Russian Hybrid Warfare: How to Confront a New Challenge to the West

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Executive Summary

In 2013, General Valery Gerasimov, chief of Russia’s Armed Forces, publicly unveiled a fresh idea. In what came to be called the Gerasimov Doctrine,1 he described “new-generation” warfare – pre-emptive operations employing a mixture of nonmilitary and military measures to achieve political goals, deploying all elements of society.2

Gerasimov suggested that such mobilization was urgent because Russia was already behind its enemies – implicitly the West, which was wielding a strategy that it called “hybrid warfare.” Russia, Gerasimov said, needed not only to catch up, but to get out well in front.

Technically, he was right – the United States does enjoy considerable global reach in cyber espionage, for example. But Gerasimov found hybrid warfare where there was none, such as the West’s insistence on a no-fly zone in Libya and in Syrian humanitarian missions, operations that Gerasimov called camouflaged strategies of aiding one side (the rebels) for political gain.3 And the Russian general’s appraisal of Moscow’s combat readiness in the new age was disingenuous: Russia began to build up cyberspace expertise in the 1990s, when its Soviet-era military capability had wilted, and it embarked on a determined hunt for an arena to confront the West.

This paper examines the threat posed by Russia’s new generation warfare to the interests and security of the U.S. and its allies – in the military arena, and in technology, economics, and culture.4 It is the first in a three-part series on the dynamics and specific contours of the intensifying financial, military, and geopolitical conflict between the West and Russia.

An End to a Largely Peaceful Post-Soviet Period

When the worst of the Balkan wars ended almost two decades ago, a period of general European calm unfolded, disturbed only in 1999 by brief fighting in Kosovo. Because of the relative quiet, the West came to expect a lasting return of its prior post-World War II insulation from major combat. European militaries dialed back and came to resemble more of an

1. Валерий Герасимов, “Новые вызовы требуют переосмысле- ния форм и способов ведения боевых действий (New challenges require a rethink of the forms and methods of warfare),” Военно- промышленный курьер (Russia), March 5, 2013. (http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632)
3. In August 2014, the world witnessed columns of Russian military trucks painted in white crossing the border mostly uninspected into the separatist areas in Ukraine under a humanitarian pretext. Michael Weiss, “A White Shining Lie,” Foreign Policy, August 22, 2014. (http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/22/a-white-shining-lie/)
4. For clarity, this paper will use the term “hybrid warfare” to describe both Western and Russian strategy and capability in this arena.
international policing force than a well-oiled fighting machine prepared to defend the NATO alliance.

But the Putin era – and the pursuit of a restoration of Moscow’s international stature – has forced a re-contemplation of the historical arc.

Since his rise to power, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly surprised the West with demonstrations of an emboldened Kremlin, and revived some of the most troubling aspects of Cold War politics. But most recently, he has pursued his political goals through hybrid warfare.

In what is effectively a permanent state of war, Putin holds together a Russian national consensus through tightly scripted, state-controlled media that sustain a drumbeat against a morally bankrupt and power-obsessed West. The instruments of this asymmetrical battle often involve major regime-linked corporations, cyber weapons, and propaganda. Wielded by a nimble, opportunistic Putin, they pose a long-term policy challenge to the United States and Europe.

On December 31, 2015, Putin named the United States a national security threat, the first time Russia has so designated Washington since the Soviet collapse about a quarter-century ago. The U.S. has done the same – the Department of Defense’s updated Cyber Strategy names Russia as the top threat to American interests and security.

Putin, who has served alternately as prime minister or president since 1999, launched his new brinksmanship four years ago when he returned to the presidency for the second time. His apparent new objective has been to revive Russia’s strategic global parity with the United States.

This is not new: Since the Soviet disintegration, Moscow has relentlessly sought, generally without success, to recover its lost role as an essential superpower. But Putin’s recent actions – from military offensives in Ukraine and Syria to a confrontation with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the SWIFT banking system – demonstrate a new sense of determination. Taken as a whole, Putin is attempting to overturn pillars of the post-WWII political and economic order.

Some analysts attribute the current tensions to NATO enlargement and a supposed Western disregard for Moscow’s voice in international affairs. But the brinksmanship with Putin more accurately fits into a much longer history of conflict with the West, one rooted in a narrative of victimhood, resentment, and “encirclement.” In Putin’s mind, the U.S. has embarked on an imperious campaign to humiliate and unseat him – a conspiracy whose “color revolutions” have already taken down governments in Georgia and Ukraine, along with those of several Arab states, and whose next target is him. Much of the Russian leader’s tension with the U.S. has flowed from his inability to shed that conception.

In 2014, Putin annexed Crimea and destabilized eastern Ukraine. The West responded with punishing economic sanctions on Russia's next-generation oil production in the Arctic and Siberia. Yet Putin has doubled down with an air-led offensive into Syria – 3,400 miles from Russian territory – Moscow's first venture outside its former imperial realm since the Soviet collapse.

Amid a show of hybrid tactics, Putin has awarded financial support to fringe political movements in Western Europe, launched cyberattacks and espionage in Europe, and ordered probing and actual attacks on U.S. and European energy and communications infrastructure. He has continued to attempt to use control over energy – pipelines, nuclear plants, natural gas supplies – to wield influence across Europe. Western intelligence reports say Russia has exacerbated the Syrian migrant crisis. And, compounding the threat, Russia has formed a growing alliance with Iran and China, countries that possess their own hybrid toolboxes of proxy warfare and cyber infiltration.

To Western queries about Russian intentions, Putin has replied that he has consistently made Moscow's interests clear, but that the West has ignored him. That history is beyond the scope of this report. Suffice it to say, however, that while Russia is going through the diplomatic motions, it is resorting to hybrid war tactics as a first order of geostrategic business.

What Is Hybrid Warfare?

Hybrid combat – the combination of violent and nonviolent means in the service of political goals – is an age-old concept. At relatively low expense, an aggressive player intentionally blurs and exploits distinctions of war and peace, civilian and military operations, and state and non-state actors.

In the last century, the U.S. and the Soviet Union carried out countless examples of hybrid warfare, what their intelligence apparatuses called *active measures*. Short of actual fighting, this dimension of the superpower rivalry included, from the U.S. side, the CIA's 27-year, $75 million funding of Italy's Christian Democrats; and, from the Soviets, the 1978 murder of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov with a poison-tipped umbrella. Some Russian tactics in Ukraine over the past two years resemble Moscow's political absorption – its Sovietization – of the Warsaw Bloc in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In a way, today's actions appear to be merely a return to the Soviet-era status quo. Yet, this is not the Soviet period: Notwithstanding Putin's declaration of a Western threat and the daggers-drawn conclusions of their respective intelligence communities, Russia and the United States are not sworn enemies. And Western European countries are by and large demilitarized and generally violence-averse.

Russia’s conduct is in fact novel in the modern age, deploying comparatively few conventional forces explicitly aimed at attacking the West, but focusing instead on the agile coordination of other instruments of national power. Since Russia cannot hope to match U.S. capability head-to-head, these tools are by necessity asymmetrical, and are unleashed where they are not expected. Moscow’s over-arching tactic is maskirovka, which loosely translated means subterfuge – the elements of surprise, diversion, and deception. All in all, Russia’s conduct capitalizes on Putin’s readiness to act outside the post-war operational norms within which the West has built its military and political response mechanisms.

Cyberspace is a primary theater of Russia’s asymmetrical activity. This is because cyberspace offers a way to easily combine fighting arenas, including espionage, information operations, and conventional combat, and to do so behind a curtain of plausible deniability, for example by taking advantage of proxy operators. A perpetrator can stealthily cross great distances without physical barriers and reach the target.

In addition, such actions can combine two or more instruments: political, intelligence, diplomatic, cyber, or information. Russia can do so with no emphasis on speed: Rapid, decisive victory is unnecessary because the ebb and flow of combat can exhaust a target’s resources, or generate confusion, and trigger a response that serves Russian goals just as well. Active combat can be followed by frozen conflict, which also can serve the original political purpose and constitute “winning.” In the parlance of the art, exploiting such responses is reflexive control.

Understanding Russia’s View of Cyberwarfare

To understand the scope of Russia’s preoccupation with cyberspace, go back to the mid-1980s when Clifford Stoll, an astronomer-turned-computer-administrator, helped to uncover one of the world’s first well-documented cyber incidents, the so-called *Cuckoo’s Egg*. West German hackers had penetrated the computers of several U.S.-based research institutions and military installations in a hunt for secret information that they sold to the KGB. Among other keyword-based searches, the perpetrators were seeking classified information related to the Strategic Defense Initiative and KH-11, a state-of-the-art digital imaging reconnaissance satellite. There also was the offer of more basic but – to the Soviets, subject to western technological restrictions – highly valuable data including source code to the Unix operating system and the design of integrated circuits.

While a cyber espionage case harking back nearly 30 years may sound dated, it highlights Moscow’s long, keen interest in an advantage in cyberspace, and its grasp of its strategic importance. 

As practiced by Russia, cyberwarfare is actually a broader concept than conventionally understood. In 2012, the White House issued Presidential Policy Directive 20, which defined cyberspace as “the interdependent network of information technology infrastructures that includes the Internet, telecommunications networks, computers, information or communications systems, networks, and embedded processors and controllers.”

This is the technology-centric domain of offensive and defensive cyberwarfare.

But Russia has broadened the domain to allow for information warfare as well. This distinction becomes clear in Russia’s operational thinking, which divides information warfare into two areas: information-technical, which aligns with the West’s definition of electronic warfare and cyber warfare, and information-psychological, which absorbs the Western idea of strategic communications and psychological operations.

The distinction is important because of the prominent role of information warfare. Russia aggressively manipulates news and other public data with a military doctrine under which the operating environment is continuously shaped, in times of war and peace. The Russian military conducts operations both in the country’s own information sphere – its media and Internet space – and outside its borders.

A first sign of this new era of hybrid war came in a five-year string of hacking attacks from 1998 to 2003 called *Moonlight Maze*. While many details are still publicly unknown, hackers traced to Russia stole thousands of U.S. military documents containing sensitive information, including encryption technologies. The hackers installed back doors in an effort to maintain access once their active attack was over.


26. Adam Elkus, “Moonlight Maze,” *A Fierce Domain: Conflict*
Subsequent cyberattacks in Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008, and present-day Ukraine show Russia further honing its cyber game. In Estonia, suspected Russian hackers were deployed in a political dispute over an Estonian decision to shift the Soviet-era Bronze Soldier from central Tallinn to the Defense Forces cemetery, two miles away. In some cases using Kremlin IP addresses, the hackers, in an apparent effort to punish and intimidate the Estonians, launched distributed denial of service attacks against local government websites, the country’s Internet infrastructure, and its financial industry.27

The 2008 cyberattacks against Georgia, coinciding with the Russian-Georgian war, may be the first time that Moscow tightly integrated cyber tools into military planning and operations. These attacks, conducted by proxy actors – self-declared “patriotic” Russian hackers and the nationalist youth group Nashi – went a step further than the Estonia operation to include infrastructure system break-ins and Internet traffic diversions and blocking.28 While the hackers did their work, Russian conventional forces rolled out a textbook example of reflexive control (described above), using feints29 on their side of the border to tempt Georgia to initiate combat, thus justifying the Russian invasion.

Russian cyber operations advanced the furthest yet in Ukraine, demonstrating sophisticated capability in electronic and information warfare. The operation began in February 2014 with the Crimean deployment of what Russia called “polite men” (and the Western media labeled “little green men”) – special forces wearing no insignia.30 In support of special forces operations, Russia jammed and intercepted Kiev signals and communications, hampering the other side’s operations, and effectively detaching the peninsula from Ukraine’s information space.31 Russian hacker groups later targeted Ukrainian elections and governmental bodies.32 The Russian hacker group CyberBerkut33 attacked routers, software, and hard drives at Ukraine’s National Election Commission with the objective of hobbling the release of the official vote count and producing false results. Russian hackers also penetrated Ukrainian government ministries and embassies, and Western targets such as NATO.34

In the latter half of 2015, Russia shifted to protect the gains achieved in the Ukraine hybrid operation. That shift included the Syrian mission, which, though a traditional conventional war, has reverberated with hybrid impacts in Europe. The Syrian campaign has been aimed at both Russia’s domestic and global audiences. For Russians, the showy mission is a reminder of their superpower days a quarter century ago, and has thus again shored up Putin’s support. Abroad, the campaign has reestablished Russia’s Soviet-era reputation for far-flung military capability, forced the West to accept a Russian role in this key international affair, and in part diverted attention from Ukraine.³⁵

As it advanced, the Syrian offensive appeared to take on the further objective of exacerbating the refugee crisis, pushing more migrants north and stirring former Soviet immigrants living in Europe into a disruptive force on the continent. A politically wrought and divided Europe is to the advantage of a Russia seeking concessions on questions from sanctions to natural gas infrastructure.

Another consequential achievement of the Syrian operation was to allow Russia – the world’s second-largest arms exporter next to the U.S. – to test some of its latest conventional weaponry in a surprising and impressive display of battlefield prowess. This was a signal to the West that Russia is a long way from its decrepit military state in the 1990s, and much readier to confront a challenge.³⁶

The Layers of Cyberspace

What follows is a structured description of cyberspace in three relevant layers:³⁷ technology; content and communication; and socio-cultural.

Cyberspace is a human-made technological entity. It is comprised of parts with distinctive roles – computers, their wired and wireless network interfaces, digital communications, routers, servers, and storage devices.

But without content, cyberspace would be only a hollow shell. Content includes data and information, of course, but also several layers of software that animate physical devices, such as communications protocols, operating systems, and applications. Content combined with technology is what gives rise to a networked system connecting individual computers in various places and roles. The network can include personal computers, servers, and controllers of other devices such as systems that operate dams, electric grids, industrial plants, and natural gas pipelines.

Finally, because of the human-made dimensions of both the physical platform and the content residing in it, cyberspace also has a socio-cultural aspect. Cyberspace is integral to communications and social media, and thus provides a path to manipulate the information sphere and influence public opinion and policy decisions.

**Technology**

During the initial days after seizing Crimea, Russia sought first to sever the local population and regionally-based military units from mainland Ukraine. It attacked physical communications infrastructure such as fiber connections between Crimea and mainland Ukraine, captured the peninsula’s sole Internet exchange point, and jammed radio connections.\(^{38}\) Russia carried out similar jamming in Eastern Ukraine, but for more tactical reasons: to hamper the use of information-gathering drones by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the diplomatic forum for the West and the former Soviet Union.\(^{39}\)

In addition to espionage, Russia has the capability to disrupt and deter Western activities, should open war break out. In October 2015, the United States detected Russian intelligence-gathering vessels and submarines operating near critical undersea data cables.\(^{40}\) About the same time, U.S. officials became nervous over a Russian satellite that had veered extremely close to an Intelsat satellite that enabled Western cyber operations, prompting concern because Russia possesses traditional anti-satellite capabilities that can knock out or commandeer targeted satellites.\(^{41}\)


\(^{41}\) Mike Gruss, “Russian Satellite Maneuvers, Silence Worry

**Content and Communications**

From a content and communications perspective, cyberspace is simply a medium to create, read, store, manipulate, delete, search, share, and transmit data. Examples of such data include operating instructions to industrial controllers, and government documents residing in network servers. But possessing control over such data can be powerful, including the capacity to sabotage infrastructure.

An illustration of Russian capabilities in the content and communications space came in August 2008. Three days before the launch of the war with Georgia, an explosion in Turkey ruptured the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and put it out of operation for almost three weeks. According to Western intelligence agencies, Russia triggered the explosion through a cyberattack that penetrated the pipeline’s control systems.\(^{42}\) In December 2014, Russian hackers reportedly damaged a German steel plant owned by ThyssenKrupp AG. The hackers penetrated the plant’s control systems, specifically the shutdown mechanism in the blast furnace, leading to massive damage.\(^{43}\) And in December 2015, a Russian hacker group identified


as the Sandworm Team was reportedly responsible for power blackouts in western Ukraine, the first publicly recorded electric outage blamed explicitly on a cyberattack.44

But these cyberattacks should have surprised no one, since experts, including the United States Computer Emergency Readiness Team, have long indicated such Russian capabilities.45 In this new age, these and other active measures are the main battleground.

There are numerous examples of Russian cyber espionage. In October 2014, Russian hackers gained access to President Obama’s unclassified email and schedules, according to a report in The New York Times.46 Russian hackers penetrated State Department computers, remaining in the system for at least three months, as well as the Pentagon, including the Joint Chiefs’ email system.47 And in 2014 and 2015, hacker


47. Danny Yadron, “‘Three Months Later, State Department

groups tied to the Russian government penetrated NATO, the Ukrainian government, the German parliament, and several other EU governments, according to news reports and private investigations.48 An especially clever though ultimately unsuccessful operation took place in April 2015, when a Russian hacker group close to the Kremlin – Advanced Persistent Threat 28, or APT28 – was caught spyng on Western discussions of the sanctions regime against Moscow. It did so by exploiting “zero days,” then-unknown vulnerabilities in Microsoft Windows and Adobe Flash software. The infiltration was halted before any data was lost.49


Socio-cultural

As discussed above, Russian military thinkers have raised the social-cultural aspect as the core of their vision of future war and military operations. Russia foresees information warfare as a way to mobilize all of Russian society, and thereby protect the state against internal and foreign enemies.\textsuperscript{50}

Much of Russian media is concentrated either in state hands or those of parties close to the Kremlin.\textsuperscript{51} Russia has introduced further controls through tight regulation.\textsuperscript{52} A 2014 law limits foreign media ownership to a 20 percent stake, which has led many foreign media companies to abandon or restructure their Russian businesses, such as Germany’s Axel Springer, publisher of \textit{Forbes Russia}, and Finland’s Sanoma Independent Media, former publisher of the English-language \textit{Moscow Times}.\textsuperscript{53}

In addition, Russia has introduced a new version of its surveillance technology called SORM, which intercepts and stores phone calls and Internet traffic. SORM provides state security services, particularly the domestic Federal Security Service, with backdoor access to local Internet services and social media platforms such as Vkontakte, the Russian Facebook alternative.\textsuperscript{54} Facebook and Twitter are subject to traffic filtering at the network level; they are also compelled to store the data of Russian users in Russia, to provide it on the request of Russian authorities, and to block content if the Kremlin so desires.\textsuperscript{55}

Moreover, Russia has introduced the equivalent of information troops – individuals typically known in the West as \textit{trolls}, or Internet provocateurs, who flood social media and media Web pages with their “alternate” interpretation of the news. These actors’ function is in part to muddy the ability of Western decision makers and their populations to separate fact from fiction, and thus hobble their capacity to respond effectively to Russian actions. But they also aim to intimidate those not sharing the “correct” narrative, and recruit sympathetic voices around the world, whether witting or unwitting.\textsuperscript{56} A role in this is played by official media such as RT, Sputnik and Russia24, which target Russian speakers living in the other ex-Soviet states, Europe and the U.S.,\textsuperscript{57} and potentially supportive western audiences.

Taken together, these tactics allow the Kremlin to effectively sequester the Russian-speaking audience

\textsuperscript{54} Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, “Russia’s Surveillance State,” \textit{World Policy Journal}, Fall 2013. (http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/fall2013/Russia-surveillance)
\textsuperscript{55} Kathrin Hille, “Twitter told to store Russian data in Russia,” \textit{Financial Times} (UK), November 10, 2015. (http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e04e035c-87c6-11e5-90de-f44762bf9896.html#axzz3yH44O5XY)
\textsuperscript{57} “Vladimir Putin’s global Orwellian campaign to undermine the West,” \textit{The Week}, May 9, 2015. (http://theweek.com/articles/553716/vladimir-putins-global-orwellian-campaign-undermine-west)
from Western mainstream media, creating an all-Kremlin information bubble, and thus both inoculating Putin from outside pressure, and strengthening his hand. Putin becomes answerable to no one.

An example of the impact is the Russian public reaction to the tragic July 14, 2014 flight of MH17. The Malaysia Airlines jet was shot down over Ukraine by a Russian-made BUK anti-aircraft system originating from the 53rd Brigade near the Russian city of Kursk, and all 298 passengers and crew were killed. By the time Western investigators concluded that Russian-backed separatists were probably responsible, intensive Kremlin-driven propaganda and Internet trolls had created a competing narrative: Kiev or the West, not the separatists, were behind the crash in yet another U.S.-led conspiracy to tarnish Russia. According to polls, the Russian public by-and-large accepted the Kremlin line.\(^58\)

The Kremlin has also run Western tests of its capacity to create an alternative reality abroad.\(^59\) In one case in September 2014, the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency concocted a deadly chemical plant explosion in Louisiana. The group created a Wikipedia page about the supposed disaster, video clips of the aftermath, social media commentary from ostensible local victims, falsified news coverage, and even a message from jihadist terrorists claiming responsibility.\(^60\) While the operation failed to gain traction and ignite panic, it demonstrated a will to operate on an insidious level designed – if and when the scriptwriters get good at it – to disrupt Western societies, in this case through stagecraft.

A few months earlier, the Russian hacking group APT28 penetrated and took over TV5, a French television channel, and masked it as a jihadist cyberattack. The attack took the globally broadcast television channel off the air for hours, during which the perpetrators posted ISIS-related updates on its social media accounts.\(^61\) The hackers were identified, but had demonstrated their capabilities and European vulnerability to such attack.

Most recently, on January 16, 2016, Russian media and officials created public hysteria and a diplomatic fracas in Germany over the alleged rape of a 13-year-old Russian immigrant by a Middle East migrant. Inflamed by the reports, Russian-speaking migrants poured into the streets to protest the alleged attack, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the Germans must be covering something up, what specifically he did not say. In the end, it turned out that the girl, in a spat with her parents, had run off to the apartment of a 19-year-old German friend. There had been no rape.\(^62\) But by then, the image of an out-of-control situation had already been exacerbated. With German opinion already deeply ambivalent over the inundation of Syrian migrants into the country, Chancellor Angela Merkel's already-waning public support plunged.


\(^{59}\) “Vladimir Putin’s global Orwellian campaign to undermine the West,” The Week, May 9, 2015. (http://theweek.com/articles/553716/vladimir-putins-global-orswellian-campaign-underline-west)


further. Putin had furthered his objective of dividing Europe to, among other reasons, undermine solidarity on sanctions against Russia.

**Other Components of Russia’s Hybrid War with the West**

Another aspect of Russia’s hybrid war is a significant expansion of traditional espionage: In December 2014, a senior EU intelligence officer estimated that a full third of the Russian diplomats assigned to Brussels are members of Russian intelligence. Just a month later, the FBI broke up a U.S.-based spy ring run by the SVR, the Russian foreign intelligence service.

When it comes to Kremlin spy games, the return of active measures – which take espionage a step further into the attempt to shape, manipulate, and sabotage events – includes financial support for Marie Le Pen’s Front National in France (a €40 million loan from First Czech Bank, linked to Gennady Timchenko, a Putin associate, in September 2014), the bankrolling of anti-fracking protesters in Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Romania, and backing for pro-Russian political parties in Belgium, Hungary (which was promised a $10 billion loan to finance a nuclear power plant expansion⁶⁷), and the United Kingdom.⁶⁸

These particular episodes are not different from traditional spycraft; active measures are a staple of the playbooks of all major intelligence agencies. For example, Russia has rattled Europe with the appearance of preparations for a military assault. In June 2014, Russia carried out a simulated attack on Denmark; and in 2014 and 2015, it penetrated the maritime and air space of Sweden and Finland. Over the same two years, Russian planes buzzed a U.S. aircraft carrier and a destroyer in the Pacific and the Black Sea, and on July 4, 2015, Russian strategic bombers flew close to Alaska and California.⁶⁹

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⁶⁶. Sam Jones, Guy Chazan, and Christian Oliver, “Nato claims Moscow funding antifracking groups,” Financial Times (UK), June 19, 2014. (http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/20201c36-7d24-11e3-9f5-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3yH44O5XY)

⁶⁷. Keith Johnson, “Russia’s Quiet War Against European Fracking,” Foreign Policy, June 20, 2014. (http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/20/russias-quiet-war-against-european-fracking/)


These are arguably probing operations, but Russia has been blunt as well: In the summer of 2015, the Russian ambassador to Sweden, Viktor Tatarintsev, relayed a Putin threat of unspecified military consequences should Sweden or Finland try to join NATO.\textsuperscript{72} In March 2015, Russia’s ambassador to Denmark, Mikhail Vanin, threatened to target Danish warships with nuclear weapons should Denmark join NATO’s anti-ballistic missile defense system.\textsuperscript{73} Around the same time, Russian officials threatened a nuclear strike should NATO use force in an attempt to reverse Moscow’s absorption of Crimea.\textsuperscript{74} And Russian air forces have simulated nuclear strikes against Poland and Sweden.\textsuperscript{75}

The examples presented in this report exemplify the vigor and sophistication of Russian hybrid operations. Russia has developed its hybrid capabilities over a two-decade period and incorporated its evolving doctrine and capabilities into its strategic thinking. Its years of on-the-ground experience include increasingly complex examples of maskirovka and hybrid operations that, taken as a whole, give Russian hybrid warfare a stature all its own. Moscow appears to understand that it must continue to improve if it wants to compete and win.


\textsuperscript{74} Umberto Bacchi, “Russia issues nuclear threat over Crimea and Baltic States,” \textit{International Business Times}, April 2, 2015. (\url{http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/russia-issues-nuclear-threat-over-crimea-baltic-states-1494675})

\textsuperscript{75} “Russia carried out practice nuclear strike against Sweden,” \textit{The Local (Sweden)}, February 3, 2016. (\url{http://www.thelocal.se/20160203/russia-did-practice-a-nuclear-strike-against-sweden})

\section*{Policy Recommendations}

The West has entered a more turbulent era of aggressive competition with powers dedicated to overturning foundational aspects of post-World War II institutions and structures. Asymmetrical hybrid warfare tactics have enabled less-powerful players to punch above their weight, and sometimes seize the initiative.

The United States, the EU, and NATO possess the capacity to meet the challenge. The requirements include defensive measures to shield government, economic, and public infrastructure targets, and offensive methods to exact a high price from transgressors. Moreover, Russia’s access to hybrid warfare instruments can be reduced, and its ability to field its existing hybrid weapons curtailed.

It is impossible from a practical perspective, and wasteful of resources, to attempt to counter every move by a Kremlin whose strategy includes tempting the West into needless and costly operations. Instead, the West should clearly identify crucial strategic and economic assets for possible targeting, while acting to undermine Russian capabilities.

A paramount objective should be persistent intelligence operations aimed at a continuing understanding of Russian goals, tactics, and means. The Kremlin should be denied access to crucial aspects of its tool kit. Finally, the West should turn to its own asymmetric tools and influence to counter and diminish the effectiveness of Moscow’s strategy and deter Russian aggression.

\section*{Defensively, the U.S. and the EU should:}

1. Build up dedicated national and international coordinating centers for hybrid defense. The U.S. and the EU should build up permanent local and supra-national coordinating centers, to be integrated within current agencies and organizations such as
NATO. These interagency centers should gather and analyze information on Russian hybrid activities, and propose defensive action and resilience against current and future threats.

2. **Build on existing measures to shore up energy resilience.** The U.S. and the EU should use the same new interagency centers to systematically probe for vulnerabilities in Western economic, governmental, and energy infrastructure, and recommend patches. They should:

- Continue to develop more robust infrastructure to capitalize on vast new gas supplies coming onto the market from the U.S., the eastern Mediterranean, Africa, and elsewhere;
- Continue to develop new technologies that can cushion the EU’s reliance on Russian natural gas;
- Elevate coordination among the U.S. Department of Energy, counterpart energy ministries, and private actors as a way to signal a concerted policy of reducing dependence on Russian gas; and
- Continue to deny access to Western energy know-how, capital, and technology using export controls and sanctions.

3. **Tighten cyber- and information-security.** The U.S. and the EU should enhance a common defense against cyber-intrusion and information warfare, including military and civilian exercises and public-private partnerships. Western forces deployed to the Baltic republics and Eastern Europe should be equipped and trained to continue to operate even when lacking control of the information space or the electro-magnetic spectrum.

4. **Develop defensive economic warfare capabilities and alliances.** The U.S. and the EU should create tools to protect allies from Russian economic and financial warfare and influence. They should:

- Form new trade, supply, and economic alliances with the specific aim of shielding the U.S. and EU from Russian economic and financial tactics;
- Create information-sharing mechanisms on Russian threats, initiatives, and resources; and
- Develop longer-term strategies to displace and undermine Russia economic weapons, to be coordinated with the U.S. Treasury and Commerce departments, NATO, and vulnerable non-NATO allies.

5. **Counter nuclear threats.** Clearly reiterate that the use of nuclear weapons against any allied member would lead to a proportional nuclear response from the United States. In addition, the U.S. and the EU should:

- Enhance the enforcement of existing sanctions against illegal and suspected transfers and exchanges of technology, materiel, and personnel relevant to nuclear development.

**Offensively, the U.S. and the EU should:**

1. **Tighten and expand economic sanctions and financial measures.** The U.S. and the EU should maintain pressure on Russia to withdraw from eastern Ukraine and cease other hybrid attacks in Europe and the U.S., including cyber and information warfare. They should:
• Amplify the application of financial tools, enforcement measures, and sanctions against illicit Russian behavior. The focus should be on the underlying conduct to which sanctions are attached, such as the facilitation of transnational organized crime and money laundering, businesses that help to prop up the Russian state.

• Prioritize the identification of Russian hackers, organizations, and businesses engaged in or profiting from malicious cyber activity against key systems in the U.S. and the EU, in line with Executive Order 13694.

2. **Focus on anti-bribery and anti-corruption weapons.** The U.S. and the EU should step up the battle against state and non-state Russia corruption, which corrodes confidence in the government and leads to instability that Russia can exploit using hybrid tactics. Western authorities should:

• Coordinate targeted anti-corruption prosecutions, especially those tied to Russian influence;

• Ensure that Western investment and interests are observing international anti-bribery and anti-corruption practices; and

• Through sanctions, exclude actors involved or associated with Russian corruption from legitimate financial and commercial transactions.

3. **Explore strategic investment in areas where Russia seeks influence.** The U.S., EU, and other allies should incentivize, facilitate, and invest in sectors and markets in which Russian economic and financial influence challenges Western strategic interests. They should:

• Leverage international financial institutions (such as Overseas Private Investment Corporation in the United States) and development in an effort to displace Russian interests; and

• Incentivize the private sector to take advantage of market opportunities.

This report aims to contribute to an understanding of the threat posed by Russian hybrid warfare to U.S. and EU geostrategy and domestic security, and to propose recommendations on how to lessen the risk. It is the first of an envisioned three-part project on Russia under Putin during an age of sanctions and low oil prices. Much more time and work is required to continue to evaluate the new geopolitical challenges posed by a freshly assertive Russia, confronting Western influence and foundational institutions.
Bibliography


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About The Author

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