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Dangerous Myths

How the Crisis in Ukraine Explains Future Great Power Conflict



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Cover image: Monitoring the movement of heavy weaponry in eastern Ukraine (credit: OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine)

¹ To gain a better understanding of how to conduct a contemporary battlefield assessment, see Collins and Beehner, *A Leader's Guide to Conducting Research Staff Rides*.

² Beehner et al., *Taming of the Tigers*; Beehner, Collins, Ferenzi, et al., *Analyzing the Russian Way of War*; Beehner and Collins, *Welcome to the Jungle*; Stanford, Jackson, and Ruppert, *Contemporary Battlefield Assessment*.

³ Beehner, Collins, and Person, "Fog of Russian Information Warfare."

Executive Summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea was more than an isolated event; it illustrates how great power conflict might look in the coming decades. After several decades of US/NATO dominance following the fall of the Soviet Union, the world appears to have returned to a period of great power competition that includes limited conflict. And while it may not have the same fear of nuclear escalation or periphery conflict, there remain new methods of conflict that need to be understood.

This report studies Russian actions against Ukraine from 2014 to 2018 to provide a better understanding of how Russia engages in conflict below the threshold of war. Russia uses proxy warfare, information operations, and even its naval forces to weaken its adversaries militarily, politically, and economically; yet it manages to execute these operations below the threshold of war and with means that some would argue are relatively cost free.

Some key takeaways from this report:

- Russia is not just in competition with the United States and the West; it is in conflict. Thus, the world is in a period of great power conflict. This conflict is being fought across multiple domains; but for the most part, this conflict is not lethal.
- The life cycle of a Russian-orchestrated crisis follows a similar pattern. First, Russia carries out some type of provocative activity in violation of international law as a form of intimidation. Next, it engages in subterfuge and denial, obfuscating the facts and even twisting international law to justify its original action. Then it employs information operations to change the narrative and public opinion while simultaneously escalating belligerent rhetoric, before presenting itself as a preserver of peace and honest broker, all the while having succeeded at sufficiently altering “facts” on the ground.
- The trigger for a great power war could be China's or Russia's embrace of a dangerous myth—some historical claim to a disputed territory or population it once controlled. These myths could animate a new type of great power conflict, one that may forego conventional military operations for other less familiar battlefields, one that embraces hybrid warfare.

- The use of proxies by great powers is likely to increase as it is often viewed as a less risky and less costly way for a state to achieve its goals. Proxies, however, can be difficult to control, and a miscalculation could inadvertently spark a major war.
- State-sponsored militias and “volunteer” fighters are somewhat analogous to proxies, in the fact that the state supports fighters that it doesn’t fully control. Yet their low cost and the uncertainty that they create for a would-be invader are making them an increasingly attractive defense capability. Given that these are part of the formal defense establishment of US allies, the United States should look for ways to more actively support the training and equipping of these forces.
- Over the past two decades, Russia has invested heavily in its information operations (IO) capabilities to great effect. By contrast, the United States largely divested after the end of the Cold War and remains woefully behind in its IO capability. When it comes to controlling the narrative in great power conflict, US responses in the IO space have thus far been weak, reactive, and too incremental. The United States must increase its IO capability and incorporate it better into its doctrine, training, and education.
- Future great power conflict will also likely be fought on the high seas or in disputed sea basins, like the Sea of Azov. Maritime crises follow a similar pattern as crises on land, insofar as countries like Russia will intimidate smaller naval powers with provocative gestures and belligerent rhetoric; they will deny any direct involvement, cite international law in their favor, and escalate before calling for cooler heads to prevail.
- Pitched battles in Ukrainian cities underscore the need to more systematically develop urban warfare capabilities among US units and those of its allies. Better doctrine, more robust training facilities, a real commitment by our military to train for war, and embedding urban warfare into the training of foreign militaries would go a long way toward avoiding future Donetsk-style imbroglios.

Russia’s investments in the means and methods of hybrid warfare provide it some asymmetric advantages vis-à-vis the United States. The United States must increase its investment in proxy, information, cyber, and urban warfare. This investment must be both physical (equipment, training,

organization) and intellectual (doctrine, education, policy, and strategy) as capacity is irrelevant without strategy and will.

Introduction

“Mr. Putin does not do frontal attacks, he does judo.”

– François Heisbourg, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique⁴

Great power competition has reentered the lexicon of policymakers and military strategists with a vengeance in recent years.⁵ The *2018 National Defense Strategy* affirms that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”⁶ Yet great power conflict is not likely to resemble its nineteenth- or twentieth-century antecedents. “Today’s versions of rivalry and competition,” writes Michael Mazarr, “almost always play out in the economic, political, cultural, and informational spheres—not on the battlefield.”⁷ Although the nuclear revolution makes “victorious wars of conquest”⁸ unlikely, it does not mean that great power competition cannot turn lethal, just as it did during the Cold War in places such as Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Before continuing, it is important to define the word “conflict,” which has multiple meanings. The first, as defined by *Merriam-Webster*, is “fight, battle, [or] war.” The second is “competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons).”⁹ This report contends that the United States and Russia are in conflict by meeting both definitions. A “fight, battle,” or “war” does not require lethal engagement, or else *Merriam-Webster* would not use the phrase “armed conflict” to describe the word “war,” because “armed” and “conflict” would be synonymous. Given that some might have issue with this terminology, this report uses the term “great power war” to describe traditional interstate wars such as World Wars I and II.

⁴ Quoted in “The Decline of Deterrence.”

⁵ See, for example, White House, *National Security Strategy*. It states, “After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned,” 27.

⁶ Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 1.

⁷ Mazarr, “This Is Not a Great Power Competition.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “conflict,” accessed January 5, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conflict?src=search-dict-box>.

While no great powers seem to desire a great power war, it is possible that great power conflict could inadvertently spark a major war.

The triggers for a great power war could be China's or Russia's embrace of some historical claim to a disputed territory or population it once controlled. The principal cause of such a conflict—fought with modern means over age-old disputes—is what Andrew Wilson calls “Russia's addiction to dangerous myths.”¹⁰ These myths are not invented but rather have deep historical roots, a perversion of the “imagined communities” political scientists invoke to describe ethnonationalist conflict.¹¹

Yet these myths animate a new type of great power conflict, one that may forego conventional military operations for other less familiar battlefields. While this embrace of so-called hybrid warfare is arguably nothing new in the annals of warfare, it may become systematized and normalized as not just an ancillary enabler to conventional means but rather may supplant traditional forms of warfare, whereby conventional or other types of power become ancillary to hybrid means. In this type of warfare, Russia and China hold both tactical and strategic advantages over the United States, which they lack when it comes to conventional conflict.

On the one hand, US armed forces have found themselves overstretched in an era of “forever wars” and “low-intensity” conflicts, for which the recent *National Defense Strategy* and *National Security Strategy* offer long-overdue course corrections by acknowledging the “re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition between nations.”¹² Yet at the same time, it also highlights that “competitors and adversaries seek to optimize their targeting . . . while also using other areas of competition short of open warfare to achieve their ends (e.g., information warfare, ambiguous or denied proxy operations, and subversion).”¹³ What is more, Beijing and Moscow benefit from speed, stealth, and surprise on the battlefield that NATO and the United States lack. On the other hand, America's long-standing alliances, economic prowess, and soft power all make the likelihood of a conventional war with a near-peer adversary almost unthinkable.

¹⁰ Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, vii.

¹¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹² Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

It is something of a truism to say that modern warfare is becoming infinitely more complex. Similar predictions are made virtually every generation. Yet in the current operational environment, with what Gen. (ret.) Raymond Odierno famously called the “velocity of instability,” the battlefields of today and tomorrow appear to be shifting toward more urban and densely populated landscapes against an enemy seemingly unbound by international norms and that attempts to hide or disguise its actions via the use of third-party proxies.

This type of warfare is playing out between Russian-backed separatists and a Western-backed Ukrainian government in the Donbas, a Switzerland-sized border region in eastern Ukraine. The conflict has already claimed over ten thousand lives and displaced three million people.¹⁴ The war was an outgrowth of the illegal annexation of Crimea by Moscow in 2014—or what one witness described as Russia’s “soft occupation of Ukraine.”¹⁵ To boost its defenses and deterrence capabilities, Kyiv has relied on Western military and economic support, as well as on legions of nationalist volunteers.

The war in Ukraine’s East has rattled nerves in the Baltic states as well. This vulnerability was made more acute after the November 2018 attack on a Ukrainian vessel and seizure of a crew of several dozen Ukrainian sailors in the Sea of Azov, which also resulted in several casualties.¹⁶ The purpose of the provocation was to force Kyiv to cede control of the Sea of Azov to Moscow, particularly its northern shores, thus giving Russia an unfettered naval bridge between the Donbas and Crimea. With each provocation and escalation, the appetite of Russian president Vladimir Putin is not satiated but rather expands, as he feasts on increasingly larger prey. A popular phrase heard in the region is, “If you’re not behind the table, you’re on the menu.”¹⁷

Russia’s grand strategy, according to Eugene Rumer, is to create “a multipolar world, with Russia as one of its poles.”¹⁸ Angela Stent argues that Russia seeks “a seat at the table on all major international decisions.”¹⁹ Russia also believes that it deserves a so-called sphere or zone of “privileged interests, namely that its post-Soviet colonies are neither hostile to Moscow nor puppets of the

¹⁴ Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 21.

¹⁵ From an interview with a Ukrainian volunteer in Kyiv, June 2018.

¹⁶ Smith and Talmazan, “Ukraine-Russia Sea Clash.”

¹⁷ From interviews with Baltic defense officials in Riga and Tallinn, June 2018.

¹⁸ Rumer, “Russian Strategic Objectives,” 3.

¹⁹ Stent, “What Drives Russian Foreign Policy?,” 6.

West.”²⁰ The motivation for this strategy is the decline of Russian influence during the decade immediately after the end of the Cold War; the ignoring of Russia on matters related to security among former Warsaw Pact members, including the eastward expansion of NATO; and the fear of an internal revolt or a further unraveling of Moscow’s control over its disparate territories and people.

The question military strategists are grappling with is Russia’s intended means. To date, the Kremlin has relied on a peculiar mix of strategies, old and new, to achieve its objectives of restoring Moscow’s great power status. On the one hand, it has relied on a nineteenth-century norm of land grabs and annexing physical territory using military force, both conventional and unconventional, something largely abolished after World War II.

On the other hand, it has pioneered the use of newfangled forms of hybrid warfare by committing “acts of aggression” that fall below the traditional threshold of war, relying on deception, subversion, misinformation, cyber, and electronic warfare (EW), as part of a calculated strategy to keep the enemy unstable and provide Moscow with plausible deniability. What Putin has studiously avoided is a direct conventional war with NATO. His embrace of this kind of warfare, as Robert Person notes, is “subtractive,” in that it seeks to offset the United States’ (or Europe’s) military superiority.²¹

This mindset also informs Russia’s evolving military doctrine. In March 2019, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff, outlined a “new” Russian military strategy beyond Russia’s borders that emphasizes the importance of high technology and modern weapons systems yet also reemphasizes precision targeting, sophisticated hypersonic weaponry, EW tools, greater centralization and automation of troops and weapons control, greater use of irregular forces and private military contractors, and greater integration of military and nonmilitary measures in fomenting social unrest abroad.²²

In this regard, Russia’s weaponization of information goes way beyond Cold War–era “active measures,” which mostly consisted of run-of-the-mill propaganda and espionage. Its actions in Ukraine provide a case of information operations not as a complement to but rather as a key component of modern warfare. After Crimea’s annexation, Russia actively supported an

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ Person, “Gray Zone Tactics.”

²² McDermott, “Russia’s Military Scientists and Future Warfare.”

antigovernment separatist insurgency in Ukraine's Donbas region, even providing surface-to-air missiles to rebels who downed a civilian jet in July 2014, killing everyone aboard.

An essential part of its hybrid warfare also included the use of information operations in Ukraine to distort the narrative and turn public opinion against the authorities in Kyiv as well as electronic warfare to jam the Ukrainian military's command, control, and communications capabilities. As Rod Thornton writes, "The use of jamming technologies in modern warfare can be an operational as well as strategic, game-changer."²³

It is not just Russia that is expanding its use of subversion, information operations, and other forms of hybrid warfare. Consider Beijing's use of "little blue men" within its maritime militias, who are disguised as Chinese fishermen but attack ships transiting through the South China Sea.²⁴ There is also evidence that other countries are imitating how Russian trolls and hackers use social media, specifically Facebook, to interfere in other countries' politics. Pro-Beijing operatives are said to post thousands of bits of disinformation on Facebook every day.²⁵ A Taiwanese official described to the *Washington Post* "the subtle Chinese threat, spread through social media, newspapers and television in an influence campaign that touches every business, farm and worker."²⁶

This kind of information warfare has gone global, according to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab, citing an Iranian-led disinformation campaign that used Facebook and Twitter to reach millions of people.²⁷ Similar disinformation campaigns were tied to the governments of Venezuela and Brazil. As NATO assistant secretary general for emerging security challenges Antonio Missiroli told reporters, "Hybrid warfare is the new normal."²⁸

Ultimately, the goal of this report is to provide a glimpse into some of the tactics that will characterize great power conflict, specifically hybrid, proxy, information, maritime/littoral, and urban warfare at the level below a major war. It is important to understand these tactics on two accounts. First, US adversaries continue to both invest in and employ these capabilities. In order to combat

²³ Thornton, "Concept of Pace in Current Russian Military Thinking," 26.

²⁴ Miracola, "Chinese Hybrid Warfare."

²⁵ Ignatius, "China's Hybrid Warfare against Taiwan."

²⁶ Ibid.

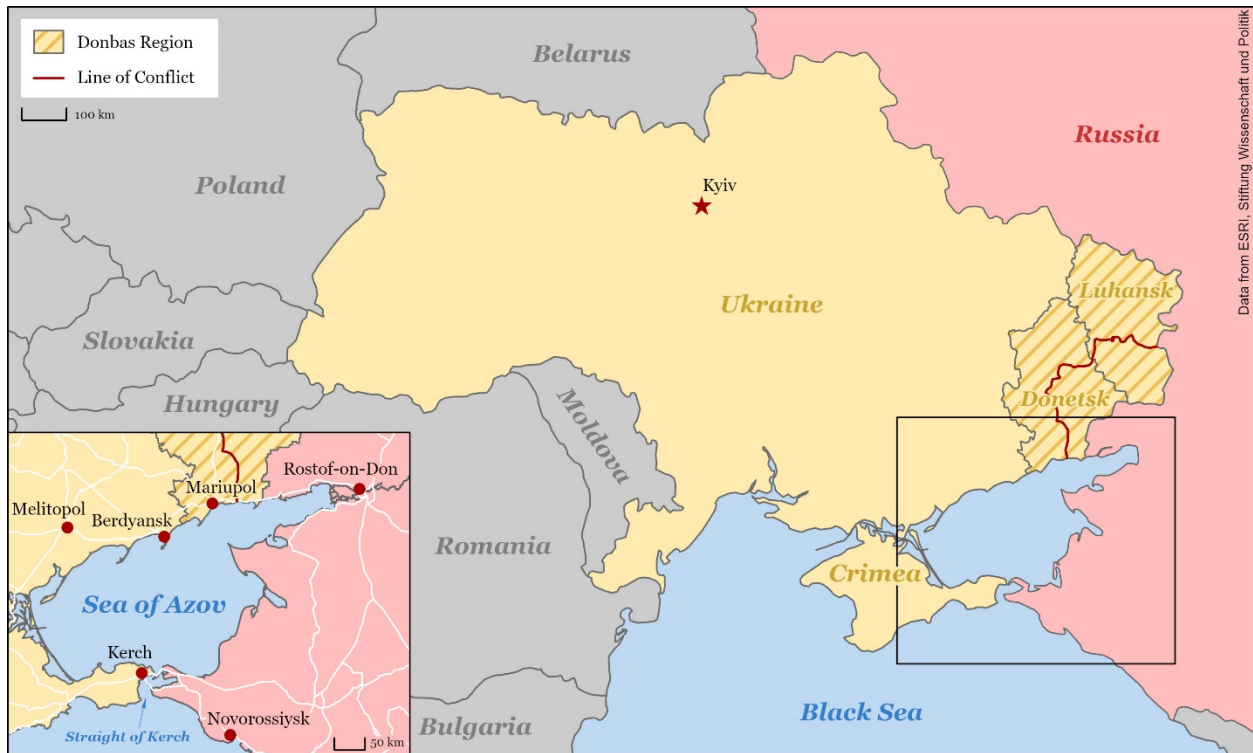
²⁷ Frenkel, Conger, and Roose, "After Russia, False Posts on Twitter Going Global."

²⁸ International Conference, "Hybrid War Decade."

them, the United States must first understand them. Second, the potential exists that a miscalculation involving one or more of the above-mentioned methods could inadvertently spark a major war, so security professionals must consider this possibility. As such, the report does not delve into the strategic objectives of Russia.

This report proceeds as following: First, we provide a brief overview of historical Russian-Ukrainian relations and the recent conflict. Next, we examine Russian military strategy and review the literature on Russian hybrid warfare, or *gibridnaya voyna*, as a way to determine its operational relevancy and adjudicate definitional confusion among scholars. Third, we detail several seminal types of warfare being waged in the Donbas region—proxy, informational, maritime, and urban—to provide greater context at the tactical level of how Russia weaponizes other domains. Finally, we conclude with recommendations that stem from the analysis.

Figure 1: Map of Ukraine²⁹



²⁹ Map credit: 2nd Lt. John Erskine and Capt. Jordan Laughlin, Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering, United States Military Academy.

Chapter I — Russian Intervention in Ukraine: A Troubled History

The roots of Russian interference in Ukrainian affairs date back centuries. Ukraine was always both a literal and proverbial borderland for a long string of tsars with imperialist ambitions going back centuries, even though Ukrainians are quick to note that Kyivan Rus predates the Romanov dynasty in Moscow.³⁰ “Why does all this matter?” as Andrew Wilson asks. “Russians are still brought up on the idea of a single ancient Rus/Russian nation and still have great difficulty adjusting to the idea not just of a separate Ukrainian state but of the Ukrainians’ separate origin as a people.”³¹

The modern era of bilateral relations can be traced to the wake of the First World War. In 1918, Russia’s newly installed Bolshevik government saw Ukraine as a vital breadbasket to feed its fledgling forces during its civil war with the Mensheviks. Yet Ukrainian nationalists were resistant to Bolshevik rule and called for greater sovereignty. Brute force had failed to compel the Ukrainian Rada, its legislature, to join the Bolshevik cause. So the Soviets, under Lenin, deployed Russian forces in disguise—a so-called “Soviet Ukrainian liberation movement”—to agitate for a unified Bolshevik Russia (which would include a Bolshevik Ukraine) using nationalist rhetoric to bolster the need for Soviet power.³² These were the precursors to the “little green men” who “liberated” Crimea’s Russian speakers in 2014.

The Donbas, which is made up of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine, had always retained a conservative ethos, having resisted attempts by Lenin a century ago to incorporate it into Soviet Ukraine. But it has long supported Moscow and Lenin’s various Russification efforts. In western Ukraine (and in Lithuania), by contrast, the Soviets faced some of their stiffest resistance.³³ Nationalism remained a strong force in a section that was primarily Catholic, rural, and agrarian. The forced collectivization of the borderlands in 1948–49 led to mass casualties as some peasant farmers fled into the forest, committed acts of sabotage (such as burning crops), and carried out guerrilla-style warfare.³⁴ Language became a sticky subject during the Soviet era. As Taras Kuzio notes, “Russians

³⁰ Reid, *Borderland*.

³¹ Wilson, *Ukrainians*, 2.

³² Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 25–26.

³³ Statiev, *Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands*, 116.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

and Russian speakers looked down upon the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages as peasant dialects slated to disappear because Russian was the language of modernity.”³⁵

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Ukraine remained under the thumb of Moscow. Ukrainians elected communist holdovers for politicians and presidents with close ties to the Kremlin. Under the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, Ukraine, along with Kazakhstan and Belarus, ceded control of the nuclear arsenal it inherited from the Soviet Union in exchange for security assurances from Moscow.³⁶ Its transition to democracy was riddled with poor governance, corruption, and soaring inequality. Independent journalists faced constant threat of being jailed or murdered. As an energy transit country, Kyiv relied on Moscow for cheap gas. Ukraine maintained a large but incapable military, a consequence of its poor governance, what it considered a safe environment, and Russian security guarantees. Moscow’s interest in Ukraine was motivated by several factors. Some powerful factions within its leadership deny that Ukraine is even a sovereign entity independent of Moscow.³⁷ Still, a version of pan-Slavism informed the brotherly relations between Kyiv and Moscow.

A second geostrategic Russian interest is Ukraine’s maritime access to the Black Sea. Russia has long maintained an important naval base in Sevastopol, which houses its famed Black Sea fleet. Crimea, whose population is predominantly Russian speaking, has only been part of Ukraine since 1954, when Nikita Khrushchev transferred its sovereignty to Kyiv. Obviously Khrushchev never anticipated that Ukraine would ever be a sovereign nation, it was viewed to be a ceremonial act “intended to mark three centuries of union between Russia and [Ukraine].”³⁸ In 1992, however, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian parliament declared the “gift” illegal.³⁹ Since then, the Kremlin has contested Ukraine’s sovereignty over Crimea, yet Russia has effectively leased the base in Sevastopol. Russia was concerned that a pro-Western government in Kyiv might annul the lease on this strategic base.

A third concern was domestic disorder and greater Western influence over Ukraine. Russia believed the Orange Revolution of 2004–5 and the subsequent Maidan Revolution of 2014 were CIA-

³⁵ Kuzio, *Putin’s War against Ukraine*, 292.

³⁶ Pifer, “Budapest Memorandum and U.S. Obligations.”

³⁷ Wilson, *Ukrainians*, 2.

³⁸ Goldberg, “Giving Crimea to Ukraine Was Illegal.”

³⁹ Ibid.

hatched plots and existential threats to its reliance on Ukraine as a pro-Kremlin buffer state between itself and NATO. Making matters worse, Ukraine vocalized its intentions to join NATO.

Still, it is not fair to call the pre-Maidan Ukrainian government necessarily a lackey of the Kremlin. The election of Viktor Yanukovich in February 2010 was neither pro-Russian nor anti-Russian, yet he maintained cordial, if businesslike, relations with his counterpart in Moscow.⁴⁰ His presidency was seen as a defeat for the post-2004 Orange coalition, which was hamstrung by political infighting and corruption charges. Yanukovich adopted a policy of neutrality and dialed back previous efforts to join NATO. Importantly for Moscow, in April 2010 he signed a twenty-five-year extension to its lease of the Sevastopol base. In return, Russia guaranteed Ukraine cheaper gas.

Over the previous decade, Russia had wielded energy as a weapon, effectively turning off its gas in the dead of winter to force Kyiv's hand. Ukraine struggled both in terms of economic advancement and political openness. Freedom House downgraded Ukraine from "free" to "partly free" in 2011, even as Kyiv sought to bridge stronger ties with the West.⁴¹ Part of this bridge was the Ukraine-Europe Union Association Agreement, which would have opened borders to goods from the West and set the stage for travel restrictions to be eased. Under Kremlin pressure, Yanukovich balked at signing the agreement in November 2013, setting the stage for the Maidan protests that would lead to his ouster the following February and subsequent Russian military invasion and annexation of Crimea.

As a response to the 2013–14 Euromaidan uprising in Kyiv, which eventually unseated Yanukovich in February 2014, Moscow annexed Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula that juts into the Black Sea (see figure 1). Russia utilized its tactical advantage in stealth, speed, and surprise, deploying undeclared special operations forces (or *Spetsnaz*), Russian volunteers, and troops not wearing insignia to the region. The Kremlin denied any involvement in the operation, countering that it was carried out by "local self-defense units." It was not until April 17, 2014, two months into the operation, that Putin admitted that "Crimean self-defense forces were of course backed by Russian servicemen."⁴² Almost nobody in the Barack Obama administration appeared to anticipate the events.⁴³

⁴⁰ Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 106.

⁴¹ Freedom House, "Freedom House Sounds the Alarm over Ukrainian Democracy in Jeopardy."

⁴² McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, 400.

⁴³ Apps, "Putin's Nuclear-Tipped Hybrid War on the West."

At the same time, large protests and violent clashes erupted across southeastern Ukraine. The contested zone extended from Odessa to Mariupol on the Sea of Azov, the site of a naval clash. The most violent clashes occurred in and around Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukraine's easternmost oblasts. In April, Russian-backed separatists declared "the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk" and held referenda whereby a whopping 90 percent of the local populace was said to have voted in support of the republics. Russia refuses to recognize the legitimacy of the national government in Kyiv and insists the Maidan protests constituted an "anti-constitutional takeover [and] armed seizure of power." Putin has likened Ukraine to a failed state, one under the sway of nefarious elements that he has referred to as a "rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces" that now control Kyiv.⁴⁴

There is some disagreement over how much of the 2014 Russian military intervention of Ukraine was preplanned and part of Putin's longer-term master strategy or whether it was a tactical piece of improvisation. According to some analysts, Putin was "fixated on the 'Ukrainian question.'" He reportedly told his staff, going back years, "We must do something or we'll lose it."⁴⁵ Taras Kuzio refers to speeches as far back as 2008 by Putin of his desire to create a *Novorossiya*, a self-proposed confederation of republics in Ukraine's eastern regions.⁴⁶ The idea never caught on or mobilized Russian speakers in the region until the events of 2014. As Peter Pomerantsev notes,

The term is plucked from tsarist history, when it represented a different geographical space. Nobody who lives in that part of the world today ever thought of themselves as living in Novorossiia and bearing allegiance to it—at least until several months ago. Now, Novorossiia is being imagined into being: Russian media are showing maps of its "geography," while Kremlin-backed politicians are writing its "history" into school textbooks. There's a flag and even a news agency (in English and Russian). There are several Twitter feeds. It's like something out of a Borges story—except for the very real casualties of the war conducted in its name.⁴⁷

Others, including Daniel Treisman, claim that Putin's seizure of Crimea was an "improvised gambit, developed under pressure that was triggered by the fear of losing Russia's strategically important naval base in Sevastopol."⁴⁸ Former US ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul writes, "By

⁴⁴ Fischer, "Donbas Conflict."

⁴⁵ Quoted by Kuzio, *Putin's War against Ukraine*, 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 190–91.

⁴⁷ Pomerantsev, "Russia and the Menace of Unreality."

⁴⁸ Treisman, "Why Putin Took Crimea."

invoking Novorossiia, a territory that had been incorporated into Ukraine after the Bolshevik Revolution, Putin was deploying the same rationale for Russian interference in Ukraine that he had used for annexing Crimea.”⁴⁹ To quote Putin himself, “It’s New Russia. Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Odessa were not part of Ukraine in czarist times; they were transferred in 1920. Why? God knows.”⁵⁰

Putin is fond of couching Russian actions in nationalist rhetoric that invokes a shared Slavic past. “Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride,” the president said. “The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea.”⁵¹ In other words, Putin was imploring Russians to view Crimea through a distorted historical lens, insofar as it was once part of Russia and large segments of its population are ethnic Russian and speak Russian. Yet this is irredentism masked as paranoia, designed to cast Russia as the victim. “It was only when Crimea ended up as part of a different country that Russia realized that it was not simply robbed, it was plundered,” he added.⁵²

Having provided local proxies with financial support, weapons, commanders, and foot soldiers, the Kremlin was able to achieve a series of victories against local militias backed by the Ukrainian military and to seize critical infrastructure and key buildings in Luhansk; Donetsk, including the city’s newly refurbished airport; and Kharkiv. In Kharkiv, the Ukrainian authorities regained control, but in Donetsk and Luhansk, pro-Russian groups held makeshift referenda on secession and voted to leave Ukraine. The People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk swear fealty to Moscow and are completely dependent on Russian economic, military, and political support, like their counterparts in Moldova’s Transnistria and Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia.⁵³

On July 17, 2014, the war further escalated after Russian-backed separatists shot down a Malaysia-bound civilian airliner over eastern Ukraine, killing 298 passengers and crew. Putin quickly denied any responsibility, yet a Dutch-led joint investigation and documentation evidence supplied from the online watchdog Bellingcat later found that Moscow had supplied the rocket—a Buk surface-

⁴⁹ McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, 405.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “Full Text of Putin’s Speech on Crimea.”

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Fischer, “Donbas Conflict.”

to-air missile—used in the attack.⁵⁴ In June 2019, international prosecutors announced murder charges against three Russians and a Ukrainian over the downing of the flight.⁵⁵

Despite such setbacks and a climate of mutual distrust, there have been ongoing peace efforts: the 2014–15 Minsk agreements. Yet they have effectively stalled and been hampered by thousands of violations by all parties to the conflict. The agreements, negotiated in September 2014 and February 2015, called for an immediate ceasefire to be monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a buffer zone, the release of all hostages, amnesty, the continuation of dialogue, and access to besieged areas for humanitarian agencies.⁵⁶ Most importantly, the agreements sought to disarm combatants in the Donbas and dissolve its quasi-state structures as a first step toward reintegrating the breakaway republics into the Ukrainian state.⁵⁷

The Minsk Agreements are deeply unpopular among many nationalist Ukrainians who see them as effectively allowing Moscow to consolidate their territorial gains and influence over Ukraine's internal affairs.⁵⁸ Many Ukrainians see the Minsk agreements as having been made under duress. Instead, they argue, the 1994 Budapest agreement should be followed, arguing, incorrectly, that Russia and the United States both provided Ukraine a security guarantee that, should it be attacked, both would come to its defense in return for giving up its nuclear weapons.⁵⁹ Russia refuses to acknowledge its role in the conflict, and after the November 2018 attacks in the Kerch Strait, few believe peace can be achieved in Ukraine's East, at least anytime soon.

A Frozen Conflict and Humanitarian Catastrophe

The result, sadly, is a stalemate—a “frozen conflict” that has lasted over five years, killed some thirteen thousand Ukrainians, and displaced millions more.⁶⁰ According to an October 2018 report by the International Crisis Group, the humanitarian crisis is not only a function of Russia's military presence in the region but also of the disaffection and alienation local Ukrainians feel toward the

⁵⁴ McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, 406.

⁵⁵ Kramer, “Four to Face Murder Charges.”

⁵⁶ Fischer, “Donbas Conflict.”

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ From numerous meetings with Ukrainian officials in Kyiv from 2017–18.

⁶⁰ Giuliano, “Is the Risk of Ethnic Conflict Growing in Ukraine?” Giuliano estimates that 75 percent of the casualties have been military and that 25 percent have been civilians. See also, Fischer, “Donbas Conflict.”

government in Kyiv.⁶¹ Some six hundred thousand people live in settlements on both sides of the line of contact, with some forty thousand crossing it on a daily basis.⁶² The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission reports hundreds of daily ceasefire violations along the line of contact, as well as heightened security risks due to unexploded ordnance, landmines, and other impediments.⁶³

It is important to note that the monitoring mission is just that, a monitoring mission. It is not a peacekeeping or peace-enforcement mission; thus its mandate is limited. Complicating its mission is the fact that Russia, one of the belligerents in the conflict, is a member of the OSCE. The mission enjoys freedom of movement on the Ukrainian side of the contact line but is much more restricted on the Russian-backed separatist side. Additionally, all violations of the ceasefire are reported equally; it does not matter if one was in defense or in retaliation to a violation from the other side. Notwithstanding these challenges, its reporting provides an important understanding of the conflict.

The area remains one of the most heavily mined and dangerous in the world.⁶⁴ Thousands of residences have been damaged or destroyed from the war, and aid agencies face restricted access to afflicted areas. Indeed, the humanitarian situation in the Donbas has deteriorated over the course of the war. The region is plagued by underdevelopment, destruction of critical infrastructure, and growing food insecurity. The Ukraine-controlled section consists of roughly one and a half million internally displaced persons; for its part, Russia took in over one million refugees as well.⁶⁵ There are also widespread reports of rises in drug abuse, alcoholism, prostitution, and sex trafficking.⁶⁶

There is little hope of the conflict resolving itself, despite recent presidential elections in Ukraine bringing to power a political neophyte and comedian, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who made peace a central part of his campaign platform.⁶⁷ Ukraine is an ethnic and cultural melting pot; and unsurprisingly, the war in the East has been fought predominantly along ethnonationalist lines, with Ukrainian-speaking nationalists who identify with Kyiv and the West squaring off against separatists who identify with Moscow (and perhaps a sentimentality of Ukraine's Soviet past). Yet at the same

⁶¹ International Crisis Group, "Nobody Wants Us."

⁶² Modern War Institute and Center on National Security at Fordham Law School, "MWI Video."

⁶³ "Latest from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM)."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Fischer, "Donbas Conflict."

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Kudelia, "Could a Zelenskiy Presidency Prove a Breakthrough?"

time, it is not purely an ethnonationalist war, as Russian-speaking Ukrainian Army units from eastern Ukraine have conducted combat rotations to the Donbas and squared off against Russian-speaking separatists just like Ukrainian-speaking units.⁶⁸ The Donbas is a predominantly Russian-speaking industrial belt rich in mining and metallurgy. It is also worth noting that Zelenskyy campaigned and addressed crowds in their native Russian, both to win over voters (he finished second in the East) and also to mollify locals' feelings of alienation from their government in Kyiv.

Still, there is something of a stalemate. Ukrainian forces, poorly armed and trained at the onset of the conflict, demonstrated resolve and, with the help of volunteers, pushed the Russian-backed separatists to the border in August 2014 before Russian troops reinforced. Yet Ukraine has committed itself to defense reform amid its ongoing conflict. In May 2016, President Petro Poroshenko published the *Strategic Defense Bulletin*, laying out strategic goals for defense reform, and a one hundred-page annex with a matrix of operational goals and objectives required to achieve the goals.⁶⁹ Additionally, NATO has provided a number of trust programs to assist the Ukrainians; the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada have provided hundreds of trainers and advisors; and the United States and Canada have each provided hundreds of millions of dollars in defensive aid.⁷⁰ Over the past four years, Ukraine has made remarkable improvements with its defense, yet many needed reforms remain.

The Minsk agreements effectively left the war in a standstill, as both sides remain entrenched in their respective positions along a 250-mile, heavily militarized front line, despite the deal expressly calling on both parties to remove heavy armaments (above 100-millimeter) from the contact line.⁷¹ These accords remain controversial in Ukraine, as many fear that they cede too much territory to Russian-backed separatists but also that they, in effect, freeze the conflict, a tactic with plenty of precedent in the region (see Moldova's Transnistria or Georgia's Abkhazia or South Ossetia).⁷² There is even lingering dispute over what to call or how to classify the conflict: Is it a civil war? An illegal invasion? Or annexation?⁷³ Some scholars and policymakers are adamant that it is an interstate war,

⁶⁸ Based on interviews with senior US government officials in Ukraine in 2017.

⁶⁹ Poroshenko, *Strategic Defense Bulletin of Ukraine* (Kyiv, Ukraine, May 2016).

⁷⁰ Interviews with NATO, Ukraine, US, and Canadian officials in Ukraine, 2016–18; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Public Diplomacy Division, *NATO's Support to Ukraine; Canada's Support to Ukraine Crisis and Armed Conflict*.

⁷¹ Peterson, "After 4 Years of Frozen Conflict."

⁷² Fischer, "Donbas Conflict."

⁷³ Driscoll, "Ukraine's Civil War."

not a civil one. Regardless of how it is classified, at least three-quarters of Ukrainians want their president to hold direct talks with Russia, according to a poll by the Social Monitoring Center of the Ukrainian Institute for Social Research.⁷⁴

Zelenskyy, for his part, has focused on four main lines of effort to bring about peace: first, to protect national minority languages (namely Russian) in the region;⁷⁵ second, to reverse “decommunization” efforts that celebrate national pride by erecting statuary to controversial Ukrainian nationalists while demolishing monuments of Lenin; third, to potentially implement a “hearts and minds” strategy, lifted from the pages of counterinsurgency field manuals, that would entail lifting the economic blockade of the region, paying pensions, and providing other humanitarian aid; finally, to sequentially deploy UN peacekeepers, a modification of the plan proposed by his predecessor, Poroshenko, who sought a more robust and immediate UN presence.⁷⁶ In addition, he has also requested and received more sophisticated antitank weaponry, including Javelin missiles, from the United States.

It should be noted that describing the Russian-speaking separatists in Ukraine’s Donbas as an ethnic “minority” is somewhat of a red herring, according to Columbia University’s Elise Giuliano. She notes that it is more of a legacy of Soviet state policies (the Soviet Union established fifteen republics as national homelands ostensibly named after the dominant nationality, hence “Kazakhstan” or “Uzbekistan”), not primordial identities.⁷⁷ Regardless, whether the subject is ethnic Uyghurs in China’s West or ethnic Russians in Ukraine’s East, the use of identity as a pretext for open rebellion or repression is something that may very well ignite the first great power conflict of the modern era.

⁷⁴ Ukrainian Independent Information Agency of News, “Some 75% of Ukrainians Want Zelensky to Hold Direct Talks.”

⁷⁵ Contrast that with the campaign slogan of his opponent, President Poroshenko, which was “Army! Language! Faith!”

⁷⁶ Kudelia, “Could a Zelenskiy Presidency Prove a Breakthrough?”

⁷⁷ Giuliano, “Is the Risk of Ethnic Conflict Growing in Ukraine?”

Chapter II — Russian Military Modernization and Strategy

To understand how Russia wages war, one must examine Putin. To understand how Putin wages war, it is important to examine two things: first, how Putin, as an individual, assesses risk and, second, the legacy of Russian military strategy going back to the Cold War—the latter being a function of Russian Soviet organizational culture, civil-military-intelligence relations, and state-society relations.

On the first point, Putin's use of force abroad mirrors his approach to quelling domestic rebellion and preventing a version of the color revolutions that swept across parts of the former Soviet Union over a decade ago. Putin's public enemy number one is Alexey Navalny, an opposition figure who is a former fellow at Yale. Yet instead of incarcerating or killing Navalny, as the authorities have for other dissidents, such as Boris Nemtsov or Anna Politkovskaya, the police typically arrest him for only a few weeks and harass his followers. As the Russian-American writer Masha Gessen notes, this is a useful tactic, to harass while studiously avoiding crisis escalation or triggering protestors to take to the streets en masse.⁷⁸

Similarly, on the world stage but especially in the former Soviet region, Putin harasses and provocatively challenges countries he perceives as enemies of Moscow. Yet he is cautious, always stepping back from the brink before hostilities escalate. Like his predecessors, his primary concern is retaining power. His embrace of so-called hybrid warfare reflects this caution; some might describe the resulting conflict as more indirect than direct, because it is not usually lethal. For Putin, Russia's main effort is not militarily focused per se but rather the subversion and subjugation of the Ukrainian state.⁷⁹ To accomplish this task, expect Russia (and likewise China in the Pacific) to bring together all its instruments of state power—soft, hard, economic, military, cultural, and political. Victory in this type of war is not about securing territory or moving front lines, even though this occurred in Crimea and the Donbas. Victory is less tangible. It is about changing minds, perceptions, and narratives; demonstrating the fecklessness of NATO to help nonmembers; and undermining the legitimacy of the national government of Ukraine.

⁷⁸ Gessen, "Frivolous Arrest of Another Russian Dissident."

⁷⁹ This point was first made by British retired Gen. Sir Nick Parker in an October 12, 2018, talk given at the US Military Academy at West Point.

Second, Russia’s approach to warfare retains some of the baggage of its Cold War days. True, its military has reformed and modernized itself in recent years, yet it’s still a shadow of its Cold War-era self. Russia has actually cut its defense spending in recent years yet emphasizes its embrace of high-tech weaponry like its hypersonic missiles. As Putin told reporters in June 2018, “Remarkably, we must be the only great military power that is cutting military expenditures.”⁸⁰ Still, Russia’s armed forces continue to rely on unprofessional conscripts and an aging assortment of Soviet-era machinery. When Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, commanders often relied on their personal cell phones to communicate with subordinates.⁸¹ Since then, Moscow has carried out an ambitious and popular reform of its military. An April 2018 Levada Center poll found that Putin’s “greatest accomplishment” in power was twofold: his reform of the military and increase in its capability, and his strengthening of Russia’s international position and influence.⁸²

Russia’s military expenditure is nearly thirteen times that of Ukraine; or put another way, Russia’s military expenditure is nearly 50 percent of Ukraine’s GDP. From the table below, it is clear why Ukraine and Georgia desire to join NATO. Arguably, being part of NATO has protected the Baltic states from Russian invasion.

*Table 1: 2018 Military Expenditures*⁸³

	GDP (\$M)	Military Expenditure (\$M)	Military Expenditure as % RU
NATO	\$40,567,645	\$963,047	1,569%
United States	\$20,544,343	\$648,798	1,057%
Russia	\$1,657,554	\$61,388	N/A
Ukraine	\$130,832	\$4,750	7.74%
Georgia	\$17,600	\$316	0.52%
Lithuania	\$53,429	\$1,030	1.68%
Latvia	\$34,409	\$680	1.11%
Estonia	\$30,732	\$618	1.01%

⁸⁰ “Russia cuts defense spending but maintains military parity—Putin,” Interfax, June 20, 2019. This assessment is supported by senior US officials, based on multiple interviews with senior US officials in Kyiv, June 2018.

⁸¹ Beehner, Collins, Ferenzi, et al., *Analyzing the Russian Way of War*.

⁸² Gurganus, “How (and Why) Russia Does More with Less,” 10.

⁸³ 2018 GDP data from World Development Indicators, World Bank, “Gross Domestic Product 2018.” Military expenditure data is based on 2018 data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database,” Excel data sheet, last modified May 10, 2019, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRI-Milex-data-1949-2018_0.xlsx. Military expenditure as a percentage of Russian military expenditure was calculated by the authors.

Despite its military spending and the fact that Russia's armed forces are more professional and capable than they were a decade ago, Russia's economy has slowed down. This partly explains its devotion to indirect hybrid means: to achieve Russia's objectives more indirectly and cheaply. The use of "dumb" bombs, artillery barrages, or siege warfare in Ukraine is more cost-effective for a budget-conscious Kremlin than the use of precision-guided munitions or full-scale frontal assaults.⁸⁴

When Putin assumed power, he inherited a military that had been deeply demoralized by its previous loss in Chechnya, one that relied on Soviet-era equipment and poorly trained conscripts. Putin learned from his enemies. Fighting a guerrilla war, Chechen separatists' approach emphasized deception and advanced reconnaissance, placing huge weight on "moral-psychological" factors to wage warfare.⁸⁵ This included weaponizing patriotism; embracing religious extremism; adhering to strict internal discipline; and utilizing electronic warfare, propaganda, and radio—the social media of its era—to control the narrative. The Chechens, badly outmanned and outgunned, employed a Fabian strategy of sorts to avoid direct contact with the enemy, relying instead on ambushes and other guerrilla tactics.

The war served as a wake-up call for Russia's military, which had suffered at the hands of the Afghans in the 1980s.⁸⁶ For over half a century, Russian soldiers had trained to fight mass-mechanized divisions over the European continent. During the war in Afghanistan, according to Robert Cassidy, they had relied on the "deliberate destruction of villages, high altitude carpet bombing, napalm, fragmentation bombs, and the use of booby-trapped toys—[which] testify to the intent of the Soviet military's efforts to terrorize the Afghan civilian population."⁸⁷ When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russian soldiers still lacked the basic training to conduct raids, and alcoholism was rampant.⁸⁸

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Russian forces were indirectly engaged in a series of so-called "frozen conflicts" throughout the former Soviet space, from Moldova to the Caucasus.⁸⁹ These were territorial disputes that rarely turned lethal but occasionally flared up and in which Russian

⁸⁴ Fox, *Reemergence of the Siege*, 4.

⁸⁵ Thomas, "Russian Tactical Lessons Learned Fighting Chechen Separatists."

⁸⁶ Golts and Kofman, *Russia's Military*, 218.

⁸⁷ Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya*, 14.

⁸⁸ Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks?"

⁸⁹ Orttung and Walker, "Putin's Frozen Conflicts."

military forces kept a watchful eye. Their point was to leave these areas in a state of ambiguity and uncertainty as a calculated way to prevent these former satellites from becoming unified or orienting toward the West.

Chechnya, located within Russia's borders, was the anomaly. Moscow sent in large conventional formations there and relied on airpower to pacify. As a playbook, however, Chechnya illuminated the dangers of relying too heavily on conventional military tactics to seize territory. With Putin at the helm, the Russians increasingly relied on a scorched-earth policy and, after leveling much of Grozny, eventually regained control of Chechnya and won the war. By some estimates, Russian forces killed upward of two hundred thousand civilians and created as many as three hundred thousand refugees.⁹⁰

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Russia has actually enjoyed a decent track record in putting down insurgencies, according to the scholar Yuri Zhukov, having won eighteen out of twenty counterinsurgencies over the past one hundred years.⁹¹ Yet Putin was less confident in Russia's ability to wage a conventional war at the interstate level. Low morale, outdated equipment, poor salaries, and the lack of a noncommissioned officer corps left the Russian military in a post-Soviet morass, and in no shape to wage wars against near-peer competitors.⁹² Corruption among its general officers was rampant too.

To maintain its ability to deter a conventional attack, Russia incorporated the concept of "escalate to deescalate" into its 2010 military doctrine, essentially stating that in the event of a large-scale conventional attack against it, Moscow reserved the right to respond with a tactical nuclear strike.⁹³ In addition to modernizing Russian military doctrine, Putin sought to modernize its aging military equipment and rely less on poorly trained conscripts. Its *Spetsnaz* units were among the few effective forces within the Russian military.⁹⁴ Putin used these highly trained units to rapidly control

⁹⁰ Janeczko, "Faced with Death, Even a Mouse Bites," 435.

⁹¹ Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency in a Non-Democratic State."

⁹² Meakins, "Other Side of the COIN."

⁹³ Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," 36.

⁹⁴ Khodarenok, "Today, Only Special Forces Are Catching Militants in Chechnya."

key terrain in Georgia and Ukraine. Moreover, Russia continued to expand its cyber, information operations, and electronic warfare capabilities.⁹⁵

A major factor in Russian military thinking is speed, deploying its forces faster to take advantage of NATO's consensus-driven slowness to respond—what Russian analysts call *oborona*, or “active defense.”⁹⁶ At the strategic level, Russia aims to neutralize its opponents' military capabilities by carrying out a variety of nonlethal *aktivnost* measures listed above, combined with conventional operations that utilize speed, stealth, and surprise—the template of such operations was Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea.

A few other key events changed Putin's outlook in the post-9/11 era. First, the US-led military intervention in Iraq justified, in his mind, the norm of foreign-backed regime change, just as much as the forceful partition of Yugoslavia did.⁹⁷ In his eyes, terms like “sovereignty” would lose weight as he found pretexts to justify various invasions over the coming years. Second, just as Russia emerged victorious in Chechnya, a series of pro-reform “revolutions” broke out across the former Soviet Union. The aim of the revolutions was to unseat the corrupt governments that were holdovers from the Soviet era and that relied on closed economies heavily dependent on Moscow. Putin accused the West, including the CIA and private individuals like George Soros, of orchestrating these revolts to put into power pro-Western politicians who were instinctively hostile to Russia.

Although Putin easily won reelection in 2004, he signaled in various speeches that he was increasingly concerned of a so-called “color revolution” toppling his government. His rhetoric also took on a more belligerent tone.⁹⁸ In 2007 he famously lashed out at the West in a speech at a defense forum in Munich, deriding the United States for creating a unipolar world, reviving a nuclear arms race, and demonstrating an “almost uncontained hyper use of force—military force—in international relations.”⁹⁹ In 2011 and 2012 a series of antigovernment protests erupted across Russia that Putin blamed on American diplomats.

⁹⁵ McDermott, “Russia's Electronic Warfare Capabilities to 2025.”

⁹⁶ Thornton, “Concept of Pace in Current Russian Military Thinking,” 26.

⁹⁷ Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” 32.

⁹⁸ Beehner, “US-Russia Relations on a Collision Course.”

⁹⁹ Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion.”

Chapter III — Hybrid Warfare Revisited

Putin responded to what he said was foreign-backed regime change with a hybrid mix of military and nonmilitary force.¹⁰⁰ Definitions of hybrid warfare vary, but the following captures most of the agreed upon components: “a combination of regular and irregular war in a highly flexible and efficient way” using modern information capabilities.¹⁰¹ Russia uses information operations—leveraging cyber and electronic warfare—to degrade and deter its adversaries in Europe and the United States and sow “complexity, fusion, and simultaneity” at the operational and tactical levels in the same operational environment.¹⁰²

Speaking at a 2019 conference on Russian military strategy, Gen. Gerasimov told the audience that Russia’s armed forces must maintain both its “classical” and “asymmetrical” potential, a hybrid form of combat that combines its intelligence and propaganda tools with its traditional conventional tools. Such warfare defines how the Russians have waged conflicts in places like Ukraine and Syria.¹⁰³ Yet it goes beyond the Donbas or the Syrian city of Idlib and characterizes how the Kremlin, together with its GRU intelligence agency, has blended information operations with its expeditionary *Spetsnaz*, as well as expanded its use of subversion and propaganda to interfere with democratic elections in the West. According to Gerasimov, there is no conceptual difference between peacetime and wartime. Russia reserves the right to deploy soldiers or proxies to interfere in countries nominally at peace, and likewise its political, economic, and propaganda tools are fair game for use during wartime. Information operations include not just petty disinformation campaigns or cyber sabotage but also systematic interventions to shape public perceptions and popular narratives to the Kremlin’s liking.¹⁰⁴

Take its 2017 *Zapad* exercises, for example, where Moscow tested advanced command, control, and electronic warfare systems (e.g., Sagittarius target acquisition complex, RB-109A Bylina EW system). Russia claimed that the exercises and the use of electronic warfare systems were part of a “defensive tactical anti-terrorist exercise,” but Mathieu Boulègue argued that it was a “drill about a

¹⁰⁰ Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” 35.

¹⁰¹ Rácz, *Russia’s Hybrid War*, 28.

¹⁰² Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*.

¹⁰³ Kramer, “Russian General Pitches ‘Information’ Operations.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

limited conventional operation against an equally conventional and advanced enemy that resembled a territory with NATO-interoperable armed forces.”¹⁰⁵ The troops “went from initially conducting lightly-equipped border incursions to launching massive air strikes and land attacks with tremendous fire power, air supremacy capabilities, submarines, and EW capabilities.”¹⁰⁶

Virtually no civil domain is off limits. As Gerasimov put it, the use of special operations forces, internal opposition, and information operations can “create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state.”¹⁰⁷ Yet some analysts argue that the promotion of hybrid warfare is aimed at drawing additional resources for Russia’s hobbled armed forces, which were largely neglected after the breakup of the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, a case has been made that the attention paid to hybrid warfare among NATO members has a similar effect of keeping military budgets perennially high, even in the absence of outright war on the continent. Yet despite the focus on Russian hybrid war, a bulk of the investment by the United States and its NATO allies remains in systems to deter and defeat conventional conflict.

It is debatable whether such use of warfare demonstrates Russian strength or weakness. Going back to Sun Tzu, adversaries have always sought to win without fighting at all. “To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill,” as he famously noted. “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”¹⁰⁹

The strategic appeal of hybrid warfare is its ability to cause harm while expending minimal resources, its decentralized nature, and the plausible deniability it affords states. As a type of warfare, however, some have argued that it is neither new nor innovative.¹¹⁰ While much of Clausewitz’s work is focused on direct warfare aimed at “decisive military victory or the conquest of territory,” he also discussed indirect warfare aimed at exhausting the enemy to achieve political objectives rather than defeating his forces in the field.¹¹¹ Likewise, the US Revolutionary War included regulars, irregulars,

¹⁰⁵ Boulègue, “Five Things to Know about the Zapad-2017 Military Exercise.”

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Gerasimov, “Value of Science Is in the Foresight.”

¹⁰⁸ On this point, see Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare*.

¹⁰⁹ Sun, *Art of War*, 77.

¹¹⁰ Author’s interview with John Mearsheimer by Skype, June 5, 2017.

¹¹¹ Rácz, *Russia’s Hybrid War*, 19–20.

and eighteenth-century information operations. Pamphlets in 1776, however, didn't have the speed or reach of modern media.

The sheer scale and state backing of this form of warfare, combined with the speed of modern technology and social media, make it unique in the annals of warfare. As previously noted, Russia does not distinguish between wartime and peacetime nor between offense and defense when it comes to carrying out hybrid warfare and information operations. Russia prides itself on its ability to achieve “information dominance”—that is, the ability to penetrate America's information space, from planting media stories to hacking the inboxes of American politicians and their operatives to influencing major elections. Nor does Russia distinguish this type of warfare as anything different from the campaigns carried out by the international NGOs and foundations it prohibits. Its uses hybrid warfare to level the playing field (*vis-à-vis* NATO, whose defense expenditures are fifteen times those of Russia), weaken its adversaries (and their alliances like NATO and institutions such as democratic elections) with little risk of a conventional retaliation, and undermine the rules-based international order.¹¹²

Yet the term “hybrid war” has come under scrutiny and criticism among many military strategists, international relations scholars, and Russian specialists.¹¹³ One line of criticism is its abstractness; there is no agreed upon definition for hybrid warfare, only that it entails a “tailored mix of conventional, irregular, terrorism and criminal means or activities in the operational battlespace” that is “aimed at achieving a political purpose.”¹¹⁴ As Michael Kofman writes, “Hybrid warfare has become the Frankenstein of the field of Russia military analysis; it has taken on a life of its own and there is no obvious way to contain it.”

John Mearsheimer also notes that warfare going back to antiquity has always been hybrid, blending a variety of tools to achieve one's objective. Russia will look to deploy its “soft power” in

¹¹² For defense expenditures, see table 1. The phrase “rules-based international order” has come under criticism in recent months from a host of scholars. See Graham Allison, “The Myth of the Liberal International Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 2018.

¹¹³ It should be stated that nowhere does the phrase “hybrid warfare” (*gibridnaya voina*) appear in Russian doctrine, except to refer to policies of the United States or NATO. Definitions of “hybrid warfare” vary. For more, see Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges”; see also Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics*; Thornton and Karagiannis, “Russian Threat to the Baltic States”; Hester, “Is a Major War Coming?”

¹¹⁴ Glenn, “Thoughts on “Hybrid” Conflict”; Mansoor, “Hybrid Warfare in History,” 2.

addition to its “hard power,”¹¹⁵ a strategy sometimes referred to as “new generation warfare.”¹¹⁶ This form of warfare, Dmitry Adamsky notes, “presumes the use of force, but it is, primarily, a strategy of influence, not of brute force.”¹¹⁷

Andrew Radin divides hybrid warfare into three actions: nonviolent subversion, covert violent actions, and conventional warfare supported by subversion.¹¹⁸ Where analysts diverge is whether hybrid warfare represents a kind of weapon of the weak or of the mighty. For Alexander Lanoszka and Michael Hunzeker, it is the latter, as hybrid warfare involves a wide spectrum of activities, both military and nonmilitary—propaganda, espionage, agitation, criminal disorder, unmarked soldiers, border skirmishes, and so forth. As such, it requires that a military have escalation dominance, as it generally requires the shadow of conventional war.¹¹⁹

Others fret that hybrid warfare at its essence violates traditional norms of international behavior and aims to deliberately undermine the postwar “rules-based” system—one that made war, conquest, and territorial violations prohibited under international law and that has kept the peace among great powers for over seventy years. Still, others complain that it deliberately blurs the line between peacetime and wartime as a way of disguising attacks and relying on third-party proxies. How should an international court treat proxies in Crimea—as soldiers of the Russian Federation or as third-party actors?

The Crimea takeover was crafted to make it look as though it was indigenously led and spontaneous, carried out not by Russian special operations forces but by “local self-defense units,” a type of intervention that other countries, namely China, might use to seize disputed islands (or Taiwan).¹²⁰ According to Lanoszka and Hunzeker, the use of irregular warfare is meant to signal that an adversary is averse to military escalation (and perhaps risk avoidant), yet at same time and

¹¹⁵ Lloyd and Litinova, “Reality of Russian Soft Power.”

¹¹⁶ It should be noted that hybrid warfare and new generation warfare are related but not the same thing. For a good primer, see Kühn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics*, 15.

¹¹⁷ Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion*, 30.

¹¹⁸ Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics*.

¹¹⁹ Lanoszka and Hunzeker, “Conventional Deterrence and Landpower,” 4.

¹²⁰ McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, 400.

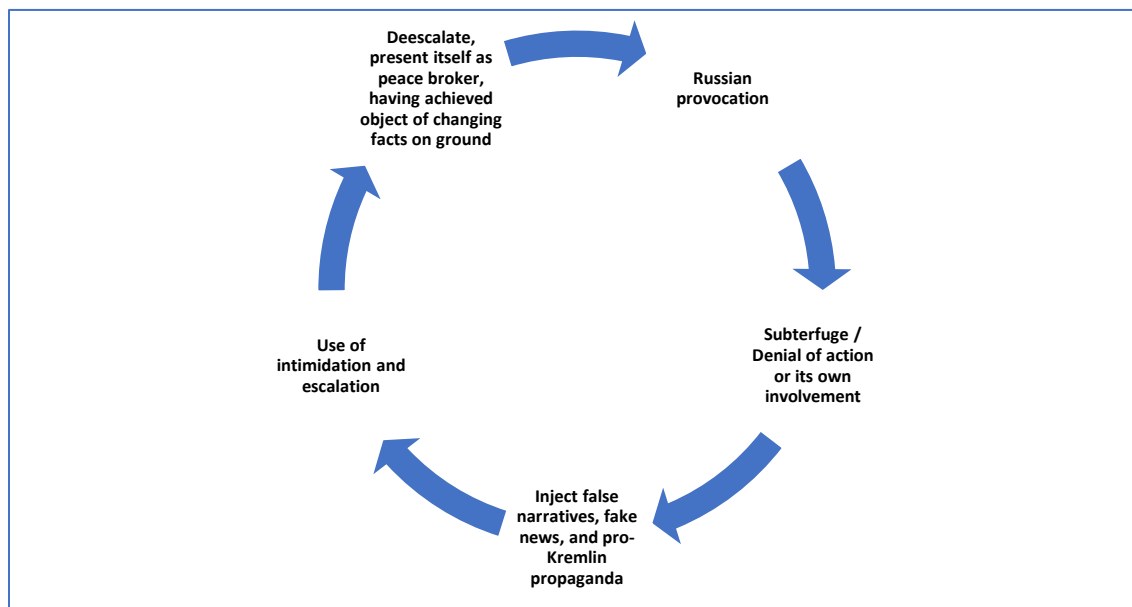
paradoxically, hybrid warfare requires threatening military escalation to unsettle the target and deter it from responding forcefully.

Drawing on several tactical vignettes and mini case studies from Ukraine, the next section examines four aspects of Russian hybrid warfare to understand the typical life cycle of a Russian provocation to examine how it takes advantage of crises to achieve its political objectives, creating new facts on the ground and keeping its enemies divided.

Chapter IV — A Breakdown of Russian Hybrid Warfare

Winston Churchill was the first to be credited with saying, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” A similar philosophy pervades Russia’s foreign policy. Its acts of aggression, regardless of the domain, locale, or stakes involved, follow a familiar pattern. First, Russia carries out some type of provocative activity in violation of international law as a form of intimidation. Next, it engages in subterfuge and denial, obfuscating the facts and even twisting international law to justify its original action. Then it employs information warfare to change the narrative and public opinion while simultaneously escalating belligerent rhetoric, before presenting itself as a preserver of peace and honest broker, all the while having succeeded at sufficiently altering “facts” on the ground. There is a predictable life cycle to how it handles crises and wages warfare that can offer lessons for how, whether, or when the United States should intervene militarily, politically, or economically to maximum advantage.

Figure 2: Life Cycle of Russian-Orchestrated Crises



This chapter will not chronicle every component of Russia’s defense establishment, nor will every component of its hybrid war toolbox be discussed. Instead, it will take a closer look at proxies,

information operations, maritime operations, and urban operations, to better understand how each of these can be applied in great power conflict.

Proxy Warfare

The future of great power armed conflict will likely be fought via proxy forces. In some ways, this is not that different from the Cold War, when direct conflict between Russia and the United States was studiously avoided, but wars were waged, via proxies, in peripheral nations like Vietnam. Proxy warfare refers broadly to the provision of financial support, weaponry, training, and other material by states to nonstate groups, in exchange for the latter fighting on behalf of the state's interests.¹²¹ The attraction of these forces is manifold. They provide states influence that is informal and covert, giving them deniability, a plausible middle ground strategy between not intervening at all and directly intervening in a civil war, and the ability to operate in the shadows of the international system. For the proxy on the ground, it gives them a lifeline of financial, material, and military support that also can shore up their local control and political legitimacy.

Proxy forces will vary between organized paramilitary outfits and decentralized militias and brigades of volunteer forces. Stathis Kalyvas, Corinna Jentzsch, and Livia Schubiger find that use of militias is on the rise in civil wars.¹²² Sabine Carey, Neil Mitchell, and Will Lowe find that militias are deployed by both democratic and authoritarian states both during times of peace and during times of war, and in interstate as well as in intrastate wars.¹²³ Militias do not necessarily need to be tied to the host state.¹²⁴ As Ilmari Kähkö notes, "Militias may well seek to defend and further social order that goes against states and their interests, while enjoying some legitimacy from parts of society, if not the state itself."¹²⁵

The use of proxy forces by third-party actors also appears to be on the rise.¹²⁶ However, proxy forces introduce new challenges. "Proxies tend to be unwieldy and difficult to manage without the presence of sponsors at the tactical level," Alex Deep argues. "This leads to a proxy dilemma wherein

¹²¹ Borghard, "Proxy War Can Have Dangerous Consequences."

¹²² Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, "Militias in Civil Wars."

¹²³ Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe, "States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence."

¹²⁴ Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, "Militias in Civil Wars."

¹²⁵ Kähkö, "Nation-in-the-Making."

¹²⁶ Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe, "States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence."

actions that increase the efficacy of proxies tend to exacerbate the domestic issues that led a state to use proxies in the first place.”¹²⁷

Proxies present a challenging principal-agent problem for the sponsor, often resulting in poor monitoring and improper vetting of the agent. Each side will point to extremist elements among the proxies fighting on behalf of its opponent as evidence that it is fighting against protofascists. As such, identity and attribution are muddled in these kinds of conflicts. Moreover, with little fear of prosecution, war crimes can be expected, especially against ethnic or religious minorities. In Crimea, which is home to large populations of ethnic Tatars, Human Rights Watch described a “pervasive climate of fear and repression,” as a result of Tatar schools being closed; monuments and graves desecrated; and Tatar nationals imprisoned, tortured, or worse, all at the hands of paramilitaries.¹²⁸

Using the legal system and military courts to try one’s enemies under suspicious laws is also commonplace in such environments. In Crimea, Ukrainian civil activists and religious leaders were tried, imprisoned, and oftentimes executed for alleged crimes of “propagation of fascism,” which is a delicious irony given that the paramilitaries issuing the sentences are themselves members of the far right, with neo-Nazi leanings.¹²⁹ They have painted Ukrainian government supporters and volunteers as right-wing militants who celebrate Ukrainian nationalists (e.g., Stepan Bandera) that fought alongside the Nazis during World War II. As one Ukrainian told us, “Russia is using Ukrainian history against it.”¹³⁰ A progovernment volunteer said, “As soon as this propaganda machine started calling us Nazis, I realized this is what information operations and hybrid warfare is.”¹³¹ Many of the Russian-backed separatists previously participated in paramilitary units in Bosnia or Chechnya, engaging in war crimes. They have resurrected military laws from 1941, when Stalin was in power. According to one report, the regional security legal environment is somewhere “between Soviet rule and vigilante justice.”¹³²

¹²⁷ Deep, *Proxy Dilemma*.

¹²⁸ Kuzio, *Putin’s War against Ukraine*, 297.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹³⁰ From an interview with a Ukrainian subject matter expert in Kyiv, June 2018.

¹³¹ From an interview with a Ukrainian volunteer and former member of Pravi Sector (“Right Sector”) in Kyiv, June 2018.

¹³² Kuzio, *Putin’s War against Ukraine*, 307.

Russia masterfully employed proxies in its war with Ukraine. After Yanukovych's ouster, Crimea was up for grabs, as the Kremlin sought a face-saving way to spin events in Ukraine in its favor. Sergei Aksyonov, who led one of the largest paramilitary forces on the peninsula, mobilized and militarized groups of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Crimea.¹³³ Such demonstrations emboldened Moscow to intervene more directly. Pro-Russia demonstrators labeled the Maidan protests as a military coup and its transition government as fascists backed by George Soros or the CIA.¹³⁴ The upshot of such propaganda was clear: ethnic Russians in Ukraine were in danger of losing their cultural rights and, in effect, being ethnically cleansed. Then, large groups of armed Russians not wearing insignia invaded, working closely with local pro-Russian militias like Aksyonov's. Together, they seized government buildings, air bases, and military installations.¹³⁵

Russia has used proxies for a variety of functions. They played an important role in information operations, conducting cyberattacks and online propaganda blitzes via popular social media sites that offered the Kremlin some plausible deniability. Russia also used them to organize massive antigovernment protests and riots. Russia has also shown a propensity to support criminal organizations whose lawlessness helps to undermine faith in the government. Additionally, proxies can facilitate the infiltration of Russian *Spetsnaz* and their operations.¹³⁶

Taken by surprise and seeking to avoid an escalation of hostilities it was not prepared for, the interim government in Kyiv ordered its military forces to stand down, almost certainly encouraged by the international community to use diplomatic as opposed to military means to resolve the dispute. After a popular referendum was held, Russia and the self-proclaimed government of Crimea signed a treaty to formally incorporate Crimea as a part of Russia. Not surprisingly, the results of the referendum were highly suspect. During the vote for secession, officials reported an 83 percent turnout with 97 percent voting for secession, but Russia's own Human Rights Council inadvertently posted the actual results with a 30 percent turnout and only 50 percent voting for secession.¹³⁷

¹³³ US Department of the Army, "Little Green Men," 31.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Rácz, *Russia's Hybrid War*, 57-72.

¹³⁷ Rácz, *Russia's Hybrid War*, 64.

Russia also relied on proxy forces to seize and hold territory in the Donbas. The leaders of these separatist militias mostly comprised extremist fighters or Russian nationalists who had cut their teeth in previous wars in Chechnya and Afghanistan. Others were well-connected businessmen with Kremlin ties, members of organized crime, or former intelligence officers. The first wave of leaders—Pavel Gubarev, Igor Girkin (Strelkov), Alexander Zakharchenko, Igor Plotnitsky—were fairly radicalized, rejecting all efforts at a ceasefire.¹³⁸

As Russia faced greater international pressure to contain the conflict, especially after the downing of the Dutch airliner, Moscow carried out a series of purges of these leaders over the course of 2015 and 2016. Many were either exiled (Plotnitsky, Girkin), detained (Gubarev), or assassinated (Zakharchenko).¹³⁹ They were replaced by seemingly more moderate, and controllable, leaders, yet local rule was still highly fragmented and dictatorial. The people's republics established their own government organs, rules of law, armed security forces, intelligence services, and judicial system. There is no independent media, and there are numerous reports of human rights abuses, including unlawful imprisonment, torture, and political assassinations.

Economically, the region was about to collapse under the pressure of a blockade and war. Property and businesses were looted or left to rot, the banking system collapsed, and pensions and taxes went unpaid and social services unprovided—all of which saw the regional economy shrunk by about two-thirds over the course of 2014. An injection of some \$1 billion annually by Russia has propped up the people's republics, though the sustainability of this economic support has been called into question.¹⁴⁰

Kyiv does not recognize these local proxies or their political legitimacy. It sees them as pawns of Moscow. As Sabine Fischer notes, “Kiev’s Donbas narrative concentrates almost exclusively on the geopolitical level and the relationship with Russia, with no space for a local conflict dimension. In this discourse the separatist rulers in Donetsk and Luhansk are not autonomous actors but puppets controlled by Moscow. Kiev regards them as criminals and terrorists who must not be legitimized by treating them as a conflict party.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Fischer, “Donbas Conflict.”

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Even still, Ukraine relied on its own volunteers to shore up its defenses in the region. These volunteer battalions were self-mobilized and spontaneous—a number of the volunteers organized themselves in response to the violent crackdown on the Euromaidan throughout 2013–14—and were described by some as “feudal” and “neomedieval,” given their autonomy.¹⁴² While not part of the formal defense apparatus, it would be difficult to consider these volunteers as proxies, given that they were fighting for the defense of their nation without external state sponsorship (although they did receive support from their diaspora). At the same time, these volunteer militias do have some similarities to proxies. They are fighting on behalf of a state (in this case, their home state), yet the state cannot control them in the same way that it can a regular army (although it does have legal methods of control). These volunteers came from all over Ukraine. One volunteer boasted that her volunteer battalion consisted of “Jews, Belarusians . . . and Ukrainians from every oblast in Ukraine.”¹⁴³

Interestingly these battalions enjoyed more public trust among everyday Ukrainians than the national army.¹⁴⁴ The state of the Ukrainian army in 2014 was abysmal. Corruption was endemic, according to several sources; its senior ranks were staffed with pro-Russia officers whose loyalty was called into question. Yet their presence on the battlefield shifted the tactical approaches to warfare in the Donbas. In some cases, the volunteers brought expertise in reconnaissance drones. Their freedom of maneuver, according to Kähkö, “threatened existing hierarchies and authority of the state, and necessitated their control.” Hence, they became, over time, more formally integrated into state security organizations, much as Ukraine’s National Guard and reservists were.

Many of these volunteers came from the Right Sector, a group of Ukrainian protestors who formed during the Maidan uprising as an alliance of nationalist groups and whose role was instrumental in battling the riot police, ultimately leading to Yanukovich’s ouster. Several members of these volunteers are female.¹⁴⁵ Russian separatists and Russian state media described these groups as neofascist and anti-Semitic. These volunteers refused to embed themselves with Ukraine’s armed forces. They saw themselves as more professional and capable than their counterparts in uniform. Each side was also distrustful of intelligence shared with the other and their intentions. Volunteers

¹⁴² Kähkö, “Nation-in-the-Making,” 155.

¹⁴³ Interview with Ukrainian volunteer in Kyiv in June 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ From an interview with a female volunteer fighter and former member of Right Sector in Kyiv in June 2018.

likened Ukrainian soldiers to “hobos” or “homeless” people, because of their lack of professional attire and the poor state of their weaponry. Even battlefield defeats were blamed on the army as deliberate attempts to weaken the self-defense battalions. The volunteers were also distrustful of foreign legions fighting on the Ukrainian state’s behalf. Eventually these volunteer battalions, loosely organized and poorly integrated, became de facto paramilitary outfits, acting as territorial-defense battalions more formally (and legally) under Ukraine’s Ministry of Defense.¹⁴⁶

A few lessons learned from Russia’s use of proxy actors in Ukraine are as follows:

- The use of proxy actors confers first-mover military advantages on great powers. Crimea is a case in point. These paramilitary forces proved capable at seizing key infrastructure, while the international community scrambled to play catch-up. These forces also provide their outside backers with plausible deniability of their involvement, at least during the critical stages of the conflict.
- The use of proxies can make negotiations and peace resolution difficult. Often governments do not recognize these groups or wish to negotiate directly with them, for fear of legitimizing their claims to power. This makes their sponsor the only other party to negotiate with, but if they deny involvement, they may not be willing to negotiate.
- Proxies can be difficult agents to control, as evidenced by the purge of proxy leaders seen in the Donbas throughout 2014 and 2015, as the objectives of the people’s republic’s leaders and the Kremlin diverged. But this challenge can be exploited. To wage effective proxy warfare, states and militaries should exploit fissures within and among their opponents’ proxies. This can be done by driving a wedge between the proxy and its external sponsor.
- Proxies are rarely employed independently and are part of a larger strategy. In Crimea, Russian information operations proved effective at confusing the international community as to what was really going on in Ukraine. Thus, information operations play an important role in legitimizing (or delegitimizing) the proxies. This paved the way for easily falsifiable local elections, both in Crimea and in the Donbas region.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.; Kähkö, “A Nation-in-the-Making,” 159.

- Volunteer fighters are somewhat analogous to proxies, in that the state supports fighters whom it doesn't fully control. Like proxies, they must also be vetted before a state should provide the group support.

Information Warfare¹⁴⁷

Information warfare—sometimes called influence operations—refers broadly to the practice of collecting information about an enemy as well as the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda to seek an advantage over one's adversary, whether in peacetime or wartime. Information operations were formally incorporated into Russian military doctrine in 2010 and date further back to the height of the Cold War, but they have expanded since. It should be stated that Russian information warfare, or *informatsionnaya voyna*, is not simply a tool to achieve limited tactical objectives or advantage during wartime, typically in the initial phase of hostilities. Rather, information warfare should be considered more broadly.

Calculated and systematic, Russia's information warfare consists of operations aimed at degrading the enemy's ability to control the information space, deny it the technical capability to retaliate via cyber means, and defend a narrative of Russian chauvinism to glorify its role in the region—a version of Russian soft power. Information operations comprise a bounty of tactical innovations, from traditional psychological operations and strategic communications aimed at controlling the narrative to the sophisticated deployment of decentralized trolls and bots across social media and other online platforms.¹⁴⁸

Before investigating their application in Ukraine, it is worth noting a few features of Russian information operations. First, Russia's leadership does not apply information warfare principally to support its military objectives—that is, to soften up the enemy or prep the battlefield, as it were—but rather vice versa. Its military operations in places like Ukraine's Donbas are often ancillary to Russia's more immediate strategic objective: to challenge US and Western interests wherever possible and undermine Washington's ability to advance unhindered its own strategic objectives. That is, information operations (IO) are not part of a military strategy to formally seize more land in Ukraine's

¹⁴⁷ A version of the section on information operations appeared in the 2018 Army University Press's volume *Large-Scale Combat Operations* and is reprinted with the editor's permission. See also Beehner, Collins, and Person, "Fog of Russian Information Warfare."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁸ Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*.

East or to send a column of tanks into the Baltics. By sowing uncertainty, discord, and division in places like Ukraine, Russian IO is a particularly cheap and effective means of achieving those strategic ends. To the degree that IO goes hand in hand with Russian conventional military operations, the latter are, in some respects, sideshows to the former, not the other way around.

Part of the confusion (and thus the utility from the Russian perspective) of IO is that it can be applied to political ends simultaneously with military ends. In such contexts, it can be difficult to determine a priori what the objectives of some information operations are. This is the situation in Ukraine, where political and military objectives are both part of the conflict's logic. The objective of Russia's military operations in Ukraine is *not* simply to acquire territory—if it wanted to, Russia could have easily by now annexed militarily the Donbas, the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine—but rather to keep Ukraine down, sow confusion among its public, and prevent Kyiv from joining Western institutions.

Russia seeks to undermine the foundational principles of the very institutions that Ukraine seeks to join. In this regard, IO does not serve its military goals of controlling or annexing territory, but rather the other way around: *its military strategy supports its IO*. Ukraine in this regard is just one piece of Russia's larger grand puzzle—an important piece, to be sure, given the close historical ties previously documented. Russian IO in Ukraine is but one component to weaken the West and by extension make the world more multipolar.

Russia's information operations in Ukraine date back decades, but the most recent campaign began in earnest around the time of the Maidan Revolution in November 2013. Russia employed IO with several objectives in mind: to undermine support for the protesters and pro-Western factions in Ukraine, to elicit fear among Ukraine's Russian-speaking and pro-Russian populations in its East and South, and to deny facts on the ground during operations to seize Crimea and interfere in the war in Ukraine's East. To accomplish these objectives, Russia employed several tactics, often in combination with cyber warfare, to influence enemy combatants, local populations, and allies. Social media has been effectively weaponized, providing a platform for armies of trolls, provocateurs, propagandists, and "Russian patriots" to give the Kremlin favorable coverage and twist the narrative. Alexander Dugin prescribes a vigorous campaign of combating pro-Western liberalism through a set of polemics designed to vilify Russian liberals as lackeys for the Americans. If a blogger advocates for Western-style democracy, the patriotic Russian should respond, "How much did the CIA pay you?" He insists

that Russians must sustain the social media campaign relentlessly over a prolonged period to effectively paint the opposition as corrupt. Persistent messaging through social media not only conditions the domestic audience and targeted groups in areas of conflict, but it also gives rise to spontaneous support groups abroad—people who respond with enthusiasm to the Russian message and help to propagate it without direct control from the state. This technique is analogous to small boat swarms overwhelming capital ships at sea; the sheer volume and persistence of the messages overtakes the adversary’s ability to defend.¹⁴⁹

First and foremost, the Kremlin consolidated its control over all Russian media covering the conflict in Ukraine. Ukrainian-language broadcast media in the East was effectively closed, leaving Kremlin-controlled RT (formerly *Russia Today*) as the sole source of information via television among Ukrainians in the region.¹⁵⁰ Because Russian servers hosted the dominant Russian-language social media platforms—VKontakte and Odnoklassniki—the authorities were able to effectively block any pages with a pro-Maidan bent. It also allowed the Russian government to monitor sympathizers of the post-Maidan Ukrainian government as well as recruit foot soldiers for its proseparatist proxies.¹⁵¹

Second, the Kremlin put considerable spin on its portrayal of events in Ukraine: the 2013–14 Maidan Revolution, the takeover of Crimea, and the ongoing war in the East. It portrayed Crimea as being land that historically belonged to Russia. It exaggerated the influence played by Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis among the Maidan protestors and later those fighting in the Donbas region to stoke fear among ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians. By demonizing the enemy, this was tactically important for its proxies, enabling the use of greater violence against their fellow citizens. Finally, the Kremlin-controlled Russian media ignored the presence of Russian soldiers and *Spetsnaz* forces in Ukraine and downplayed the illegality of Russia’s seizure of Crimea. Conversely, Russia vastly overstated the role played by Washington in controlling the protests on Maidan and influencing events in the East.¹⁵²

Third, Russian operatives sought to shape the battlefield by directly targeting and manipulating the minds of Ukrainian troops through subversive forms of propaganda and misinformation. In 2017

¹⁴⁹ US Department of the Army, “*Little Green Men*,” 17.

¹⁵⁰ Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*.

¹⁵¹ From an interview with a civil society activist in Kyiv, Ukraine, June 2018.

¹⁵² McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*.

the Russian authorities created so-called “information operation troops,” whose remit, according to Russian defense minister Sergei Shoygu, was to spread “clever and efficient propaganda.”¹⁵³ The aim of these troops encompassed a mix of strategic communications, psychological operations, and influence activities. They should *not* be treated as a separate cyber command, as their means go beyond just conducting cyber warfare to disrupt networks but also include manipulating the media and planting counterpropaganda to control and distort the enemy’s cognitive understanding of what is real and what is false.

They involve planting fake news stories to stoke irredentist violence. A case in point is the steady stream of misinformation among Russian-language news broadcasts in the South and East of Ukraine claiming to locals that Kyiv would rescind their right to speak the Russian language. Much of the misinformation plays on people’s traditional moral values. In 2014 it was also falsely reported by Russian media that Ukrainian soldiers had crucified a small boy.¹⁵⁴ The aim of such efforts is to paint the protestors with a broad brushstroke as LGBTQ activists, a way to sow distrust among rural and more conservative segments of Ukrainian society.¹⁵⁵

The targets of these IO campaigns are not just Russian speakers or natives but also the members of the Ukrainian military fighting on the front line. Shortly after the fighting started in eastern Ukraine in 2014, for example, soldiers deployed to the combat region started receiving “fake texts.” The texts were often meant to threaten and demoralize troops in a grinding conflict with some texts reading: “Ukrainian soldiers, they’ll find your bodies when the snow melts,” “Leave and you will live,” “Nobody needs your kids to become orphans,”¹⁵⁶ “Ukrainian soldier, it’s better to retreat alive than to stay here and die,” and “You will not regain Donbas back. Further bloodshed is pointless.”¹⁵⁷

Other texts were aimed at undermining unit cohesion and morale. Texts, often appearing to come from fellow soldiers, claimed that the commander had deserted or that Ukrainian forces were being decimated and that “we should run away.” Nancy Snow, a professor of public diplomacy at the

¹⁵³ Sharkov, “Russia Announces ‘Information Operations’ Troops.”

¹⁵⁴ Snyder, *On Tyranny*, 97.

¹⁵⁵ Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters*, 161.

¹⁵⁶ Satter and Vlasov, “Ukraine Soldiers Bombarded.”

¹⁵⁷ Golovko, “Ukrainian Frontline”; all texts are reproduced in this source with their original errors.

Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, described this as “pinpoint propaganda.”¹⁵⁸ In previous conflicts, leaflets dropped by air or radio messages could easily be ignored—by refusing to pick up and read the leaflet or by tuning to another radio station—but it is nearly impossible to avoid reading text messages sent to one’s phone.

Russia also combines its information operations with lethal operations, starting with a text message to a soldier, telling him he is “surrounded and abandoned.” Ten minutes later, the soldier’s family receives a text message stating, “Your son is killed in Action” (the family’s phone number having been pulled from the soldier’s recent-contacts list). The soldier’s friends and family likely call the soldier to see if the news is true. Seventeen minutes after the initial text message, the soldier receives another message telling him to “retreat and live,” with an artillery strike following shortly thereafter to the location where the large group of targeted cell phones are detected. Thus, in one coordinated action, Russian forces use IO to target the soldier and his family and friends, combining it with electronic warfare, cyber warfare, and artillery, to produce both lethal and psychological effects.¹⁵⁹

Likewise, the soldiers of potential allies are not immune to Russian IO. NATO troops deployed in the Baltics and Poland as part of the deterrence mission have also been targeted. Instead of pinpoint propaganda, NATO soldiers have had their Facebook accounts hacked, had their data erased, or received messages stating, “Someone is trying to access your iPhone,” with a map appearing in the text with Moscow at the center of the map. One commander believes the intent of the IO is to intimidate the soldiers and to let them know that Russian intelligence forces are tracking them and that their data is at risk.¹⁶⁰

Russia has also targeted the US military, employing IO in an attempt to decrease the military readiness of the United States and its NATO allies. Russian media outlets have been known to reach out to the mayors of towns outside the Hohenfels training area in Germany, asking them if the noise from military training is disruptive to the local population.¹⁶¹ This is a clear attempt to sow discord between the populations and the US base, with the intent of enticing the German government to put restrictions on military training.

¹⁵⁸ Satter and Vlasov, “Ukraine Soldiers Bombarded.”

¹⁵⁹ Golovko, “Ukrainian Frontline.”

¹⁶⁰ Grove, Barnes, and Hinshaw, “Russia Targets NATO Soldier Smartphones.”

¹⁶¹ Interview with military officials in Hohenfels, Germany, on May 8, 2018.

Finally, Russian IO in Ukraine has included attempts of technological interference in political institutions via cyber means, with mixed degrees of success. Ukraine provided a laboratory of sorts for Russian hackers who would later interfere more boldly in elections in the United States and in Western Europe.¹⁶² The concept of weaponized information was directed in Ukraine to undermine its fledgling institutions and erode public trust. In addition to targeting critical infrastructure—Ukraine’s electric grid, government websites, and banks—Russian operatives were active in planting fake news stories. The effectiveness of such operations, however, are questionable. Examining the effects of Russian propaganda vis-à-vis Russian state-controlled TV in Ukraine, the political scientists Leonid Peisakhin and Arturas Rozenas found the effects to be uneven:

Ukrainians who were already predisposed in Russia’s favor found its media message persuasive. Pro-Russian Ukrainians who watched Russian TV were more likely to vote for pro-Russian candidates in the 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections than were anti-Russian Ukrainians who watched the same programming. Those with anti-Russian views were dissuaded by the Russian media message and became more likely to vote for pro-Western politicians. Individuals with no strong political priors seem not to have been swayed in either direction.¹⁶³

It should be noted that Russian IO campaigns are not always professionally executed or effective. After the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014, Russia’s Foreign Ministry put out several different and often contradictory theories for how the plane crashed, blaming it first on Ukrainian combat aircraft and then on a Ukrainian surface-to-air missile. Its state-run news outlets, *RT* and *Sputnik*, repeated the claims, as did Russian bots on social media. Perhaps the Kremlin’s strategy all along was to put out several conflicting narratives to sow confusion and cast doubt on the official version of events and explanation. The reportage of the MH17 downing had a he-said, she-said quality to it, even despite corroborating evidence of Russian involvement after US intelligence declassified satellite imagery showing Russian military hardware pouring across the Ukrainian border. “Because we had to be fact-checked, because we had to be mindful of sensitive intelligence, we were slower than the Russians, and couldn’t be as definitive in our statements or as far-reaching in our social media presence,” writes former deputy national security advisor under Obama, Benjamin Rhodes.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Greenberg, “How an Entire Nation Became Russia’s Test Lab for Cyberwar.”

¹⁶³ Peisakhin and Rozenas, “When Does Russian Propaganda Work?”

¹⁶⁴ Rhodes, *World as It Is*, 382.

A few lessons that can be learned from Russia's information operations in Ukraine are as follows:

- Russian IO is not part of its military strategy to seize land or send conventional forces into its neighborhood. Rather, Russian IO provides a cheap and efficient means of achieving its strategic ends. Put otherwise, IO goes hand in hand with Russian conventional military operations; the latter are in some respects sideshows to the former, not the other way around, insofar as Russian strategic objectives are to sow confusion, not necessarily to militarily control more territory or reimpose its empire.
- Russian propaganda rarely changes minds but rather pushes voters to adapt more extreme points of view and increases political polarization, which itself is a factor that undermines democracy and liberal norms. Whether this is intended or not, the tactical effect of Russian IO in Ukraine is not to change minds but rather to push people toward the extreme and crowd out the middle. The middle is where democracy thrives; the polar extremes are where it withers and dies.
- Social media efforts by the Kremlin aim not only to shape domestic public opinion or targeted groups in the areas of conflict but also to influence support groups abroad—people who respond with enthusiasm to the Russian message and help to propagate it without direct control from the state.
- Russia has effectively integrated IO as part of its military planning, with other means, including lethal, playing a supporting role. In the US military, IO functions remain too diffused across command staffs, making synchronization difficult. The most recent *National Security Strategy* acknowledges that US efforts “have been tepid and fragmented,” have “lacked a sustained focus,” and “have been hampered by the lack of properly trained professionals.”¹⁶⁵ The United States must address these shortfalls.

Maritime/Littoral

Russia demonstrated the willingness to conduct littoral and maritime military operations by taking advantage of poorly enforced laws of the seas to its strategic and tactical advantage. A case in

¹⁶⁵ Collins, “Learning from Russia’s Information Operations,” 31; and White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 35.

point was the incident on November 25, 2018, in the Kerch Strait, whereby Russia's coast guard patrol ships fired on and seized Ukrainian naval vessels—two Ukrainian artillery boats and a tugboat—and apprehended two dozen sailors.¹⁶⁶ The strait is a strategically important artery that links the Black Sea with the Sea of Azov (see figure 1) and has been under Moscow's de facto control since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. (Previously the strait and the Sea of Azov were controlled by both countries under a 2003 joint agreement.)

The naval incident represented an escalation in hostilities, as Moscow has sought to place the Sea of Azov under its thumb to give Russia naval access between occupied Crimea and the Donbas and to close Mariupol, a Ukrainian seaport located on the Sea of Azov, from the Black Sea.¹⁶⁷ To that end, Russia's coast guard has recently begun inspecting all vessels, commercial or otherwise, sailing to or from Ukrainian ports in the sea. This bottleneck of ships passing through the Kerch Strait has delayed hundreds of commercial ships, costing captains \$15,000–\$20,000 per day, and discourages trade in Mariupol.¹⁶⁸

What's more, Russia also built a low-hanging \$3.7 billion bridge over the strait as a way to cement its claim to the artery, which also effectively blockades two of Ukraine's largest ports.¹⁶⁹ The Russian navy has also expanded its presence in the sea basin.¹⁷⁰ These moves have drawn criticism from Kyiv that Russia is, in effect, enacting a naval blockade, which is an act of war under international law. Others have charged Moscow with "creeping annexation" of the Sea of Azov's littoral region.¹⁷¹ Russia claims that it is the victim and is well within its rights, calling the incident a "provocation made by bandits' methods" and pointing out that Ukraine's coast guard had earlier in the year seized the *Nord*, a Russian fishing vessel, near the city of Kerch, sentencing its captain to five years in prison.¹⁷²

The details of the November 2018 incident remain disputed, but a small flotilla of Ukrainian ships was reportedly being transferred from Odessa to Mariupol to boost Ukraine's naval presence in the Sea of Azov. The fleet comprised two armored artillery boats, the R-175 *Berdiansk* and the R-179

¹⁶⁶ Smith and Talmazan, "Ukraine-Russia Sea Clash."

¹⁶⁷ Fischer, "Donbas Conflict."

¹⁶⁸ Monje, "Russia, Ukraine, and the Sea of Azov."

¹⁶⁹ "Sea of Troubles."

¹⁷⁰ Fischer, "Donbas Conflict."

¹⁷¹ Smith and Talmazan, "Russian 'Creeping Annexation' Hits Ukraine."

¹⁷² Ukrainian Independent Information Agency of News, "Russians from Nord Ship Swapped."

Nikopol, along with the tugboat *Yana Kapu* and were supposed to link up with other Ukrainian vessels based in Mariupol, including twin gunboats, the R-177 *Kremenchug* and the R-178 *Lubny*. According to one analysis of the incident, “The deployment of new ships in the Azov Sea would at the moment give Ukraine a significant advantage in these waters over Russian forces, which presently consist essentially of the unarmed patrol boats of the Coast Guard of the Border Service of the FSB [the Kremlin’s successor to the KGB].”¹⁷³

The analysis further challenges the notion that the Ukrainian artillery boats should have been sent to Mariupol by sea in the first place.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, Russian authorities claim that the Ukrainian vessels ignored verbal warnings and warning shots and entered waters near the Crimean Peninsula, waters that Russia considers its “territorial sea,” en route to the port of Mariupol. Russia blocked their advancement by placing a large cargo tanker under the bridge, before proceeding to fire on them and pursue them as they retreated. The vessels were boarded by the Coast Guard of the Border Service and by Russian intelligence, whose agents do not typically participate in standard patrols.

Upon seizing the three vessels, the Russians arrested the twenty-three Ukrainian sailors and detained them at a nearby port. Ukraine claims that its crewmen did notify Russian authorities and sought cooperation yet were fired upon in response. Kyiv, which does not recognize the annexation of Crimea or Russia’s right to deny passage to Ukrainian vessels, maintains that its vessels fled back into international waters before being fired on. Ukraine’s government declared thirty days of martial law in the region, summoned all Ukrainian army units to full combat-readiness status, and called on the West to impose tighter sanctions against Russia.¹⁷⁵

This action demonstrates Russia’s desire to exert its domestic control over the Azov Sea basin, as well as their desire to expose the vulnerabilities of a NATO nonmember, Ukraine, and its helplessness to respond.¹⁷⁶ Yet some argue that Moscow’s response to the incident was uncharacteristically measured and moderate. Still, the rapid deployment of a cargo tanker to block

¹⁷³ Niecypor et al., “Consequences of the Incident.”

¹⁷⁴ According to the same report, “In September the first two ships initially reached Berdyansk via land, and were only then sent to Mariupol on the Azov Sea. At that time, Russia decided not to take any hostile action, apart from merely escorting the Ukrainian ships. This was a reaction to Russia’s blockade, ongoing since the end of April, of Ukrainian commercial vessels leaving and entering the Ukrainian ports on the Azov Sea.”

¹⁷⁵ Niecypor et al., “Consequences of the Incident.”

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

passage suggests that the incident was premeditated and that the Russians were prepared well in advance to block any expansion of Ukraine's naval presence in the Sea of Azov. The deployment of air force assets—Ka-52 attack helicopters and Su-25 attack aircraft were summoned to the area—further backs up the theory that Moscow's intention was to provoke an armed reaction.¹⁷⁷

The incident follows a familiar playbook when it comes to Russia's waging of hybrid warfare. The initial reaction from Russian authorities was that it was merely responding to a breach of its territorial sovereignty, when in fact there are clear indications that the move had been planned well in advance. Second, there is some level of subterfuge and denial. In this case, Russians deny having illegally boarded and seized the vessels, despite evidence to the contrary. The intention of Moscow is both to deny Ukraine a greater naval military presence in a region it considers vital to Russian security and also to expose the weakness of Ukraine's naval power and the brittleness of its allies' support. With its actions, Russia has credibly signaled its willingness to escalate and control waters it deems vital to its security, redrawing maritime borders, rewriting the rules of the game, and changing facts on the ground.

There is concern that Russia is positioning its forces on the Crimean Peninsula to shut down the sea lane to the Mediterranean, which is an important supply route for Western operations in Syria.¹⁷⁸ Russia's Black Sea Fleet just added six Kilo-class attack submarines, four surface ships, and ten new warships whose Kalibr missiles can range targets 1,500 miles away.¹⁷⁹

A few lessons that can be learned from the November 2018 Sea of Azov incident are as follows:

- Russia will continue to challenge the freedom of navigation and laws of the seas in maritime areas deemed vital to its national interests. Its master plan is to flex its muscle, improve access between its occupied Crimean Peninsula and the Donbas area of operations, and damage Ukraine's economy by increasing the uncertainty and costs of Ukraine's shipping lanes.¹⁸⁰ Its Black Sea Fleet, going back centuries, is critical to Russia's projection of force in the wider

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Tucker, "US Intelligence Officials and Satellite Photos."

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Fischer, "Donbas Conflict."

Middle East region and protection of sea lanes that are important for its commercial and energy transit interests.

- This show of force on the Sea of Azov indicates that this maritime area may become a new front line in Moscow's ongoing confrontation with NATO and the West. Parts of the Baltic Sea can expect to be similarly challenged. The situation around the larger Sea of Azov region has arguably shifted in Moscow's favor.
- An aggressive information operations campaign is likely to follow any Russian actions. Russia followed the incident with belligerent rhetoric, accusing the Ukrainians of "provocative behavior," the very thing it stands accused of, as a way of distorting the narrative, bombarding the airwaves with its own version of events, and sowing confusion while saving face.¹⁸¹ Even if foreign leaders don't believe the rhetoric, it gives them enough plausible deniability to not act based on the "uncertainty."
- Russia will continue to engage in military actions that weaken opponents without risking war. The economic cost of delaying ships to Mariupol is significant and damages an economy that has yet to recover from the loss of Crimea and waging a war in its East. Yet Russia does not appear willing to risk all-out war; Putin correctly anticipated that there would be no significant cost to its actions (through additional sanctions).

Urban Warfare

A helpful preview of the fog and friction of future urban warfare is how Russian-backed separatists attacked the city of Donetsk and laid siege to its newly refurbished international airport, not once but twice, over the course of 2014, during the early stages of the war. The campaign demonstrated the use of speed, stealth, surprise, siege tactics, concealment, close air support, and plausible deniability—all characteristics of how great powers may fight in future urban operations. The Donbas is fairly urbanized, comprising 20 percent of Ukraine's urban areas and 16 percent of Ukraine's total population (preconflict), with a large number of Russians and Russian speakers.¹⁸² This

¹⁸¹ "Russia and Ukraine Trade Barbs."

¹⁸² Fischer, "Donbas Conflict."

ethnic apartness and urbanization make it a unique test case to understand urban warfare waged via proxy actors across multiple fronts and domains.

David Kilcullen points to four key megatrends that motivate the likelihood of states fighting in cities: demographic shifts, urbanization, coastal settlement, and greater connectedness.¹⁸³ He projects a future of what he calls “feral cities”—urban systems under stress, with increasing overlaps between crime and war, internal and external threats, and a blurring of lines between the real and virtual worlds.¹⁸⁴ According to John Sullivan, urban warfare is proving challenging for nations that have spent much of the post-9/11 era focused on stability operations or counterinsurgency.¹⁸⁵ Yet sieges are becoming more commonplace as states and violent nonstate actors alike realize how civilians packed densely together can be used as pawns in modern warfare.¹⁸⁶ A case in point is the Philippines, which has fought a series of sieges against Islamist rebels over the past decade. As described by John Sullivan,

The Philippine experience with insurgency had largely involved jungle fighting. The battle zone in Marawi involved weeks of heavy urban fighting, including close quarter battle, and trapped residents. Past Philippine urban operations, as seen for example in the Moro National Liberation Front’s Siege of Zamboanga City in 2013, had involved lightly constructed structures as opposed to hardened structures, which included tunnels in Marawi. The Islamic State/IS-affiliated rebels in Marawi (Maute-IS) brought a new dimension to the fight. The five-month Siege of Marawi left over 1,100 dead amid accusations of war crimes. The Philippine military claims the rebels took refuge in mosques, took hostages to use as human shields, and used rat like tactics, including maneuvering in tunnels and sewers to prolong the conflict.¹⁸⁷

Other scholars argue that combat in urban areas is the most destructive type of warfare imaginable.¹⁸⁸ Yet despite its lethality and destruction, as John Spencer notes, urban warfare rarely results in the “death” of cities.¹⁸⁹ Even places like Aleppo in 2017 or Grozny in the mid-1990s, despite

¹⁸³ Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Sullivan, “Urban Warfare.”

¹⁸⁶ Beehner, Berti, and Jackson, “Strategic Logic of Sieges in Counterinsurgencies.”

¹⁸⁷ Sullivan, “Urban Warfare.”

¹⁸⁸ Spencer, “Destructive Age of Urban Warfare.”

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

appearing to look leveled and resembling a modern-day version of Guernica, are resilient and incapable of being destroyed. Spencer likens cities to biological organisms:

A basic urban geography text divides cities between their physical aspects—such as the ground the city is built upon, shelters, buildings, or permanent facilities for different functions—and its social aspects—which allow the city to function as a “a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collocative unity.” Accordingly, the social functions of a city are as key to its existence, distinction, and definition as are its physical attributes.¹⁹⁰

This analysis is relevant to urban warfare in the context of eastern Ukraine, where a series of pitched battles took place throughout 2014 between the Ukrainian army, untrained and unprepared for urban conflict, and a Russian-backed army of separatists. During the war’s early phase, the Ukrainian army was overwhelmed by the fighting, and the rebels enjoyed a substantial military advantage. Kyiv’s various antiterrorism operations resulted in high levels of casualties among its troops.¹⁹¹

A center of gravity, the opponent’s source of strength, for the war was Donetsk, the largest city in the East and the capital of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic. The first major campaign began in April 2014, when Ukrainian army forces were sent into the city to quell an uprising. The bulk of the fighting was limited to a few neighborhoods near the Sergey Prokofiev International Airport, a Soviet-era building recently refurbished ahead of the 2012 European Football Championship. It was named for a famous twentieth-century composer who was ethnically Russian yet also a fervent Ukrainian nationalist and folk hero of sorts. In other words, the airport was a symbol of Ukrainian unity and togetherness, a bridge between Ukraine’s largely Catholic and pro-EU West and its Orthodox and largely pro-Russian East. Yet it was also strategically important, given its position just to the north of the separatist-controlled city.

After Russian-backed separatists seized the airport in April 2014, the Ukrainian army and progovernment volunteer militias shelled it and reclaimed it, using it as a base to launch artillery toward separatist strongholds in Donetsk. As one rebel battalion commander told a reporter, “The defense

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Fischer, “Donbas Conflict.”

of Donetsk is impossible without the airport,” given its vast networks of nearby mines and tunnels connecting it to the center of Donetsk.¹⁹²

Arguably, the airport held little tactical value, as the Donetsk People’s Republic did not possess an air force and its cratered runways were rendered inoperable. The airport, moreover, is surrounded by dense yet defensible woods that would have provided the same level of concealment for Ukrainian forces. But the siege took on its own mythology in popular culture. The airport was likened to a modern-day version of the Alamo.¹⁹³ According to a report in *Newsweek*, “For the Ukrainian side . . . the airport had turned into a symbolic Stalingrad, with much war propaganda invested into the image of the indestructible, Terminator-style ‘cyborgs’ who defended it.”¹⁹⁴ Ukrainian soldiers remained at the airport, even after a September 2014 ceasefire declared the airport to be ceded to the separatists.

Those besieged in the Donetsk airport consisted mostly of young volunteers and conscripts from across Ukraine. One member of the elite 80th Paratrooper Brigade, based in Lviv (a city in western Ukraine), described a chaotic scene at the airport. “We’ve been looking around for people’s arms so we might stitch them on again,” a soldier told *Newsweek*.¹⁹⁵ The sprawling mass of burnt concrete, once a paragon of modern design, provided an ideal place to take shelter. It provided no shortage of hiding places, given its labyrinthine maze of tunnels, bunkers, and underground communications systems. In violation of the laws of armed combat, separatist forces stationed artillery in residential neighborhoods near the airport.

Numerous “ceasefires” failed, as did attempts by the Ukrainian army to rescue trapped soldiers after the terminal fell back into rebel hands in late 2014. The Ukrainian army sent in a convoy of light army vehicles to retrieve those most seriously wounded. Finally, backed by Russian drones and tanks and by the cover of smoke bombs, Donetsk People’s Republic forces advanced into the airport and seized a number of hangars, a fuel-storage area, and other buildings, all of which were used as artillery emplacements.¹⁹⁶ The building was littered with booby traps providing what one report called “a

¹⁹² Carroll, “Inside the Bloody Battle.”

¹⁹³ Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 20.

¹⁹⁴ Carroll, “Inside the Bloody Battle.”

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ “Pro-Russia Rebels Attempt to Seize Donetsk Airport in Ukraine.”

claustrophobic game of cat and mouse.”¹⁹⁷ The *Los Angeles Times* reported, “Every pane of glass has shattered; every door, wall and ceiling has been pierced with bullets and shrapnel.”¹⁹⁸

The Battle of Donetsk provides several lessons for US military thinking on urban warfare:

- The episode demonstrates the fluid nature of the lines of control in urban combat, as control over the terminal, and at times different floors of the same terminal, seesawed between Russian-led separatists and the Ukrainian army.
- Civilians are the main victims of siege or urban warfare, given that their freedom of movement is restricted. Hundreds of civilians were killed or wounded during the Battle of Donetsk. Nonstate actors (and others), given their power asymmetry, are incentivized to violate the laws of war by staging artillery and other weapons systems in residential areas, turning civilians into human shields and raising the likelihood of civilians being killed in the cross fire. Russia was also accused of shelling civilian residences.¹⁹⁹
- The siege of Donetsk’s airport highlights the importance of subterranean warfare. An important supply route to the rebel-backed areas in the city was the vast network of underground tunnels and mines. So long as the Ukrainian army controlled the airport, the separatists could not cement their control over Donetsk city proper. In this regard, the airport held more than just symbolic importance.
- Ceasefires, which are inherently difficult to hold, are likely even more fragile in urban environments. Certain areas might have tactical or symbolic value, making belligerents less likely to follow an agreement. Additionally, with subterranean zones that are difficult to monitor, belligerents are incentivized to cheat on the agreement if there is a first-mover advantage to cheating.

¹⁹⁷ Loiko, “Ukraine Fighters.”

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ “Pro-Russia Rebels Attempt to Seize Donetsk Airport in Ukraine.”

- Outside support from third parties is critical to sustaining urban warfare. In the case of Donetsk, Russian provisions of personnel and weapons, despite Russia's denial, fueled the insurgency.²⁰⁰
- Media outlets will be key terrain or high-value targets in urban warfare. Urban warfare campaigns are often information-poor environments. Russian-backed separatists flooded the televisions and airwaves with fake news and pro-Kremlin propaganda, effectively controlling the narrative of the battle, regardless of what was occurring on the ground. In this case, the targeted audience was not only Russian speakers in this region but also the wider international community. Russian agents in Donetsk and the wider Donbas region were quick to target media outlets so that they could replace Ukrainian broadcasts with Russian television to establish an information monopoly.²⁰¹ In Crimea, Russians nearly eliminated all Ukrainian landline, Internet, and mobile services. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian government did a poor job at providing a counternarrative, whether over traditional or social media.

²⁰⁰ "Pro-Russia Rebels Attempt to Seize Donetsk Airport in Ukraine."

²⁰¹ US Department of the Army, *"Little Green Men,"* 46.

Conclusion

Russia and China are enjoying a version of their First Gulf War moment. America showed the world in 1991 what a combination of precision-guided munitions; superior intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities; space-based satellites; and stealth technology could achieve on the battlefield. Some at the time predicted that future war would be swift and painless, at least for the United States. Learning from its experiences in Chechnya and Georgia, Russia has innovatively adopted various forms of warfare that reduce Russian forces' military exposure to the enemy while exploiting opponents' vulnerabilities by expanding the traditional battlefield space and combining both lethal and nonlethal tools. Russia has been able to use the conflict in Ukraine as an ideal laboratory to test and improve its use of conventional, urban, cyber, EW, proxy, information, and maritime operations. The United States has played a mostly reactive role to date, militarily providing support and training to Ukraine's armed forces. Yet it should take the lessons from Ukraine as a harbinger of what might come in other regions involving other great powers.

The historical invocation of social or national identity, often dangerous myths, could spark the next great power war. There is ample evidence of great powers like China or Russia clinging to historical myths to justify a hold over various peoples and territories. Expect them to conjure up centuries-old grievances (e.g., Crimea) and to look to resolve such grievances by employing a range of lethal and nonlethal means to achieve their ends. They could carry out aggressive actions for one of two reasons (or a bit of both). First, they may purport to protect their own nationals on territory they deem historically theirs (Moscow provided a similar rationale for interventions into South Ossetia in 2008 and Crimea and the Donbas in 2014). Second, great powers will look to test the strength of Western alliances. For China, this could include a provocation against Korea, Japan, or the Philippines.

While a major war with a near-peer opponent seems unlikely, it is not impossible. Additionally, it would almost surely be an "away game" for the United States, in a region and for an issue deemed more vital to the opponent than to the United States (Crimea or Taiwan, for example).

This report's title also referred to the "myths" swirling around hybrid warfare and its components. It sought to clarify some of this confusion by describing some of the methods that Russia employs in its hybrid warfare. Future conflict will likely be fought with indirect or hybrid means across multiple domains, which presents both challenges and opportunities for US military planners. For

Russia, this could include a spoiler attack or limited incursion against one or more of the Baltic states that may not formally trigger NATO's Article 5 collective defense commitment.

Great power conflict is not and will not be confined to the military domain. Given that the economic, social, and military space is now so heavily integrated, warfare will be fought across multiple domains, thus complicating deterrence, as well as complicating international norms.²⁰² America's rivals, going forward, will exploit the ambiguous space between peace and war. Regardless of the domain, locale, or stakes involved, however, crises instigated by great powers tend to follow a familiar cycle. Consider Russia: its forces carry out some type of provocative activity not in accordance with international law as a form of intimidation; then Russian authorities engage in subterfuge and denial, obfuscating the facts and even twisting international law to justify their original action; then Moscow employs informational warfare to co-opt the narrative to its version of events, while simultaneously escalating belligerent rhetoric, before presenting itself as a preserver of peace and honest broker, all the while having succeeded at sufficiently altering facts on the ground.

As evidence from Ukraine suggests, great powers like Russia have grown more sophisticated. Having learned from past wars in Chechnya and Georgia, Moscow has been modernizing its aging forces and regularly carrying out snap exercises that demonstrate a greater degree of sophistication, coordination, and military professionalism than previously seen. Similarly, China has embraced artificial intelligence and other modern technologies, integrating their use across multiple domains, which could alter the balance of power in the Pacific region. Both powers lever quasi-statal enterprises to gather intelligence and supplement their militaries.

Even so, Russia and China are both operating from a position of weakness, not strength, given their many vulnerabilities. For Russia, chief among those vulnerabilities is its army, which still consists mostly of unprofessional conscripts. Its army, which still occupies one-fifth of Georgian territory, is also overstretched. Its ability to keep up an ongoing frozen conflict in the Donbas, much less instigate a new conflict in the Baltics, is limited. For China, Beijing fears disrupting trade (and by extension economic growth) with its various partners and is militarily far weaker than the United States despite its investment in anti-access and area denial weapon systems.

²⁰² See Gartzke and Lindsay, *Cross-Domain Deterrence*.

Rather than provoking the United States, the intention of great power rivals is to weaken the cohesion of Washington's various institutional alliances, including NATO. Ukraine provides a template for how Russia will seek to create a wedge between alliance partners. From the rise of populist governments in places like Poland and Hungary to the Brexit debate, Europe appears divided and weak. To project strength, it is necessary for the continent to remain united on defense matters, as division only invites future Russian aggression in the form of military provocations, cyberattacks, and interferences in European elections. Similar conditions apply to US allies in the Pacific to check the rise of China.

Deterrence and defense in this region will come not only from international alliances but also from the popular will of allied states' citizens. In the Baltics, average citizens are training informally as volunteers (or formally as reservists) to fight a rear-guard insurgency in the event of a Russian invasion as a way to deter—by raising the cost of—a land grab like the 2014 annexation of Crimea from taking place in the Baltics. The presence of armed Ukrainian volunteers in the Donbas shifted the local balance of power at the start of the conflict, resulting in a war of attrition not unlike the trench warfare of World War I. The aim of these armed volunteers is to deny the enemy the ability to operate freely, to create the expectation of a long and bloody fight, and to inflict maximum damage on an opponent whose professionalism and willingness to fight may waver. Obviously, the question is whether this threat will create the requisite fear in Moscow (or Beijing) to recalibrate their decision making were a crisis to break out.

When it comes to Russia's use of hybrid warfare, neither NATO nor Washington can adequately fight fire with fire, given their observance of international norms. Nor can they maneuver as fast as Russia, because decisions on the use of force take longer in democracies. Thus, Moscow will often have a critical first-mover advantage in future conflict and the benefit of surprise, similar to its seizure of Crimea, which caught Western governments flat-footed.

There is also some concern that a version of the November 2018 Sea of Azov incident might be replicated in the Baltic Sea and executed in a manner that makes NATO hesitant to do much. Some analysts caution that Putin may look for opportunity to challenge the freedom of movement and the demilitarization of islands in the Baltic Sea. This route is a critical energy and communications lifeline for the Baltic states, as well as Russia, and so Moscow has occasionally contested these maritime areas. Some 53 percent of Russia's total containers passed through ports along the Baltic Sea, and the Nord

Stream pipeline gas projects should see increased economic importance to the region.²⁰³ “In the case of a military confrontation, Russia’s Baltic fleet currently has the upper hand,” notes Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former secretary general of NATO.²⁰⁴

Both Russia and China hold imperialist ambitions that tend to be expansionist. Cases in point are Russia’s reference to a sphere of “privileged interest” and China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The motivation for future war hinges on these powers’ statuses as revisionist powers and perceived historical grievances based on territory that is geostrategic, such as Crimea or the disputed atolls and islands along the South China Sea. A few takeaways this report highlighted are as follows:

- The future of great power conflict will likely be fought across multiple domains, and future great power wars are not likely not resemble the conventional wars of the early twentieth century. Importantly, the trigger for such a war may be the latent historical grievances pent up among powerful Russian and Chinese nationalists over various lands (or islands), peoples, waters, and other resources. Such dangerous myths provide the necessary kindling to spark wider wars. For the US military, it is necessary to identify the areas of potential conflict and war game scenarios, especially in cases like Crimea, where our opponents may have greater national interests.
- The life cycle of a Russian-orchestrated crisis follows a similar pattern. First, Russia carries out some type of provocative activity in violation of international law as a form of intimidation. Next, it engages in subterfuge and denial, obfuscating the facts and even twisting international law to justify its original action. Then it employs information operations to change the narrative and public opinion while simultaneously escalating belligerent rhetoric, before presenting itself as a preserver of peace and honest broker, all the while having succeeded at sufficiently altering “facts” on the ground.
- Although the Ukrainian army has not yet used its US-supplied Javelin antitank missiles, these missiles have an important psychological effect on fighters on both sides and serve as powerful symbols of American support for the Ukrainian government. According to one report, Russian tankers “refused to deploy and shell Ukrainian positions” after learning that the Ukrainian

²⁰³ Dahl, *Strategic Challenges in the Baltic Sea Region*, vii.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

military was armed with the weapons.²⁰⁵ Thus, the provision of the right support can have both a military and political impact.

- The use of proxies by great powers is likely to increase and could provoke a major war. Proxies can be difficult to control, and a miscalculation could inadvertently spark a major war. What if the Russian-backed separatists had downed a US military or civilian aircraft instead of the Malaysian airliner? What if Russia would have retaliated after the United States killed more than one hundred Russian fighters in Syria on February 7, 2018?²⁰⁶
- In both cyberspace and conventional space, expect Russia and China to continue to rely on third-party proxy actors both to avoid attribution and to catch its opponents off guard. To guard against proxy warfare, strengthened international legal norms are required to prevent states from avoiding consequences for actions carried out by third parties under their sway or direct control.
- The United States and its allies should actively support volunteers in a more robust fashion, providing them with training, arms, and other materials. Such forces, whether active reservists or less formal self-defense militias, have proven effective in Finland as well as in the Baltic states in deterring Russian aggression.²⁰⁷ The presence of Ukrainian volunteers also helped tip the balance of power in the Donbas, resulting in a stalemate. Yet it is important to properly vet such volunteer brigades, given the presence of far-right nationalists. The presence of such extremists provides grist for the enemy's use of propaganda and misinformation campaigns.
- When it comes to controlling the narrative in great power conflict, US responses in the IO space have thus far been weak, reactive, and too incremental. A US-sponsored Russian-language broadcasting channel in the region, even by one former Obama official's own admission, "was a drop in the ocean compared to the Russian effort."²⁰⁸ During the Cold War, thanks to Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty and Voice of America, American public diplomacy was more effective. Some have called to create an information warfare command

²⁰⁵ Ukrainian Independent Information Agency of News, "Poroshenko Speaks of 'Javelin Effect' in Donbas."

²⁰⁶ Tsvetkova and Zverev, "After Deadly Syrian Battle."

²⁰⁷ Beehner and Collins, "Can Volunteer Forces Deter Great Power War?"

²⁰⁸ Rhodes, *World as It Is*, 383.

as a way to centralize and streamline the US military response to IO attacks and help US allies like Ukraine.²⁰⁹ Whether with a more formal command or through existing organizations, the United States must invest more heavily in its information operations.

- Likewise, in the realm of cyberspace, American responses have also been slow and too deliberate. Recent reports that US Cyber Command authorized a cyberattack against Russia's electric grid constitutes an escalation, yet one that may showcase American countermeasures and that may be a shot across Russia's bow, in an attempt to tamp down its online provocations.²¹⁰ Domestic policy and international norms are still fairly nascent in the cyber domain and must be strengthened, but the United States must continue to act as they are being developed.
- Future great power conflict will also likely be fought on the high seas or in disputed sea basins, like the Sea of Azov. Maritime crises follow a similar pattern as crises on land, insofar as countries like Russia will intimidate smaller naval powers with provocative gestures and belligerent rhetoric; they will deny any direct involvement, cite international law in their favor, and escalate before calling for cooler heads to prevail.
- NATO must work more closely with its regional European partners, Sweden and Finland, to secure the vulnerable Danish straits and boost their anti-access and area denial capabilities. This will provide assurance to its Baltic members that Russia will not attempt a land grab of the Gotland or Aland Islands (or position mobile surface-to-air missiles there), much less disrupt freedom of navigation in the surrounding sea. To be sure, Russia's firing of the Baltic Fleet's command staff may signal its lack of readiness or willingness to launch offensive operations in this theater—or as Michael Kofman put it, signal to its naval units elsewhere, notably in the Caspian Sea, to improve their capabilities.²¹¹
- Pitched battles in Ukrainian cities underscore the need to more systematically develop urban warfare capabilities among US and allied military units. The Ukrainian forces under siege in Donetsk were unprepared for the terrain and tactical challenges that such types of warfare

²⁰⁹ Crane, "United States Needs an Information Warfare Command."

²¹⁰ Sanger and Perlroth, "U.S. Escalates Online Attacks."

²¹¹ Kofman, "NATO Deterrence and the Russian Specter."

present. Better doctrine, more robust training facilities, a real commitment by our military to train for war, and embedding urban warfare into the training of foreign militaries would go a long way toward avoiding future Donetsk-style imbroglios.

- Russia's investments in the means and methods of hybrid warfare provide it some asymmetric advantages vis-à-vis the United States. The United States must increase its investment in the proxy, information, cyber, and urban warfare. This investment must be both physical (equipment, training, organization) and intellectual (doctrine, education, policy, and strategy), as capacity is irrelevant without strategy and will.

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