

New Technology, Deadlier Weapons, and Disinformation Campaigns: How Russia Sees the Future of Warfare



Featuring Mason Clark

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Russian leaders have a very specific vision for the future of warfare, one that US leaders need to understand if they are to effectively counter Russian strategy and technology. This is the second episode in our series examining the Russian understanding of hybrid war. In our first episode on this topic, we discussed the ways in which Russia's definition of this term differs from the West and why those differences need to be understood by US leaders and policymakers. On this episode of Overwatch, Mason Clark, ISW's Russia team lead, talks about the places and ways in which Russia's concept of hybrid war is affecting reality.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. This is the second episode in our series, Examining the Russian Understanding of Hybrid War. In our first episode on this topic, we discussed the ways in which Russia's definition of this term differs from the West and why those differences need to be understood by US leaders and policymakers. I'm rejoined today by Mason Clark, ISW's Russia team lead, who is here to talk about the places and ways in which Russia's concept of hybrid war is affecting reality. Thank you for joining us, Mason.

Mason Clark:

Thanks, Jacob. Good to be here.

Jacob:

I'd like to start by justifying this discussion. Why does the US need to understand the Russian concept of hybrid war?

Mason:

Sure. Russian discussions of the drivers of hybrid war are essential to understand because the Russians discuss their efforts to conduct hybrid wars as an adaptation, not the novel innovation that many Western sources discuss it as. There's a large literature in the United States and in the West more generally discussing hybrid war as this Russian invention that they have been carrying out in the last several years. And that's not how the Kremlin conceptualizes it.

The Kremlin also crucially does not discuss hybrid war as something Russia should do in the future. They assess they're responding to external factors that necessitate them to prepare for hybrid war now. They consider hybrid war to be the current state of warfare, not something necessarily just in the future. What's so crucial about this Russian discussion is that Russian and US discussions of the factors that are changing the nature of war are incredibly similar, but Russia and the US are reaching very different answers of how they should respond to these changes. There's a risk in the US of misunderstanding what the Russians are doing if we project our own forecasts of current and future war without understanding how the Russians are discussing these same inputs.

Jacob:

And on those inputs, what do the Russians generally see as being the major driving factors of change in modern warfare? At least what is their general consensus among their leaders and thinkers?

Mason:

There's three main factors that the Kremlin and the Russian military assess are shaping the future of war. First is

new military technologies. Second is the information revolution. And third is the current geopolitical balance of power between Russia, the United States, China, and other powers. They think these three factors are the main things shaping the hybrid war and their need to adapt to it.

Now, there's many other factors that could be discussed as shaping current and future warfare. There's an entire literature that all militaries around the world are talking through of what is going to be shaping the next conflicts to occur. And many of these factors overlap between both Russian and US discussions, but I want to focus in today on these three that the Russian military has assessed are going to be the main factors shaping what they need to do in current and future conflicts.

Jacob:

That sounds good to me. Let's start with technological changes. What are the technological changes that the Russians think are most important?

Mason:

At its core, the simple changing lethality of weapons. The Russians assess modern conventional war as becoming simply too costly and lethal to be the most effective way for states to achieve their objectives. Now, as we discussed in the previous episode, that doesn't mean that they think that conventional war will never occur again, but more that it's becoming increasingly unlikely and states are better suited to achieving their goals through these hybrid means.

Due to new technologies such as deadlier precision weapons, including cruise missiles, the sheer economic cost of maintaining a high-tech modern military, not to mention nuclear deterrence, means that states are adapting by finding other methods to achieve their objectives in the Russian view. Russian writers repeatedly state that Russia is not best served by a conventional confrontation with NATO, but rather using these hybrid means to work around a conventional conflict. They, in fact, allude to an awareness that NATO would possess the edge in a large conventional war due to many of these technological changes.

Jacob:

You mentioned as your second factor that the Russians are focused on is the "information revolution." What does that mean to the Russians? And that's, I assume, different from the technological changes in general that you just talked about.

Mason:

Right. This is focused on the emergence of information technology and social media as a way to reach large segments of the global population. Russian analysts often discuss how the internet and these new information technologies enable actors, both state and non-state actors, to achieve effects that previously would have required the use of military forces.

Now, this is a bit of a weird conception, and it's very unique to the Russian military, but they frame revolutions that are sparked by social media, such as the Arab Spring or what they claim occurred in Ukraine in 2014, as something that in the 20th century would have been achieved by a conventional military invasion. This is the key point that the Russian military has highlighted, that this is now how governments are overthrown and political changes are enacted around the world and they need to adapt to this.

Now, most Americans are likely very familiar with this concept of the information revolution, making it easier to influence populations and cause changes with ongoing efforts by Russia and other states to manipulate media and the information space right here at home, which we discussed in the previous episode as a key focus of Russian

hybrid war.

Jacob:

I think that brings us to the balance of power element, the third factor that the Russians are focused on. How do they think the current balance of power drives hybrid war? And part of that I would guess hinges on their interpretation of the balance of power, which correct me if I'm wrong, might be a bit different than how we see things in the West.

Mason:

Yeah, that's a really great point, and it's a very unique aspect of this Russian conception of hybrid war, that it's very focused on a balance between them and what they frame as the West, which they assert is very centrally led by the United States. They don't really leave room for other actors in the West having their own say. They crucially sort of exclude China from a lot of these conceptions.

It's very rooted in the Kremlin's worldview of needing to oppose this sort of Western encirclement of Russia. And to that point, the Russian military assesses that it's in an ongoing hybrid war with the West, comparing the struggle to the Cold War in many ways. The Kremlin conceptualizes many actions, such as the NATO intervention in Libya, the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, and various color revolutions in the former Soviet Union in the 21st century to be part of this Western effort to constrain Russia. They assess the interactions of what the Russians consider to be several great powers, but not superpowers as in the Cold War, to be driving the emergence of hybrid wars as the dominant type of modern war as both Russia and the West try to reshape the global order.

Jacob:

I just want to drill in on that point a little bit more, because you and I have talked about this on previous episodes of *Overwatch*, that core to the Russian understanding of warfare and hybrid warfare is their understanding of events like the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine as being actions taken by NATO in a hybrid war that they're engaged in. That what was an organic political movement, they see as an action in a conflict. That's correct, right?

Mason:

Yes, exactly. The way the Kremlin conceptualizes a lot of global events is very oriented, interestingly, as if it's all directed by the West at Russia. It's frankly a pretty paranoid worldview. They link conflicts including Syria or Libya or protests in Venezuela as all being aimed at targeting Russia's allied states, ignoring not only that those states are independent and have their own policy struggles, but as you're saying, also the possibility of simple grassroots political struggles and uprisings and protests and that sort of thing. The Kremlin views all of this as part of this global hybrid conflict with the West.

Jacob:

And that view, it's not just propaganda, right? You're arguing that the Russians and the Kremlin leaders view it that way. That is their reality from their perspective.

Mason:

Exactly. It's discussed at the highest levels of the Russian military, as well as the Russian Foreign Ministry, as a point of fact that they articulate in speeches on the military's priorities for each year. It's articulated in training exercises as scenarios that they're preparing for. It's not just an information cover that they're putting out as sort of a propaganda spin.

Jacob:

Got it. From that understanding, what are the key changes that the Russian military is making to try and respond

to these changes?

Mason:

The main point is that the increasing prominence of information operations requires the Russian military to adapt to and incorporate information operations into its own actions, moving away from focusing strictly on conventional or kinetic military operations. The key phrase that dominates much of Russian discussion is an assertion made in 2017 that's been heavily incorporated in discussions since then claiming that non-military efforts now have four times the impact on the outcome of a war than conventional military efforts. This is the really key shift that the Russian military thinks it needs to adapt to.

They acknowledge that non-military efforts have always been part of war, but the shift is that they are now more important than the conventional fighting that the Russian military has previously focused on. Several Russian analysts and theorists argue that information warfare is now the most important sphere of military operations, and that all kinetic operations have to be conducted in coordination with information operations.

The Russian military discusses this relationship between information and kinetic operations as a two-way street. Kinetic operations are inherently subordinate to an information operation in a hybrid war and no kinetic operation can succeed unless it is nested in and enabled by an overall information campaign. This is a key point of Russian learning in Syria that's being applied in Belarus or Ukraine and elsewhere of essentially thinking through how conventional military actions are going to play out narratively in the information space and planning for that ahead of time.

Jacob:

You mentioned there's this emphasis on non-military actions, that hybrid war is crucially both military and non-military. What is the Russian military doing to prepare for or improve upon its ability to deal with these non-military components of hybrid war? And frankly, is that even the right question, asking what is the Russian military doing? Are there other Russian government organs that are more involved in that side of hybrid war?

Mason:

Right. That's a good question. Well, due to Russia being an authoritarian state, the Russian military has much less of a problem navigating this gap of working with other elements of the Kremlin, such as the Foreign Ministry or organizations focused on media manipulation, that sort of thing, to construct a cohesive approach to hybrid war. However, the Russian military is also going out of its way to expand into non-military actions in what they frame as whole-of-society efforts. The reason they're doing this is that Russian military theorists argue that traditional military theory can be applied to hybrid war. There's a large discourse in Russian military writing describing various aspects of hybrid war, such as ideological operations, economic pressure, flat-out military operations, or diplomatic negotiations in the language of fronts.

Now, very briefly, fronts is a very foundational idea in Russian and previously Soviet military thinking. In the West, this gets used to describe a sort of large theaters of war. Think in World War II, the Western and the Eastern fronts are sort of the two classic examples. To the Russians, fronts is almost a focus of efforts. What we call the Eastern front was divided throughout the war, to the Soviets, into a changing number of individual fronts like Ukraine or Belarus or the central front, things like that. The Russians are sort of updating this language of main lines of efforts and emphasis to apply to hybrid war and asserting that the Russian military should have a prime place in working with the rest of the Russian government to prepare for these whole-of-society efforts.

Jacob:

And in a tangible sense, what do those preparations look like?

Mason:

The Russian military is itself preparing to carry out information campaigns and interact with Russian society. There's a fascinating discussion in the Russian military where they say that they need to prepare Russian society to resist perceived Western information campaigns and the pressures on Russian society of hybrid war. Russian officers interestingly often argue that the US has lost in Iraq and Afghanistan because it was unable to properly mitigate pressures in the information space on the US population and argue the Russian military must have a role in preparing Russian society to be involved in hybrid wars. Again, it's a deeply paranoid and cynical view of international politics, but it's something the Russian military is really focusing on.

In fact, they reestablished a Soviet-style military political directorate in 2018 and openly discussed the need to rally Russian society behind the military. And just to really make clear, I'm not over-emphasizing that Soviet-style point. The quote that was rolled out by the leader of this new military political directorate when he founded it, is that "We would borrow much from the Soviet system, but not use the same ideology." But they are very clearly updating Soviet-style information war and control of the populous in order to carry out these hybrid wars.

Jacob:

That's very interesting. Presumably, this all comes out of the Russians needing to centrally control all of these military, non-military efforts that they perceive as going into hybrid war, which they project is the way wars will be fought in the future. How is the military specifically dealing with that need for centralization?

Mason:

Yeah. The Russian Ministry of Defense consistently argues that they're best suited to create a single governing center to coordinate the government, state corporations, financial structures, and any other possible means of state power to ensure a totality of means is used in hybrid wars. They claim to have done so since April 2014. They have this structure they call the National Defense Control Center based in Moscow they claim connects all elements of Russian executive authorities, all of Russia's federal subjects, and over a thousand state corporations and defense enterprises, as well as, of course, the Russian military itself into a single system. The Russian Chief of the General Staff further claimed in 2016 that every government ministry is connected to the structure and needs to be able to respond to crises in hours in order to support hybrid war.

My research personally has focused on the Ministry of Defense and what the Russian military is doing to prepare for hybrid war. But this is a whole-of-government priority for the Kremlin that other ministries, including Finance and the Foreign Ministry, are working on as well, all linked through this National Defense Control Center.

Jacob:

You've said that the Kremlin is pretty open about its intent to carry out hybrid wars. How do they discuss those efforts?

Mason:

Yeah, that's a really fascinating point about all of this. Obviously, the Kremlin is not openly discussing details of specific campaigns. I would be blown away if they said, "Oh, here's how we manipulated the media in Ukraine," openly.

Jacob:

That would probably be itself a part of a hybrid war effort.

Mason:

Right. Exactly, exactly. But they do have these open discussions of general plans of how to carry out hybrid wars that map very clearly to Belarus, Ukraine, and other conflicts, and they do openly refer to those conflicts as hybrid wars. Briefly to sort of run through how the Russian military conceptualizes the general course of a hybrid war, they discuss the need to clearly formulate the objectives of each hybrid war clearly, study the weak points in enemy security, and form a complex of hybrid threats targeting different aspects of a specific state taking into account local specifics.

This is interestingly enough likely a learning point from Ukraine where the Kremlin vastly overestimated just how pro-Russia much of the population was in Eastern Ukraine back in 2014. They argue they must then focus on influencing the narrowly vulnerable areas of the opponent, essentially picking out what aspects of their society and government to undermine, and anticipate the enemy's likely counter-strategy, again, because the Russians think the West is doing the same hybrid war framework as well.

Finally, they argue they have to employ, and this is a very Russian military term, consistent destructive impact on the key areas of government. Interestingly, that's the exact same way the Russian military discusses artillery fire, which sort of shows that clear connection of them applying these traditional conventional military methodologies. And then finally, if needed, potentially deploy undeclared conventional military forces into the target state. These are all very specific actions that clearly match both historical Russian thinking and operational art, as well as Russian efforts in Ukraine and Syria. The US needs to increasingly prioritize assessing Russian hybrid wars under these frameworks and understanding the Kremlin's conception of these objectives, as much of the current discussion of the Kremlin threat focuses on just individual items of what I've laid out as sort of the Kremlin's cohesive view of how to carry out a hybrid war.

Jacob:

Is it your assertion that US leaders are not necessarily prepared for all of these developments? Are any of these developments blind spots due to them not really aligning with the Western view of hybrid war?

Mason:

Yeah, that's a great point. Many US blind spots occur due to misunderstanding this holistic way the Russian military looks at hybrid wars. To go back to what we discussed at the beginning of the Russians building this conception of hybrid war based on the factors they think are shaping future war, every military, such as the US, Russia, China, Iran, and many other states, are grappling with the changing nature of warfare and looking at these same changing factors. However, the US needs to avoid assuming its perceptions and plans for modern or future war are the only approach and projecting these assumptions onto what our adversaries are doing, which is what in many aspects the US has done with Russian hybrid war. We can't understand what the Russians are doing unless we look at their operations and their mental frameworks and plans.

Again, to reiterate from our previous episode, I'm not at all arguing that the US needs to adopt this Russian view of hybrid war, but we can't properly confront what our opponents are doing if we don't even understand how they conceptualize their own actions.

Jacob:

Well, Mason, thank you so much for being with us today and sharing your expertise.

Mason:

Thanks for having me.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Overwatch*. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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