

Hybrid Threats, the Gerasimov Doctrine, Nonlinear Warfare – or Indirect and Asymmetric Operations?

by

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Rightly or wrongly, many observers who discuss present national security threats emanating from Russia will refer to the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine as essential reading. The Gerasimov Doctrine, as it is explained in most media reports, purports to be a new Russian military doctrine that combines military, technological, information, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and other tactics, which are then deployed towards one set of strategic objectives. The doctrine was allegedly launched in 2013, when General Valeriy Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, published an article with the title “The Value of Science in Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations” in the journal *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer* (Military-Industrial Courier).¹ The article led to Gerasimov’s sudden rise to fame in the West, and his alleged association with Russian hybrid warfare.

What General Gerasimov did was to add the concept of nonmilitary actions to Russian strategic thought. He observed that in the West’s new way of conducting war, nonmilitary operations were used over military operations by a ratio of 4:1. Instead of overt military invasions as in the past, attacks were now instigated by the installment of and support to a political opposition. In North Africa and the Middle East during the Arab Spring, technology and information networks were used to instigate revolts. Economic and political sanctions were imposed to combat the legitimate government. Eventually, military forces under the guise of peacekeepers could be employed to assume control over the territory. His conclusion was that henceforth, non-military methods were the key means used to achieve political and strategic goals.

However, Gerasimov formulated his findings more as an explanation of what the Western powers were doing against Russia and its former or present allies, including Ukraine and Syria, than what Russia was hoping to achieve.

Gerasimov was right in his conclusion that hybrid nonmilitary and military means were used to achieve political and strategic goals. This in itself was not a new development. However, the threat potential of hybrid means was by then being recognized in the West as well. The Austrian Defense Academy noted the phenomenon and defined hybrid threats as follows: “A hybrid threat is a threat to a state or an alliance that emanates from the capability and intention of an actor to use its potential in a focused manner, that is coordinated in time as well as being multi-dimensional (political, economic, military, social, media, etc.) in order to enforce its interests.”² To this definition was added that threat activities must exceed a strategic threshold in order to count as a hybrid threat. This would apply if the hostile activity substantially limited the attacked state’s freedom to act or decide. The form this limitation might take may differ from case to case and, depending on its effects, may be interpreted differently by each state.³ At all times, however, the hybrid nature of the threat would mean that no less than two segments of the state would be affected and, accordingly, at least two ministries would need to be involved in defending against it. This hybridity would also, in many cases, result in the strategic threshold being exceeded. As the phenomenon of hybrid threats

¹ Valeriy Gerasimov, “Tsennost’ nauki v predvidenii: Novyye vyzovy trebuyut pereosmysleniya form i sposobov vedeniya boyevykh deystviy”), *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer* 8 (476), 27 February 2013, pp. 1, 2-3.

² Anton Dengg and Michael Schurian (eds), *Networked Insecurity: Hybrid Threats in the 21st Century* (Vienna: Landesverteidigungsakademie, 2016), 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 39.

was increasingly recognized, the European Commission on 6 April 2016 adopted a “Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats” that in its fundamentals was based on the Austrian definition.⁴

The use of hybrid threats, or hybrid warfare, has also been referred to as full spectrum warfare, which refers to its multi-dimensional aspect, and nonlinear warfare. The latter term, however, is unfortunate, since it was popularized in the West in the mistaken belief that this was the official Russian term. The error resulted from the term’s incidental use in a short story of fiction, published in 2014 and set in a dystopian future, by a certain Natan Dubovitskiy, which allegedly is the pen name of Vladislav Surkov, one of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s political advisors.⁵

However, Russian doctrine does not rely on the term hybrid threat or hybrid warfare as such, nor does it refer to nonlinear warfare. Instead, since at least 2005 Russian officers describe such actions as indirect and asymmetric operations.⁶ Since thoughts along these lines took hold within the Russian armed forces during the 1990s, when Russia was weak, the Western terms were predominantly used to describe threats aimed at Russia, not Russian strategies toward other countries. Indeed, in March 2017 Gerasimov published an article titled “World on the Brink of War.” In it he explicitly mentioned the concept of hybrid war, but in a discussion of U.S. actions in North Africa and the Middle East.⁷

Nonetheless, the Western term hybrid threat can be employed for what Russian strategic thought terms indirect and asymmetric strategies, as long that we do not fall into the analytical trap of believing that it was Russia which introduced this particular concept.

It is accordingly conceivable that Moscow has returned to the use of active measures, as defined during the Cold War, in order to exert influence on the foreign policy and the internal political situation of target countries, with the ultimate aim of weakening the positions of a perceived enemy and undermining its aggressive plans, in order to create conditions favorable to the successful implementation of Russia’s foreign policy, to paraphrase the old KGB definition.⁸ If so, there is every reason to believe that non-military methods are being used to achieve the desired results, not only because of Gerasimov’s published articles but because such means were used by the KGB during the Cold War. Such measures would fall within the current definitions of both hybrid threats and full-spectrum warfare.

Finally, we need to understand that hybrid threats by no means constitute a new invention. Already in the nineteenth century, modern Afghanistan’s first king, Abdur Rahman (1844-1901), noted the nature of the threat: “Some Powers take new countries by the force of their strength and victories; others take them by treachery, fraud, and stirring up home quarrels between chiefs of the country, themselves keeping behind the curtain, and benefiting themselves at the expense of the folly of others. Such Powers are more difficult to deal with, and one ought to be more careful in dealing with them than with the Powers that attack openly.”⁹

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⁴ European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats – A European Union response (Brussels, 6.4.2016, JOIN(2016) 18 final).

⁵ Natan Dubovitskiy, “Bez neba,” *Russkiy pioner* 3 (45), April 2014, pp. 104-7. The story, dated 12 March 2014, is available online at <http://ruspioner.ru/honest/m/single/4131>.

⁶ Timothy L. Thomas, “Russia’s Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric—and Putin-Led,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28 (2015), 445-461; Timothy L. Thomas, *Russia Military Strategy: Impacting 21st Century Reform and Geopolitics* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), 2015), 37.

⁷ Valeriy Gerasimov, “Mir na granyakh voyny: Malo uchityvat’ segodnyashniye vyzovy, nado prognozirovat’ budushiye,” *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer* 10 (674), 15 March 2017.

⁸ Vasilii Mitrokhin (ed.), *KGB Lexicon: The Soviet Intelligence Officer's Handbook* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 13.

⁹ Abdur Rahman, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan* 2 (London: John Murray, 1900), 239-40.