



Russian armoured vehicles during a joint Russian-Tajik exercise in the Khatlon Region of Tajikistan, next to the border of Afghanistan, 30 March 2017.

## New 'Hybrid War' or Old 'Dirty Tricks'? The Gerasimov Debate and Russia's Response to the Contemporary Operating Environment

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### Introduction

In February 2013, the *Voyenno-Promyshlenny Kurier* (Military-Industrial Courier) published an article written by Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov entitled "The Value of Science is in the Foresight." The article, which appeared in a military journal known for its wide military readership, outlined General Gerasimov's viewpoint regarding the contemporary security environment.<sup>1</sup> Although largely ignored by Western analysts at the time, the article became the subject of intense debate after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. While some argued that Gerasimov was merely outlining the challenges posed by the contemporary operating environment, others theorized the article was a hidden blueprint for the annexation of Crimea and subsequent actions in East Ukraine. Notably, some also argued that Gerasimov's article called for the use of "hybrid war" in order to confront Russia's adversaries.

Troublingly, the debate over Gerasimov and hybrid war suffers from conceptual difficulties that may lead to faulty models of Russian forces and misunderstanding of Russian actions. Specifically, the concept of hybrid war is a Western concept not present in Russian military thought, and therefore, does not adequately capture Russian perspectives and practices. Instead, recent Russian actions since the end of the Cold War suggest continuity with the Soviet concepts of deep operations, active measures, and reflexive control. The concept of deep operations helps explain the recent Russian emphasis upon integration of all elements of its national power in pressuring a target state, while active measures explains the use of proxy forces and certain kinds of information operations. Meanwhile, reflexive control theory makes sense of Russian actions in the information domain which, through Western eyes, can appear bewildering and contradictory. Although all three concepts are used simultaneously by Russia when confronting a situation, this examination will focus upon the use of deep operations during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, active measures as they relate to the crisis in Eastern Ukraine, and reflexive control theory as applied to the annexation of Crimea.

## What is the “Gerasimov Doctrine?”

In his 2013 article, General Gerasimov begins by stating that “Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template.”<sup>2</sup> He went on to describe the events of the “Arab Spring” as typical of warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, giving the Russian perspective that they were triggered by the West’s:

...broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – applied in potential with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces. The open use of forces – often under the guise of

peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only after a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Gerasimov further noted the emergence of “mobile, mixed-type groups of forces” using intelligence and sophisticated command and control systems to avoid frontal engagements, and stated that “asymmetrical actions have come into widespread use, enabling the nullification of an enemy’s advantages in armed conflict.” These asymmetrical forces, integrated with “global strike” capabilities, private military contractors, and adept usage of non-military elements of national power, posed a serious challenge to the Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup> Gerasimov also identified a requirement to “perfect the forms and means of applying groups of forces,” and that:

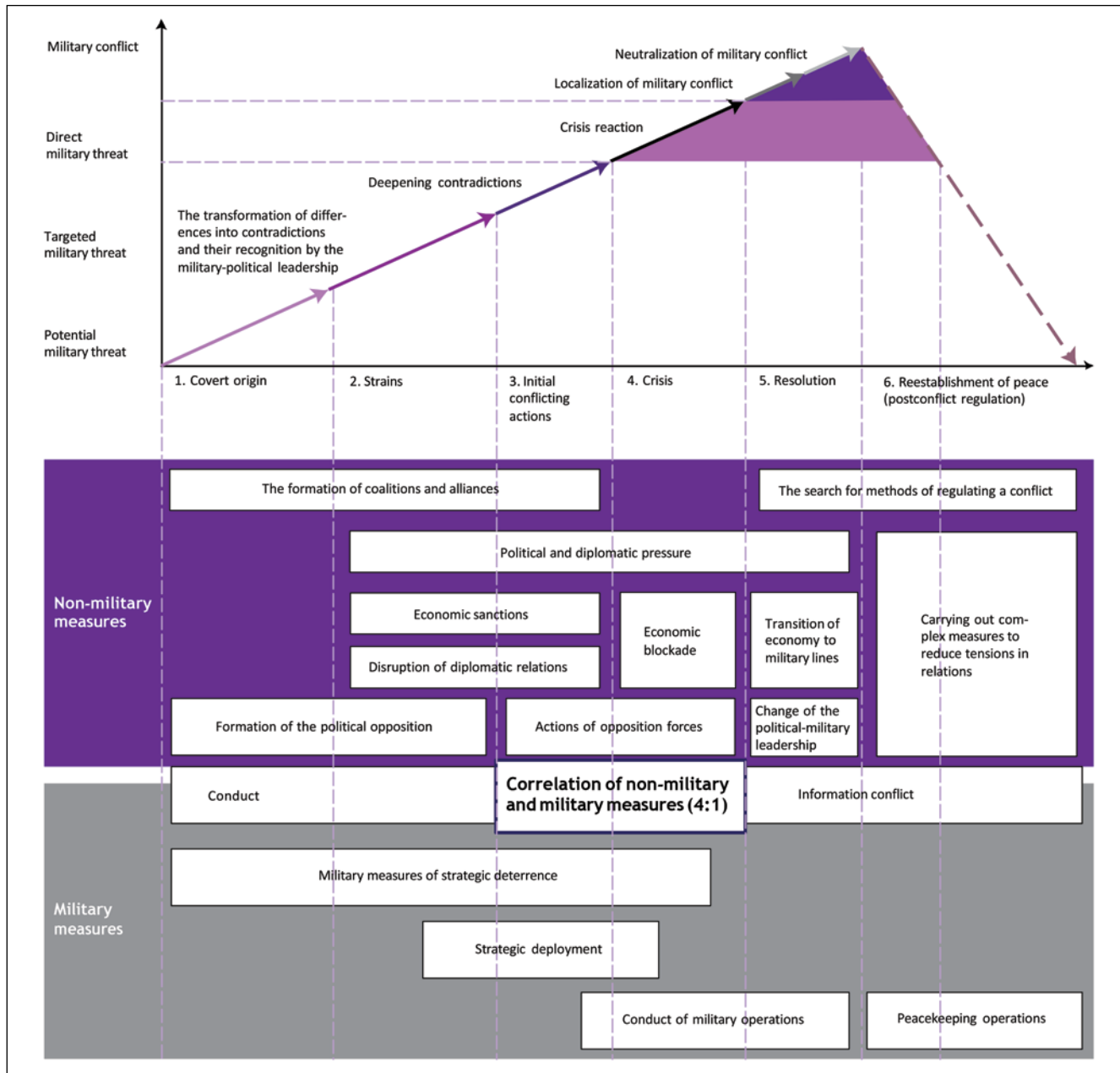


Figure 1 – The role of non-military measures in interstate conflict resolution.



Russian armoured personnel carriers on their way to Gori in Georgia, August 2008.

...the information space opens up wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy. In North Africa, we witnessed the use of technologies for influencing state structures and the population with the help of information networks. It is necessary to perfect activities in the information space, including the defence of our own objects [objectives].<sup>5</sup>

Later, in a section entitled “Controlling Territory” Gerasimov outlined the importance of a “whole of government” approach integrating the armed forces of the Russian Federation with other Russian government departments and agencies for “countering diversionary-reconnaissance and terroristic forces.”<sup>6</sup> This theme of cooperation between military and diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments of national power is repeated in an accompanying graphic, where Gerasimov outlines the use of all four in the resolutions of interstate conflicts (See Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

Gerasimov concludes his article by appealing to his audience to accept new ideas and that:

...no matter what forces the enemy has, no matter how well-developed his forces and means of armed conflict may be, forms and methods for overcoming them can be found. He will always have vulnerabilities, and that means that adequate means of opposing him exist.... We must not copy foreign experience and chase after leading countries, but we must outstrip them and occupy leading positions ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

Although at first overlooked by military analysts, Gerasimov’s article is now the subject of intense debate. At issue is whether or not the article is meant to be *descriptive* or *prescriptive* in nature. Proponents of the descriptive interpretation argue that Gerasimov was relating his perception of the Western approach to war in the contemporary operating environment, as demonstrated by successes during the Arab Spring and in Libya. The article is not meant as a blueprint in the conduct of war for Russia, but a wakeup call for Russia’s military theorists to adapt their thinking to this new environment.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, proponents of the prescriptive interpretation argue the article is too good a guidebook for Russia’s subsequent actions in the Ukraine to be a mere descriptive article. They maintain it is a form of “mirror imaging,” masking a Russian method of conducting “hybrid war” within an alleged American approach.<sup>10</sup> Although proponents of the prescriptive interpretation disagree in some areas, they generally concur that Gerasimov was outlining a Russian model of war integrating all elements of national power with a military capable of using both deniable irregular and high-technology conventional forces.<sup>11</sup>

### Hybrid War and Traditional Soviet Concepts

**M**any participants in the debate over Gerasimov’s article are using the term hybrid war to describe Gerasimov’s supposed vision of warfare, and what occurred in Ukraine in 2014. In 2007, the term hybrid war was defined by Frank Hoffman, a former long-serving Marine Corps officer and Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Strategic Research, US National Defense University, as “...a full range of different



modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate acts and coercion, and criminal disorder.” Hoffman further stated that hybrid war “can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors.”<sup>12</sup> Since the idea was defined by Hoffman it has found a level of acceptance in NATO armed forces, being the subject of multiple articles and studies.<sup>13</sup>

However, hybrid war only appears in Russian publications when Russian analysts refer to it as a concept within Western military thought that has been employed against Russia.<sup>14</sup> Most Russian military thinkers completely reject the concept, arguing it is nothing new, and has been practiced since the beginning of warfare.<sup>15</sup> Some critics also point out that most Western examinations of hybrid war under-emphasize the role of conventional state forces,<sup>16</sup> and that the concept fails to capture the specific political and information manipulation that Russia executes in support of its objectives.<sup>17</sup> A better concept is therefore required when describing Russian perspectives, preferably one present in Russian thought.

The debate between those who see Gerasimov’s article as a descriptive survey of the operational environment or a clever means of communicating a doctrinal concept is of little help to military practitioners. However, what can be of assistance is the realization that a number of concepts that appear in the Gerasimov article may be based upon Soviet concepts updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Specifically, key elements of the alleged Gerasimov doctrine appear to be derived from the concepts of deep operations, active measures, and the theory of reflexive control. These concepts are the new means through which Russia exerts its influence in its ‘near abroad,’ and the wider world.

### Deep Operations

One of the few traditional military thinkers directly referenced by Gerasimov in his article is Georgy Isserson, who was portrayed by Gerasimov as a prophet. Isserson was a proponent of the Soviet theory of deep operations, along with other prominent Soviet-era military figures such as Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Vladimir Triandafillov. The concept of deep operations was based around the central belief that the most effective way to defeat an opponent was to subject it to a number of successive blows throughout its operational depth.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Western military thought, deep operations theory did not stress the identification of a single centre of gravity, and then directing efforts towards it. Instead, deep operations encouraged attacks upon a wide variety of objectives, and then reinforcing success as it occurred.<sup>19</sup> Over time, this idea manifested itself in Soviet manoeuvre doctrine as the use of a “breakthrough force” to allow a longer-range “mobile force” to push deep into an enemy’s tactical defensive area, enveloping defending forces. The result would be a collapse of those tactical defending enemy forces, either through their systemic destruction or prolonged isolation, while the mobile force pushed forward towards higher-level operational objectives.<sup>20</sup> Although many Western observers began to conflate the theory’s expression in manoeuvre with the theory itself, others warned against such literalism, noting that adherents often hinted at a high degree of flexibility.<sup>21</sup>

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Deep operations theory still holds a significant place in Russian military doctrine, as evidenced by recent Russian military reforms. As part of its ongoing military modernization program, Russia appears to have prioritized the *Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska* (VDV), its airborne and airmobile forces. This gives Russia a rapidly deployable military capability that can intimidate countries in its ‘near-abroad,’ and in the case of a conventional conflict, exploit the success of mechanized forces by attacking deep into enemy territory.<sup>22</sup>

While deep operations theory appears to have informed some aspects of Russia’s military reforms, the 2014 edition “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation” appears to endorse a closer coordination of state resources to achieve the ends of the state. In one paragraph describing the operational environment, it identifies the “...integrated use of military force, political, economic, informational, and other non-military measures,” and “...the effect on the enemy throughout the depth of its territory simultaneously in the global information space, aerospace, land, and sea” as characteristics of modern warfare. Large portions of the document are dedicated to mapping out interdependencies between the military, economic, and political institutions as a basis for national mobilization.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the National Security Strategy discusses ways of achieving whole-of-government approaches to deterrence and national security, as well as social mobilization.<sup>24</sup>



Marshal of the Soviet Union Mikhail Tukhachevsky (1893-1937).

SPUTNIK/Alamy Stock Photo B91RJF



General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, and Russia's First Deputy Defense Minister.

The emphasis upon deep operations underlying Russia's military reforms and Russia's stress on "whole of government" integration can also have offensive applications, a fact that has been put into practice. Instead of using military forces alone, recent history shows Russia is more than willing to strike at an adversary multiple ways simultaneously using diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of national power following the prescriptions of deep operations theory.

In the lead-up to the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, Russia launched a series of coordinated actions designed to cripple Georgia and force it to abandon its policy of rapprochement with NATO. Diplomatically, Russia attempted to undermine Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili by encouraging protests against his government, establishing direct contact with unofficial governments in Ossetia and Abkhazia, and lifting sanctions prohibiting arms exports to those same regions.<sup>25</sup> Concurrently in the information domain, Russia spread accusations of Georgian atrocities in South Ossetia, and marketed its troop presence in the region as "peacekeeping."<sup>26</sup> Economically, Russia imposed energy, trade, and financial sanctions on Georgia as punishment for its NATO rapprochement.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Russia undertook a number of small-scale military actions and exercises in July 2008 designed to intimidate Georgia, and ultimately, to prepare for the invasion.<sup>28</sup>

Russia's invasion of Georgia therefore came after extensive diplomatic, informational, economic, and military preparations that struck at a number of strategic objectives, including the legitimacy of the Saakashvili presidency, Georgia's ties with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, its international reputation, and its economic



Russian military vehicles in Georgia, August 2008.



health. Striking these objectives throughout Georgia's strategic depth weakened it to the point that when Russian conventional forces entered the country, Georgia's political will collapsed in a manner predicted by deep operations theory. Although Russia's means described in this section appear relatively conventional, the 2008 Russo-Georgia Conflict also saw extensive use of cyber-warfare and irregular forces.<sup>29</sup> The use of such forces and 'dirty tricks' was not new to Russia, and they had their origins in another concept inherited from the days of the Soviet Union, namely, active measures.

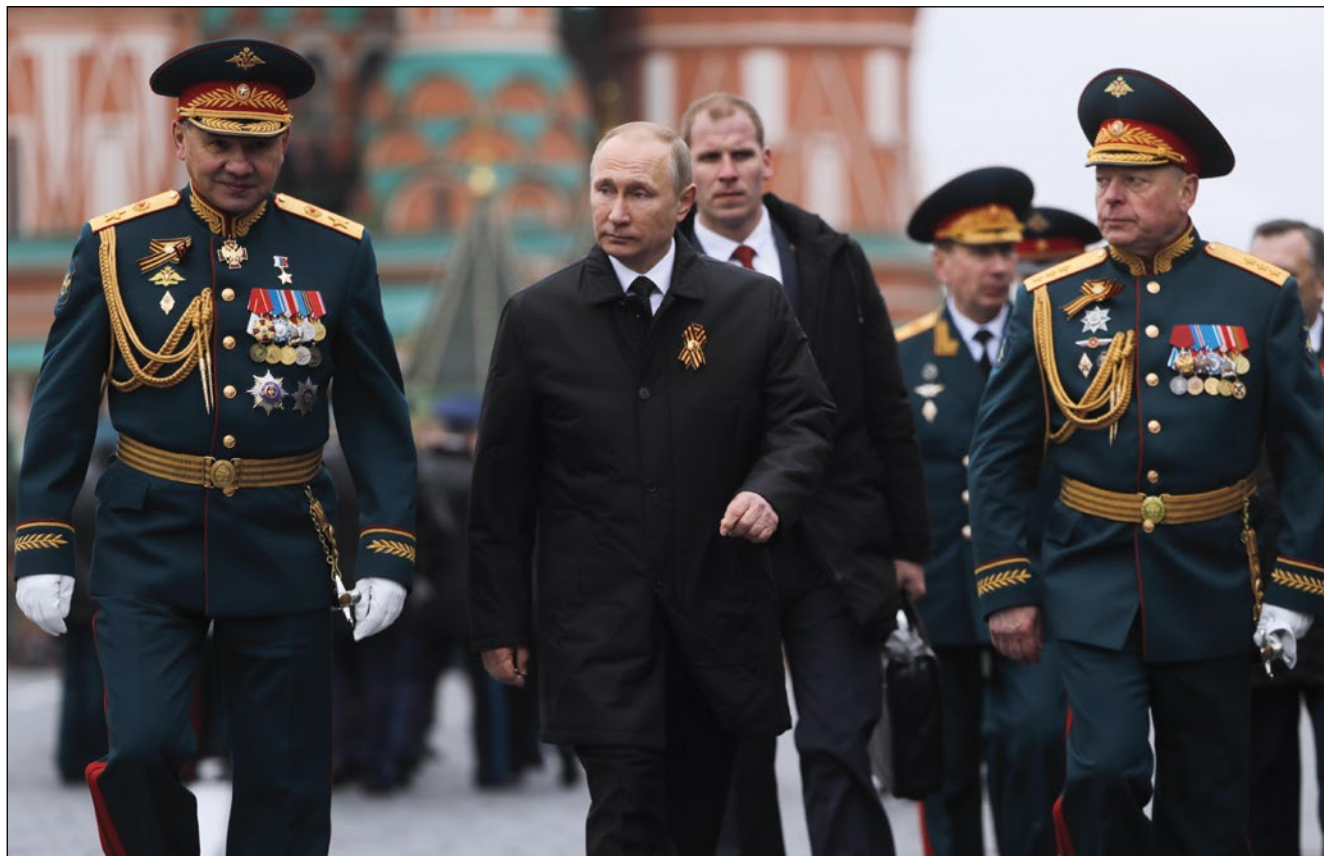
### Active Measures

A concept that describes many of Gerasimov's 'non-military' and 'asymmetric' methods is the Soviet notion of active measures. Although its exact Russian definition is vague and heavily based upon the imperfect recollections of defectors, most Western definitions of active measures state they consist of:

...a form of political warfare conducted by Soviet intelligence and security services to influence the course of world events. Active measures ranged from 'media manipulations to special actions involving various degrees of violence' and included disinformation, propaganda, counterfeiting official documents, assassinations, and political repression...<sup>30</sup>

Although the concept was developed to assist the spread of communism through non-conventional means, many of its elements are evident in the means used by contemporary Russia to advance its interests. The Russian use of deniable irregular forces, cyber-warfare, ethnic diasporas, media manipulation, political parties, and 'think tanks' are all contemporary manifestations of this old Soviet concept. Although the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that the use of some of these tactics was suspended for a period of time, the skill sets behind them continued to survive in the Russian security services, and they have been exploited domestically by President Vladimir Putin.<sup>31</sup> Far from a dead art, active measures now find expression both within Russia defending Putin's regime, and internationally, as a means for Russia to pursue its interests.

Significant evidence exists that Russia employed active measures in Ukraine, particularly in the East. Russian agitators appear to have travelled into the Ukraine to aggravate the regional grievances of ethnic Russians and to undermine law and order, provoking a Ukrainian response.<sup>32</sup> This response was then used to unleash a series of irregular forces consisting of Pan-Slavic Russian "Patriots," local pro-Russian political parties, Cossacks, and adventurers/mercenaries, all armed and supplied by the Russian security services and special operations forces.<sup>33</sup> Led by Russian intelligence officers, detachments of rebel forces appeared to prioritize communications facilities in an attempt to suppress narratives different from that of the rebels, which portrayed the revolt as a reaction to a humanitarian crisis engineered by Kiev.<sup>34</sup>



Left-to-right: Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, President Vladimir Putin, and Colonel-General Oleg Salyukov, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Ground Forces, after a Victory Day parade marking the 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany in the 1941-1945 Great Patriotic War, as celebrated in Moscow's Red Square, 9 May 2017.

ITAR-TASS Photo Agency/Alamy Stock Photo J43XRR



A Ukrainian serviceman sits at his entrenchment near Donetsk, 16 September 2014.

All the while, Russia denied involvement, but sustained these irregular forces with weapons and manpower, as well as the occasional direct (but denied) conventional military action.<sup>35</sup>

The situation in Eastern Ukraine therefore has all the hallmarks of Active Measures: internal political manipulation of a sovereign state, the use of violence through proxy forces, and information manipulation, all coordinated to achieve a common end. Unlike Russia's actions in Crimea, the situation in Eastern Ukraine did not result in a quick victory. Instead, the conflict drags on today, and it has provoked economic sanctions, a re-invigorated NATO, and military assistance to Ukraine and other Eastern European countries.<sup>36</sup> However, by inspiring and controlling an insurgency, Russia can bide its time until an opportune moment arises to re-seize the initiative.

### Reflexive Control

**I**n addition to the use of violence, active measures consist of media manipulations, disinformation, and propaganda components. Reflexive control is a behavioural theory that links these informational means together, and it is defined as

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“...a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specifically prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.”<sup>37</sup> A well-established concept in Russian military theory, reflexive control emerged in the 1960s, and it has evolved into an interdisciplinary field with its own journals and experts.<sup>38</sup> The ‘reflex’ in reflexive control refers to a behavioural model constructed to understand a target’s decision-making processes. If an actor understands the behavioural model of its target,

that actor can manipulate the target’s plans, views, and how it fights.<sup>39</sup> Reflexive control’s roots in behavioural theory places its emphasis on achieving the desired decision/behaviour without regard for truth, morality, or reason.<sup>40</sup>

Russia’s use of reflexive control can be detected in information operations during the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Russia’s primary informational aim appears to have been to cause significant confusion and doubt at the international level, even to the extent of convincing external audiences that all reporting from the region was suspect.<sup>41</sup> This would blunt any potential NATO and US responses, as this informational ‘pollution’ would weaken the



public opinion needed by Western politicians to take firm action. Although clear evidence existed that the 'Little Green Men' in Crimea were Russian soldiers, Western journalistic ethics forced respectable news outlets to report outright denials by Russian officials, Russian-owned news outlets, and thousands of 'cyber warriors' in on-line commentary.<sup>42</sup> This reinforced the legitimacy of Russia's false narrative of a spontaneous heart-felt Crimean uprising and created enough doubt to weaken the resolve of Western politicians:

Given the habit of leaders in democratic nations to attempt always to say something that at least resembles the truth, implausible denials are a ploy which Western media are particularly ill-equipped to respond and report appropriately...it is not important that what he [Vladimir Putin] says is plainly untrue – the approach is effective not only in press conferences... it also makes it impossible to confront or engage with Putin even when face to face.<sup>43</sup>

While the public in Western democracies struggled to understand the deliberately confused and contradictory messages emerging from Crimea, Russia also carefully influenced Ukrainian decision makers. As tensions mounted, the Russian Federation Armed Forces held a snap exercise near Ukraine's borders, diverting Ukrainian attention away from Crimea to a potential existential threat that played into long-standing national fears.<sup>44</sup> Russia concurrently used its deep media penetration into ethnic Russian-Ukrainian

communities (particularly television) to fuel pro-Russian sentiment in support of an illegal annexation referendum.<sup>45</sup> These combinations of informational pressures paralyzed the government in Kiev, hampering a firm and effective response to the ongoing seizure of facilities in Crimea.<sup>46</sup>

Far from being an exercise in perception management, Russia's use of reflexive control during the annexation of Crimea undermined the ability of Western politicians to confront Russia over its actions by exploiting an understanding of Western political decision-making. Meanwhile within Ukraine, Russia set the conditions for an illegal referendum that would provide a legal excuse for annexation by targeting ethnic Russian Ukrainians, and then played upon Ukrainian fears of a military invasion of their nation. The end result was decisions (and non-decisions) that supported Russian objectives.

### Conclusion

The debate over Gerasimov's article has led to a greater awareness of the concept of hybrid war and the challenges of the contemporary operating environment. However, 'hybrid war' is a Western term for a form of warfare that is not native to Russian military thought. Russia's recent actions in both Georgia and Ukraine can instead be understood through concepts it inherited from its Soviet past, namely deep operations, active measures, and reflexive control theory. While deep



A man looks at graffiti produced to support the territorial integrity of Ukraine and to protest Russia's annexation of the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, Odessa, 7 April 2014.

REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo H4XTH2





Georgian artillery unit soldiers in Georgia, August 2008.

operations theory gives Russian decision-makers a framework through which to integrate its diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power in an offensive manner, active measures gives them deniable or ambiguous means to pursue their objectives. Meanwhile, the theory of reflexive control shapes the Russian use of information operations, and explains its approach to them.

It is likely that, as Russia continues pursuing its aims in the international arena, it will draw upon concepts developed during the Cold War to advance its interests. Many of these concepts have a long history, and provide Russia with the “forms and methods” Gerasimov’s referred to as necessary to “...outstrip them [Russia’s

opponents] and occupy leading positions ourselves.”<sup>47</sup> It would be a mistake for contemporary analysts to dismiss these concepts and instead fit Russia’s actions into Western constructs, as this overlooks some subtleties in the Russian approach to contemporary conflict: namely, simultaneous coordinated action, use of deniable means, and manipulation of decision-making processes. After years of counter-insurgency oriented operations, the re-emergence of Russia as an adversary is an unwelcome development for Western armed forces. What would be even more unfortunate is if the West were to misunderstand this re-emergence...







Vladimir Konstantinov/Reuters RTR4TUK

Pro-Moscow head of Crimea Sergei Aksyonov (L), Crimean State Council speaker Vladimir Konstantinov (R), and Oleg Belaventsev (C), Vladimir Putin's envoy to Crimea, attend a meeting to celebrate the first anniversary of Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, Simferopol, 16 March 2015.



Oleg Zabelin/Alamy Stock Photo H344EA

Soviet Spetsnaz in Afghanistan.



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