

Russian Perspective and Operational Framework

by Mr. David P. Harding, Colonel David Pendall (Retired), and Lieutenant Colonel Steven J. Curtis

Introduction

In the European theater, we sometimes find Russian motives and actions confusing. We can readily identify that they are competing with the West in all domains, yet we struggle to characterize Russian activity as aggressive, defensive, provocative, or simply prudent. Moreover, we have difficulty classifying their actions, using the terms interchangeably such as *asymmetric*, *irregular*, *hybrid*, and *gray zone*. In order to understand and describe their behavior, we must view the strategic operational environment through their perspective. This article summarizes a tool we have used in the U.S. Army Europe G-2/66th Military Intelligence Brigade analysis and control element to help us understand Russian actions.

The Ambiguous Strategic Environment

Among intelligence analysts and defense intellectuals, there is a thriving discussion about new technologies, the changing character of war, and the blurring spectrum

of conflict. We are struggling to understand our competitors' actions as they increasingly explore ways to sidestep Western military might. The ambiguous strategic environment generates increased risk for miscalculation and demands a shared understanding of Russia's means to ends to enable the Army to compete and win in multiple domains.

The multi-domain operations construct posits that our competitors will engage us using all means necessary to achieve their political objectives. The competition phase is critically important for them because, like most nations, they do not want to go into armed conflict if they can achieve their goals in the competition phase. Therefore, they employ a broad range of options, drawing from their total capabilities, both military and non-military, to achieve their ends. As they attempt to mitigate our strengths and gain advantage, they make every effort to remain below the threshold that would trigger armed conflict (Figure 1).

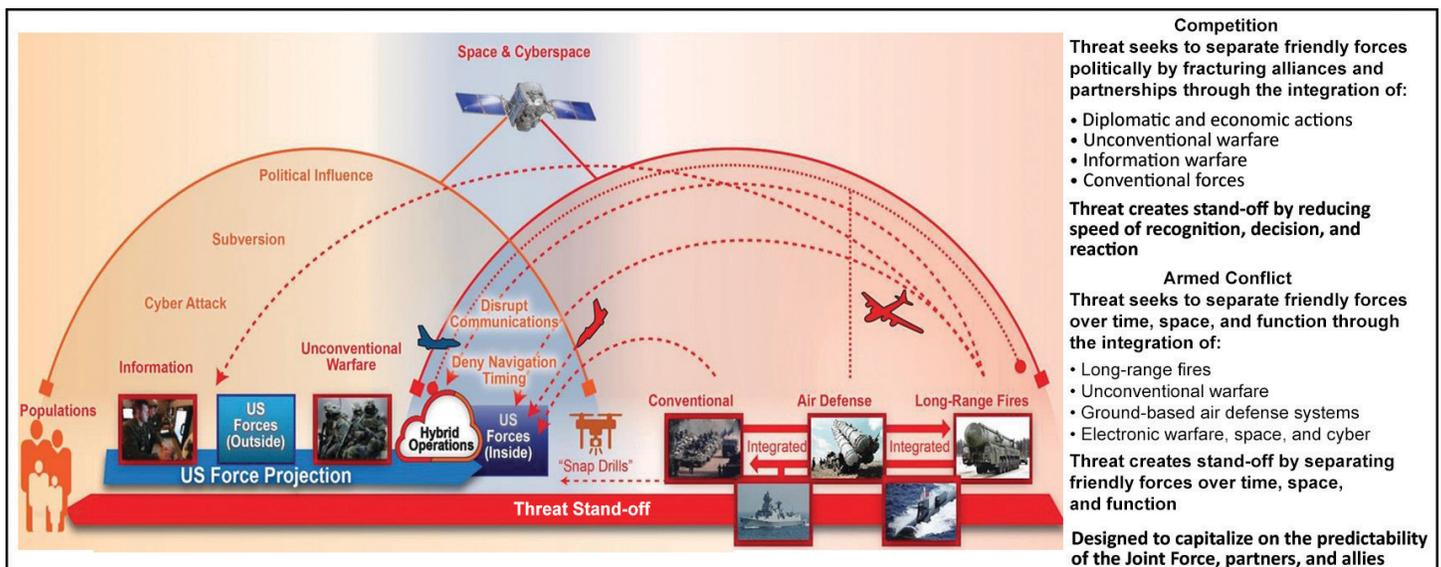


Figure 1. China and Russia in Competition and Armed Conflict¹

Ultimately, what we observe the Russians doing in the United States European Command (EUCOM) area of responsibility is rooted in history. The principles of war remain unchanged, and the strategic objectives of combatants and/or competitors, if they change at all, remain largely constant over time. What compounds our confusion about Russian actions is the observable fact that the Russians are leveraging the whole of Russian society to apply modern capabilities/technologies in creative ways to established concepts. They are intentionally blurring the line between competition and conflict by applying not strictly a whole-of-government but rather a “whole-of-Russia” approach that comprises elements outside the Russian government. Applying some basic intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) elements can help clear up some of the mystery by looking at Russia’s theater campaign from the operational level of war.²

Russia does not have a monopoly on realpolitik—almost all nation states act pursuant to their survival, applying all elements of power to ensure regime survival, expand wealth, and advance their nation in the international system. Russia is a nation state with its will and means coalesced under a ruling power structure that is less democratic than we prefer—enabling greater agility and capacity to meet challenges with a whole of society response. For contrast, the United States demonstrated the power of its will and means working in concert in World War II, followed by a whole of Western society containment strategy in the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, the West has rightfully focused its attention on violent extremism, presenting an opportunity for Russia, and China, to modify their strategy to address a Western military overmatch.

The Russian Perspective

As the Russians look over the horizon to the west, what they see since the Soviet collapse in 1992 is a loss of substantial operational depth that has subsequently been backfilled by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion and more recently by the deployment of additional NATO ground forces. For historical reasons, the operational depth afforded by the occupation of Eastern Europe figured prominently in Russian security; now a potential threat from the West is no longer 2,000 kilometers away—it is 600 kilometers to Moscow, a net loss of 870 miles. Former Defense Secretary Mark Esper’s July 2020 announcement regarding the relocation of United States land forces from Germany to Poland only corroborates Russia’s fear. A theater strike capability from air and sea comes from across the Atlantic and over the Arctic and polar cap, compounding Russia’s threat perception. Figure 2 (on the next page) represents what might be Russia’s perspective of NATO and European Union activities currently and since the 1990s.

The map shown in Figure 3 (on the next page) is straight from Russia’s National Security Strategy of 2015. As should be clear from the highlighted entries, the threat from NATO that Russia perceives is heavily in its security calculus. The annotations on the map also make clear that the Russians remain very concerned about conflict and instability in Southwest Asia, especially the threat from Islamic extremism from the north Caucasus. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov recently articulated these concerns when reflecting on the United States-NATO exercise DEFENDER-Europe 20: “Although the entire space there is oversaturated by military facilities and weapons, although NATO’s eastward expansion has already created serious problems in the field of strategic stability in Europe, the merger of NATO and the [European Union] EU is continuing. NATO members have been trying to hold joint exercises and trying to plug in neutral EU members, such as Finland and Sweden.”³

Russian Ground Force Dispositions

As part of their effort to organize the operational environment, the Russians divide it into three zones: the disruption zone is roughly equivalent to our deep area; the battle zone is roughly equivalent to our close area, and the support zone is the equivalent of our rear area. The battle zone is where the conflict and the competition for resources and allies take place in what the Russians call the “near abroad,” or the former Warsaw Pact states and the former Soviet Republics lost after the Soviet collapse.

After many years of insufficient political backing and re-sourcing, the poor performance in 2008’s small war with Georgia focused Russia’s military leadership, and force modernization efforts began in earnest. They gave initial priority to units in the Southern Military District to contend with the Islamist threat in the North Caucasus. More recently, Russia has reconstituted a number of heavy divisions along the border with Ukraine and NATO’s eastern flank.

In addition to building up its ground forces capabilities in the Western and Southern Military Districts, Russia has constructed a complex system of air defense and fires based on the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. As can be seen from the map in Figure 4 (on page 47), it provides a complex, layered, and redundant antiaccess and area denial capability with complementary fires that can range virtually all European port facilities. Similar efforts are underway in Crimea as Russia attempts to reconstruct a protective glacis in the western, southwestern, and southern strategic directions.

Although our (U.S. Army Europe) focus is primarily on Russian land power, or ground forces activities in EUCOM’s area of responsibility, we are aware of and monitor Russia’s

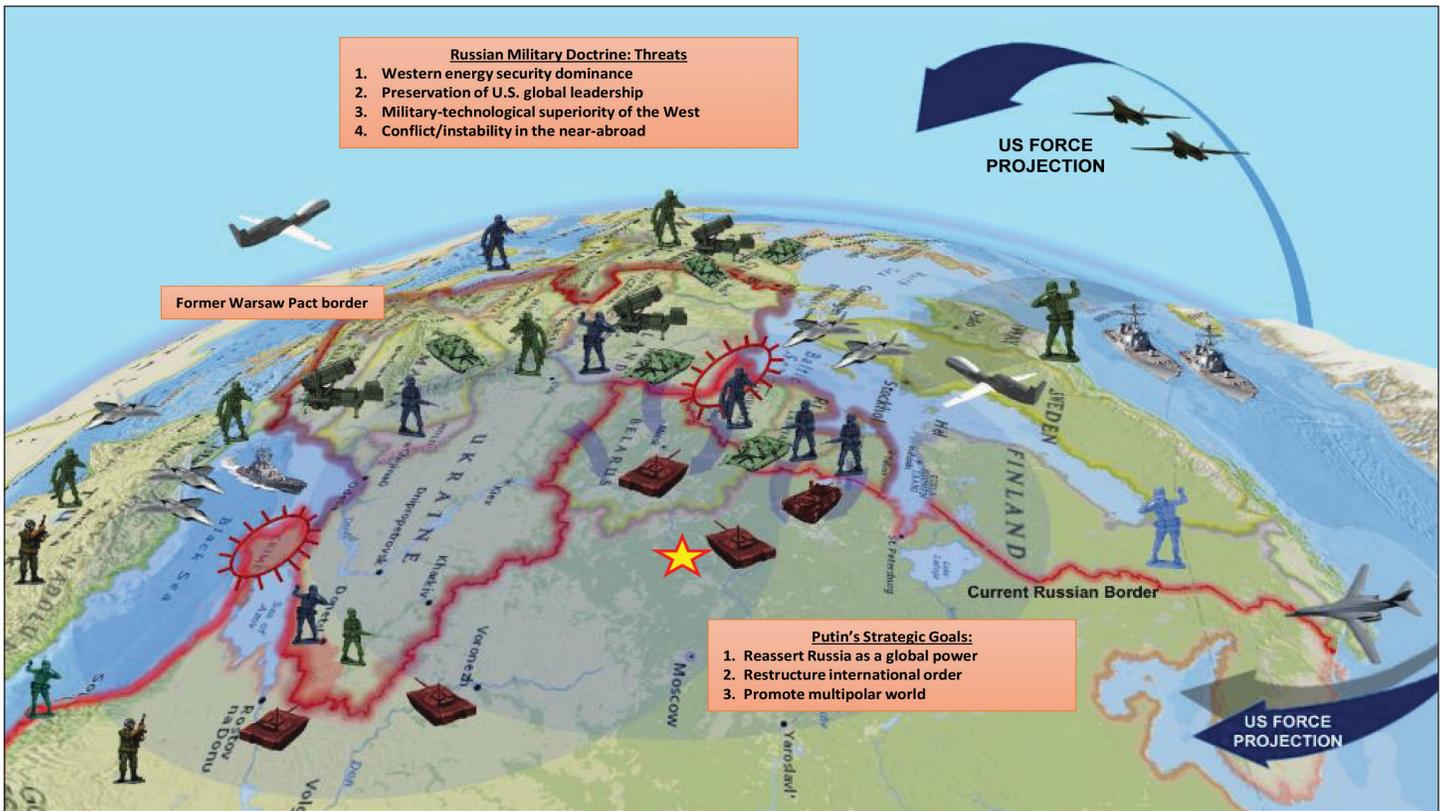


Figure 2. The Russian Perspective⁴

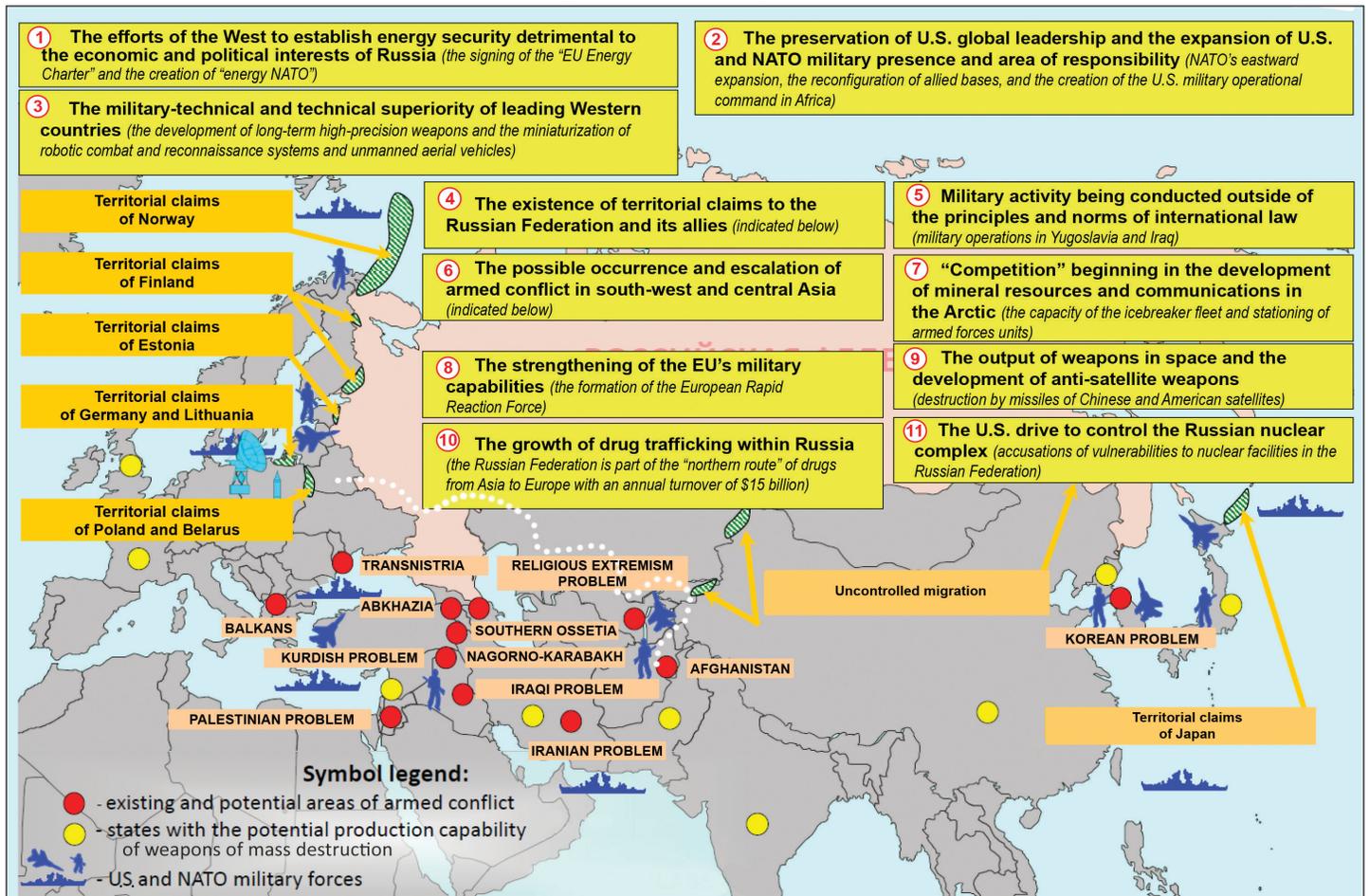


Figure 3. The Russian Perspective: Threats to the Military Security of the Russian Federation⁵

activities across the diplomatic, information, military, and economic spectrum, also known as DIME (Figure 5, on the next page). The activities listed in the figure are primarily everyday observables, and we could classify them as tactical moves. As should be clear from the figure, Russia's military activities in the area of responsibility comprise just a small percentage of the Russian Federation's activities. This list is meant to be representative, not comprehensive. Still, it represents a broad spectrum of activity, some of which is normal statecraft, some of which is aggressive and/or illicit. As mentioned earlier, the Russians intentionally blur the lines between the two. Our challenge is that while we generally have fairly good fidelity on Russian activities from which we can compile and catalog long lists of actions, how do we connect means to ends?

A long list of activities constitutes a lengthy catalog of measures of performance, which can result in confusion—how to sort out what the Russians are doing and why? By bridging the gap at the operational level and connecting means to ends, we can clarify what the Russians hope to accomplish and make better sense of seemingly unconnected or discrete activities across the area of responsibility. Ideally, with better understanding, we can begin to anticipate our adversary's future moves.

We can expand warfighting functions to many forms of competition.⁶ For instance, if one were going to start a car dealership, one would need first to do market research (intelligence) to determine where to set up. Advertising is necessary and could be considered a form of information operations (fires), and we would need to find sources for inventory, electricity, warehouses, and showrooms (sustainment). Someone would have to be in charge and have responsible individuals on hand to perform various functions to keep things running (mission command). Another example might be a political campaign during which surveys are conducted and demographic data collected (intelligence), a campaign manager and their staff appointed (mission command), and advertising bought and disseminated (fires), and so on.

Warfighting Function	Activities (Linear Warfare) (Nonlinear Warfare)
Mission Command	Command post exercise/field training exercise/fast-reaction exercise, mobilization of reserves Russian society, transportation infrastructure, economy, industrial base
Movement & Maneuver	Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, long-range aviation, maritime Political system funding, candidates; "lawfare;" International bodies: Organization for Security and co-operation in Europe, United Nations, Collective Security Treaty Organization, Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
Intelligence	Financial Stability Board, Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), Special units (SPETSNAZ) active internal, external; unmanned aircraft systems, long-range aviation, maritime; penetration of NATO allies, partners Cyber exploitation, Night Wolves, criminal organizations, commercial enterprises
Fires	Artillery, cruise missiles Information operations, cyber, electronic warfare, economic, political
Sustainment	Mobilization of Russian society, transportation infrastructure, economy, industrial base; demographic manipulation external (ethnic support zones)
Protection	New ground forces divisions, counter force and force disruption capabilities, hardened facilities Conspicuous firings, leadership refresh; creation of multiple, redundant security organizations; National Guard, frozen conflicts, crowd/riot control, political assassination, suppression of free press, internal Russian narratives, media control, banning of Western non-governmental organizations in Russian Federation

Figure 6. Russian Activities Categorized as Warfighting Functions

Figure by U.S. Army Europe G-2 Analysis and Control Element

The Operational Environment and Framework

Importantly, the Russians do not use "warfighting functions" as a doctrinal construct,⁷ but we choose to bin what we see them doing in a construct familiar to us as a conceptual handrail for our own basic understanding. If we take what the Russians are doing, and bin their activities across the warfighting functions, it helps to simplify the picture. The warfighting functions depicted in black in Figure 6 are what we would expect in a conventional military conflict, or in their concept "linear warfare."

But, what we are confronting in competition bears more resemblance to their concept of "nonlinear" warfare or conflict. In competition, the Russians are taking a "whole-of-Russia" approach to apply new (modern) capabilities/technologies to established concepts. Plotting Russian activity in our operational environment—across the area of responsibility by warfighting function—looks something like what is shown in Figure 7 (on page 48).

Insert another caveat: We accept that using tactical symbology for an operational-level graphic is not doctrinally correct. However, feedback from a wide range of senior and allied audiences to whom we presented this concept convinced us there is value in using this framework to help visualize the operational environment in competition. From the map in Figure 8 (on page 49), with the warfighting functions plotted in time and space, we can derive this operational graphic for the area of responsibility.

The following points should be clear:

- ◆ **The decisive operation is to ensure regime survival.** Everything else is a supporting effort. This is normal nation state behavior, exhibited especially by nations with an autocrat at the helm who is preoccupied with both internal and external threats. Even in Western democracies, regime turnover creates staggering instability and presents a major security risk to a population.
- ◆ While focused on retaining key terrain, **Russia is committed to undermining the cohesion of NATO.** Russia is employing integrated operations (political, information, economic, and military) across multiple domains to *isolate* the Baltics, Turkey, and the Caucasus states while simultaneously conducting *disruption* in Scandinavia, NATO countries, and the Central Asian states. Creating fissures in NATO deprives the United States of its principal power projection platform and restores Russia's principal military strength—mass. The West created an opportunity when we misapplied our own worldview to Russia and assessed Russia as European after the collapse of the Soviet Union, seeking to bring them into the NATO tent in the fight against violent extremism. We were disappointed when Russia acted as a distinct Eurasian nation state, wholly apart from Western

Europe, that rejected a progressive NATO encroachment toward Moscow.

- ◆ We see **Russia is aggressively conducting intelligence collection against its adversaries**, both foreign and domestic, throughout the breadth and depth of the area of responsibility and using intelligence, information confrontation, and influence to retain its own freedom of action and initiative in both the European regional and global contexts.

Russian Maneuver Space

As a result of fixing NATO's attention on its eastern flank (Figure 9, on the next page), preventing Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO, isolating Turkey through diplomatic advances and military cooperation, and staving off the collapse of Syrian President Assad's regime, Russia has created maneuver space for itself in Southwest Asia.

By financing opposition parties and conducting aggressive information operations in France and other European countries, Russia is attempting to undermine the cohesion of NATO and the European Union. The provision of medical supplies to Italy during the early days of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic is a form of Russian fires, or information operations. Using energy transfers to attain leverage over European partners is another form of fires or sustainment.

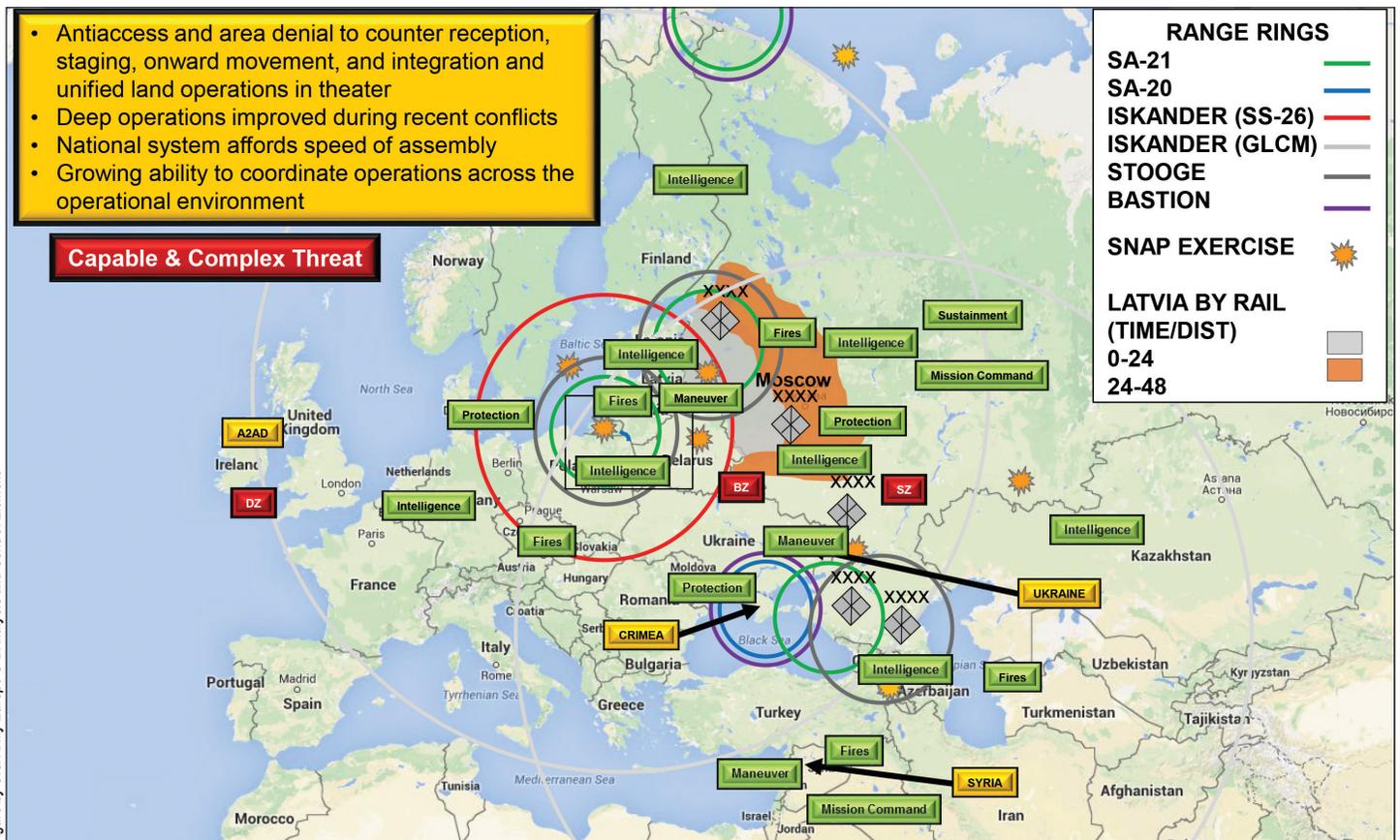


Figure 7. Visualizing the Operational Environment

Figure by U.S. Army Europe G-2 Analysis and Control Element

Decisive Operation: Ensure Regime Survival
 Shaping Operation 1: Dominate Black Sea region
 Shaping Operation 2: Isolate threat from NATO's eastern flank
 Shaping Operation 3: Prevent threat from emerging in the Caucasus
 Shaping Operation 4: Maintain partnerships and mitigate Islamist threat

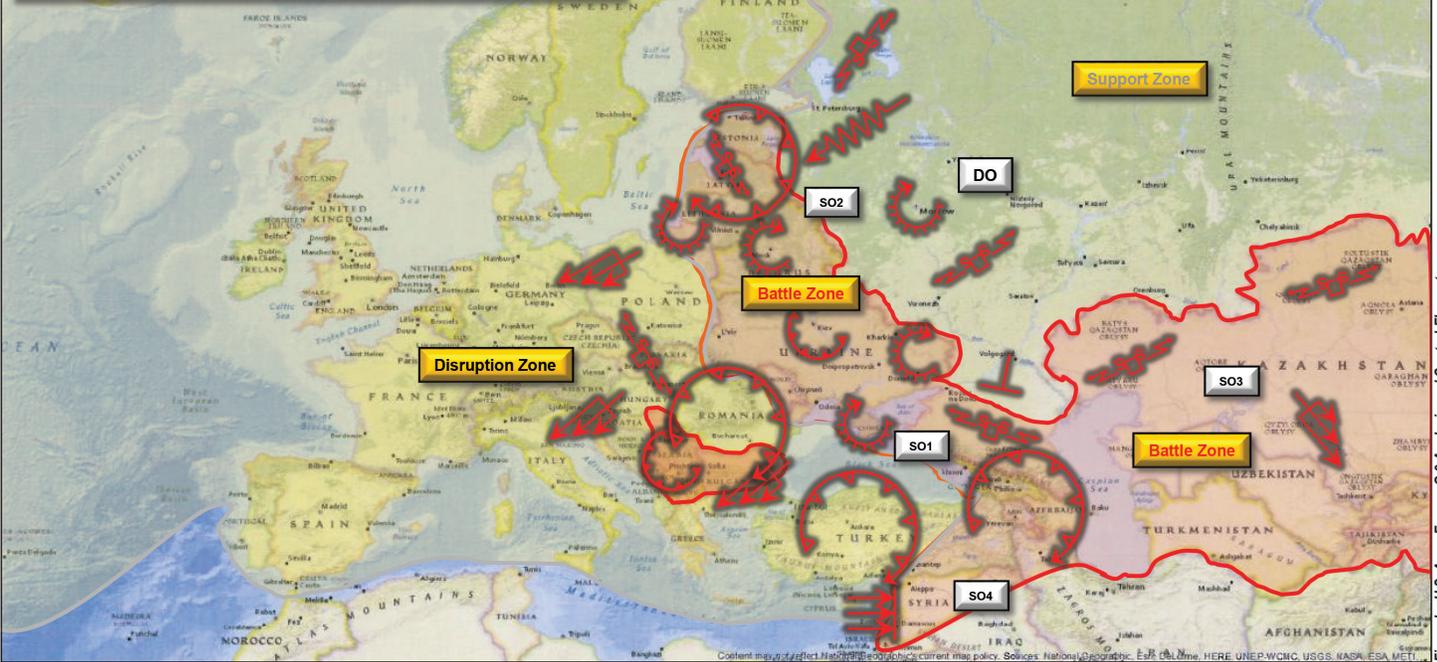


Figure 8. Russia's Operational Framework

Decisive Operation: Ensure Regime Survival
 Shaping Operation 1: Dominate Black Sea region
 Shaping Operation 2: Isolate threat from NATO's eastern flank
 Shaping Operation 3: Prevent threat from emerging in the Caucasus
 Shaping Operation 4: Maintain partnerships and mitigate Islamist threat



Figure 9. Eastern Flank/Baltics

By applying pressure and intimidation on the Baltic, Russia has forced NATO to increase its forward force posture, which potentially undermines NATO's cohesion by putting additional strain on countries that have a primary threat focus on terrorism or illegal migration from North Africa.

In the Black Sea/Caucasus Region (Figure 10, on the next page), Russia wants to neutralize Ukraine as a threat while simultaneously keeping it out of NATO and other European institutions. Russia views retaining Crimea as vital to its strategic interests. A simple review of the geography reveals Crimea as key terrain. Applying pressure to Georgia keeps it isolated, while maintaining security cooperation with Armenia and supporting local conflicts helps Russia sustain its influence in this energy-rich region.

In the Balkans and along NATO's southern flank (Figure 11, on the next page), Russia is attempting to gather intelligence while undermining alliance cohesion using information operations and manipulating the refugee crisis. In addition, the Russians are providing military aid to Serbia in an attempt to isolate it from membership in western institutions. In Serbia, and in Bulgaria, Russia is using a shared cultural identity (Orthodox Christianity) as a lever between their populations and the West. The cumulative effect is to create a sense of isolation in Romania, an important NATO ally in the Black Sea region.

Conclusion

While it may appear the Russians are conducting a broad range of discrete actions across the Eurasian landmass, it is actually a campaign across the theater. The Russians are employing new technologies and techniques to accomplish traditional tasks, which often obfuscates their intent or purpose. Russia remains opportunistic, but their actions are strategically defensive. For example, in Syria and Ukraine, the Russians are gaining valuable experience in expeditionary warfare—experience they can selectively draw on to improve their capabilities in the Western strategic direction. Through some basic tools from the IPB process, we can plot their activities on a map, visualize relationships between them, and begin to identify the connections between seemingly disconnected actions and strategic objectives.

What the Russians are doing on NATO's eastern flank and elsewhere does not constitute a new form of warfare.

Rather, it is a creative application of the warfighting functions using a "whole-of-Russia" approach in competition. By simplifying what we are observing and focusing on the operational level of war, we are better able to connect seemingly discrete events and paint a more accurate picture of what Russia is attempting in EUCOM's area of responsibility. Nevertheless, Russian modernization and evolved doctrine increase the risks to NATO, specifically the Baltic countries. Russia's malign activities are effective in Eastern Europe because they are supported by a dangerous military threat.

Russia is employing an efficient, full-spectrum "whole-of-Russia" approach. The dichotomy between hybrid and conventional is a false one—Russia does not distinguish or compartmentalize warfare as the West does. This wholistic view confounds analysts who explain Russian behavior through Western constructs. Instead, when understanding Russia, and China, we should simplify their actions to one—warfare. 

Endnotes

1. Department of the Army, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028* (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 6 December 2018), 9.
2. Department of the Army, Army Techniques Publication 2-01.3, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 1 March 2019).
3. Vladimir Gerdo, "Russia to React to US-NATO Exercise Defender 2020 in Europe," TASS, 4 February 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1116409>.
4. Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Russian Strategic Intentions, A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper* (Washington, DC, May 2019), <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016b-a5a1-d241-adff-fd908e00001>.
5. Figure adapted by authors from original Russian National Security Strategy document available on the Russian Security Council website, 31 December 2015.
6. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 31 July 2019), 5-2.
7. Charles K. Bartles, "Recommendations for Intelligence Staffs Concerning New Generation Warfare," *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (October–December 2017): 10-17.
8. Department of the Army, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations*, iii.

The American way of war must evolve if we are to successfully thwart the aims of our adversaries in competition or to defeat them in conflict.⁸

—GEN Stephen J. Townsend

Statement made as Commander, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, currently Commander, U.S. Africa Command



Figure 10. Black Sea/Caucasus Region

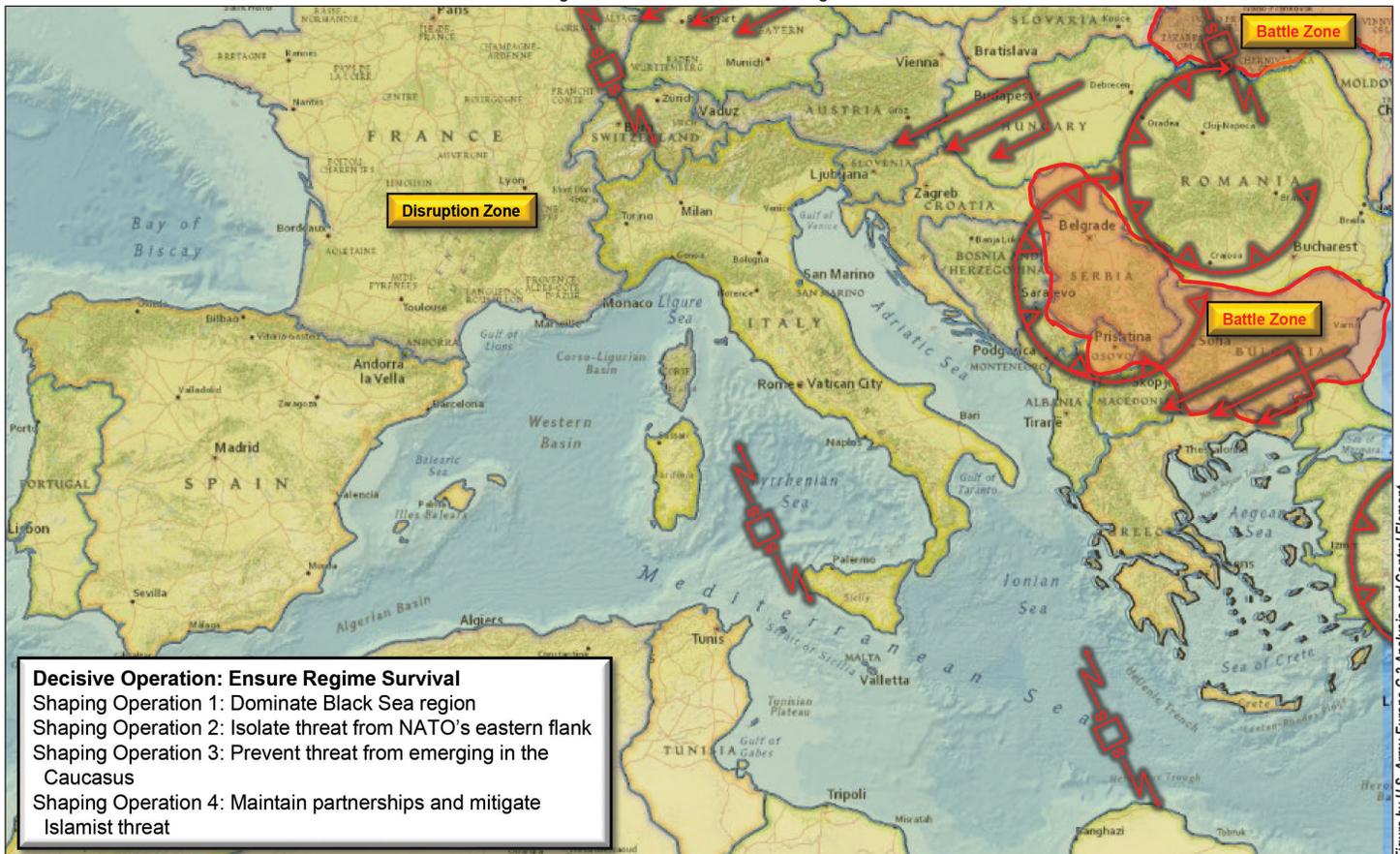


Figure 11. Balkans/NATO's Southern Flank

Mr. David Harding began his intelligence career in 1984 as a signals intelligence voice interceptor, serving in the 3rd Armored Division. His first assignment as a civilian analyst was in modeling and simulation at the Army's Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center, before it formed the General Military Intelligence component of the National Ground Intelligence Center (NGIC), where he served until 2015. Mr. Harding has expertise in a wide range of Eurasian and Middle Eastern ground forces, the full range of warfighting functions, and both conventional and irregular warfare entities, including Lebanese Hizballah and Iran's threat network. He has served variously as an analyst, team lead, liaison officer, and branch chief for the NGIC, Joint Chiefs of Staff J-2, Multi-National Force–Iraq, and Multi-National Corps–Iraq. He has also embedded with the U.S. Special Operations Command Central, U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, and a special missions unit. Mr. Harding received research fellowships from the Secretary of the Army and Office of the Director of National Intelligence, leading multi-organizational and multinational projects at the cutting edge of intelligence tradecraft. He holds a master of arts from George Mason University and an all-but-dissertation degree from the University of Virginia. He completed a 5-year tour as a Russian ground forces analyst in the U.S. Army Europe G-2/66th Military Intelligence Brigade (24th Military Intelligence Battalion analysis and control element).

COL David Pendall (retired) has extensive experience in Europe and in defense intelligence. He was a G-2, senior intelligence officer, for U.S. Army-Europe, and a commander of the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade, also based in Europe. He served as a J-2 for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Eastern Afghanistan and as a senior staff officer in Afghanistan's ISAF joint command and the Multi-National Corps in Iraq. He has spent more than 28 years as a career intelligence officer, serving across all levels of the U.S. Army, joint force, and defense intelligence. He has an executive certificate in national and international security from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, has served as a fellow with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Security Studies Program, and was assigned to MIT Lincoln Laboratory as the senior U.S. Army liaison. He is also a member of the International Institute of Strategic Studies and the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House).

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