

The Fog of Non-linear War:

Russia's Strategic Coercion in the Near Abroad

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As Georgians - and now Ukrainians – are keenly aware, the real security risk to countries in Russia's “near abroad” is not a direct armed conflict with the Russian armed forces, but the threat of *Nelineinaia voina*, or Non-linear war.

To prepare, Lithuania's conducted a country-wide war game this summer, Operation Lightning Strike, involving separatist insurgents, supported by the fictional country of Udija, which seized a government building (Scrutton and Sytas 2015). NATO also conducted military exercises in all three Baltic republics and in Poland (MacAskil 2015). Recently, an article presented another “hypo-thetical situation” in which Russia backs some “internal opposition” in the Russian-speaking city of Narva, Estonia. Locals start to protest to redress their grievances against the government. Then motorcycle gangs entered the fray and soon bombs went off in the railway station (Stuttaford 2015). Neighboring countries have read the writing on the wall. The whole neighborhood is worried that “the Russians are coming”. This time, there will be no formal declaration of war, and they will come in under the guise of humanitarian motives, on the backs of a fifth column of Russian-speakers, and without formal insignia (“little green men”). Russia's adamant denial – “there are no Russian troops in Ukraine” – rings as true as Ahmadinejad's claim that “there are no homosexuals in Iran”.

Non-linear war is neither new nor uniquely Russian (Popescu 2015). Nonetheless, if this form of conflict is indeed on the rise, then it behooves us to improve upon our currently rudimentary analytical understanding of it. NATO will station heavy US weaponry on the territory of ex-communist countries for the first time ever, but that will not be sufficient. This essay considers what we know about non-linear war and what we do not yet appreciate, and tries to bring some relevant social science theory to bear on this pressing policy problem. I analyze its core components, explain why it matters, along with its limits, and discuss possible responses that Georgia and the United States can take against it.

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The Origins of Non-Linear War

The term has an unusual (but very fitting) origin in a short story, which describes the first fictional non-linear war, and was published in *Russkiy Pioner* just a short time before Russia annexed Crimea. The author, Natan Dubovitskiy, was a pseudonym for former Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, Vladislav Surkov (Finucare 2015). The author characterizes this new form of war as intentionally blurring the line between war and peace and creating a permanent fog of war (hence, the title of this essay).

Another publication – this one from the *Military-Industrial Kurier* in 2013 – entitled “The Value of Science in Prediction,” puts a less fictional face on non-linear war. It argues that:



“In the 21st century, there is a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace....wars are no longer declared... in a matter of months and even days, a perfectly thriving state can be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war... The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”



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However, as recent archival documents demonstrate, this form of warfare is not new (Voronov 2014; Giles 2015). Stalin referred to it as “active reconnaissance,” since it combines standard combat operations with reconnaissance, sabotage and information warfare, while providing plausible deniability and enabling strategic coercion under the alleged legitimacy from international law (Voronov 2014; Goble, 2014; Dempsey 2015; Popescu 2015). The archives provide compelling evidence that Stalin used this strategy in his dealings with China and Korea, and apparently tried it (unsuccessfully) in Western Ukraine, Western Belarus and Eastern Poland, where “popular uprisings” failed to cascade according to his plan.

The U.S. also used similar approaches in Afghanistan, and in other areas where it has pursued regime change (Downes and Monten 2013; APSA-CD). Hizbullah did the same in its fight against Israel (Popescu 2015).

Although it comes with a new name, the form of war is really a set of “old wineskins in a new bottle”. To understand how states have wielded it, the key is still to understand state interests, and how states can use this strategy to harmonizes micro and macro-level tactics in order to subvert unfriendly states and leaders without direct armed conflict (Gerasimov 2013; Galeotti 2014; Hoffman 2009). Fundamentally, it combines information war with special operations in a manner that acts as a force multiplier for “useful” insurgents while maintaining plausible deniability (Perry 2015). Non-linear war relies on these insurgents in a manner similar to fifth columns in irredentist conflicts. However, unlike the goal of irredentism to unite ethnic kin spread across political borders into one political unit, one of the main political objectives of non-linear war (as Russia yields it) is to prevent neighboring countries from joining the EU and NATO by increasing domestic instability, thereby causing EU and NATO members to postpone any plans for institutional integration. A hallmark of this approach is the use of non-military means to achieve these political ends under the mask of humanitarian intervention and international law.

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The Core of Non-Linear War

Roughly speaking, Russia's use of this mode of warfare has five main components: information warfare, lawfare, petrol and debt pressure, sponsoring divisive political actors and criminal elements, exploiting the grievances of Russian-speakers (Cederberg 2015; Hunter 2015;; Ressinger 2014; Rynning 2015; Saunders 2015; Schuster 2014). Let's tackle these in turn.

The use of information warfare is certainly nothing new in the history of international relations, but Russia has made a concerted effort to escalate its online presence (e.g. Russia Today, the use of trolls to infiltrate social media, cyber-attacks using malware to attack government websites, etc., Jones 2015) and to coordinate it with micro-level tactics to foster discontent in target countries (Hunter 2015; Dempsey 2015). During its 2008 invasion of Georgia, Russia disabled communication systems (Hunter 2015). A cybergang in Russia recently sent malware to government organization in Ukraine. Perhaps most disturbing is the campaign of misinformation coming from the Kremlin: labeling the Maiden moment in Ukraine as fascist and arguing that Ukrainians are trying to escape "fascism" and get to Russia (Reisinger 2014).

Second is the use of energy dependence for political ends. Russia has been dubbed "the energetic bear" for (in)famously exploiting its natural resources as an instrument of its foreign policy. This is facilitated by the (unhealthy) dependence of other states on access to these resources, along with their debt for energy already consumed (Jones 2015; Man-koff 2009; Nygren 2008). Russia cut off gas supplies to Georgia in response to the Rose Revolution (Newham 2011), it has threatened to cut off gas pipelines to Ukraine for almost a decade and to aid Armenia if Azerbaijan becomes an energy rival.

Third, Russia uses "lawfare", or the spinning of legal agreements, to further state interests (e.g., the Budapest agreement, the call for the extradition of Lithuanians who did not show up for conscription in 1991-92, etc.). It first manufactures a humanitarian crisis in which Russian-speakers are allegedly being ill-treated and then summons the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine (R2P) to give its intervention

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the appearance of legality (Rynning 2015). Georgians will recall a variety of actions that Russia has taken under the guise of humanitarianism. For example, in 2006, Russia boarded over a 100 Georgians accused of “immigration offenses” – although many possessed valid documentation allowing them to be in Russia – and termed the mop-up a “humanitarian mission” to return immigrants to their “mothers and children” (Danilova 2006).

Fourth, Russia has sponsored left and right wing political parties in an effort to deepen political cleavages in countries across East and West Europe. There are repeated allegations that Russia sponsors parties such as Marine Le Pen’s FN and Hungary’s Jobbik, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ), Italy’s Northern League, Slovakia’s National Party (SNS) and the Netherlands’ Party for Freedom. One commentator went so far as to describe Bulgaria’s government as “compromised by criminal organizations linked to the Russian state and by Moscow’s intelligence agencies” (Jones 2015). Russia has also tried to pull Germany, Europe’s strongest economy, further away from the EU and NATO (Ryunning 2015).



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The last component, but arguably the critical one, is the fifth column – the sine qua non of non-linear war. Russia takes full advantage of local discontent among Russian speakers to foster internal opposition that diverts national governments and creates a permanent (internal) front line. Russia is empowering the regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and pursuing informational war in both territories to create the image of Georgia as an enemy among the local population. Russia is also trying to change the ethnic landscape in Abkhazia by bringing Russian military personal and their families to reside in Abkhazia, thus creating additional the basis for long-term influence. This causes panic in their inter-national allies about further integrating these countries into their institutions and alliances, and thereby the political ends are realized.



Typically, outsourcing such tasks to third parties runs the risk associated with many principal-agent relationships. Namely, it is difficult to monitor and sanction the agents, who often have distinct interests and incentives from the principal (Salehyan, Siroky and Wood 2014). Although these risks still exist for Russia, they are mitigated to the extent that the principal has ethnic ties to the agents, as they did in Crimea (Saunders 2015; Shuster 2014). Russia has exploited Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine, the Baltics and in Georgia to do its bidding, and locals have obliged. However, the situation is not universal and thus limits the applicability of Russia's model of non-linear war.

Non-linear war is not only dangerous for the obvious reasons that it can push a stable regime into a civil war in short order, but that it goes under the radar of war, and therefore it is unclear what sort of

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responses are warranted (Scrutton 2014; Schadlow 2015). Whereas NATO would be required to respond to any formal attack against any member state, it is less clear what would be required in response to a non-linear attack, such as was carried out against Ukraine. Dalia Grybauskaitė, the Lithuanian President, claims that Lithuania is already under attack. Georgia has been under this kind of attack for years. The downing of the Georgian drone over Abkhazia by Russia in 2008, leading up to the Russian invasion, serves as a particularly poignant case (Daily News Online 2008). Denmark's foreign minister, Martin Lidegaard, even claimed that Russia does not pose a threat to the EU, since its actions in the Ukraine fall below the threshold of war (Scrutton 2014).

Action and Reaction

How should neighboring countries, the EU and NATO respond? This question is causing furrowed brows in meeting rooms (Cederberg 2015; Pifer 2015).

A range of options has thus far been proposed range. Among the commonly advanced recommendations include non-military tactics, such as economic sanctions, to limit access to Western loans and investments (Buckley 2015). According to the Russian Statistical Service, unemployment in Russia has increased by 20,000 people every week since the start of 2015, and could reach more than 2.5 million by the end of the year (Nest 2015). There has also been an exodus of foreign capital from Russia on the order of 150 b US dollars since the sanctions began (Buckley 2015). The currency has lost almost half of its value against the dollar and inflation is hovering around 15 percent. More than 23 million people (or 16% of the population) are now living below the poverty line in Russia, according to Rosstat. Does that mean that sanctions are working? Not so fast.

Sanctions have long been in the toolkit of the United States. However, recent political science research suggests that they are rarely effective and “work” in less a third of the cases in which they were used over the past sixty years (Early 2015). One of the main causes of their failure has been “sanctions busters”, or third parties that provide the target state with alternative revenue sources. Ironically,



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the most common “sanctions busters” are often the closest allies of the United States. Although it is no surprise that China and Russia rarely respect US sanctions, allies often undermine sanctions as well. For example, Great Britain, Spain and Japan have been trading with Cuba for years. The same has been true for the years of sanctions against Iran and dozens of other countries against which the US has issued sanctions. [Sanctions can work, one scholar argues, but only when the contentious issue is narrowly defined, and when they are issued against states with which the issuer has reasonably amicable relations (Drezner 1999). Sanctions often do not work, it is argued, precisely because they are issued in cases when they are least likely to be effective. That is one of the paradoxes of sanctions, and one reason why they are unlikely to be effective against Russia, which has responded by limiting imports of Western goods, including food, x-ray machines and defibrillators for hospitals, which are already poorly equipped.

Estonia's senior military commander, Lt. General Riho Terras, has suggested a possible way to deal with Russia and its “little green men: “You should shoot the first one to ap-pear” (Stuttaford 2015) Others have proposed equally militaristic solutions, including the deployment of US troops in Europe. This summer, not long after the US removed heavy equipment from the European theatre, the US decided to bring them back, but this time to Eastern Europe. It will pre-position tanks, artillery and other military equipment in eastern and central Europe.



General Riho Terras

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This is likely to include 250 tanks, Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and self-propelled howitzers. Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia – along with Bulgaria, Romania and Poland – have all agreed to host the arms and heavy equipment on their territory. These forward deployments are likely to be interpreted as a sign of seriousness, but they are also likely to elicit further armament from Russia, which has already promised to add 40 intercontinental ballistic missiles to its nuclear arsenal in an effort to counter what it perceived as NATO aggression. More arms, however, may, oddly enough, make everyone feel a bit safer through deterrence. This kept the cold war from becoming hot, and let us hope the sequel is as good as the original in terms of its peace dividend.



To counter the informational dimension of Russia's non-linear warfare, NATO members and other neighbors must develop cyber defense strategies and critical infrastructure protection. NATO is already at work on developing an Estonia-based NATO cyber center, and such efforts will need to receive further investment to keep up with Russia's creative use of the internet and other media to advance its interests in the region.

Finally, NATO members and other countries within Russia's reach need to decrease their dependence on Russian energy, for instance, by utilizing alternative sources from the Caspian, as well as adopting alternative energy initiatives such as wind and solar. It would be remiss not to mention Russia's trump card and the foundation on which its non-linear strategy rests – Russian-speakers and ethnic Russians, who ought to have their (of-ten) legitimate grievances addressed and become more tightly integrated, thereby reducing Russian ability to exploit ethnic affinity and real human suffering for geo-political ends. Otherwise these grievances will continue to be exploited and exaggerated, as when Russia accused the Baltic States and Ukraine of Neo-Nazism, for its treatment of Russians (Shuster 2014).



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