

Oscar Jonsson

# PUTTING MODERN WAR IN PERSPECTIVE

”The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.<sup>1</sup>”

If a state had \$10 billion to spend on achieving maximum influence over an adversary, what would they have spent it on? Some would probably have answered “hackers”, to strike at electric grids or communication networks. Others might have answered “troll factories” to broadcast friendly or confusing narratives into the adversary’s information sphere. Some, of course, would answer “nuclear weapons” or “hypersonic missiles”.

This thought experiment underlines the challenge facing strategists across the world as to whether it is military or non-military means that yields the greatest influence today. This is connected to the question of how war and conflict

1 von Clausewitz, C. (1976, first published 1832). *On War*, Translated by Howard, M. & Paret, P. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.88-89.

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is changing. Tanks and fighter jets might not necessarily be what states find most effective. The preconditions for security policy and strategy have changed profoundly the last decades with the revolution in information and communication technologies, the globalisation of finance and the coming AI revolution. This brief analyses what war is today and what threats strategists are faced with, especially Russian strategists, and how to navigate conceptually between them.

## Military vs. Non-Military War

War has been traditionally defined, both in Russian and the West, by armed violence. In the West, the orthodoxy has come from Clausewitz, and his definition that ‘war is

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an act of violence to compel the enemy to do your will'.<sup>2</sup> At the creation of the Soviet Union, Lenin used another of Clausewitz's descriptions, that 'war is the continuation of politics by other [violent] means'.<sup>3</sup> The purpose is not to dwell on definitions, but to emphasise that armed violence aimed at a political goal is the key characteristics in both concepts of war. This has been the orthodoxy until recently, as theorists grapple with how the world is changing.

Among Russian theorists, there has been longstanding debate on how the character of war is changing, in the context of rapid technological and societal change. The most notable features of this discussion are the increasing utility of non-military means, which that are perceived to be more important than military means, blurring the boundaries between war and peace.<sup>4</sup> A similar discussion has also been going on in the West, but recently the same popular notions are now heard from senior Western military and political leadership. For instance, the British Chief of Defence Staff Carter stated that Britain is 'at war every day' due to cyber attacks and that the boundaries between war and peace 'don't exist any longer'.<sup>5</sup>

How should we understand this? It is helpful to start with yet another of Clausewitz's ways of describing war, namely as a battle of wills.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the goal of the armed forces is not to blow things up and kill people, but rather to impact the adversary's will and determination. War ends

when the adversary lacks the will to defend itself and gives into to the aggressor's demands.

Grasping that wars are a battle of wills helps us understand why information warfare plays a pivotal role in modern conflict. The most effective way of imposing your will is to make your adversary want what you want. Further, broadcasting your views and narratives into their information sphere is cheap and low-risk. This, of course, echoes the idea of Sun Tzu that the best victory in war is one where the armed forces are not used at all.<sup>7</sup> On a similar note, the former Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov stated in 2007 that 'the development of information technology has resulted in information itself turning into a certain kind of weapon. It is a weapon that allows us to carry out would-be military actions in practically any theater of war and most importantly, without using military power'.<sup>8</sup>

Naturally, it is important to be cautious of labels. However, what Ivanov is saying is underlined by the Russian influence operations related to the US 2016 election. Regardless of how much one believes Russian influence impacted the election, it has vastly contributed to the polarisation of how to perceive Russia among US politicians. It has notably undermined trust and increased hostility to the point where President Trump's administration doubts what have conclusively been stated by the US intelligence agencies.<sup>9</sup> Achieving such an impact via military means would have been incredibly hard, especially as Russian military power is mostly regional. The Chief of Russian General Staff's statement that non-military means are becoming four

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2 von Clausewitz, C. (1991, first published 1832). *Om Kriget* [On war]. Translated by H. Mårtenson, K. R. Böhme, and A. W. Johansson. Stockholm: Bonnier Fakta Bokförlag, p.29.

3 Lenin, V. I. (1915). "The Collapse of the Second International" in *Collected Works*, vol. 21, Moscow: Progress Publishers, p.219.

4 Jonsson, O. (2019). *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Boundaries Between War and Peace*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

5 Nicholls, D. (2019). "Britain is 'at war every day' due to constant cyber attacks, Chief of the Defence Staff says", *The Telegraph*, 29 September.

6 von Clausewitz, *op cit*.

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7 Sun Tzu (1944). *The Art of War*, New York: Dover Publications Inc., p.49.

8 Quoted in Blank, S. (2013), "Russian Information Warfare as Domestic Counterinsurgency", *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 35(1), p.34.

9 Intelligence Community Assessment (2017), "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections"

times as important as military ones should also be read in this light.<sup>10</sup>

If non-military means are becoming so important, why are Western states spending billions on tanks and fighter jets, one might wonder. There is something unique about armed violence: Clausewitz reminds us that violence knows no boundaries. The most simple metaphor can be taken from the schoolyard where even though there are regulations that fights are not allowed, everyone knows who holds the greatest amount of suspended violence. This violent capital will underlie every interaction with that person. Interactions in the international system bear a similarity, where a great power with large capital of violence will impact how other states behave around it. The military capability furthermore needs to be credible and communicated to the adversary. In essence, coercive bargaining is a feature of international relations that must be countered. For instance, Ukraine termed the war in Eastern Ukraine a domestic anti-terror operation rather than an interstate war, as they would have otherwise been at war with Russia. Many Western states did not call out Russian special forces and airborne forces in Crimea as be Russian, but preferred to (derogatorily) call them ‘little green men’. In the light of this, it is worth repeating that war is a battle of wills, in which the object is to coerce your opponent in to your interest.

Whilst Russian non-military operations have received the most attention in recent years, their provocative military actions are mostly flying under the radar. Most often, it does not come to public attention when Russian military fighter jets act provocatively or jam NATO ships and units,<sup>11</sup> but such actions send clear signals to the military and political

10 Gerasimov, V. V. (2013), “*Tsennost nauki v predvidenii*” [The value of science is in foresight]. *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer*, 8 (476).

11 See for instance Adomaitis, N. (2019). “*Norway says it proved Russian GPS interference during NATO exercises*”, *Reuters*, 18 March.

leadership of other states. Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that Russian military tools are not separate from its use of non-military tools, but rather a foundation for them.<sup>12</sup> Thus, military means will still be relevant both in and of themselves and as a precondition for Russia’s offensive use of non-military means. Even though the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been lauded as successful ‘hybrid warfare’, it reached its limits as Ukraine started its counteroffensive and ‘by August 24 [2014], the hybrid approach had demonstrably failed [...] [and] Moscow traded it in for a conventional invasion by regular Russian units, which it had sought to avoid.’<sup>13</sup>

It is clearly too early to declare the death of the military instrument, and it is part and parcel of a state’s grand strategy in the modern world. Moreover, the way the military instrument can be used is changing at a rapid pace with the advent of artificial intelligence, unmanned weapon systems and hypersonic weapons. Just one example is how Russia declared itself to be the first state in the world with hypersonic intercontinental ballistic missile-system (Avangard) on 27 December.

## What Has Changed?

The elements that are seen to be changing war and blurring the boundaries of war and peace have less to do with the development of military means and more to do with how society is changing. With globalisation and the anonymization of finance, opportunities to influence others have vastly increased. The collective OCCRP has extensively detailed one Russian money-laundering operation in which Russian money moves through murky banks into the Western financial system.<sup>14</sup> The investigations related to both collusion in the US and the Brexit vote

12 Baev, P. (2018). “The Military Dimension of Russia’s Connection with Europe”, *European Security*, 27(1), pp.82-97.

13 Kofman, M. (2016). ‘*Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts*’, *War on the Rocks*.

14 OCCRP (2017). *The Russian Laundromat Exposed*, 20 March.

in the UK underlines that it is critical to know who pays whom and for what purpose. This also compounds the problem with media and data ownership, and how media stations and data are being used for political influence, as seen with Cambridge Analytica. With the revolution in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), we have changed from a centralised information environment to a 24/7 global media cycle, a decentralised information environment where everybody can be a producer of media through blogs, vlogs and social media accounts. This has been described by Wanless and Berk as due to the speed of communication, how far a message can travel and, the ability of the audience to engage with the content, transforming one-way communication into multi-directional engagement.<sup>15</sup> This is also a neat summary of how Russian information operations have developed the last decade.

At the start of Putin's presidency, he made sure to take control of key parts of broadcast media.<sup>16</sup> The Second Chechen War, however, emphasised the threat coming from the internet, as the Chechen side rallied support, money and recruits whilst the Russian government was mostly helpless.<sup>17</sup> This convinced Russian security agencies that *all* of the internet was a threat and they needed to develop their capabilities in the digital domain.<sup>18</sup> The Arab Spring uprisings showed the potency of social media and in September 2013, the Russian journalist Alexandra

Garmazhapova for *Novaya Gazeta* revealed the existence of a troll factory in St. Petersburg.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than revolutionising information operations, the Russian approach is rather to adapt their campaigns to how society is changing. Today, the key way of accessing the digital world is through a small number of social media companies and their algorithms. Cyber tools are an indispensable part of the modern toolbox in war. Komov and his colleagues from the Russian GRU and Ministry of Defence note that,

the damage done by cyber weapons may include man-made disasters at vital industrial, economic, power, and transportation facilities, financial collapse, and systemic economic crisis. Besides, cyber weapons can cause government and military operations to spin completely out of control, leave the population demoralized and disorientated, and set off widespread panic.<sup>20</sup>

Not only can cyberattacks have vast effects, they also produce an analytical problem for understanding war. Pavel Antonovich, then chair of electronic warfare at the Russian Combined-Arms Academy, stated that the 'dividing lines between war and peace can be eroded conveniently in cyberspace. Damage (whatever its nature) can actually be done to an adversary without overstepping formally the line between war and peace.' Talk of blurring the lines between war and peace can be seen as a hype, but conducting successful cyber operations cannot *only* be done in wartime. Rather, gaining access to the systems you want to target, and planting the necessary software to do so, needs to be done in times of peace. This means that an adversary

15 Wanless, A. & Berk, M. (2020, forthcoming). "The Changing Nature of Propaganda: Coming to Terms with Influence in Conflict", in Clack, T. & Johnson, R. (eds.), *The World Information War: Campaigning, Cognition and Effect*, London: Routledge.

16 Soldatov, A. & Borogan, I. (2017). *The Red Web: Kremlin's War on the Internet*, Washington DC: Public Affairs, p.106.

17 Thomas, T. (2003). "Information Warfare in the Second (1999-Present) Chechen War: Motivator for Military Reform?", in Aldis, A. C. & McDermott, R. N. (eds.), *Russian Military Reform 1992-2002*, London: Routledge.

18 Giles, K. (2016). "Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power", *Chatham House*.

19 Garmazhapova, A. (2013). "A. Garmazhapova, "Gde zhiyyt trolli. I kto ix kormit (Where the trolls live. And who feeds them)"", *Novaya Gazeta*.

20 Bazylev, S. I., I. N. Dylevsky, S. A. Komov, and A. N. Petrunin (2012). "The Russian Armed Forces in the Information Environment." *Military Thought* 21(2), pp10-15, p.11.

will register attempts to insert malicious code and register animosity, as per the British Chief of Defense Staff stating above that Britain was at war every day.

Likewise, influence in the information sphere also requires building the necessary infrastructure in peacetime, and long in advance. Facebook pages, Twitter and Instagram accounts need to build up credibility and followers over a period of time to have a significant platform when it is needed. They can then be amplified with the use of networks of bots, but a successful operation requires key accounts as well. In the run up to the US election 2020, the analysis company Graphika had exclusive access to data from Facebook that showed that the Internet Research Agency was seemingly building up infrastructure to influence the 2020 election. The common narrative among all the accounts they ran, from alt-right to Black Lives matter accounts, was that they were all targeting Joe Biden.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Today there is widespread confusion as to how to label modern conflict (hybrid, gray zone or non-linear war) and even more so in terms of how to act in it. To maintain transatlantic security, we need to update our understanding of contemporary conflict to fit how the rest of society has evolved. Changes in our society have increased the opportunities to increase influence without the blatant use of military violence, and potentially at lower costs. Competition and conflict in these spheres can be malign and consequential without amounting to what traditionally has been classified as war. These operations are said to be conducted in places of ambiguity, either in legal terms or in regards to attribution. However, the Mueller report confirms how well the US intelligence agencies saw and understood the Russian intelligence operation, as they

sanctioned individual desk officers at the GRU.<sup>22</sup> Rather, there is a political ambiguity due to a lack of resolve rather than a lack of intelligence or jurisdiction. The more pressing problem facing Western leaders in handling conflict today is determination and deterrence, the ability to discourage an adversary, rather than new concepts. To be successful in a modern conflict, states both need a modern military instrument for coercive bargaining to deter the extreme scenario of large-scale violence, and an updated strategy for non-military defense. Otherwise, complacency will create opportunities for an adversary.

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21 Francois, C., Nimmo, B. & Shawn Eib, B. (2019). "The IRA CopyPasta Campaign", 21 October, *Graphika Report*,

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22 Mueller, R. S. (2019). "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election", *U.S. Department of Justice*.