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STRIKE FIRST AND STRIKE HARD?

Russian military modernization and strategy of active defence

On 2 March 2019, Russia's Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, gave a speech where he launched what he called a "strategy of active defence".¹ It summarises Russian security thinking and the modernization of the Russian Armed Forces – and indicates the flavour of the next Russian doctrine, expected in 2020. In this brief we will interpret this speech in view of the evolution of Russian military capabilities over the last decade, with emphasis on the role of precision-guided missiles and the role of the Russian Navy. We will argue that Russia is still likely – if not even *more* likely – to continue to use military force as a foreign- and security policy tool.²

The Russian worldview

A military threat is traditionally regarded as a combination of capabilities and intentions. A potential adversary would need to be considered to have both potentially ill intentions and the means to hurt – to represent a threat. The Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine from 2014 onwards represented a sudden shift in perception of intension. Russia experts tend to agree that the political culture allowing such behaviour – "Putinism"

– is here to stay, also beyond Putin.³ In other words, the socio-political structure of Russia that is run by a kleptocracy and riddled with endemic corruption is likely to be the case also in the foreseeable future. Various power circles, related to economic interests and state authority structures (so-called *siloviks* from the intelligence, police and military) fight for influence and prestige in a constantly evolving carousel of governance and business deals. Their main fear is for someone – internal or external – to undermine or destabilise this system, and to contain and intimidate Russia.⁴ Fuelled with this rather paranoid view of the West and an opportunistic and "macho" foreign policy, Russia is unlikely to come to good terms with the West anytime

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soon. Russia is not considered to pose a direct and immediate threat to Europe today, but it is not friendly either.

GPV 2027 and the Active Defence Strategy

The Russian defence budget has increased significantly over the last decade, and probably remains the third largest in the world.⁵ Its military modernization programme, running since 2008, has been largely successful in making the Russian Armed Forces more agile and up-to date despite recent economic hurdles. Russia's new armament programme, the GPV 2027 (for the period 2018-2027), gives an indication of Russian defence priorities in the years to come. According to the Norwegian Intelligence Service, it confirms the shift in Russia's threat perception, and consequently the understanding of the purpose of the Armed Forces. While strategic deterrence continues to be the cornerstone of Russian security, premium is also placed on a more general "applicability" of military force, with major investments in long-range precision-strike capabilities as the main tool. The GPV 2027 also involves a move away from a unilateral emphasis on major direct military conflicts towards a more asymmetric, indirect and complex use of such means.⁶

Gerasimov's Active Defence strategy – while presented as "defensive" against what he perceives as Western political and military encroachment – rather foresees an active and even anticipatory use of military force based on prediction. For Gerasimov, the importance of seizing what he called the strategic initiative has become ever the more important. Maintaining such an initiative would be supported through a set of measures aimed to strategically deter but also pre-emptively neutralise threats to Russian national security when necessary.⁷ And while Gerasimov still accounted for the integrated use of so-called hybrid tactics in modern warfare, he played up the Armed Forces as backstopping for the effectiveness of such means. The strategy also involved an approach of active use of "limited actions" in cases where Russian interests must be defended or promoted abroad, with Syria being a case in point.

Precision-strike capabilities: the new Russian silver bullet?

In his speech, Gerasimov displayed a particular appreciation for precision-strike capabilities, which proliferation in Russia is profoundly changing its ability to deter, threaten or destroy an adversary.⁸ The most accessible examples to mention would be the *Kalibr* cruise missiles, which can be mounted on both submarines and other vessels, and the ground launched *Iskander*. The 9M729 *Novator* cruise missile, which triggered the break-up of the INF Treaty due to its long range, is another.⁹

The evolution of thought surrounding the use and strategic effect of precision strike is reportedly subject to experimentation in Russian doctrinal thinking and seems to be characterised by an innate tension between the defensive and offensive.¹⁰ Indeed, precision-strike capabilities provide Russia with a broader range of options. For example, it allows it to plan the level of enemy losses to correspond to its aims of deterrence and coercion.¹¹ According to Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in 2017, the development of high precision weapons may even allow Russia to leave nuclear deterrence in favour of conventional deterrence.¹² Russia could threaten to launch a set of high-precision and high-impact strikes severe enough to degrade the enemy's military-economic potential. This would be a particularly useful strategy of coercion in a limited conflict, i.e. taking place in Russia's border regions. In a larger conflict, the use of precision strikes could also be a bid for escalation control by threatening to reinforce their use with limited nuclear strikes, signalling to the enemy that the last stage before the nuclear threshold has been reached.¹³

Some also note that Russia's precision-strike capability development increases Russia's offensive potential, which in turn might make military force a more available tool of Russian foreign policy.¹⁴ Gerasimov's remarks about "limited actions" seem to support this view. With both Russia and the US having left the INF treaty, the conventional

and nuclear military balance in Europe is bound to be reshaped, pushing first-strike capabilities – whether conventional or nuclear – to the fore. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the US withdrawal from the treaty, defence minister Shoigu was quick to bury the treaty by declaring that by 2020 Russia will create a ground-based version of the sea-based *Kalibr* system and a ground-based missile system with a long-range hypersonic rocket.¹⁵ The fact that systems like *Iskander* are mobile is another point: it is assumed that Russia might choose to shuffle this system as a “trump card” rapidly across the north-western flank when necessary, constituting a form of coercive “*Iskander* diplomacy”.¹⁶ As of 2019 Russia operates 10 combat brigades of *Iskander-M*.¹⁷

Enhancing precision-strike with speed further amplifies the threat. In his speech, Gerasimov made due mention of Russia’s newest weapons complexes, like the *Avangard* (hypersonic glide vehicle), *Zircon* (hypersonic, sea-based missile) and *Burevestnik* (nuclear powered, nuclear tipped cruise missile). By using long-range, high-speed precision weapons, Russia can also use minimal force to strike at enemy strategic targets from the rear – or from the sea – and force him into submission without the platforms having to enter the theatre of active conflict, let alone violating the sovereignty of other states until the moment of the attack.

Importantly, as can be inferred from Gerasimov’s speech, current Russian doctrinal thinking puts emphasis on offensive strikes and the initial phase of war as being decisive, not on prolonged defence. Pre-emptive action constitutes a key element here, where there is no contradiction between pre-emptive countering of an attack, counter-offensive and being offensive.

The Russian Navy

While Russia since the inception of its military modernisation programme has had an ambition to restore a blue water navy by 2050, this has been put temporarily on hold

due to several factors. The quality and capability of the yards are varying, and the economic sanctions have had some impact on shipbuilding as well. There is also an ongoing debate about the viability of larger vessels in a conflict dominated by cruise missiles. In practice, these factors have made Russia pursue a pragmatic solution, converting modest maritime platforms into strategic assets by arming them with heavy weapons like the *Kalibr* cruise missile. Indeed, Russia has invested significantly in conventional capabilities in the maritime domain and is likely to continue to do so until 2025.

While this development seems to be forced mainly by economic considerations, it may also force a shift in Russian operational thinking. For example, in the event of a conflict between Russia and the West, littoral areas like the Norwegian coast could be particularly valuable for Russia to deploy its combination of small vessels and long range precision-strike capabilities in order to establish a coastal rim of denial. This effect could be reinforced by anti-air and anti-ship assets on shore and would – among other consequences – severely threaten Norwegian Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).¹⁸

In 2014 the Northern Fleet was established as a separate Joint Strategic Command and remains key to Russia’s nuclear second-strike capability. One of the most important Russian long-term investments in strategic capabilities is the *Borei*-class ballistic missile submarine. So far, three units have been completed and are sailing with the Northern and Pacific fleets.¹⁹ In total, the Northern Fleet currently has about 6 operational strategic submarines (*Strategic Submarine Ballistic Nuclear – SSBN*) and about 7-9 operational attack submarines (*Submarine Ship Nuclear SSN/ Submarine Ship Guided Nuclear SSGN*) in the Northern Fleet.²⁰ It is the SSN/SSGN attack-submarines that has caused the most Western concern recently, out of which the *Severodvinsk*-class submarine is the newest and least detectable.²¹ One submarine is operational by now, another one is in sea trials (*Kazan*), five more are under

construction and two more ordered. The *Severodvinsk* can carry both conventional and nuclear missiles. It is considered to represent a particular threat to naval group formations with its anti-ship missiles, thereby threatening the NATO transatlantic SLOCs.²² The new frigate *Admiral Gorshkov* can also be equipped with *Kalibr* or other kinds of precision missiles. More ships of this class are expected to be delivered over the next years.²³ Recently, the Navy also announced that it will equip its latest class of corvettes in the Pacific, *Gremyashchiy*, with hypersonic anti-ship cruise missiles.²⁴

The Russian Navy has also sought to achieve better strategic effect by moving and concentrating naval platforms between key theatres, as demonstrated recently during an exercise outside the Norwegian coast, which featured a Russian flotilla comprised of vessels from the Northern, Baltic and Black Sea fleets.²⁵ Russia has also used the Black Sea, Pacific and Northern Fleets to provide air defence for Russian units in Syria. The Black Sea Fleet has gained status as a multiregional force due to its tactical versatility and ability to rapidly despatch to the Mediterranean Sea. Even more interesting in Syria, perhaps, was the way in which Russia demonstrated that it is starting to overcome its traditional reliance on railways for logistics by using a mixed and greatly enhanced system of SLOCs and Air Lines of Communication (ALOCs) to project power - even well beyond its periphery.²⁶ Reportedly two helicopter carrier ships are being built in the Black Sea to support such operations.

Conclusions

Although Russia is not regarded as an imminent military threat to NATO or EU member states, the volatile socio-political system in Russia makes it an uncomfortably unpredictable neighbour for most Western states. Russia's continued criticism of Western values and institutions combined with the continuous non-violent attacks on the

Western democratic institutions and digital infrastructure, reinforces this.

The Active Defence Strategy speaks of a General Staff that is more confident and pro-active in thinking about the instrumentality of Russian military power across a spectrum of future scenarios, in the near and far abroad. This includes development of means to achieve technological parity with the West and ways of using advanced weapons complexes in a game of political-military coercion. Moreover, the Russian military modernization programme, including enhanced firepower and a renewed naval capability, the experience from the war in Syria, the increased number of exercises – all indicate a more agile and potent military adversary than a decade ago.

In particular, the precision-guided cruise missiles, including those of long range, are of concern. They represent a potential for deep strikes on Europe from a long distance – whether from sea or land – with a minimum of warning time. In other words, the smaller hybrid operations often associated with Russian actions in Ukraine is not representative of the broader military development in Russia. Rather, what we see is a military force with increased firepower and mobility, capable of conducting complex joint operations in the entire spectrum of the use of force.

Russia's limited resources has forced it to think outside the box – both in means and ways. What could be uncomfortable about this situation is that, from a tactical military point of view, it promulgates a first-strike approach from the Russian side. In case of an escalating political conflict, the calculus may be that it will achieve more by striking early than by waiting for a broader Western mobilization. If, in a future Russian constellation of power, the military leaders are hawkish and the political leaders weak, this would be a concerning scenario.

Endnotes

- 1 General Valery Gerasimov (2019), *Speech at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Military Sciences, Moscow*, 2 March 2019,
- 2 We will not discuss the Army, as it is unlikely to have capacity to protracted offensive warfighting. Although it in theory could capture e.g. the Baltic states quickly, it would struggle to keep an occupational force in place for an extended period. It would drain a lot of manpower, logistics and other resources from other flanks. This does not rule out tactical territorial advances in case of conflict with NATO, but the Army is unlikely to be the main Russian weapons system in a war. See Pavel Baev (2019c), "PART II: The Re-Emerging Nuclear Dimension in Russian-European Relations", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 7 May 2019.
- 3 See e.g. Keir Giles (2019), *Moscow Rules - What Drives Russia to Confront the West*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press; Mark Galeotti (2019a), *We Need to Talk About Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong*. London: Ebury, 2019; Mark Galeotti (2019b), *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- 4 Massicot (2019). See also "[Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment \(SMA\) White Paper](#)", *NSI*.
- 5 Michael Kofman (2019), "Russian defense spending is much larger, and more sustainable than it seems", *Defense News*, 3 May; Pavel Baev (2019a), "Is Russia really cutting its military spending?", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 16: 65, 6 May 2019.
- 6 Norwegian Intelligence Service (2019), *Focus 2019*, p. 27,
- 7 Importantly, "deterrence" in the Russian context appears different from the Western usage of the term: it implies dissuasion, compellence and coercion as key elements. It can include non-military active measures to shape the opponent also prior to Armed conflict. See Daniel Flynn (2019), "Russia's evolving approach to deterrence" in 'Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper'. *NSI*, p. 39.
- 8 Office of Naval Intelligence (2015), '[The Russian Navy: A Historic Transition](#)', *Office of Naval Intelligence*, December 2015, p.33.
- 9 Furthermore, Russian Tu-160 *Blackjack* bomber planes have been observed in Norway with dual-use (nuclear/ non-nuclear) long-range cruise missiles (*Raduga Kh-101/AS-23 Kodiak*) which can reach all European territory either from Russian heartland or the Norwegian Sea. See Douglas Barrie (2019), "[Kh-101 missile test highlights Russian bomber firepower](#)", *IJSS Military Balance Blog*, 8 February 2019; LtGen Morten Haga Lunde (2019), *Speech at Oslo Military Society*, 12 February 2019,
- 10 Tor Bukkvoll & Roger McDermott (2017), "Russia in the Precision-Strike regime - military theory, procurement and operational impact", *Norwegian Defence Research Establishment*, 1 August 2017.
- 11 Roger N. McDermott & Tor Bukkvoll, 'Tools of Future Wars – Russia is entering the precision-strike regime', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31:2, 198- 201; Dave Johnson (2018), 'Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds', *Livermore Papers on Global Security* No.3. Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Center for Global Security Research. February 2018.
- 12 Sergei Shoigu quoted in 'Ministr oborony Rossii provel ustanovochnyu lektsiyu kursa "Armiya i obshchestvo"' ['Russia's Minister of Defence held an overview lecture at the course "Army and Society"'], Russian Ministry of Defence, 12 January 2017.
- 13 Daniel Flynn (2019). For more on the seamless integration of nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence see Katarzyna Zysk (2018), "Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy", *The RUSI Journal*, 163:2, p. 4-15
- 14 Norwegian Intelligence Service (2019), p. 22; Tor Bukkvoll & Roger McDermott (2017), p.39.

- 15 Matthew Bodner (2019), '[Russia bids farewell to INF Treaty with fresh nuclear development plans](#)', *Defence News*, 6 February 2019.
- 16 [CSIS Missile Defense Project](#).
- 17 The Iskander-M SRBM (Short-range Ballistic Missile) possesses a maximum range of 500 km and carries payloads between 480 and 700 kg.
- 18 Tor Ivar Stømmen (2016), «Ein strategi på leirføter», *Necesse* vol 2, no 2; Ståle Ulriksen (2016), «Den russiske marinen – status og fremtidsutsikter», *Necesse* vol 2, no 2.; Ståle Ulriksen & Åse Østensen (2019), «Building on Strength – Proposals for US-Norwegian cooperation on the Operational and Tactical Level», *Concept Paper 2/2019*, Norwegian Naval Academy; Ina Holst-Pedersen Kvam (forthcoming 2020) «Russisk maktprosjeksjon i og fra kystsonen: Implikasjoner for Bastionforsvaret», *Necesse*; John Andreas Olsen (ed.) (2017), *NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalising Collective Defence*. London: RUSI, Whitehall Paper 87.
- 19 Russia's maritime strategic priorities also include continuing the renewal of its old nuclear submarines until the new *Borei*-fleet has been completed.
- 20 The Northern Fleet has 2 Victor III, 4 Sierra I and II, 6 Akula and 3 Oscar II SSN og SSGN, plus Severodvinsk og Kazan, in total 17 submarines, plus some «special subs» and some older diesel subs. It is assessed that 1 Victor III, 2 Sierra II, 1 Akula, 2-3 Oscar II, Severodvinsk and maybe Kazan are operational, i.e. totalling 7-9 SSN and SSGNs. In addition, the Northern Fleet currently has about 7 larger battleships operational (1 battle cruiser, 1 cruiser, 4 destroyers, and 1 frigate), and some under long-term overhaul. More corvettes are expected in the next few years. In addition, it has 3 regiments of fighter jets, 5 helicopter squadrons, 3 air defence regiments, 2 mechanised infantry brigades and one naval infantry brigade. This is a corrective note, as IISS numbers are frequently too high since they include non-operational units (IISS, 2019; Kvam, 2020)
- 21 Norwegian Intelligence Service (2019), *Focus 2019*, p. 25.
- 22 Rolf Tamnes (2017), «The significance of the North Atlantic and the Norwegian Contribution», in John Andreas Olsen (ed.) (2017), *NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalising Collective Defence*. London: RUSI, Whitehall Paper 87, p. 25.
- 23 Franz-Stefan Gady (2019), «Russia's New Admiral Gorshkov-Class Stealth Frigate Enters Final Shipbuilder's Trials», *The Diplomat*, 14 August 2019.
- 24 H. I. Sutton (2019), '[Russian Navy to Deploy New Zircon Hypersonic Missile to Pacific](#)', *Forbes*, 5 November 2019.
- 25 IISS Military Balance (2019), p. 174 – 175.
- 26 Roger N. McDermott (2015), 'Russia's Strategic Mobility and its Military Deployment in Syria', *RUFBS Briefing* No 31. Swedish Defence Research Agency. September 2015.