian military aircraft and shot it down. If this is the case, the crash was an accident attributable to the proxy forces not being under the command and control of the Kremlin. In addition, with the proxy forces alone, they were going to be subdued by the Ukrainian Army.

The Wagner Group is a private military company and an example of a force which Russian command and control can more easily reach than such proxy forces as mentioned above. As these armed groups are illegal in Russia, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation and other agencies deny involvement. However, in Syria, while the official Russian Armed Forces mainly operate the air force to reduce the risk of death in action, mercenaries from Wagner engage in ground operations to complement the regular forces. During a battle in Deir ez-Zor Governorate in February 2018, the U.S. Armed Forces carried out an attack after having confirmed through their channel with the Russian Armed Forces that the official Russian forces were not present in the targeted area. However, Wagner combatants were killed and injured. Although the Russian government denounced the attack conducted by the U.S. military, it took no retaliation measures, which would have been necessary had the Russian Armed Forces been attacked. The government of Russia can employ Wagner combatants, who receive training in line with the official Russian Armed Forces, in dangerous operations as pieces for battles, and the government can cut them off if needed.

From the perspective of the Kremlin, the advantage of using proxy forces is that the Russian government can let them conduct dangerous operations without being held responsible domestically for major losses such as death in action. The Kremlin can also secretly start, and end the operations with no public responsibility if an operation fails. However, major disadvantages include difficulties in securing their warfighting ability, and that they cannot be put under direct command and control of the Kremlin.

3. Covert elite units

In the Crimean Peninsula in February and March 2014, the elite units under the command of Russia made covert operations complementing the political manoeuvring by proxy forces. Naval infantries that belonged to the Russian Black Sea fleet and were stationed at the port of Sevastopol due to an agreement with Ukraine were the first unit sent to target areas, followed by Special Operations Forces from mainland Russia. Since they acted as a discreet unit without wearing any identification, the Russian government took a stance that regarded them as vigilantes among local residents. In the West, they were called “little green men,” and in Russia, they were called “polite people” «ВЕЖЛИВЫЕ ЛЮДИ». While these forces besieged government buildings and a Ukrainian military base to hold the move of the opponents, the local proxy forces completed political maneuvering. In April, President Putin remarked, “Our military unit cooperated in order to guarantee the free manifestation of the residents.”

Proxy forces also engaged in battles in the eastern Ukraine conflict in the summer of 2014. However, they suffered losses to the Armed Forces of Ukraine due to their limited warfighting ability and resources. In August, when Ukraine’s control over the region seemed complete, many mysterious trucks referring to themselves as “humanitarian supplies” entered from the Russian border and the rebel military forces regained momentum. Although this was not officially confirmed, elite units from the official Russian Armed Forces directly joined the battle and stopped the attack and advance of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Then, in the beginning of September, President Putin proposed a ceasefire, and Ukraine had no other choice but to accept the proposal and abandon the fight.

The advantage of elite units is that they can be placed in direct command and control to achieve effective results. The disadvantage is that it is difficult for them to conduct many dangerous operations because soldiers taken as prisoners of war or killed in action will become a political issue. During fighting in summer 2014, Ukraine actually announced the identities of their prisoners of war as personnel of the official Russian Armed Forces. The Russian government responded by saying, “The soldiers went to the area to support the local residents at their will on holiday.”

If the number of these cases increases, domestic criticism grows, such as, “The Russian government denies the fact that its order caused the consequences of war prisoners and death in action, and is not dealing with them accordingly.” Thus, the Kremlin needs to minimize covert operations by the units directly under its commands.

4. Large-scale official units

In contrast with the covert operations in eastern Ukraine, Russian military operations in Syria have been carried out openly since September 2015. This was a period when the Assad regime in Syria faced tough battles against rebel fighters, Europe was shaken by a huge influx of migrants, and the conflict in eastern Ukraine was reaching a stalemate. By fighting against “terrorists” at the request of the Syrian government,

the official Russian units weakened the power of extremists, which were a threat both domestically in Russia and internationally. Those operations raised Russia's position mainly in the political dynamics of the Middle East. As long as the use of the official units is justified and the sacrifice of Russian soldiers in aerial attacks is minimized mainly in aerial operations, the Russian government can openly carry out military operations even in front of its citizens by giving honorary treatment to the small number of soldiers killed in battle.

Openly conducting operations in this way has direct effects on moving military and political situations in reality. In addition, even if the activities of official units do not lead to the execution of actual combat operations, they can make indirect "deterrent" effects. At the end of February 2014, the Russian Armed Forces conducted a mobilization of their units called "snap inspection" on the east side of the Ukrainian border. If the Armed Forces of Ukraine had escalated conflicts within the country, those Russian military units at the border might have invaded the Ukrainian territory. When the battle intensified in February 2015, France and Germany quickly worked to implement the ceasefire agreement with Russia to avoid an escalation of the situation. Previously, Russia had officially sent its military units to Georgia in August 2008 and unofficially to eastern Ukraine in August 2014. Therefore, the possibility that Russia would dispatch a large-scale military unit was a realistic threat. Furthermore, in March 2015, President Putin remarked that he had "ordered that nuclear weapons be put into a state of combat readiness against the crisis in the Crimean Peninsula in 2014," which caused concerns that nuclear forces could be employed if the situation continued to escalate.

In addition, the capacity of Russian conventional forces made this an issue to nearby NATO member states. Now, we shall consider an imagined scenario in which a supposed social divide in Latvia progresses and proxy forces initiate an anti-government armed struggle. In response to this move, if Russia becomes militarily involved either unofficially or officially, local troops would be on their back feet, and NATO would be faced with a decision on whether to send reinforcements. However, Russia deploys highly sophisticated anti-ship missiles and anti-aircraft missiles in Kaliningrad (so-called "Russia's A2/AD"). Therefore, if NATO were to send reinforcements, it would need to be prepared for additional losses and take further escalation into consideration. If NATO did not send reinforcement, it would risk its collective defense deterrent and would be seen as a dangerous organization existing only to provoke Russia. If this situation did escalate, it would lead to the neutralization of Latvia or the collapse of NATO.

To prepare for this scenario, Latvia invited NATO's research base, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, and has conducted research and practice on communication issues to protect society from social divide and maintaining unity. NATO has dispatched troops from member states to the Baltic nations and Poland, and has makes efforts to commit to strategic communication to protect the unity of NATO by sustaining the credibility of collective defense.

Conclusion: Internal control issues and the non-full employment of tactics

As it has been discussed so far, Russia today employs multi-layered tactics depending on various purposes. While it is important to keep an eye on Russia's military capability, what is also required is to have the viewpoint regarding the ways in which different tactics are actually used according to different purposes. Although a full-fledged employment of large-scale military forces is unlikely in reality, recognizing the possibility that Russia can operate such military forces will have an effect in a conflict with low intensity.

In the previous sections, this paper described the process in which Russia would employ different tactics as if by escalating from non-military to large-scale military conflicts. However, this is just a simplified account made as a model to be used when considering such a possibility. There are, in fact, important points to keep in mind.

The first point is that the processes of decision making, strategy formulation, and command and control are not necessarily exercised in an organized manner. While each military unit, Special Operations Forces, and Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (GRU) are placed within the Russian Armed Forces' chain of command, it is not necessarily easy to exercise effective command and control. In addition, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) operates based on a completely different organizational culture. Conflicts over resources and authority, and competitive relationships can also be listed as a factor. President Putin is supposed to be the person with an ultimate control over these issues, but there are some emerging phenomena that will raise questions as to whether Putin is actually controlling them in an organized manner. In the beginning of 2020, President Putin started constitutional reforms with the aim to develop a system that would enable stable transfer of authority to the next generation. However, this initiative failed to transfer the authority and resulted in a mere constitutional amendment with miscellaneous contents. As another example, Alexei Navalny, an anti-government activist, left for Germany after having been poisoned and hospitalized to recover, and now he threatens the relation between Germany and Russia. This seems to represent the results of chaotic behaviors of each actor, rather than a failure of centralized operations.

Another point is that Russia does not always take the maximum hostile behavior by utilizing these conflict tactics, but it adjusts the employment of the tactics according to the timing of relevant information. Before 2013, the Kremlin had placed an emphasis on diplomatic means and had been modest in its actions that would invite hostility of other countries. Based on the perception that its strategic interests were constantly being attacked, the Kremlin changed the attitude in 2014 and shifted it to the direction of inciting hostility and fear of other countries. Nonetheless, it is true that Russia has carefully controlled the employment of conflict tactics when it was the time to concentrate on domestic policy reform issues, or if there was room for demonstrating attitudes towards cooperation with President Trump and President Macron. In the long run, if Russia changes its policy to emphasize more diplomatic means than hostile attitudes (see Кортунов (2018) as an example of leading Russian experts advocating diplomatic means), the Russian leadership is replaced by a new generation, which stands in a place far from the Soviet era, or

the power of the norm, which does not tolerate covert conflict tactics, is strengthened, then the ways in which Russia employs the conflict tactics that it holds can change significantly.

Hence, it will be beneficial for our democratic societies to take defense measures that will not tolerate social divide and foreign interventions, as well as continuing to promote discourses and take actions that convince the people in Russia of the importance of Russia's external actions based on transparency and trust over the long term.

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