

'Hybrid War' and 'Little Green Men': How It Works, and How It Doesn't

Written by Mark Galeotti

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When Russian special forces seized Crimea at the end of February 2014, without their insignia, but with the latest military kit, it seemed as the start of a new era of warfare. Certainly, the conflict in Ukraine has demonstrated that Moscow, in a bid to square its regional ambitions with its sharply limited resources, has assiduously and effectively developed a new style of 'guerrilla geopolitics' which leverages its capacity for misdirection, bluff, intelligence operations, and targeted violence to maximise its opportunities. However, it is too soon to declare that this represents some transformative novelty, because Moscow's Ukrainian adventures have not only demonstrated the power of such 'hybrid' or 'non-linear' ways of warfare, but also their distinct limitations.

The Genesis of the Idea

The essence of Russia's tactics was precisely to try and avoid the need for shooting as much as possible, and then to try and ensure that whatever shooting took place was on the terms that suited them best. To this end, they blended the use of a range of assets, from gangster allies to media spin, in a manner that draws heavily on past political operations, not least the *aktivnye meropriyatiya* ('active measures') of Soviet times (Madeira, 2014).

While not entirely new, their tactics were given a particular novelty simply by the characteristics of the contemporary world, something recognised by the Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov, in a crucial article from 2013, in which he noted that 'The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of weapons in their effectiveness' (Gerasimov, 2013). In what is ostensibly a piece on the lessons of the 'Arab Spring' – which Kremlin orthodoxy presents as the result of covert Western campaigns of regime change – he outlines a new age in which:

Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template... [A] perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a morass of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war.

There are a variety of reasons why today's Russia may find itself favouring operations in which, still to quote Gerasimov, 'The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.' For a start, despite the still-formidable size of its military, in practice, many of its forces remain antiquated, poorly trained, and scarcely operational. Moscow clearly has the preponderance of military and economic muscle in post-Soviet Eurasia, the region in which it feels it has hegemonic rights. However, not only is this apparent advantage to a considerable extent

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neutralised by the risk of involving the USA, China, or even the European Union in case of obvious aggression, it is also often not so overwhelming as to guarantee a quick and above all risk-free adventure. Even the five-day war against Georgia in 2008, while a victory, was a sufficiently painful one – with friendly fire incidents, communications mix-ups, and vehicle break-downs – that it galvanised meaningful military reform for the first time in more than two decades (Cohen and Hamilton, 2011).

Non-Linear Instruments

Instead, Russia finds itself in a situation where many of its strengths are either less decisive than it might like, or else are constrained because of economic or geopolitical realities. Put bluntly, a country with an economy somewhere between the size of Italy's and Brazil's is seeking to assert a great power international role and agenda. To this end, Russia has turned to this new 'guerrilla geopolitics' as a means of playing to its strengths and its opponents' weaknesses. It has also invested disproportionate resources into the assets most useful for such conflicts.

These are, broadly speaking, three, and they reflect how this is a way of war which even more explicitly than most targets not the opponent's military or even economic capacity, but their will and ability to fight at all. Of course there is a 'kinetic' element – the need to deploy armed forces and sometimes for them to fight – but the forces required for this will tend to have to operate with more autonomy than has in the past been usual for Russian troops, and likewise with greater precision. Thus, Russia has been developing its special and intervention forces, especially its 12,000 or so Spetsnaz. These are generally described as special forces, but they are highly mobile and effective light infantry akin to US Rangers or the French Foreign Legion, rather than true commandos (Galeotti, 2015). Instead, the newly established Special Operations Command (KSO) has perhaps 500 true operators in what in the West would be called 'Tier One' akin to the British SAS or US Delta force. Nonetheless, the Spetsnaz, like the VDV Airborne Troops or the Naval Infantry marines, represent an 'army within an army' able to operate professionally, decisively, covertly if need be, and outside Russia's borders.

There is an 'intelligence-war' dimension beyond the 'military war'. The Kremlin has devoted particular resources in its intelligence community. The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU, military intelligence), and even the Federal Security Service (FSB), which is increasingly involved in overseas operations, are not only agencies tasked with gathering information about foreign capabilities and intentions. Rather, they are also instruments of non-linear warfare, spreading despair and disinformation, encouraging defections, and breaking or corrupting lines of command and communications.

The third particular focus for Kremlin efforts has been its capacity to fight the 'information war,' to broadcast its own message and undermine and contest those of others in the name of winning the war in their hearts and minds (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014). The RT international television station, for example, has become a crucial player not only in espousing the Kremlin line, but, perhaps more importantly, in challenging Western media orthodoxy with a glitzy mix of genuine investigation, bizarre conspiracy theory, and cynical disingenuousness (Ioffe, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2014). Its 2015 budget is due to increase by almost 30%, suggesting the Kremlin appreciates its role.

Crimea: When It Works

The application of these new, deniable, and politically driven tactics in Ukraine has proven their potential value, but also the risks. In so many ways, Crimea was the perfect context in which the Russians could test out their new approach. The Peninsula already had Russian Black Sea Fleet facilities including the 810th Independent Naval Infantry Brigade, amongst whom KSO operators could quietly be secreted under cover of regular troop rotations. The local Ukrainian military forces, which in any event would never get clear orders from Kiev, were essentially technicians and mechanics, not front-line combat troops. The local population, alienated by twenty years of neglect and maladministration by Kiev, were largely willing to join richer Russia, and there were political and also criminal powerbrokers especially eager to become the agents of a new Muscovite order.

On 27 February, KSO and Naval Infantry seized the Crimean parliament building and began blockading Ukrainian bases on Crimea. Despite their modern Russian uniforms and weapons, the lack of insignia on these 'little green

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men' and Moscow's flat denial that they were Russian troops was enough to inject a moment's uncertainty into the calculations in both Kiev and NATO. Were they mercenaries, could it be Crimean vigilantes, or was this some unsanctioned adventure by a local commander? This deliberate maskirovka, or deception operations, was enough to give the Russians and their local allies the time to take up commanding positions across Crimea, including blockading Ukrainian garrisons, such that even if they had then been ordered to fight, they would have been in a very weak position. Ultimately, they surrendered after at most the demonstrative use of a few tear gas grenades, and Russia was able to seize Crimea without a single fatal casualty (Howard and Pukhov, 2014).

The reasons for the success were several. The new government in Kiev was already in disarray and mistrustful of its military commanders, something Moscow could encourage. The Russians had not only good troops already in-theatre and the opportunity covertly to introduce more, they also had a broadly supportive local population. Ukrainian forces, by contrast, were largely not combat ready, scattered in smaller garrisons, demoralised and in some cases sympathetic to or suborned by the Russians. Likewise, the local police and even Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) were penetrated by the Russians, while there were ample allies within the Crimean political and criminal elite to provide both compliant front men and a supply of thuggish 'local self-defence militias.'

For Moscow, these were the ideal possible conditions. They precluded the need to destabilise the target before intervention, allowed Russia to wage a pre-emptive information war to establish grounds for its mission, and allowed it to use its troops to assert and maintain a near-bloodless fait accompli with, if not deniability, at least a degree of ambiguity.

The Donbas: When it Doesn't

However, the subsequent adventure into south-eastern Ukraine – Novorossiia in the new Russian lexicon – while undoubtedly also following the non-linear war playbook, has shown how this is by no means the guaranteed war-winner some had initially assumed. Again, the Russians armed and supported irregular allied detachments, backed by a deniable force of their own special forces, while presenting this as an entirely spontaneous and local response to an illegal transfer of power in Kiev. The full panoply of Russian propaganda was deployed to muddy the waters in the West, especially by presenting the new Ukrainian regime as comprising or depending on 'fascists.'

The expectation appears to have been again that this would be a quick operation that would capitalise on Western hesitancy and its need for consensus politics. Chaos would be stirred up in Novorossiia to demonstrate to Kiev just what could happen if it failed to appreciate its place within Moscow's sphere of influence. Rather than face a Russian-backed insurgency just at the time it was trying to build a new Ukraine, the government would make suitable obeisance and concessions, above all ruling out further movement towards the European Union and NATO and also constitutional guarantees for Moscow's allies and clients in the east. Russian active operations would be ended, and all before the West had had a chance to decide what to do.

So much for neat plans, and the Kremlin's glib assumptions that all would run smoothly epitomises a cocky attitude that prevailed in government circles after Crimea. As one senior military advisor told me at that time, 'Russia is back. And we now know of what we are capable.' The very disarray in Kiev, which had worked to Moscow's advantage over Crimea, now proved a serious problem, as there was no one there able or willing to make the kind of politically ruinous concessions the Russians were demanding. Instead, a 'short, victorious little war' (as Interior Minister Plehve invoked before the disastrous 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War) turned into a 'bleeding wound' (as Mikhail Gorbachev characterised the 1979-88 invasion of Afghanistan).

Militarily, Russia could maintain the war, not least by the drip-fed addition of military matériel for the fighters of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. Russian troops maintain a role on the battlefield in the guise of 'volunteers' alongside locals, mercenaries, and adventurers, including many Russians and Cossacks marshalled and armed by the GRU in Rostov and moved across the border into Ukraine (RFE/RL, 2014). Others provide training or technical support for the heavy weapons Russia has provided. In situations where it looks as if government troops might even make serious headway on the battlefield, such as in August, a large body of Russian troops were deployed across the border directly to ensure that the insurgent forces were not defeated, only then to be

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withdrawn – all without any formal acknowledgement of their role.

Russia has been able to maintain an insurgency which, by all accounts, has some genuine local support, but which in military terms is really best considered a loose coalition of local warlords, gangsters, opportunists, and Kremlin proxies. However, it has done so at catastrophic cost, considering the economic impact of the consequent Western sanctions regime, and with no evidence of any successful outcome. Both Kiev and Moscow now want the conflict to end, but unless one side or the other is willing to make greater concessions than have yet been placed on the table, Novorossiia risks becoming an unviable frozen conflict, a pseudo-state dependent on Moscow for its security and economic survival, while in return dooming Russia to continuing international opprobrium and economic crisis.

Conclusions: Politics Is All

Why such a different outcome? The first crucial difference was in the intended outcome: seizing Crimea was a relatively simple objective and although the issue would have been more complicated had the Ukrainians fought, either on Kiev's orders or local initiative, ultimately it was up to the Russians to win or lose. Their subsequent adventure, though, was a political gambit to influence Ukrainian politics and, as such, dependent on a multitude of factors beyond Moscow's control, or even imagination.

Most of the same operational advantages were present. A contiguous border allowed for the quick deployment of forces and reliable resupply of men and matériel. The Russians had and have near-absolute command of the air and a preponderance of artillery. Ukraine's forces have proven largely of indifferent quality; their capacity is undermined by Russian intelligence activity, including the presence of foreign agents within the ranks of their command structure (Galeotti 2014). Moscow had the initiative, and could also rely on local allies and agents.

But while in military terms, the operation was a success, the military is purely a part of the political campaign, and that has been a disastrous failure. What this highlights is that this new style of war, which seeks to rely on multiple military and non-military shocks to paralyse the enemy and break their will to resist, depends above all on a clear and accurate understanding of the political context in which it will operate. Putin gambled that over Crimea, Kiev would be unable to respond meaningfully and on time, and that Western anger and dismay would likely soon ebb, not least as new crises and challenges arise to direct its attention elsewhere. He was probably right. But perhaps over-emboldened by the effortless victory in Crimea, he overreached dangerously in his subsequent intervention into mainland Ukraine.

The Russian state won the 'military war' to create Novorossiia. It won the 'intelligence war' to support combat operations. It even had successes in the 'information war' to undermine Western enthusiasm for direct involvement, at least until the tragic blunder which was the shooting down of MH17. However, the essence of 'non-linear war' is that all these diverse components must effectively combine to win the underlying 'political war' to achieve the desired aim, and here Moscow is losing, and losing badly.

Does this mean that 'non-linear war' is just a temporary fad? No. In an age of interconnected economies, expensive militaries, and the 24/7 news cycle, if anything the fusion of a range of different types of conflict will become the norm. Indeed, arguably the combination of Western military aid on the battlefield, economic sanctions, and political pressure represent a similarly non-linear and asymmetric response. Where Russia leads, the West – but also perhaps China, India, and other powers looking to asserting their power in restrictive and non-permissive political environments – may well follow, albeit carefully learning the lessons of Crimea and Novorossiia alike.

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About the author:

Mark Galeotti is Professor of Global Affairs at New York University's Center for Global Affairs. A specialist in modern Russian crime, intelligence, and security affairs, he was educated at Cambridge and the London School of Economics, has served as a special advisor to the British Foreign Office, and consults widely with commercial and government bodies around the world. He has 14 books to his name, the most recent being *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2008* (Osprey, 2014), and is completing a history of Russian organised crime.