



IS THE CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT “CONVENTIONAL”?

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One of the biggest European conflagrations after the World War II constitutes Russian's unprovoked attack on Ukraine which begun in 2014 and evolved in a full scale war in February 2022. Despite the fact that it represents an armed conflict between two actors, it is difficult to classify it as pure conventional or unconventional war. The main goal of the paper is to reveal the extent to which conflict can be classified as conventional since both sides have been using a long range of elements of unconventional war. Using the historical and analytical method, the paper emphasizes that the conflict cannot be classified fully conventional or unconventional as the actors use a mixture of both to reach their military and political objectives. The scope of our paper limits the research to the Russian military interventions unfolding during the last two decades.

Keywords: *Russia; Ukraine; unconventional war; security; military power.*

Introduction

The 21st century started with a controversial event that shook the entire world. The 9/11 attacks on the world hegemon raise a question mark on whether the upcoming wars will be conventional. In his book “On war”, Clausewitz emphasized the unstable character of war stating that “War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case” (Howard and Paret 1976). The following aggression of Russia in Georgia, in 2008, and in Ukraine in 2014 ingrained a new typology of war among scholars – the hybrid warfare. Acting aggressively to annex Crimea, Russia changed the Western military mindset. In the quest for its previous

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status as a great power and in combination with its imperialistic aspirations, Russia sought a different confrontation with the West. With a weak economy and a military instrument in reformation, Russia could not afford a direct military confrontation with a more powerful adversary. As a result, its military strategies during the last decades to maintain its control over the ex-Soviet countries resemble a combination of conventional and unconventional activities (Boston and Massicot 2017). Such move was necessary to surpass or prevent overreaction from the international community.

Conversely, Russia's recourse to unconventional activities in the regions where the denial of their presence proved less economic and political risk increased. Intervention in Syria in 2015 highlights its commitment toward an international assertion of the great power. Yet, to limit domestic stress, Russia started using the Wagner Group for some illicit missions as control of oil fields. The 2018 failed operation against US troops and denial of the presence of the Russian military is a clear example of the Russian use of irregular units to achieve its political ends, lowering political risk (Hauer 2019). The presence of the Wagner Group in Eastern Ukraine and the way Crimea annexation occurred strengthen the claim that Russia is willing to resort to unconventional methods. "Blurring" the threshold between legal and illegal, between war and peace, Russia seeks to limit a possible overreaction from the international audience.

The present paper highlights that the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine tends to be more conventional than unconventional. In this respect, we will highlight that Russia resorted more to unconventional methods to initiate the conflict in 2014 and made it successful in Crimea but failed in Eastern Ukraine. Secondly, we will emphasize that in the ongoing operations in Ukraine the means and ways used by Russia and Ukraine to achieve their end states are more conventional.

1. The Trends in the Russia-Ukraine War

The post-Cold War period of a relatively warm relationship between the West and Russia ended when Russia suddenly annexed Crimea. Understanding Russia's way of conducting military operations explained by General Gerasimov as New Type War (NTW) was complicated in the West because of its emphasis on non-military rather than military tools and many scholars tried to identify it as something new (Gerasimov 2013). This might explain what Russia implements nowadays on the battle field adding its commitment toward a strong military standing force.

Chekinov and Bogdanov defined the Russian approach as "New Generation Warfare," suggesting a focus on more conventional war using long-range weapons to strike adversaries in the entire strategic deep. However, they abandoned the idea and switched toward a mixture of conventional and unconventional, emphasizing the use of "mislead or bribe opponents, to conduct sabotage operations, and to utilize



cunning and indirect actions to surprise adversaries,” which proved successful in Crimea (Chekinov and Bogdanov 2012). Bērziņš made the same observation in his report that Russia’s view of developing military capability will switch from direct destruction of the enemy toward indirect influence. He coined it as new generation warfare, emphasizing “the idea that the successful use of force results in legitimacy” (Bērziņš 2014).

However, NATO found that Russian New Generation Warfare has different techniques and tactics than asymmetric warfare due to the gradation on which it is managed. According to Palmer, “Russia seeks to accomplish politically significant results with, if feasible, no or only a limited use of force, while being prepared to strike militarily, with devastating effect at the operational level, if required” (D. Palmer 2015). On the other hand, Thomas explained it being an arrangement of strategic opportunity and need implemented in an appropriate situation interrelated to societal instability and vulnerabilities (Thomas 2016). Such construct allows them to reach political objectives by using mainly non-military means to avoid implementation of deadly force.

The new approach to conducting military operations took a distinctive form, and many argued that the 2013 Gerasimov article preempted the emergence of such change in Russia’s way of conducting wars. Russian military strategists provided a different perspective to comprehend Russia’s vision on modern warfare, which they referred to as a “new style of conflict”. Instead of the phrase used by Chekinov and Bogdanov, General Gerasimov used NTW to describe how their foe intended to wage future conflicts (Thomas 2016). Additionally, Thomas suggested that Gerasimov and other Russian military officials rejected the use of the term hybrid tactics in military affairs, claiming that this is a Western strategy for waging contemporary conflicts (Thomas 2016). Gerasimov argued for the non-military aspect of the war, indicating a ratio of 4:1 which speaks in favor of unconventional warfare (Gerasimov 2013).

Despite the numerous explanations of the Russian type of warfare, all have a standard feature and are focused on unconventional activities to shape the environment for victory. Russia’s seizure of Crimea reflects Sun Tzu’s insight that the “highest excellence” in the war was not in winning every battle but in subduing the enemy’s force (Tzu 2008). The same idea conveyed Bērziņš who considered that Russian non-military tools as the “psychological warfare, intimidation, bribery, and internet/media propaganda” overcame the resistance of Ukrainian military units in the Crimea peninsula, and allowed Russia to avoid the use of firepower (Bērziņš 2014). Such victory was possible due to several factors that Russia facilitated before the operation and such a perspective can face some countries from the Russian border as they are perceived as Russian zone of strategic interest.

Furthermore, Russia’s unconventional approach proved very successful in Crimea as it surprised a conventional, unprepared and less experienced adversary.



Its covert use of military power in support of its proxies in Donbas still highlighted its proneness toward unconventional methods. Using a column to transport the humanitarian aid in order to supply its units and separatist formations in Donbas emphasizes an excellent example of their approach toward war (Buel and Joselow 2014). Moreover, constant shelling across the border and the “loss of orientation and sudden appearance in Donbas” of airborne troops captured by Ukrainian forces sustain its denial of conflict involvement. The downing of the MH flight over Eastern Ukraine proves that Russia played unconventionally during the conflict. However, its results proved less successful in Donbas when converting toward traditional actions even though it achieved a temporary political goal – stopping NATO’s advance.

On the other hand, such a scenario applied in Eastern Ukraine before the full scale invasion had little success as the Ukrainian government could organize state resistance, forcing Russia toward a more conventional intervention that balanced the power. However, Russia denied its presence in the region, acting through local separatist movements and paramilitary organizations, trying to maintain the deniability of government intervention. Unconventional warfare, according to Joint Publication 3-05, constitutes the “Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area” (Staff 2014). Thus, despite its military might, Russia preferred to act covertly and smoothly to achieve its political goals rather than use the bulk of the army as it might consider them less developed and capable than their Western counterpart, however, never admitted it openly (Renz 2016). Moreover, its activities in Eastern Ukraine emphasized its tendency to act unconventionally as it proved harder for the Western adversary to react appropriately. Even if the West viewed the Donbas operation as a failure, Russia succeeded in preventing Ukraine from joining NATO and advancing towards the EU integration. The unrecognized secessionist territories from Eastern Ukraine (and others from the former Soviet space: Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia) are a perfect tool for Russian external policy in Eastern Europe, maintaining its influence in its neighborhood. These results, in addition to the complete control over Crimea, highlight that the adapted combination of conventional and unconventional methods of warfare and means may prove successful. However, the use of Battalion Tactical Groups (BTG), which proved very viable on the battlefield, still highlights the necessity of Mao’s view on the third stage of the protracted war – the war of position – to seize and retain the territory (Tse-Tung 1967). Although Russia’s way of war is prone to Clausewitz approach of massing military power toward an adversary, the initial attack on the Crimea and subsequent aggression on Eastern Ukraine highlight an incline toward Sun Tzu’s approach (Tzu 2008).



Moreover, we can sustain that Mao's approach could also succeed if Russia maintained its superiority over the information space of Ukraine. By doing so, it could "gain the hearts and minds" of the Russian-speaking population, which overwhelms the Ukrainian-speaking in South - Eastern regions, and realize the "Novorossiia" project as smoothly as they annexed Crimea. Russia encouraged separatists using its intelligence services and provocateurs even before 2014 attack and provided indirect support through third-party Russian organizations in terms of arms and funding to deny its intervention (Kofman, et al. 2017).

However, the switch toward conventional operation through proxies in Donbas and more support from regular units allowed Ukraine to take the initiative in the information space by portraying Russia as an invader. Moreover, Ukraine gained full support from the international community, which was absent during the Crimea annexation and immediately after it. Thus, Russia's unconventional actions lost its primacy as it integrated its proxies from Donbas into regular units that conducted conventional operations alongside Russian troops deployed in the region. Consequently, the 2022 full-scale invasion had no other choice than a conventional one as Putin sought the seizure of the entire Ukraine by rapidly using an overwhelming force as a modern implementation of Clausewitz concept. However, Ukraine's approach toward conventional operations adjusted, giving them an advantage over the operational battle space. Ukraine started to attack Russia's line of supply that could not sustain its massive bulk of forces. Such an example is Russia's 40-mile armored column bogged down on the march toward Kyiv (Ellyatt 2022). Ukraine's strategy sought to strike the weak points in the Russian military structure that enabled small Ukrainian forces to circumvent the power of a direct attack. Ukraine's approach revealed the experience of Napoleon's march on Moscow when Russian generals applied the same method: retreat and harass – attack the enemy strategy. Ukraine proved that an unconventional approach, although used by the conventional military, achieved its goal – stop advance and force the adversary to play on the defenders' condition. Moreover, Ukraine was able to reverse the situation in the battle space through an astute application of drone technology by inflicting many losses in manpower and equipment.

Thus, trying to employ conventional forces in the first phase of the conflict, Ukraine encountered an almost disastrous defeat coalesced with many casualties. Ukraine's army, trained and equipped in an old Soviet-style, could not resist Russia's bulk of experienced forces. Moreover, its limited combat-ready troops led by Russophone leadership could affect their initial effectiveness (Kofman, et al. 2017). Overwhelmed in the information space and having disrupted lines of communication, Ukraine's army needed help in coordinating its response in Crimea. To reveal the true face of Russian action in Donbass and to gain the time for preparation, Ukraine formatted its actions as operation combating terrorism. Highlighting the



internal character of the problem and with the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the lead, Ukraine could have shadowed Russia and kept its possible use of full military strength that bought it valuable time. While preparing the army and economy for a more conventional approach, Ukraine still used unconventional methods to fight the Russian threats. Partisan attacks behind the enemy lines and targeted killing of specific persons gave to Ukrainian actions an unconventional approach (Peter and Ivshina 2023).

2. More Conventional is Effective or Vice Versa?

As discussed previously, the first phase of Russian aggression in Ukraine proved more unconventional than conventional. Such an approach gave Russia a considerable advantage both on the international stage and internally. Moreover, it proved successful on the battlefield as it could achieve its goals with the minimum use of military force. Oppositely, Ukraine's conventional approach proved ineffective as it could not cope with the increasing threat in Donbas, as Russia displayed the tendency to intervene with traditional forces when necessary to prevent the defeat of its proxies (Menkiszak, Sadowski and Żochowski 2014). Its pure conventional intervention encountered many casualties and loss of territory, as seen after the Ilovaik and Debal'tseve battles (Menkiszak, Sadowski and Żochowski 2014) as it sought "a violent struggle for domination between nation-states or coalitions and alliances of nation-states. It typically involves force-on-force military operations in which adversaries employ a variety of conventional forces and special operations forces (SOF) against each other in all physical domains" (Staff, JP-1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States 2017). Their inability to combat Russian BTG's which relied mainly on great fight power resulted in "extensive restructuring, reform, and modernization efforts" in the Ukrainian army (Akimenko 2018). Such improvements reduced separatist efficiency to a buffer and screening force that separated Russian regulars from Ukrainian troops (Holcomb 2017).

After 2015, Ukraine reformed its Armed Forces denying Russia's ability to use unconventional methods on Ukraine's controlled territory. Ukraine increased its irregular activities on lost parts of its territory, allowing it to shape the future environment. Russia's emphasis on conventional forces was ineffective because they underestimated Ukraine's capacity for resistance. Moreover, Ukraine's primacy over the information space gave priority and resolve toward gaining Western support to Russia's detriment. Russia continued to focus on conventional activities, decreasing the unconventional, which resulted in a stalemate after September 2022.

Russia resumed its aggression against Ukraine based on its conventional forces by simply looking to seize the country and force regime change. Bettina Renz explains such behavior from the point that nations perceive powerful traditional forces as an attribute of a strong state that gives them more credibility on the international stage



(Renz 2016). Thus, Russia's resort toward more conventional than unconventional stands for its quest for international recognition as a great power but not from the point of just retaining control over Ukraine (Neumann 2008). Moreover, Russia needed to prove that its military returned to its Cold War period greatness and, as in Georgia, it could conduct full-scale expeditionary operations.

However, as in Syria, in Ukraine, its conventional forces acted alongside mercenaries. Denied in the beginning, it proved necessary as conventional forces encountered defeats on the battlefield. Moreover, "Kadirovtssev" could be perceived as an application of unconventional methods to inflict stress on Ukrainian soldiers. Furthermore, the recent statement of the Ukrainian president that Russia seeks to attack Moldova covertly and overthrow the legitimate government stands for Russia's return toward unconventional methods due to the unsuccessful operation in Ukraine (Reynolds 2022). One of the goals sought to be achieved through the Ukraine campaign was to create a land corridor to Transnistria, where Russia has deployed a contingent as peacekeeping forces and the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), currently guarding the Cobasna ammunition depot (Solovyov 2022). Conversely, the Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies assessment that Russia focuses on "conduct strikes on targets throughout its adversary's operational depth with long-range precision fires" still emphasizes the conventional overmatch of its operations (Zabrodskyi, et al. 2022). Thus, in spite of using mercenaries and subversive actions across Ukraine it still maintains a low level of unconventional activities.

On the other hand, during the 2022 conflict, Russia continuously emphasized the imminent use of nuclear power as a deterrent against Western involvement and support to Ukraine. Although it was a prerequisite of the Russian military standpoint during and after the Cold War, it became more prominent during the Ukraine aggression. Unlike the initial attack in February 2022, Ukraine also focuses on more conventional actions to increase its military capability to resume its counter-offensive operation. Its goal was to regain territorial control over the lost areas, and such success could be acquired through Mao's war of position, while maintaining strikes on enemy supply lines. The continuous military and economic support boosted Ukraine's capabilities, which allowed it to stabilize the front and create preconditions for a counter-offensive, in summer 2023. Therefore, all these activities highlight a more conventional effort of war from both sides to control the territory.

Conclusion

The 21st century started with a new threat for international security emphasized by the 9/11 attack on the US. The afterward wars against Iraq and Afghanistan brought to light an increased emergence of unconventional wars. However, Russia continued to build its conventional forces but focused more on an unconventional approach



toward its Global Power Competition with the West, avoiding an overreaction from US/NATO side. Thus, the 2008 attack on Georgia highlighted its commitment to combining conventional and unconventional methods to achieve its political goals. Its successful implementation against Georgia constituted the premises for 2014 Crimea annexation and aggression against Ukraine in Donbas. Ukraine crises emphasized a more unconventional approach toward war, thus maintaining a clear presence of military power to boost its quest to reassert its status as a great power. Russia's commitment to unconventional more than conventional proved successful as it prevented a coherent response from the Western side.

However, the focus on unconventional methods could not bring the necessary result, as it did not stop Ukraine from progressing to Western integration. Consequently, a more robust response under conventional attack was considered by the Russian leadership. Although Russian military strength overmatched Ukrainian, it could not succeed in achieving its objectives. Russia's unsuccessful results owe to the unconventional approach taken by Ukraine. Ukraine chose to attack Russia's strategy by cutting its overstretched lines of communication and "shaping" international and domestic information space. Moreover, Ukraine's effort to gain the international community's support isolated Russia and burdened its economy.

To sum up, the Russia-Ukraine war cannot be described as purely conventional or unconventional, as both actors implemented extensive methods to reach their objectives. Therefore, it must be seen as a typical confrontation between two regional powers with the application of combinations of conventional and unconventional methods according to operational and strategic needs. It cannot be entirely depicted as conventional or unconventional, as different stages of the conflict highlight more or less such features.

Despite Russian inclination to develop a conventional military force and continuous use of military to threaten its neighbors for the near future it will tend to use more unconventional methods as its capabilities are degraded in the current war in Ukraine. Having a damaged economy and being politically isolated, Russia will not be able to restore its depleted military force and will try to cover the gaps with its nuclear umbrella. Moreover, China's rise as global power tends to conduct dialogue with Russia from a position of strength which was not before a norm. Such situation can raise new risks and challenges for the regional and international security that might conduct to new escalations in Central Asia and Eastern Europe normally seen as Russia's particular zone of strategic interest.

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