



U.S. ARMY



Project 1704

**A U.S. Army War College
Analysis of Russian Strategy
in Eastern Europe, an
Appropriate U.S. Response,
and the Implications for U.S.
Landpower**

Executive Summary of Project 1704: A U.S. Army
War College Analysis of Russian Strategy in Eastern
Europe and its implications on American Landpower

The United States Army War College

The United States Army War College educates and develops leaders for service at the strategic level while advancing knowledge in the global application of Landpower. The purpose of the United States Army War College is to produce graduates who are skilled critical thinkers and complex problem solvers. Concurrently, it is our duty to the U.S. Army to also act as a “think factory” for commanders and civilian leaders at the strategic level worldwide and routinely engage in discourse and debate concerning the role of ground forces in achieving national security objectives.

Project 1704 and is produced under the purview of the United States Army War College to foster dialogue of topics with strategic ramifications. This study drew upon the expertise of hand selected U.S. Army War College faculty and students from across the services, departments, agencies and from eight nations to provide a thought-provoking and relevant discourse of a topic of timely relevance; the reemergence of Russian strategic landpower.

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US Army War College Contributors and Authors to “Project 1704”

Project leader: COL Douglas Mastriano, PhD, US Army War College Faculty
Editor: Lt Col Derek O’Malley, USAF

Chapter 1: The Russian Strategic Environment

Dr. Craig Nation, US Army War College Faculty
Dr. Marybeth Ulrich, US Army War College Faculty
COL Gregory Anderson, US Army
COL Gert-Jan Kooij, Royal Netherlands Army
LTC Karen Briggman, US Army
LTC Joseph Hilbert, US Army
Lt Col Christopher Lay, USAF
Dr. James McNaughton, Center of Military History

Chapter 2: The Russian Application of Strategic Landpower

COL Robert Hamilton, PhD, US Army War College Faculty
COL R. Patrick Huston, US Army
COL Ihor Yeriomchenkov, Ukrainian Army
LTC Roman Kavtaradze, Georgian Army
LTC Vahur Murulaid, Estonian Army
Lt Col Thomas Marble, USMC
LTC Joe Hilbert, US Army
Mr. Stewart Eales, Department of State

Chapter 3: Assessment of Russian Strategic Landpower

COL Douglas Mastriano, PhD, US Army War College Faculty
COL Greg Anderson, US Army
COL Heath Niemi, US Army
COL Ted Middleton, Canadian Army
COL Kenneth Pedersen, Denmark
LTC Arturas Jasinskas, Lithuanian Army
LTC Anthony “Chuck” Rush, US Army
Mr. Richard Hoehne, Defense Intelligence Agency

Chapter 4: Recommendations to counter the emerging Russian approach

COL Douglas Mastriano, PhD, US Army War College Faculty
COL Gert-Jan Kooij, Royal Netherlands Army
COL David Knych, US Army
COL Christopher Lackovic
LTC Karen Briggman, US Army
LTC Warren Wells, US Army
Lt Col Christopher Lay, USAF
Lt Col Derek O’Malley, USAF
Dr. James McNaughton, Center of Military History

The Return of the Bear?

Russian strategic landpower as an emergent threat to European stability
A Summary of a US Army War College Study titled "Project 1704"

By COL Douglas Mastriano, Lt Col Derek O'Malley and US Army War College "Project 1704" team

In the summer of 2014, Russia forcibly annexed Crimea from Ukraine and then actively supported ethnic Russian separatists in an on-going irredentist bid in Eastern Ukraine. This aggressive policy threatens to challenge NATO and the United States in its support of Ukraine and other nations of Eastern Europe. From this changing strategic environment, three central questions emerge: (1) What is the Russian strategy in their periphery? (2) What is the appropriate U.S. response? (3) What are the implications for U.S. landpower?

The Russian Strategic Environment

Vladimir Putin's grand strategy relies on a complex mix of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic factors to preserve and expand Russian global power. Putin's strategy hinges on maintaining internal legitimacy, advancing a narrative of Russian greatness, manipulating nationalism, and protecting sources of revenue. He seizes opportunities to improve his position by controlling the media and the wealth of the elite class. Additionally, he maintains government control of large sectors of the Russian economy and industry, while engaging in energy politics abroad to advance its national interests. Finally, Putin is determined to keep former Soviet bloc countries oriented politically and economically toward Russia. In this, he espouses distinctly anti-Western rhetoric, casting NATO and the United States as Russian adversaries.

Putin wields substantial control over the entire Russian system, and he will not willingly give up power. His governing style is called "competitive authoritarianism," which is a blend of old Soviet style leadership laced with hints of democracy. Yet, in this, he must maintain popular support, energy revenues, a strong military, and an elite that will not challenge his position. Adding to his woes, Putin's aggressive tone against the West gives him less and less room to maneuver diplomatically. Yet, he will continue to propagate a nationalist agenda, while bashing the West and blaming America for Russia's hardships. It seems, that at least domestically, his gambit is working. In the wake of the crises in Crimea and the Ukraine, Putin's popularity has reached impressive heights.

Yet, not all is going well for him as there are dark economic predictions on the horizon for Russia. Western sanctions indeed have taken a toll, but they are only partly responsible for the economic crisis Putin now faces. Other factors include Russia's energy-dependent market, a "corrupt-and-control" economy based on patronage and fraud, the collapse of the ruble, and declining oil prices. To compound matters for Moscow is the inclination of some European customers, not wanting to be subject to potential economic blackmail, and thereby seek non-Russian alternatives to their energy needs.

Russian Landpower

The 2008 invasion of Georgia and the ongoing intervention in Ukraine demonstrates Russia's increasing reliance on the military and security services as instruments of its grand strategy. The application of the Russian military instrument of power has taken various forms over recent history. For instance, the Russian operation in Georgia was largely conventional. The 2014 Russian operation in Crimea diverged from the strictly conventional approach by manipulating a sympathetic population and using a robust security infrastructure from the Sochi Olympics to capture the region. Finally, with the subsequent unrest eastern Ukraine, Moscow inspired and led a separatist movement hidden behind a cloak of ambiguity, backed by the powerful capabilities of its army.

Despite the differences, these operations, exhibit common features of Russia's use of military force. First, Russia depends heavily—almost exclusively—on landpower to achieve its strategic military objectives in its near abroad. This landpower-centric approach has been part of a broader Russian strategy to roll back the expansion of Western influence (especially NATO and the EU) in the former Soviet republics. Second, Russia has enabled its ground forces to conduct hybrid, irregular warfare as the primary means of warfare against its smaller neighbors. Additionally, it has shifted to a less centralized military structure, relying on special operations forces and other unconventional units to achieve its strategic ends. Finally, information operations (IO) and cyber capabilities have emerged as key components of Russian military operations. IO and cyber operations were used independently against Estonia in 2007. In contrast, they were integrated as key elements of a coordinated military campaign more recently in both Georgia and Ukraine.

Russia's military reforms started shortly before the war with Georgia and accelerated after the conflict exposed critical shortcomings in a number of areas. Ongoing reform and modernization progress are directed at developing a capability to intervene quickly and decisively in the region. To do this, it is concentrating resources on a small number of elite units, primarily airborne and special operations forces that make up the core of its emerging Rapid Reaction Force.

From Putin's perspective, the West is acting provocatively by turning Russia's neighbors into potential adversaries. He blames prodemocracy movements on the United States, and refuses to believe that a people would not want to be under the influence or control of the Kremlin. In this, the propensity of Russia to see itself as besieged by the West will, in the words of Olga Oliker of RAND, make it "difficult to reassure and easy to escalate with."

The Emerging Russian Operational Approach

Moscow uses deception and disinformation to prevent a quick response from the West. Such was the case in Crimea, where, despite evidence to the contrary, Putin denied that the "little green men" were his soldiers until after he had completed annexation of the region. By doing this, Putin operated inside the decision-making cycle of NATO and

thus retained the strategic initiative. Additionally, this approach exploits fissures between NATO and the E.U. When Putin believes that employing conventional forces is too risky, he resorts to using unconventional forces, scaled and adapted to the strategic environment. This “strategy of ambiguity” is being applied with effect in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Putin’s “strategy of ambiguity” is comprised of seven components:

1. Consolidate political power and use nationalism to maintain domestic support. At the core of the strategy of ambiguity is the maintenance of Putin’s powerbase and his need for popular support. Putin secures his base by casting the West as the enemy of Russia and thus fuels the engine of nationalism.
2. Capitalize on long-term IO campaign. The tools of the IO campaign include high-quality Russian television, radio programming, hockey clubs, youth camps, and the internet. They are designed to export Moscow’s strategic messaging across Europe, specifically targeting the Russian diaspora.
3. Use subversive activity to create instability in ethnic Russian areas. With a continuous IO campaign brewing in the background, the groundwork is laid to manipulate disgruntled ethnic Russians in any region Putin chooses. As in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, these movements start as peaceful protests, but ultimately lead to taking over government buildings and inciting armed insurrections. Once engaged in low-level combat, the Russian rebels proclaim their right to self-determination and eventually appeal to Moscow for aid. However convenient, the Kremlin does not need popular support in the Russian diaspora to achieve its strategic ends. Should the local populace in a contested region not support an uprising, Moscow can simply export a separatist movement from Russia to provide the pretext for an intervention.
4. Move a large conventional force along the borders to dissuade action against the subversives. As in eastern Ukraine, Moscow responded to the instability by deploying a large conventional force along the border under the guise of aiding refugees and containing unrest. The real reason, however, was to intimidate Ukraine, which hesitated out of fear of provoking a response from Moscow.
5. Leverage ambiguity to maintain strategic flexibility. Deception and disinformation are the key ingredients of the Russian approach, and Putin uses these tools to sow ambiguity and thus obscure his strategy. As a result, Putin remains a step ahead of NATO’s decision-making process, and quickly adapts his actions to keep the Alliance off balance.
6. Violate international borders and support the pro-Russian insurgents. As the Ukrainian Army launched its offensive to subdue the rebels in eastern Ukraine, the Russian Army was poised to provide support to their comrades. These “volunteer” soldiers provided armor, artillery, and air defense assets that blunted Ukrainian

offensive action. Meanwhile, the Kremlin equivocated about its intentions and denied involvement in the conflict. Had there been a determined international response against Moscow, Putin could have withdrawn support from the separatists, denied complicity in the violence, and waited for a more opportune time to try again.

7. Seize an area to achieve a limited strategic end. When the security of a targeted region collapses, the international response is mired in debate, and a humanitarian crisis ensues, the conditions are set for Russian forces to intervene. Despite characterizing the intervention as a temporary salve to an unacceptable human crisis, Putin would deploy forces for as long as needed to achieve a security environment favorable to Moscow. With such an approach, Russia can attain limited strategic objectives with minimal risk. The ultimate goal of this methodology would be, in the long term, to discredit NATO and thereby undermine the security of the Baltics. In the short to midterm, such an approach could easily be used against Moldova or other area outside of NATO to expand Russian influence.

The challenge facing the United States and NATO is how to respond quickly to ambiguous and nontraditional military threats emanating from Russia. Although the strategy of ambiguity has proven effective in Ukraine, it is vulnerable to political resolve and military deterrence. The United States and NATO should therefore craft a clear policy and implement an unambiguous strategy to deter further Russian aggression in Europe.

Analysis and Recommendations

U.S. policy aims should consist of: (1) a strong NATO alliance as the backbone of European security (i.e. no further talk of a “European Army”); (2) Russian compliance with international norms that recognizes and respects international borders; (3) recognition by regional powers (including Russia) of the right to political self-determination in Ukraine and elsewhere; (4) A clear, unambiguous NATO policy to deter Russian aggression in Eastern Europe.

There is a need for a strong NATO to ensure a safe and stable Europe. A resilient NATO bolsters the confidence of member states while moderating the behavior of would-be aggressors. Non-NATO members likewise benefit from these effects, albeit to a lesser degree. The path to forging a strong NATO must include significant activities in the land domain. Given the wide range of U.S options, capabilities, resources, and relationships necessary to bolster European security, the new U.S. Army Operating Concept is well-suited for this strategic challenge. While military forces in all domains will play a role, landpower will be a decisive component of the combined joint force for this long-term strategic challenge.

Countering Russian advantages in geography, forces, and ethnic-based nationalism requires a balanced and multi-faceted approach to deny Moscow the strategic initiative.

There are ten key objectives U.S. and NATO leaders should pursue to counter the Russia advantages that drive its hybrid operational approach:

1. Cultivate increased NATO commitment and resolve.
2. Build and maintain a credible and scalable deterrent force forward in Eastern Europe.
3. Develop effective intelligence capabilities across the region.
4. Develop focused information operations and cyber capabilities.
5. Develop capabilities and set conditions to counter Russian special operations forces and their development of proxies.
6. Buttress operational security, counterintelligence, and communications security capabilities in potential flashpoints.
7. Counter anti-Western rhetoric in the near abroad.
8. Influence Russia's centrally controlled decision-making process.
9. Decrease energy dependence on Russia to mitigate Russia's political, economic, and informational leverage against NATO countries.
10. Maintain the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

Moscow seeks to assert authority over its near abroad (the region) while discrediting NATO. The latter goal is accomplished if Article V is not triggered in the face of "local," Moscow inspired unrest. The way to counter such provocation is to signal to Moscow that stirring trouble in any part of the Baltics—Narva, Riga, eastern Lithuania, or elsewhere—will trigger Article V. Unfortunately, rapid decision-making is not a strong suit of the 28-member alliance, especially given Russia's ability to apply economic pressure and other disincentives to action. Yet, NATO is the best hope for European security. The challenge is to provide a capable and credible forward deterrence that allows NATO to have time and space for deliberations.

The clearest way to undermine Putin's strategy of ambiguity and to deny him the advantage of time and space is to station NATO (especially U.S.) forces in the Baltic countries. This should be a credible deterrent force that would be committed to combat in the event of Russian intervention or attack, whether conventional or unconventional. Such a forward deployment would underscore NATO's resolve, demonstrate physical commitment, and deprive Moscow of the strategic initiative. Such a robust strategy would deprive Putin of the strategic initiative regarding the most vulnerable NATO members, while deterring Moscow from aggression. In this regard, "a single U.S. infantry company in Estonia would have a greater deterrent effect than a heavy brigade

stationed in Germany.” With this simple stroke, Putin’s advantage in time, geography as well as his advantage with rapid decision making is muted. The strategic calculus changes from, “if Narva (or other Baltic area) is worth New York,” to, “is Narva worth Moscow.” Simply put, Russian adventurism in the Baltics would be too risky.

The burden of paying for this forward presence need not be borne alone by the United States. The cost can be mitigated by requiring the host nations to provide adequate infrastructure and logistic support. Additionally, NATO and the European Union should be requested to provide financial support as well, since they are the beneficiaries of a forward American presence. NATO and the EU should also offset the costs of logistics, transportation, etc to further reduce the cost of a forward American presence. Finally, NATO nations should commit to providing military enablers to round out this American forward force. This will not only reduce the expense for the American taxpayer but also make this force truly multinational. In this way, the tax payer, whether in New York, or Berlin, will know that all of NATO is doing its part in providing for a mutual defense. However, the United States must take the lead. This will set the conditions for other NATO nations to take an increased portion of the burden, and over a short period, this forward force will be truly a multinational NATO element.

Vladimir Putin’s approach to Europe and the United States is to divide and conquer. He craftily leverages economic incentives and energy politics to weaken the resolve of NATO and EU member states. In this, Moscow succeeds when, for the sake of economic concerns, bilateral agreements are signed between Russia and any given European nation. With this in mind, the ongoing discussion of creating a “European Army” would be a decisive strategic victory for the Kremlin should it ever come to fruition. Such a force would weaken NATO and ultimately fracture the friendship and cooperation between Europe and North America. Why, after nearly seventy years of peace and stability, would leaders either in Europe or North America create a force structure that would benefit Moscow? A European Army, despite its merits otherwise, would not only draw off NATO’s already limited assets, resources and capabilities, but would set the conditions for a rival North American / European military force. Nothing could be better for the Kremlin than such an outcome or worse for NATO as an Alliance.

Despite its flaws, NATO is the most successful alliance in history. It weathered the dangers of the Cold War, provided Western Europe the longest period of peace that it has enjoyed since the Dark Ages, kept an expansionist Soviet Union at bay, survived the post-Cold War tribulations of the Balkans (despite predictions of its demise otherwise) and proved both adaptable and committed in the complex post 9/11 world. In the midst of this success, it is folly to entertain any discourse on setting the conditions for the Alliance’s end by ripping from it a “European Army.”

Putin’s tactics of manipulating the Russian populations of neighboring nations to stir instability and thereby attain limited strategic objectives is a threat to the NATO Alliance and European security. Putin’s actions in Georgia, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine demonstrate that he is willing to break international law to advance his regional ambitions. The United States has an opportunity to implement concerted measures to avert future Russian trouble in the Baltics. The message to the Kremlin must be that

any cross border activity will categorically result in a confrontation with the United States, period. Whether it is Narva, Tallinn, Vilnius or Riga, the Kremlin must understand that meddling with the Baltic's Russian populations is not an option and these nations are off limits to any type of Moscow inspired destabilization. Any such meddling will be met quickly by determined force.

What of the region's large minority populations? The significance of fully assimilating the ethnic Russian populations is an important consideration for the Baltics. Steps must be taken to ensure that the ethnic Russians feel a part of society and enjoy economic prosperity. However, even if the Baltic countries fully integrate their ethnic Russian populations, there is still a risk. This will reduce the threat of Kremlin meddling, but it will not eliminate it. For instance, the turmoil in Eastern Ukraine was inspired and led by Russian Special Forces and intelligence operatives. If there is not sufficient popular backing locally, Moscow will simply export it, in the form of professional military forces attired in civilian clothes. Yet, forward basing of American conventional forces, bolstered by willing NATO troops and SOF changes the strategic calculus and makes such an act too risky for Moscow no matter how ambiguous their approach.

The options for countering Moscow's territorial aggression against Ukraine are far more complex. Putin views this nation, and Belarus, as squarely in his zone of control and influence. Any moves away from the Russian sphere of influence (such as gravitating toward the EU or NATO) are viewed as a direct threat to Moscow's vital interests. Yet, NATO and the EU's prevarications on how to deal with Putin's ongoing war against Ukraine serve to strengthen his position and only embolden him, not unlike the effect of the 1930s appeasement of Hitler. NATO should train, arm and equip the Ukrainian Army to defend its territory from Russian aggression in addition to the other indirect approaches to strengthen Kiev. Vladimir Putin must understand that North America and Europe will not tolerate his his invasions of neighboring countries.

For example, in Georgia, the Russian attack of 2008 derailed all attempts for this nation to seek integration into NATO and the EU. A plan should be developed by NATO to get Georgia back on its membership plan. Until this is decided, Moscow retains the strategic initiative with the message that its use of military force was successful in imposing its will on neighboring states.

There are no easy solutions to the challenge that Moscow poses to the stability of Europe. The nearly seventy years of peace that most of Europe has enjoyed is unprecedented in its history. This stable environment, which was largely provided by the United States, is taken for granted by our European Allies. Clearly they must do more to maintain this peace and security. Yet, the United States should not put this peace at risk by reducing its presence in Europe. The surest way to deter aggression directed against the Baltics is a viable American deterrence force forward deployed in these countries. With this, there will be clarity in the halls of the Kremlin, and in the mind of Vladimir Putin, of the resolve of the United States to ensure a Europe whole and free. Although maintaining such a credible force is costly, the risks of not honoring that commitment are far greater.

