



## How Moscow Understands War and Military Strategy

Andrew Monaghan

Russia Research Network & Royal United Services Institute

**DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:** Approved for public release distribution unlimited.  
Cleared for public release.

## Abstract

In this CNA Occasional Paper, Andrew Monaghan examines Russian military strategy. Monaghan frames an analysis of Russian military strategy in terms of sustained Russian debate about the changing character of war, especially since the mid 2010s, and how this debate has recently turned to focus on military strategy in modern conditions. It makes several key arguments. First, history permeates the contemporary Russian debate, featuring both in the way that military experience is rendered into didactic lessons of history to advance military science, and in the arc of the theoretical development of Russian military strategy—it is not possible to parse today’s discussion without knowledge of this history. Second, military strategy is specifically and clearly defined in the Russian lexicon as the “highest sphere of military art,” the art of higher command comprising the bridge between the theory and practice of war. Military strategy is explicitly subordinate to state policy. Third, there are constraints on military strategy, particularly in terms of the implementation of plans. Moscow’s re-examination of military strategy has important implications for Western audiences. While many are focused on Moscow’s measures short of war, this paper highlights the importance that the Russian military still accords the use of armed force. Moreover, it suggests the need to move beyond thinking in terms of the blurring of the lines between war and peace, to the blurring of the lines between the offensive and the defensive.

---

This report is part of a series generously funded by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. CNA’s Occasional Paper series is published by CNA, but the opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of CNA or the Department of the Navy.

### Distribution

**DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A.** Approved for public release: distribution unlimited.

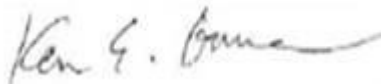
11/17/2020

This work was performed under Specific Authority Contract No. G-19-56503

**Cover image credit:** Пресс-служба Президента России [Press service of the President of Russia], "Национальный центр управления обороной Российской Федерации (зал управления и взаимодействия)" [National Defense Management Center of the Russian Federation (management and cooperation hall)], Kremlin.ru, December 19, 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/47256>.

Approved by:

November 2020



Ken E. Gause, Research Program Director  
Adversary Analytics Program  
Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs Division

Request additional copies of this document through [inquiries@cna.org](mailto:inquiries@cna.org).

# Executive Summary

---

Since the mid 2010s, the Russian leadership has conducted an in-depth debate about both the changing character of war and the nature of modern military strategy. This sustained debate offers an opportunity to reassess our understanding of Russian thinking and activity at a time when Russia is understood to be an adversarial actor in a new era of great power competition. Moscow has also conducted its own wider update of strategic planning and forecasting, looking to the 2030s and beyond. It also envisages a great power competition as powers vie for access to resources, and this influences the debate about contemporary and future war. Russian military strategy is based on three arcs: an arc tracing the line through Russian history to foresight and the future of war; an arc through state policy and statecraft to military operations; and an arc through the conduct of war from the depth of one state's strategic rear to the strategic rear of the enemy.

The implications for Western thinking go to the heart of the current debate about Russia in a time of global power competition. First, while many Western observers point to Russian measures short of war, or tactical-level questions, the current Russian discussion serves to highlight the role of armed force as a central element of Russian military strategy. Second, it is time to move beyond thinking of Russian activity as blurring the lines between war and peace and towards thinking of it as blurring the lines between the offensive and the defensive.

This page intentionally left blank.

# Contents

---

<b>Russia’s Reconceptualizing of Contemporary War and Strategy .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Understanding Russian Military Strategy.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Cross-cultural translation.....	6
The centrality of history.....	7
Debating military strategy: strategy of destruction or a strategy of attrition? .....	9
How Russia defines military strategy .....	12
Constraints on military strategy .....	17
<b>Conclusion: Towards a New Era? Blurring the Lines Between Offensive and Defensive</b>	<b>21</b>

This page intentionally left blank.

# Russia's Reconceptualizing of Contemporary War and Strategy

---

Within a decade, Russia's military and broader defense capabilities have undergone a major transformation. A reform and re-equipment process, a re-organization of the defense and security landscape (including the establishment of new entities such as the Unified Strategic Command/Northern Fleet, the Aerospace Forces, and Rosgvardia (national guard)), and combat experience (especially in Syria) have yielded considerable results. By 2017, senior Russian officials were stating both that the Russian armed forces are "emerging on a principally new level of military readiness,"<sup>1</sup> and that the improvement of combat capabilities since 2012 "has made it possible to extend significantly the military presence of the Russian Federation in strategic areas of the world."<sup>2</sup> Alongside this transformation, a series of reappraisals of the conceptual aspects of military, defense, and national security affairs is underway, particularly in terms of how the Russian defense community understands the changing character of war and military strategy.

In 2016, for instance, the Russian General Staff and the scientific council of the National Security Council, the main body that oversees national strategic planning, held discussions about the essence of "war," and the characteristic features, trends, and developments relating to contemporary armed conflicts. The key themes of this reappraisal feature in the speeches and articles of the senior leadership. In an article entitled "The World on the Brink of War," published in March 2017, Valeriy Gerasimov, Russia's chief of general staff since 2012, stated that since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, thinkers in the US have sought to add the new category of "hybrid warfare" to their classifications of traditional and nontraditional war. This category, he stated, includes actions during a period that cannot be strictly defined as war or peace. In contrast, he noted that Russian military science and practice offers a "more balanced approach

---

<sup>1</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, "World on the Brink of War" (Мир на гранях войны), *Voенно-промышлennyi Kurier* (hereafter cited as *VPK*), Mar. 13, 2017, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/35591>.

<sup>2</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, "Meeting of Colleagues of the Russian Federation's Ministry of Defence on the Question of the Process of Implementation of the Presidential Decrees of 7 May 2012 and the development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" (Заседание Коллегии Министерства Обороны РФ по вопросу «О ходе выполнения указов Президента Российской Федерации от 7 мая 2012 г. и развитии Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации»), Website of the Ministry of Defence, Nov. 7, 2017, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12149743@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12149743@egNews).

to classification of contemporary armed conflicts,” and that it was “too early” to use “hybrid warfare” as an established classificatory term.<sup>3</sup>

Equally, Gerasimov acknowledged that there is no definition of *war* in Russia’s official documents. The military doctrine, he observed, defined it as a “form of solution for interstate or internal state contradictions using military force,”<sup>4</sup> and “active discussion” continued over anything approaching a more precise definition. He characterized this debate as being between those “scholars and specialists” who support classical interpretations, and others who advocate a fundamental review of the content of the term *war* because armed conflict is not its only defining attribute and other attributes such as economics and information aspects are relevant.<sup>5</sup>

For Gerasimov himself, conflicts of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century differ from those of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of the participants, weaponry used, and methods of confrontation. Armed conflicts in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century create a “new perception of peace time,” he suggested, when, although military or other forceful measures are not used against a state, its “national security and sovereignty becomes threatened and may be destroyed.” Equally, though, he stated that the spectrum of reasons and justifications for using military force is broadening, and it is now more often used to “secure the economic interests of the state under the slogan of defending democracy or promoting democratic values in this or that state.”<sup>6</sup>

Gerasimov acknowledged the mixed methods of struggle through the application of political, economic, diplomatic, information, and other nonmilitary measures, such as the harnessing of the protest potential of the population. But he also emphasized that the characteristic common to all modern conflicts is the use of armed force. “The main foundation of wars of today and for the foreseeable future remains as before. And their main characteristic is the fact of armed struggle,” he stated. “And so the question of defining the essence of war is not yet closed; instead, it continues to require careful study of the new forms of inter-state confrontation and the elaboration of effective methods to overcome them.” Developing long-term prognoses of

---

<sup>3</sup> Gerasimov, “World on the Brink.”

<sup>4</sup> Section 8, d. *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (Военная Доктрина Российской Федерации)*, No. 2976, approved on Dec. 25, 2014, Website of the Russian National Security Council, <http://scrf.gov.ru/security/military/document129/>. In the document, what Gerasimov calls “war” is termed “military conflict” and is defined as Gerasimov states.

<sup>5</sup> Gerasimov, “World on the Brink.” An extensive discussion of these questions, including material from roundtable discussions in Russia about the war in Syria and lessons for Russia and on hybrid war can be found in I. Popov and M. Khamzatov, *War of the Future. Conceptual Foundations and Practical Conclusions (Война будущего. Концептуальные основы и практические выводы)* (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Gerasimov, “World on the Brink.”



the military-political and strategic situations in the most important regions of the world, and of the characteristics of current armed conflicts, provides the basis for developing operating methods for military control and actions of troops.<sup>7</sup> Here are signs of the discussion in Russian military thought shifting from re-examining the essence of war to considering what to do about it in practical terms. Since 2017, this has become increasingly evident.

While the changing character of war remains under debate, the more specific focus is now the development of military strategy. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated in June 2019 that “conflicts of a new generation (*novogo pokoleniya*) reflect the merging of classical and asymmetric means of conducting armed conflict, where military actions are short and fast-flowing and there is simply no time to correct mistakes.” Thus, Russia needs to “modernize its theory of armed confrontation.” He highlighted the fact that already that year more than 20 conferences convening the military leadership with the military academy and other scientific-research organizations had examined and debated the theory of military art and the results were facilitating the further development of military strategy.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, military strategy in contemporary conditions was the key theme of 2019’s Russian Academy of Military Science conference, at which several contributors—Gerasimov prominent among them—addressing the theme.<sup>9</sup> In his speech, Gerasimov pursued themes he had already set out in previous speeches, but also reflected on a number of key points for Russian military strategy. He again noted new spheres of confrontation in modern conflicts and said that the methods of struggle are increasingly mixed with a complex of nonmilitary means. Yet the main content of military strategy, he stated, is about questions of preparation for war and its conduct *in the first instance by armed forces*. While he accepted that nonmilitary measures affect the cause and outcome of war, he argued that these areas are *separate* activities, with their own

---

<sup>7</sup> Gerasimov, “World on the Brink.”

<sup>8</sup> “The Theory of Armed Confrontation Requires Modernisation” (Теория вооруженного противоборства нуждается в модернизации), *Krasnaya Zvezda*, June 19, 2019, <http://redstar.ru/teoriya-vooruzhyonnogo-protivoborstva-nuzhdaetsya-v-modernizatsii/>; “The Russian Minister of Defence Spoke of Changes in the Character of Modern Wars” (Министр обороны России заявил об изменении характера современных войн), Website of the Russian Ministry of Defence, 18 June 2019, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12237310@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12237310@egNews).

<sup>9</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, “The Development of Military Strategy in Contemporary Conditions. Tasks of Military Science” (Развитие военной стратегии в современных условиях. Задачи военной науки), *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk* (hereafter cited as *VAVN*) 2 (2019); V. Ostankov, “The Character of Modern Armed Conflicts and its Influence on Military Strategy” (Характер современных военных конфликтов и его влияние на военную стратегию), *VAVN* 2 (2019); Alexander Korabelnikov, “The Interrelation Between Military Strategy, Operational Art and Tactics in Modern Conditions” (Взаимосвязь военной стратегии, оперативного искусства и тактики в современных условиях) *VAVN* 2 (2019); E. Derbin, “On the Perfecting of Strategic Leadership of Russian Defence” (О совершенствовании стратегического руководства обороны России), *VAVN* 2 (2019).

strategies, means of action, and resources, which the military should coordinate rather than direct.<sup>10</sup>

The priority of military strategy, he emphasized, is the study of the means of increasing Russia's combat power: the size and quality of the armed forces, their staffing and technical equipment, their moral and psychological condition, and their level of preparation and combat readiness. Military strategy, he therefore suggested, encompasses two directions: the theoretical, in terms of understanding the changing character of war; and the practical, in terms of preparing to deter an aggressor and, if necessary, waging war.

He also named three particular features of Russia's military strategy. First, he focused on an "active defense strategy" (*strategiya aktivnoi oborony*), which, in "accordance with the defensive character of Russia's Military Doctrine, envisages a complex of measures for the preemptive neutralization of threats to state security." Second, he pointed to the fulfilment of tasks for the "protection and promotion" of Russia's national interests beyond its territorial boundaries in the framework of a "strategy of limited actions" (*strategiya ogranichennykh deistvii*). And third, he underlined the need for an enhanced system of territorial defense.<sup>11</sup>

This sustained debate about contemporary warfare and military strategy presents an opportunity to examine Russian thinking and activity at a time when Russia is understood to be an adversarial actor of a new era of "great power competition." At the same time, the Russian leadership has begun to reconsider and update its thinking on what in the West would be called "Grand Strategy." Moscow has begun to conduct a wider update of strategic planning and forecasting, looking to the 2030s and beyond. This has led to the approval of a new State Arms Program to 2027 (in 2018); a new Strategic Forecast to 2035 (in 2019); and the Foundations of State Policy in the Sphere of Nuclear Deterrence, the Energy Strategy to 2035, and the Foundations of State Policy in the Arctic to 2035 (all in the first half of 2020). The updated National Security Strategy is due later in 2020, and updated versions of other documents relating to security, defense, and foreign policy are likely to appear in the not-too-distant future. The broad thrust of Russian strategic planning suggests that Moscow also envisages the emergence of a "great power competition," as major powers vie for access to resources, trade and transit routes, and access to markets.

While Russia's military strategy is subordinate to state "Grand Strategy," the influence of defense and military matters is not limited to Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine. This can be observed across its strategic plans—for instance, in the Energy Strategy and the Arctic development documents. *Strategy* is not merely synonymous with *plans*; strategy bridges the gap between the development and the execution of plans. Therefore, the

---

<sup>10</sup> Gerasimov, "Development of Military Strategy."

<sup>11</sup> Gerasimov, "Development of Military Strategy."

issues of where and how the modernization of the military fits—i.e., where it sees itself to fit and what it sees its role to be—in this overhaul, and its tasks in implementing it, is key to a more nuanced understanding of Russian activity on the international stage. Thus, a clear understanding of how the Russian leadership views contemporary and future wars and how it intends to address them in practical terms is not just timely but also necessary. What are the core features and tenets of Russian military strategy?

This paper will now look at two foundation points for understanding Russian military strategy, particularly the role of history and how it shapes thinking. It will then examine how military strategy is defined in Russian military science, before finally illustrating some constraints that the leadership faces. At the outset, it is worth noting that Russian military strategy is a complex nexus of many interrelated elements, each influencing the other to varying degrees. These elements address broader questions of politics and statecraft, and specifically their military aspects—such as the relationship of strategy to operational art and tactics, deterrence and the organization and preparation for it, and the waging of different types of conflicts and wars—each of which brings a further series of connections.<sup>12</sup> Not all of these themes can be addressed here in the depth they deserve. Escalation management and nuclear strategy have received recent detailed coverage elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> but the interlinking of military strategy with military doctrine, diplomacy, economics, and civilian morale all warrant additional attention in future studies.

---

<sup>12</sup> The variations of armed conflict, local war, regional war and large-scale war are defined in *Military Doctrine*, Sections 8, e, f, g and h.

<sup>13</sup> For examination of escalation management, see Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, CNA, DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev. Apr. 2020, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf). For the role of nuclear weapons in Soviet and Russian military strategy, including the point that nuclear war is understood to be a tool of state policy rather than military strategy, see Andrei Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91* (London: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 54, 59.

# Understanding Russian Military Strategy

---

## Cross-cultural translation

Examining another state's strategy raises the perennial problem of trying to understand a different political entity and culture, especially one that is widely considered to pose a potential threat. There are well-known problems inherent in the translation of terms and contexts: where words are cognates and contexts are similar, translators can tend to assume that words are synonymous.<sup>14</sup>

Politically, this includes the difficulty of interpreting the other's intent. The dissonance between Moscow and Euro-Atlantic capitals is obvious, with both sides seeing the actions and intentions of the other in terms of threat. If Gerasimov understands the Russian military doctrine as being of a *defensive* character, therefore, this view is at odds with a lot of thinking across the Euro-Atlantic area about Moscow's activities, which are usually characterized as offensive and aggressive. The further exploration of this dissonance does not imply acceptance of Moscow's position as being entirely defensive; rather it looks at Russian activities beyond the current view that the lines between war and peace are blurred, towards the idea that the lines between the offensive and the defensive are blurred.

Moreover, there are differences in category that can mislead. Precision in semantics is a feature of Russian military science, and much can be lost in translation to English, since terms have different or alternative meanings from those with which Western readers are familiar.<sup>15</sup> Left undiagnosed, these become a source of mirror imaging or misinterpretation: since 2014, Western analysts have ascribed a range of strategies and doctrines to Moscow's activities which do not exist in the Russian lexicography.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert Bathurst, *Intelligence and the Mirror. On Creating an Enemy* (London: SAGE publications, 1993), pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Dick, *From Defeat to Victory. The Eastern Front, Summer 1944* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Mirror imaging and the imposition of Western concepts on Russian thinking and activity are discussed at length elsewhere and do not need further elaboration here. See Timothy Thomas, *Russian Military Strategy. Impacting 21st Century Reform and Geopolitics* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: FMSO, 2015). p. 37.

The word *strategy* is a good example: the fact that it has various meanings compounds differences in understanding the hierarchy in the state architecture, both in scale of operation and in function. In Euro-Atlantic terms, *strategy* has become very broadly defined; its meanings range from Grand Strategy as a state-level activity to create power, to long-term plans and goals.<sup>17</sup> But in the Russian approach, *military strategy* is much more clearly defined as being below the level of state policy and having very specific functions. (Similarly, *doctrine* means different things in the US and in Russia. In the US, military doctrine is developed by the military to win wars. Russian military doctrine is of a higher theoretical level and is defined as “establishing the essence, aims and character of possible wars,” and as “encompassing economic, technical, legal and other essential aspects of military politics relevant to the state for the preparation of war.”)<sup>18</sup>

The US has a “naval strategy”; however, the Soviet Navy—and now the Russian Navy—could have no separate strategy in this sense, because it could not have a mission that was independent from that of the other armed forces, let alone from political goals. As Alexander Svechin, one of the most prominent Russian strategic theorists, wrote in the 1920s: “Quite often we encounter the term ‘naval strategy,’ but such terminology is ‘based on a misunderstanding.’” He stated that it is only possible to speak of naval operational art when naval forces are given separate operational goals, because it is only one component of an overall operation rather than significant in itself. Thus, there is “no need to speak of strategy in this case ... because it would be a clear misuse of the term.”<sup>19</sup>

## The centrality of history

History permeates contemporary Russian military thinking and strategy. History features both in the way that military experience is rendered into didactic lessons of history to advance military science, and in the arc of the theoretical development of Russian military strategy.

---

<sup>17</sup> Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War. Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> The author is grateful to Charles Bartles for this point. For the definition of *military doctrine*, see Dmitry Rogozin (ed.), *War and Peace in Terms and Definitions. Military-Political Dictionary* (Война и мир в терминах и определениях. Военно-политический словарь) (Moscow: Izdatelstvo “Veche,” 2017), p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Svechin, *Strategy* (Minneapolis: East View Information Services, 1992), 4<sup>th</sup> printing, 2004, p. 70. If Svechin’s definitions are categorical, a discussion may still be had over how to define Russian thinking about maritime matters, and where these fit into Russian strategic thought. Note, for instance, that Russia has considerable maritime commercial assets and interests—not least as a result of energy trading—and Moscow recently published updated versions of its *Maritime Doctrine and the Fundamentals of State Policy in the Field of Naval Activities*.

Thus, the echoes of the learning, experience, and debates of the 1920s and 1930s are audible in today's discussion, as are the echoes of the debates of the 1940s, 1960s, and 1980s. This history often serves as an anvil on which contentious contemporary issues are hammered out in debates.<sup>20</sup>

The Great Patriotic War, as World War II is known in Russia, is of particular significance. A seminal event, it receives consistent attention in the professional press as the military debates the changing character of war and war of the future, and it influences how the Russian military thinks about its organization and doctrine.<sup>21</sup> A particular theme is the command and control of large groups of forces and the state in time of contemporary war. For some, the Great Patriotic War reflects the “pinnacle” of development of Soviet military strategy, because during that war “principally new forms of strategic actions were discovered and successfully implemented,” most notably the operations of groups of fronts.<sup>22</sup>

This is visible in current policy thinking: Gerasimov has emphasized the relevance of the lessons of strategic leadership of that war for contemporary conditions.<sup>23</sup> And according to its commanding officer, General Mikhail Mizintsev, the National Defense Management Centre—which opened in 2014 and is a major feature of Moscow's attempt to generate strategy through augmented coordinated command and control—is analogous to the commander-in-chief headquarters during the Great Patriotic War, which “centralized all controls of the military machine and the economy of the nation in the interests of the war.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Steven Main, “It's the Thought Process That First Went to War: Marshal I Sergeev, General A Kvashnin and the Experience of World War II. A Commentary,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>21</sup> Makhmut Gareev, “War of the Worlds on New Rules” (Война миров по новым правилам), *VPK*, Mar. 26, 2019, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/49229>.

<sup>22</sup> V. Zolotarev, *History of the Military Strategy of Russia* (История военной стратегии России) (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, “The Experience of Strategic Leadership in the Great Patriotic War and the Organisation of Unified Direction of Defence in Modern Conditions” (Опыт стратегического руководства в Великой Отечественной войне и организация единого управления обороны в современных условиях), *VAVN* 2 (2015); S. Makarov, “The Work of the Organs of Strategic Leadership in the Pre-War Years and in the Initial Period of the Great Patriotic War” (Работа органов стратегического руководства в предвоенные годы и в начальном периоде Великой Отечественной войны), *VAVN* 2 (2015). Another version of Gerasimov's piece was published later that spring after a conference examining the war's lessons, with the explicit title “Command Cadres of the Current Russian Army and Navy Must Know the Lessons of the Last War.” Valeriy Gerasimov, “Commanders of Today's Russian Army and Navy Must Know the Lessons of the Last War” (Командные кадры современной Российской армии и флота должны знать уроки минувшей войны), *VPK*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/25167>.

<sup>24</sup> “Immediate Readiness” (Мгновенная готовность), *Lenta.ru*, Nov. 29, 2014, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2014/11/29/ntsuo>.

The influence of history is also visible in the frequent references to Carl von Clausewitz and Basil Liddell Hart, and to Soviet/Russian thinkers, including Mikhail Frunze, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Alexander Svechin, Georgi Isserson, Vasiliy Sokolovsky, Nikolai Ogarkov, and Makhmut Gareev. The work of such figures influences today's Russian military strategy, even if their explicit influence waxes and wanes with fashion.

The influence of Nikolai Ogarkov, chief of the Soviet General Staff from 1977 to 1984, may be seen today in, for instance, the way that the Russian armed forces are structured and operate. He had advocated taking advantage of new technological possibilities to reshape the Soviet armed forces towards high-readiness, mixed-force combat groupings conducting strategic operations in military theaters on strategic directions. Much of his vision has come to pass in the last decade of Russian reforms, including complex strategic exercises drawing on combined forces from different military districts, the integration of combat branches and arms on strategic operations in theaters of military activity, and conventional deterrence.<sup>25</sup>

## Debating military strategy: strategy of destruction or a strategy of attrition?

Equally, a series of long-running debates characterizes current Russian thinking about military strategy. The Russian military has its share of those who may be termed “traditionalists” and those who may be termed “innovators,” as well as dominant theories and approaches, and interservice rivalries. Debates on the impact of technology and new weapons on military strategy have continued. So have debates on the duration, sequence, and relationships between different phases of war, from the initial period of war through the middle phases of theater battles and ground operations, to the terminal phase of occupation and the political collapse of the adversary.

Regarding military strategy, though, an overarching debate has persisted between those arguing for taking the offensive and those preferring the defensive as the best means of achieving victory in war. This debate has played out through arguments over the “strategy of destruction” and the “strategy of attrition,” with advocates of each also encompassing questions of whether Russia's military strategy should prepare Russia for a shorter or longer war.

---

<sup>25</sup> Michael Kofman, “The Ogarkov Reforms: The Soviet Inheritance Behind Russia's Military Transformation,” *CCW Russia Brief* 5 (June 2019), <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2019/07/11/the-ogarkov-reforms-the-soviet-inheritance-behind-russias-military-transformation/>.



For much of the Soviet era, most Soviet military commanders advocated an offensive strategy and combat operations. In part, this was framed as a strategy of destruction (*strategiya porazheniya*). Such ideas were promoted by those such as Tukhachevsky (and his followers), who asserted that it was possible to conceive of a war that starts with surprise and is waged by methods that destroy the first echelon of the enemy combat forces, disrupt the enemy's mobilization, and destroy its vital centers of power.<sup>26</sup> For advocates of that view, the force of the initial blow was of decisive significance, and the initiative sustained through uninterrupted activity: speed would offer victory, but hesitation, delay, or interruption could only have negative consequences.<sup>27</sup>

Such a strategy of destruction envisaged the decisive annihilation of the enemy in one push. The direction of the main blow would split an enemy coalition, and operations would seek to have a permanent impact on the enemy not by pushing it back but by encircling and fragmenting it, splitting joint forces into separate arms to annihilate it. For Tukhachevsky, the defensive was only a strategy for the weaker party, a strategy carried out with limited forces against a superior enemy—at best, a temporary measure used either to alter the force ratio in order to set up a counteroffensive, or to support an offensive elsewhere. Victory in war could not be achieved through a defensive approach. Not all subscribed to such a view, though; some, such as Georgii Isserson, pointed out the difficulty of crushing the enemy with one quick strike and the need for conducting strategy through a series of operations.

A critic of this approach was Svechin, whose influence echoes throughout today's debate on military strategy. Svechin was a Tsarist and Soviet officer and the author of the book *Strategy* (1926), before he was twice purged in the 1930s and executed in 1938. Since the early 1990s, his work has taken an ever more visible place in Russian military thinking. Andrei Kokoshin, who has held a number of senior positions in the Soviet and Russian defense and political establishments, and has become one of the most important current Russian authors on strategy, admires Svechin's work so much that much of one of his own books on Soviet and Russian strategy explicitly draws on it.<sup>28</sup> And Svechin's ghost stalked the halls during the 2019

---

<sup>26</sup> Mikhail Tukhachevsky, *Selected Works* (Избранные произведения) (Moscow: Russian Chess House, 2020), p. 250.

<sup>27</sup> For extended discussion of Soviet views of the advantages of speed and the dangers of hesitation and delay, see Nathan Leites, *Soviet Style in War* (New York: Crane Russak, 1982).

<sup>28</sup> Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91*, p. 8 and passim.



Academy of Military Sciences conference on military strategy, during which he was repeatedly cited by different speakers, including Gerasimov.<sup>29</sup>

Svechin challenged the idea of a strategy of destruction for limiting the concept of the offensive only to military matters; he believed that war should also be waged through political and economic means. Such political and economic measures would require a long time to have an effect, and thus require prolonging the war. But such a “strategy of attrition” (*strategiya izmora*) might also lead to the achievement of the most decisive effects and the attainment of the ultimate goals through the complete exhaustion of the enemy. This strategy could involve active military operations of limited goals up to the moment of the final crisis, even though the state’s goals in the war might be far wider.<sup>30</sup> (Note that it is the “strategy of attrition” that features in Ministry of Defense definitions of strategy today, with reference to Svechin, not to Tukhachevsky’s strategy of destruction.)

Svechin noted that the choice between these strategies was both very significant, because of the different preparatory requirements, and very challenging, because of the difficulty in foreseeing the character of the coming war. This, he suggested, usually led to a compromise or hedge between the approaches, with the intention of a quick decisive strike being balanced by preparation for a prolonged war of attrition. The character and duration of the war would be a result of the conditions on all three fronts—political, military, and economic—and, if an enemy was not characterized by internal political conflict, they could hardly be defeated by a single destructive strike; defeat would come only through a war of attrition.

The resolution of this gap can be found in the work of Gareev, who in the late 1980s drew on the work of Mikhail Frunze to emphasize a blurring of the offensive and defensive. Frunze pointed to the value of gradually wearing down and weakening the enemy in political, economic, and military terms through a strategy of attrition, and the need to prepare the nation for a protracted and intense war with the mobilization of all forces and capabilities. Equally, he distinguished between the offensive and defensive at different levels: a politically defensive war should still be fought with offensive combat operations, since only the offensive could defeat the enemy. Thus, a thread connected thinking across the century, from Frunze in the 1920s to Gareev in the 1980s and beyond, that saw the need for blending of the offensive and defensive.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> For instance, Gerasimov, “Development of Military Strategy”; Ostankov, “Character of Modern Armed Conflicts.” Another contributor, Alexander Korabelnikov, is a laureate of the Academy of Military Science’s Svechin Prize.

<sup>30</sup> Svechin, *Strategy*, pp. 94-96.

<sup>31</sup> See Makhmut Gareev, M.V. Frunze, *Military Theorist* (London: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1988).

## How Russia defines military strategy

How is Russian military strategy defined today? The Russian Ministry of Defense defines *military strategy* as a “component of military art, its highest sphere, which includes the theory and practice of the military activity of the state.” The contents of military strategy are

based on the results of the evaluation of the state of and directions of development of military-political conditions, and on scientifically-based goals, principles, directions and tasks, and the objective needs and real capabilities of the functioning and development of the military organisation of the state. Military strategy is closely connected with the politics of the state and is directly dependent on it. Politics defines the tasks for military strategy, and strategy provides their fulfilment. In military strategy, the main principles of the Military Doctrine of the state are given concrete shape where applicable to the military sphere.<sup>32</sup>

The fundamental questions in theory and practice therefore address a range of matters such as the leadership of the armed forces in peacetime and wartime; the preparation of the aims and tasks of the armed forces in war and military activities at the strategic level; the content, methods, and conditions relevant to preparing and conducting the war as a whole; and the different forms of strategic activity. It also includes foresight—estimating the likely character of future war—and strategic planning, and thus the preparation of moral-psychological, technical, and rear-echelon activities of the armed forces and the preparation of the economy, population, and territory of the state for war. The official definition continues with the important point that military strategy should include an assessment of the strategic views of leading states and coalitions, and their capabilities for preparing, unleashing, and conducting wars and military activities on a strategic scale.<sup>33</sup>

No single major recent work on Russian military strategy is as significant as Svechin’s *Strategy* in the 1920s or Sokolovsky’s *Soviet Military Strategy* of the 1960s, or has the nuance of the writings of Ogarkov.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, other sources provide some embellishment on this official definition, and four interlinking points emerge beyond the basic foundation that military

---

<sup>32</sup> “Strategy Military” (Стратегия военная), *Encyclopaedia of the Ministry of Defence*, Website of the Ministry of Defence, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=14383@morfdictionary>.

<sup>33</sup> “Strategy Military,” *Encyclopaedia of the Ministry of Defence*.

<sup>34</sup> Ogarkov oversaw contributions, including those on military strategy, to the *Soviet Military Encyclopaedia* (“Strategiya voennaya,” *Sovetskaya voennaya entsyklopedia*), vol. 7 (Moscow: Voennoe Izd., 1976-1980), pp. 555-556), as well as those to the Soviet military press. He also wrote the book *History Teaches Alertness* (История учит бдительности (Moscow: Voennoe Izd., 1985).

strategy is the theory and practice of preparing the armed forces and the state for war (including the study of the enemy), and the planning and waging of that war.

The first such point is about the subordination of military strategy to state policy. Apart from some early disagreements in the 1920s—led by Tukhachevsky, who stated that the “intrusion of politics into strategy is an extreme evil,” and asserted that “to be successful in military operations the military should enjoy complete authority, entrusted unconditionally with matters of policy”<sup>35</sup>—consensus has largely existed among Soviet and Russian military professionals that military strategy is subordinate to state policy. Svechin, for instance, emphasized that politics guides the use of military strategy: military strategy is the tool of politics. He argued that because war and military operations were only a component of a political conflict, military strategists should not complain about political interference in the leadership of military operations. Nevertheless, he did point out that mistaken policies “bear the same fruit in war” as in other fields, and that it would behoove responsible politicians to be familiar with the tenets of military strategy. If politics guides military strategy, therefore, there is interaction between the two.<sup>36</sup> This is not to suggest permanent or complete harmony between state leaders and the professional military with no instances of each disagreeing with or disparaging the other,<sup>37</sup> but this broad position has characterized the debate since Tukhachevsky’s day.<sup>38</sup>

The second point is about evolutionary continuity and change. As one Russian has observed, development has “not been straightforward, with periods of stagnation, departure from traditional ways, breaks and stumbles: often on the eve of and during major wars, there were large-scale strategic miscalculations.”<sup>39</sup> While Russian military strategy offers the evidence of the “huge wealth of military theory in Russia, not in isolation from the international process, but following its own paths with its own specific style and an active character,” it also includes changes in military science and the strategies of other leading states and coalitions, including the principal threat. Thus, it seeks to take into account the “general process of the development of military art in the world” and the “categories and definitions of other states, to take all of

---

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91*, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Svechin, *Strategy*, pp. 74, 83.

<sup>37</sup> For disagreements and mutual criticism during the Cold War, especially over the question of the role of nuclear weapons and the reduction of the size of the armed forces, see Boris Sokolov, *Marshal Malinovskii: Hero of the Soviet Union. Architect of the Modern Soviet Army*, trans. R. Harrison (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2017), p. 390; John Erickson, *Soviet Military Power* (London: RUSI, 1971), pp. 7-8.

<sup>38</sup> Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91*, p. 56.

<sup>39</sup> Zolotarev, *History of the Military Strategy of Russia*, p. 551.

what is useful of this into account and use it for reaching Moscow's own aims" and "working out its own line to counter the strategic efforts of Russia's enemies."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, much Russian thinking about military strategy is about the strategy of other leading states.<sup>41</sup> And Gerasimov has spent much time reflecting on the evolving threats to Russia, especially those posed by the US and its allies. He has repeatedly highlighted the global sweep of US power, and written of US globally integrated operations and "21<sup>st</sup> century Blitzkrieg," which entails "the swiftest possible establishment in any region of inter-service troop groupings capable of destroying an adversary in joint operations in different operational environments."<sup>42</sup> And his 2019 assessment addressed how the US conceives of war and its development of a "fundamentally new" "Trojan Horse strategy," which seeks actively to use the "protest potential of a fifth column to destabilise conditions while simultaneously delivering strikes against the most important strategic targets."<sup>43</sup>

Although the definition of Russian military strategy today broadly echoes the Soviet definition that Ogarkov set out in the late 1970s, in 2019 Gerasimov acknowledged that military strategy has gone through several stages of evolution, from strategies of destruction and attrition, to strategies of global war, nuclear deterrence, and indirect action. Given the changing character of war, he added, "some principles of strategy stop being applicable, and others take on new content." Moreover, he stated that Russia "must be ahead of the enemy in the development of military strategy" in order to be "one step ahead" and to retain the initiative. For Gerasimov, the Syrian experience has played an important role in the development of strategy, particularly in terms of expeditionary operations—for instance, in creating a "new practical sphere," the basis of which is the establishment of "self-sufficient groups of forces based on one branch of the armed forces with high mobility and the ability to adopt a major role in required tasks'. The

---

<sup>40</sup> Zolotarev, *History of the Military Strategy of Russia*, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> One major contribution to Soviet military strategic thinking during the Cold War addressed the "military strategy of imperialist states and their preparation of new wars" in chapter 2, before dealing with Soviet military strategy only in chapter 3. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 dealt with modern war, organizing and developing armed forces and methods of conducting warfare. Vasily Sokolovsky (ed.), *Military Strategy (Военная стратегия)* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatelstvo Ministerstva Oborony SSSR, 1968). Today, the Ministry of Defence includes definitions of several "strategies" of the USA or NATO. See <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/search.htm>. There is also much discussion of the strategies of the primary threat (the US) in the military press. Examples are "Strategy of Destruction" (Стратегия Разрушения), *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Mar. 24, 2014, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/advice/item/22596-strategiya-razrusheniya>, and "Third Strategy" (Третья стратегия), *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Nov. 29, 2015, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/advice/item/26778-tretya-strategiya>.

<sup>42</sup> Valeriy Gerasimov, "On the Experience of Syria" (По опыту Сирии), *VPK*, Mar. 7, 2016, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/29579>.

<sup>43</sup> Gerasimov, "Development of Military Strategy."

“seizure and retention of information superiority” is one of the “most important conditions for realising this strategy’.<sup>44</sup> Other senior Russian officers have also emphasized the need to create and use integrated groupings in wars of the new type, pointing to the need to “develop a unified understanding of the theory of the use of such groupings in combat.”<sup>45</sup> This emphasizes the point that Russian military strategy *evolves in interactive dialogue*. Through continuity and change, it is *competitive*.

The third point is that Russian military strategy is about the bridge between theory and practice. As Gerasimov stated, the development of military strategy as a science should encompass two directions: the development of a system of knowledge about war; and the completion of practical activity for the prevention, preparation, and conduct of war.<sup>46</sup> For Gerasimov, the theoretical part is primarily concerned with foresight and forecasting of future wars—not only to develop new strategies for preparing the armed forces and the state as a whole for conducting them, but also to prevent them. Indeed, he stated, the “principle of preventing war is in the forecasting of the development of military-political and strategic conditions in the interests of the timely identification of military dangers and threats and the response to them.” He continued, “This foundation of forecasts serves as the initial data for working out forms and means of using armed forces.”<sup>47</sup> Here, Gerasimov seems to be in tune with Svechin, who noted that the strategist will be “successful if he correctly evaluates the nature of a war which depends on different economic, social, geographical, administrative and technical factors.”<sup>48</sup>

In practice, other themes cascade from this. According to Svechin, strategy is the “art of the entire high command” of the armed forces. As a practical art, it is a very important component of military leadership, which links state policy to operations. He states, “Strategy begins when we see a series of successive goals or stages towards the achievement of the ultimate goals of the war,” and it must “look forward and take the long term into consideration.” Thus, the strategic art involves the ability to justify choices between more than one operational method. But it is also about the leader’s ability to apply the art of war—the bridge between policy and

---

<sup>44</sup> Gerasimov, “Development of Military Strategy.”

<sup>45</sup> Alexander Dvornikov, “Headquarters for New Wars” (Штабы для новых войн), *VPK*, July 23, 2018, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/43971>. For an assessment of Russia’s intervention in Syria, including some reflection on its expeditionary nature, see Michael Kofman, “Syria and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow’s Military Strategy and Operational Performance,” in Robert Hamilton et al. (eds.), *Russia’s War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned* (Philadelphia: FPRI, 2020).

<sup>46</sup> Gerasimov, “Development of Military Strategy.”

<sup>47</sup> Gerasimov, “Development of Military Strategy.”

<sup>48</sup> Svechin, *Strategy*, p. 69.

operations: if strategy is an extension of politics, operations are an extension of strategy and the strategist “cannot be indifferent to operational art.”<sup>49</sup>

That Gerasimov cited Svechin on this suggests that he agrees, but a noteworthy supplement may be found in the discussion of achieving surprise as part of the art of war. While the Euro-Atlantic discussion makes much of the Russian concept of *maskirovka* as being the way in which Russia seeks to deceive an opponent, this is only part of the story. *Maskirovka* is indeed intended to deceive the opponent through a complex of activities designed to conceal from the opponent the scale, activities, and intentions of one’s own forces. But the concept of *voennaya khitrost*—or “military cunning”—is another vital feature of the commander’s art: it is the “art of leading the enemy into confusion” while fulfilling military tasks. It is part of the aim of achieving surprise and “creating favorable conditions for the destruction of the enemy.”<sup>50</sup>

Again, here it is worth highlighting the consistent emphasis that officials and observers place on the military’s role in war—and emphasizing that while they acknowledge the changing character of war and the role of nonmilitary measures, armed struggle has the “decisive role” and military strength “not only keeps its role but becomes even more important.” The military strategist should understand that action will become more “dynamic, active and decisive” as tactical and operational pauses disappear. Thus, military strategy requires the development of interservice groupings and the definition of their place in the system of battle and in the *overall fire-destruction of the enemy (ognevoe porazheniye protivnika)*.<sup>51</sup>

The fourth feature of military strategy, which also relates to the practical aspect, is the understanding of *depth through the state*. Svechin’s statement that the strategist takes into account the “entire rear, both his own and his enemy’s, represented by the state with all its economic and political capabilities,”<sup>52</sup> is echoed today. Again, Russian military strategy sees a blurring of lines, particularly between the offensive and the defensive, with the need to defeat the enemy throughout the depth of territory through a mix of long-distance strikes and

---

<sup>49</sup> Svechin, *Strategy*, pp. 70, 73.

<sup>50</sup> For definitions of *maskirovka* and *khitrost voennaya*, see Ministry of Defence, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=7917@morfDictionary>, and <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=11498@morfDictionary>.

<sup>51</sup> Ostankov, “Character of Modern Armed Conflicts,” pp. 31, 33. Emphasis added. *Fire destruction of the enemy* is defined as “the destruction of the enemy with fire from different types of weapons, including rocket forces, aviation and the recce-fire complex with the use of conventional and incendiary ammunitions.” See the Ministry of Defence’s encyclopaedia, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=7453@morfDictionary>.

<sup>52</sup> Svechin, *Strategy*, p. 69.

sabotage and internal destabilization through protests.<sup>53</sup> As Gerasimov stated in 2019, “One of the characteristic features of modern military conflicts is the destabilisation of the internal security of a state by sabotage and terrorism”—which is why the “elaboration of a territorial defense system and measures for constant readiness are an important direction in the development of military strategy.” The enhanced coordination of activities of a range of federal organs is required in order to manage the tasks of territorial defense.<sup>54</sup> The echo of Svechin’s point is clear: if an enemy is not characterized by internal political conflict, they can hardly be defeated by a single destructive strike; defeat can be reached only through a war of attrition.

## Constraints on military strategy

The emphasis on the bridge between theory and practice requires some reflection on what might be called the “constraints of real life” in Russian military strategy: the gaps between theory and practice, between plans and their implementation. First, if forecasting the character of future wars is one of the most important but complicated tasks in military strategy,<sup>55</sup> according to one group of Russian authors, the quality of forecasting is very uneven, with a number of defects. Problems include the lack of agreed-on methods of modelling for assessing the state and development of military-political conditions and the strategic character of military threats and achievable levels of military security, the absence of methodology and models which would allow the establishment of sufficient combat capability to parry possible military threats, and the obsolescence of operational models for combat activities of strategic and operational groups of forces. Moreover, not only is the number of qualified researchers able to carry out such work in “irreversible decline,” but the operational staff of the military’s leadership at various levels still exhibits mistrust towards mathematical modelling methods, seeing it as an additional and unjustifiable burden.<sup>56</sup>

The process of strategic planning as it relates to military and security questions is also subject to persistent criticism. Assessing the draft federal law “On Strategic Planning” in 2012, one

---

<sup>53</sup> Ostankov, “Character of Modern Armed Conflicts,” p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> Gerasimov, “Development of Military Strategy.”

<sup>55</sup> Gerasimov, “Development of Military Strategy”; Ostankov, “Character of Modern Armed Conflicts.”

<sup>56</sup> Vasily Burenok (ed), *Concept for the Foundations of the Future Outline of Force Components of the Military Organisation of the Russian Federation* (Концепция обоснования перспективного облика силовых компонентов военной организации Российской Федерации) (Moscow: Academy of Rocket and Artillery Science, 2018), pp. 455-456. For more detailed analysis of Russian thinking about the correlation of forces and means, see Clint Reach et al., *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2020).



well-placed Russian suggested that the content of the new law project did not offer a coherent, integrated platform for regulating strategic planning across the whole system of national security. Indeed, Sergei Belokon, who has served on the General Staff, criticized this early draft for being merely a “conglomerate of words” that was impossible to use in a practical way.<sup>57</sup>

Since the law “On Strategic Planning” was signed in 2014, Russian analysts have continued to emphasize problems such as ongoing debates within the state apparatus, particularly between economists and the security sector. Incompatible methodologies and the lack of an integrated approach mean that two systems of strategic planning are emerging that are poorly, if at all, connected. There is, therefore, plenty of formal implementation of the law, they assert, but it leads only to the growth of a mountain of papers that correspond poorly to each other. Belokon suggests that the timing between forecasting and planning is disjointed, such that the absence of meaningful, timely forecasts is a persistent phenomenon. He also suggests that the quality of forecasting “leaves something to be desired” because the continued use of Soviet-era models is inappropriate for current conditions. Finally, he criticizes the Ministry of Economic Development’s role in preparing forecasts that apply only in peacetime and that do not examine the likelihood of Russia’s participation in war and armed conflict, even in theory.<sup>58</sup> Other observers also question the quality of state management, pointing to bureaucratic inertia such that “the probability of the successful use of the new system of strategic planning in prevailing conditions” appears to be “extremely low.”<sup>59</sup>

This leads to the second constraint: the “human element.” While corruption is a problem that is often remarked on in the Russian military (and in society more broadly), there are other constraints on effectiveness that deserve mention. Russian historians show how senior Soviet officers recalled serious problems, including the indolence, laziness, lack of understanding, and

---

<sup>57</sup> Sergei Belokon, “Stepchild of State Strategic Planning” (Пасынок государственного стратегического планирования), *VAVN* 41, no. 4 (2012).

<sup>58</sup> Sergei Belokon, “Digital Technologies as Instruments of Evaluating the Level of Military Security of Russia,” (Цифровые технологии как инструментарию оценивания уровня военной безопасности России), *VAVN* 69, no.4 (2019), pp. 10-11.

<sup>59</sup> Maxim Vilisov, “The Role of Legislation on Strategic Planning in the Formation of State Policy” (Роль законодательства о стратегическом планировании в формировании государственной политики), *Vlast* 6 (2016), [https://www.isras.ru/index.php?page\\_id=2384&id=4307&l=&j=2](https://www.isras.ru/index.php?page_id=2384&id=4307&l=&j=2); Vladimir Nazarov and Dmitry Afinogenov, “Problems of the Development of a General Theory of National Security in the Context of the Amendments of the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation” (Проблемы развития общей теории национальной безопасности в контексте корректировки стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации), *Vlast* 1 (2020), [https://www.isras.ru/index.php?page\\_id=2384&id=7035&l=&j=2](https://www.isras.ru/index.php?page_id=2384&id=7035&l=&j=2). For more detailed examination, see J. Cooper, “Strategic Planning in Russia: A Mid 2020 Update,” unpublished paper, 26 June 2020.



resistance at every level in the chain of command.<sup>60</sup> And, as one attentive Western observer put it, “Spectacular as Russian prestige undertakings can be, and formidable as is the concentrated energy which they can focus, no one familiar with the country could miss the antithetical and no less characteristic qualities of vagueness, laziness, casualness, unpunctuality and the like.” Of particular note too, is the quality of *bezalabirshchina*, roughly translated as “sloppiness” or “an inability to see things through.”<sup>61</sup>

To these, other observers have added *oblomovshchina*—symptoms of which include the “talismanic belief that putting things down on paper is the same as doing them”—combined with an indifference to keeping to agreed-on schedules and actions and a fear of taking responsibility for decisions because of potential repercussions. Similarly, in Russia there are qualities that will be familiar to all those who have tried to create strategy. These include negligence (*khalatnost*), indecisiveness (*nereshitelnost*), vacillation (*kolebanie*), and the non-execution of a decision (*neispolnitelnost*), and mean that, as one observer noted, “a well composed plan is only the beginning of the work, the main thing is its realisation.” Indeed, officers may display willingness for action and to fulfil tasks, but “when the time arrives to report on practical execution of the matter, they find with similar ease ‘objective’ reasons which allegedly prevented that.”<sup>62</sup>

Such problems remain visible in the Russian military. In 2016, for instance, the commander and the chief of staff of the Baltic Sea Fleet were fired. The official reason was “ongoing serious shortcomings in their work,” including failures in combat training and low levels of combat readiness, units’ daily activities, poor care of subordinates, and misrepresentation of the real situation in reporting. This, apparently combined with a failure to implement the presidential decrees that constitute Moscow’s Grand Strategic vision (specifically, in this case, the failure to improve living conditions) led to their firing.<sup>63</sup> Other examples of problems in the chain of

---

<sup>60</sup> Valeriy Zamulin, “To Defeat the Enemy was Less a Problem than the Laziness and Indolence of Our Own Commanders,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>61</sup> Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Mind* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1977), pp. 40-41.

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Kennaway, “The Mental and Psychological Inheritance of Contemporary Russia,” in *Collected Writings, 1990-2000*, M20 (Camberley: Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2000), pp. 13-14; Leites, *Soviet Style in War*, pp. 7-12.

<sup>63</sup> “The Baltic Fleet Commander and the Chief of Staff Were Fired for Embellishing Reality” (Командующего и начштаб Балтфлота сняли за приукрашивание действительности), Lenta.ru, June 29, 2016, [https://lenta.ru/news/2016/06/29/za\\_upruschenia/](https://lenta.ru/news/2016/06/29/za_upruschenia/); “Out of the Ranks” (Из рядов вон выходящие), Lenta.ru, June 30, 2016, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/06/30/flot/>.

command and human error include the sinking of the drydock PD50 in October 2018 and the fire on *Admiral Kuznetsov* in December 2019.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> “The Head of OSK Allowed for the Human Factor in the Story of the Fire Aboard Admiral Kuznetsov” (Глава ОСК допустил человеческий фактор в истории с пожаром на Адмирале Кузнецове), Interfax, Dec. 12, 2019, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/687684>. Both incidents resulted in fatalities and injuries, as well as setbacks to the refit of *Admiral Kuznetsov*.

# Conclusion: Towards a New Era? Blurring the Lines Between Offensive and Defensive

---

A new stage appears to be emerging in Russia's conceptualization of war and military strategy, based on its new capabilities and the lessons of Syria. For many Euro-Atlantic officials and observers, Russia revealed a "new" form of war in 2014, one that was under preparation in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Many still see Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, followed by what is widely understood to be its "measures short of war" approach, to be the result of Moscow's study of Western strengths and methods, and its investment in new approaches and capabilities designed to exploit Western weaknesses.<sup>65</sup>

But Western attention should now focus on this evolving *new* stage of discussion of the essence of war and military strategy that emerged in the second half of the 2010s, and how it relates to both the shifts underway in the Russian defense and security landscape, and the clear global horizon that the Russian military now has. Preparing suitable deterrence and even defense—not only in northeastern Europe, but also in regions that appear likely to become increasingly contested, such as the high north and the global commons more broadly—demands the ability to envisage how and why Russian military strategy is evolving.

Russian military strategy includes the nature of the threat and a concept of future war, especially how strategies of the primary threat are evolving as well as the scope of the theaters of war—and thus the preparation for and waging of that war, including readiness and dispositions. Understanding Russian military strategy therefore involves a detailed grasp of how and why the Russian system functions as it does, what concepts Moscow itself develops (including how it translates and even transplants the ideas of other states), what roles key figures play in it, and what practical problems and constraints those figures face. Without a knowledge of Russian military history and science (particularly the trajectory of debates through Frunze, Svechin, and Ogarkov, to today), correct parsing of the public statements of senior figures will continue to prove elusive, and Euro-Atlantic officials and observers will risk misdiagnosing Russian military strategy. When the late Makhmut Gareev was deputy chief of

---

<sup>65</sup> General Sir Nicholas Carter, "RUSI Annual Chief of Defence Lecture," Dec. 11, 2018, <https://rusi.org/event/annual-chief-defence-staff-lecture-and-rusi-christmas-party-2018>; David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes. How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (London: Hurst, 2020).

the General Staff in the 1980s, he drew on Frunze to advance his thoughts on contemporary war; similarly, today Gerasimov draws on Svechin, with Ogarkov looking on.

Taking this further, Russian military strategy can be found at the meeting point of three arcs: an arc tracing the line through Russian history to foresight and the future of war; the arc through state policy to operations; and the arc through the conduct of war from the depth of one's own strategic rear to that of the enemy. As all strategists must, Russian military leaders face the problems of fog and friction as they develop both the theory and practice of strategy, including—especially—within their own system. Strategy is still difficult.

Looking ahead, getting Russian military strategy right will require reconsidering what has become orthodoxy in the Euro-Atlantic discussion about Russia, and retuning our thinking about Russia's approach to warfare. For some, there is a focus on Russia's tactical-level capabilities, such as so-called "anti-access / area denial," and how to solve local military questions. For many others, it has become axiomatic that the Russian military seeks to emphasize nonviolent means, or measures short of war, rather than combat capabilities and the role of force, and that the primary question, therefore, is the blurring of war and peace. Russia's understanding of war and military strategy is almost entirely overlooked.

Though Russian officials and observers do acknowledge the roles played by nonmilitary means—and, like many others through history, study the theoretical ideal of achieving the state's war aims without sustained combat if possible—the role of military force remains prominent in Russian thinking about warfare and strategy. Indeed, the Russian military emphasizes the roles of combat readiness and capability in its operations in Syria, speaking of "massive fire strikes." As we have seen, military strategy includes the requirement for the development of interservice force groupings, defining their place in battle and the overall *fire destruction of the enemy*.<sup>66</sup> If some of this speaks to the attempt to enhance deterrence, it also points to the shift in Russian thinking to the blurring of the lines of offensive and defensive, as made clear by Gerasimov's emphasis on strategies of "territorial defense," "limited actions," and "active defense." This requires refocusing Western attention, therefore, on the range of military strategic matters being discussed in Russia—from territorial defense and the preparation of the rear echelon (including moral-psychological aspects), to questions of forward deployment and prepositioning abroad in order to facilitate the defense of Russian interests beyond Russia's borders.

---

<sup>66</sup> Dvornikov, "Headquarters for New Wars"; Ostankov, "Character of Modern Armed Conflicts."

**This report was written by CNA's Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs Division (SP3).**

SP3 provides strategic and political-military analysis informed by regional expertise to support operational and policy-level decision-makers across the Department of the Navy, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the unified combatant commands, the intelligence community, and domestic agencies. The division leverages social science research methods, field research, regional expertise, primary language skills, Track 1.5 partnerships, and policy and operational experience to support senior decision-makers.

CNA is a not-for-profit research organization that serves the public interest by providing in-depth analysis and result-oriented solutions to help government leaders choose the best course of action in setting policy and managing operations.



Dedicated to the Safety and Security of the Nation

IOP-2020-U-028629-FINAL

3003 Washington Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201

[www.cna.org](http://www.cna.org) • 703-824-2000