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WAR IN PEACETIME

AMBIGUOUS WARFARE AND THE RESURGENCE OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY

TWO ESSAYS by Christopher Donnelly

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Above. President Putin (centre), accompanied by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoygu (left) attends military exercises at Kirillovsky firing ground, near St Petersburg, 2014. *Reuters.*

Front cover. 'Digging in' – at the time of the armed incursions into Ukraine territory and annexation of the Crimea, 2014 . *Daily Telegraph.*



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By Chris Donnelly

Series Editor

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**FOREWORD BY
RODDY LIVINGSTON
CHAIRMAN COMEC**

These complementary essays on challenges facing the West were enthusiastically received at the COMEC Defence Conference 2016 'Britain's Future Airpower', and continue to be relevant today.

Christopher Donnelly contends that classic war was accompanied by profound structural change not seen in peacetime. The new reality, however, is of continual conflict which, because of its different nature, our institutions have not recognized as a driver of necessary change; they have been unresponsive to the need for wartime mentality to manage this instability. A renewed emphasis on education, leadership, risk, effectiveness and long-term thinking is required to deal with our new competitors, or change will overtake our ability to adapt and survive.

We are introduced to 'Hypercompetition' as the underlying paradigm of conflict today and, as to be expected from a Russian expert, to the rise of new complex alternatives to war and power to challenge the West in the 'Hot Peace' after the collapse of the USSR. There are considerable implications for the adaptability of our intelligence and armed forces as the Russian military becomes a policy weapon once more.

We have much to learn from this expert analysis of the nature of the present conflict as we face the challenges of training and developing the officers of tomorrow.

Roddy Livingston

ONE. WAR IN PEACETIME

Coping with today's rapidly changing world

'War.... puts nations to the test. Just as mummies fall to pieces the moment they are exposed to the air, so war pronounces its sentence of death on those social institutions which have become ossified.'

It is over 150 years since Karl Marx wrote these prescient words. Much of his thinking has been discredited since then, but his understanding of the revolutionising impact of war on society has been proved correct. His understanding was based on the appreciation that the most important feature of war, particularly large-scale and protracted war, was that it was usually accompanied by much more rapid and profound social, economic and technological change than was the case in peacetime. It was this drastic, revolutionising change which overtook the ability of institutions to adapt and stay fit for purpose, and brought about their collapse.

If war is change, then to all intents and purposes the world is at war, because we are living through a period of change more widespread, rapid and profound than we have ever experienced outside a world war. Moreover, this change has been sustained longer than any world war of the last two centuries, and it is still increasing. But because this is not a shooting war like 1939-45, we in Western countries have not adopted the paradigmatic 'wartime mentality', *essential* if we are to cope with the instability which drastic change inevitably brings. We are now trying to cope in a wartime situation but with a peacetime mentality, peacetime institutions and peacetime procedures shaped by the last seventy years of living in a stable, secure, rules-based environment. We have quite naturally selected our leaders – politicians, corporate CEOs and boards, even our generals - for their abilities to shine in a peacetime environment. As a result, we are now in trouble.

This is not a unique situation, but it is new to many holding office today. It is best understood through a military example. If we think back to 1939 and study the British battalion and divisional commanders who were in command of their units and formations on the day war started for the UK on 3rd September, only a small fraction of these individuals were still in command 3 months later. This was

because the skills, abilities, attitude, mentality, behaviour we need from an officer in peacetime are radically different from those we need in war. When the war ended, many officers who had had wonderful military careers could not cope with peacetime conditions and became ineffectual, misfits whose careers failed because their wartime skills did not suit peacetime.

This, I would argue, is exactly analogous to the situation in which Western societies find themselves today. The speed of global change has outpaced all our national and international institutions. They are now becoming obsolescent. They have been unable to react and adapt fast enough to remain fit for purpose. There is an excellent example in the English education system, which knows how many IT specialists are needed nationally but does not produce them, instead producing 30,000 graduates in media studies a year for only 500 jobs. Problems like this are often recognised, yet nobody does anything to change things, chiefly because the system resists change due to inbuilt vested interests and inertia. It seems just too much effort and, with peacetime mentalities, it just does not matter enough.

This inability to recognise the problem we have and acknowledge its cause, i.e. our inability to adapt our institutions because they have become so strong and inflexible, is paralysing our social, economic and political system. It applies in government even more than it applies in the corporate boardroom. It even applies in armies as we prepare to fight the last war, and fail, and fail again. Professor Leon Megginson, interpreting Darwin in societal terms (and in a quotation often attributed to Darwin himself), put it most succinctly, 'It is not the strongest of the species that survives... It is the one that is most adaptable to change'.

Now, we should be learning from our failures, but we are not, because today we only record lessons, we do not learn from them and amend our procedures and our institutions as we should. Institutional resistance to change is just too strong; political correctness too widely enforced; 'Performance Management', with its corrosive ideology of self over team spirit, is just too entrenched.

So if we consider what qualities and characteristics we need in those whom we select for national leadership today, in a period of rapid and profound change, in all sorts of institutions – government departments, big companies, the NHS and military – the conclusion is that we need now to look for people who have

abilities that suit a wartime environment¹ rather than a peacetime one. In each case, the qualities we need are not a straight choice between clear alternatives, not exclusively one thing or the other. Rather, think of a cursor on a line between two related qualities, and moving the cursor along the line so that it is closer to the wartime position than to the peacetime.

The first quality requires a change in the balance between training and education. In peacetime, we can maximise on training, because we have slow development. In a period of slow change, experience is our best help. So we ask for proof of everything. Evidence-based policy is what we think we need. Best practice is revered. All these have a value, of course, but all are based *only* on the study of the past. At a time of slow change this can be sufficient. But at a time of rapid change, is like driving down the M6 and steering by only looking in the rear view mirror.

Today, we need to move the cursor along the line away from training, towards education. Training is still necessary, but education becomes proportionately much more important than before. Education differs from training in that it prepares people by enabling them to distil principles to guide their actions, so that they can use an understanding of things to deal with the unexpected. That is exactly what war-time rates of change will bring - the unexpected, the unthinkable, the unpalatable. In periods of rapid change we will be faced with the unpredictable. It will surprise us.

The second quality concerns management. In times of slow change we can *manage* everything. We can give in to the desire to *control* everything. But at times of rapid change, we cannot do that. We need to move the cursor along the line away from management towards leadership. Of course, we will always need management. But today the meaning most organisations and businesses give to management in reality is 'administration'. To deal with a situation of rapid change we need leadership. *Leadership* understands that in a period of tumultuous change you cannot *control*, you have to *command*. To command means to trust, to delegate

¹ A good example is Vladimir Putin himself. With his KGB background and exposure to the corrupting influence of money in East Germany (where he was serving in 1989), combined with his cleverness, ruthlessness and ambition, he rose to the top during the turmoil, vicious free-for-all and extreme violence that characterised Russia in the 1990s. This process of natural selection rewarded his 'wartime' mentality – his ability to deal with complexity, instability and uncertainty. Compare his ability to achieve his policy objectives in today's turbulent international system with that of many Western leaders, and his willingness to use all forms of power in pursuit of his aims. Putin needs a 'wartime' environment if he is to thrive. He has not hesitated to create such an environment when it suits him.

and to generate confidence, because there is never time to monitor and check up on everything.

The third quality is risk. In peacetime we become risk-averse. Everything has to be failsafe. But in times of war or in times of rapid change, we need a system that encourages us to take risk; that allows us to make mistakes and learn from them. We have to create an environment for staff where it is safe to fail and try again. This means we must move the cursor along the line away from 'error and trial' towards 'trial and error'.

The fourth quality is effectiveness. Peacetime forces us to be *efficient*. It forces us to plan long term, to tie everything up for a long time so we have no reserves. But in wartime, that leads to disaster, because it means we are no longer flexible and cannot respond to a surprise or when things take a bad turn. It is the same in business and government during today's rapid change. Think of investments tied up long term. Think of just-in-time-delivery, which gives supermarkets and filling stations only 2 days' reserves. No flexibility can result in failure.

In wartime, or at a time of rapid change, we must have a clearly articulated, long term vision and clear objectives. Without that, short term thinking can lead us astray. 'Tactics without strategy is just the noise before defeat', to quote Sun Tzu. But guided by that strategic understanding, we have to be able to think and act very short term indeed. For that we have to create a big slush fund of people, time and money, so we can adapt quickly and react quickly, so we are not so vulnerable to disruption. With our short term flexibility coupled with long term vision and a clear view of the goal we can still keep going in the right direction, even if we have to zig-zag. Strategy is not having a big, detailed plan. Above all, strategy is being able to adapt and react, to take advantage of a situation.

All the foregoing means that institutions in wartime or in periods of rapid change *must* operate differently from how they do in peace time if they are to survive or flourish. The hierarchical structure of an organisation in peacetime is very different from in wartime. In war, you look for the people who can do things best, whatever their age or rank, and put them in there to do it. Then you listen to what they say. Stupid is the colonel who doesn't listen to his sergeant when the sergeant says 'boss..... things are going wrong'.

This is not necessarily a problem of too many 'yes men', those who fail to challenge the boss. It may well be an organisation in which younger staff have not been able to adapt in the way their leaders can and learn to think differently. These people will not say yes – quite the opposite; they will oppose the innovator and stop them doing the drastic, necessary thing, saying instead: 'No, we think you should go the old way. We don't think you should change so quickly'. This is a question of understanding people's ability to take risk, to be imaginative, to be creative, to turn old tools to new tasks.

The institutions of the West have been slow to react to this new reality. Not so many of the West's competitors. Countries in what we condescendingly call the developing world; countries like Russia and China; sub-state actors like Al Qaeda or Islamic State; all have learned more rapidly than we have how to cope with today's instability, complexity and rapid change. They are presenting us now not with a crisis, which will pass, but with a strategic challenge, which we are not matching up to because we are trying to deal with it tactically.

These countries and organisations want to set up their own alternative world system to rival ours. We are today in a constant, existential competition with these and all other actors in the global ecosystem, be they nation states, sub-state groups or big corporations. Our success in this competition will only be guaranteed if we learn to cope with change as they have. Change is war.

To conclude with another unpopular Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, 'You may not be interested in this war, but this war is interested in you'. This leads me on to my second Essay, which is much, much more than just a case study.

TWO. AMBIGUOUS WARFARE AND THE RESURGENCE OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY

Change in the global security environment and the evolution of 'Ambiguous Warfare'²

To understand anything about security in today's world I believe we need to revisit our knowledge and understanding of the sweep of history.

In the 19th and 20th Centuries we can see that there was a clear paradigm of *War and Peace*. We found

- A clear distinction existed in people's minds between the two, peace was the norm, war the aberration
- National and international institutions were built to meet distinct and separate internal and external threats
- Institutions grew strong, life could be complicated, but was largely predictable, and a fair degree of control was possible
- War was global, or local and contained
- There was stability and low rates of social change in peacetime; instability and rapid change occurred only in wartime
- The West controls most of the world's wealth and power.

The 21st Century paradigm is one of *Cold War to Hot Peace*. We can see that

- Internal and external threats are inextricably interlinked
- Wars, manmade catastrophes and natural disasters all create ungoverned space, which is filled by instability
- Local conflicts and instabilities have global impact – trouble is exported
- Tactical actions can have strategic effect

² For 'Ambiguous Warfare' and the modern-day composite noun 'Hypercompetition' are capitalized.

- Globalisation brings wartime rates of change to populations with a peacetime mentality
- Constant uncertainty is the norm
- Institutions cannot cope as everything is complex and cannot be predicted or controlled
- The focus of global wealth and power is moving to the East, see the map below .



More people live inside this circle than outside.

The speed and depth of global change has thus overtaken national and international institutions' ability to react and adapt. They too often prove unfit for purpose.

The resulting governance problems are felt everywhere, including in advanced democracies – for example the credit collapse, failure of policing in the UK, crisis of confidence in the political system, the Scottish referendum, and now Brexit, and the Trump phenomenon. Such problems are most acute in countries with ineffectual, brittle governments for whatever reason – tradition, ideology, corruption, technical or political incompetence – there being little or no responsiveness to their peoples' aspirations. We have seen the result, sudden governmental collapse, with the

- Arab Spring
- Eastern Europe's 'Colour Revolutions'
- Ukraine's 2014 'Maidan'³ protests.

Overreacting, Russia attributes all these events to a deliberate Western plot. The 2016 US Presidential elections have added even more uncertainties and confusion on both sides.

So to understand the implications of the changing character of conflict we saw that after the collapse of the USSR, classic warfare lost its dominant position in the paradigm of conflict involving the West, chiefly due to US technological predominance. This made it futile for Russia to challenge the West in areas where it was strongest. The result was that countries or organisations wishing to challenge Western global dominance had to search for alternatives to classic war if they are to have any hope for success.

'Hypercompetition'

The 19th & 20th Century model of conflict, as being between two clear belligerents – between countries, alliances, ideologies - is replaced today with a complex global system where all significant players (countries, corporations, sub-state groups, such as Al Qaeda, Islamic State (IS) and Hamas, are competing simultaneously against each other and against the environment in which they are operating. What I call '*Hypercompetition*' is the underlying paradigm of conflict affecting the UK and many other countries today. Furthermore we urgently need to understand this in terms of Darwinian ecology, where it is not the largest or strongest which survive and flourish, but those most able to adapt when faced with change.

After World War 2 the US and Europe were able to shape the global environment to favour the 'Western' model of society, their values, culture, way of doing business, democratic political systems. believing this to be best for all mankind. Indeed many in the West have come to see this as the only world model after the competing Soviet model failed in 1990. However, the failed wars and financial crisis of recent

³ Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), the main square of Kiev, where the protests are centred. Maidan is an open square in a city in some countries, like India and Egypt, used as a parade or sports ground in colonial times. Another symbolic space in modern times is Tiananmen Square, Beijing where protest was ruthlessly eliminated in 1989.

years have undermined the credibility of this model in the eyes of much of the world, giving credibility and respectability to those who, for various reasons, now wish to challenge this global model and establish their own, alternative model as dominant. Russia China and IS are the most obvious examples. The challenge each of these presents is truly strategic, presenting us with a fundamental and inescapable challenge to our system.

The emergence of multi-dimensional 'Ambiguous' or 'Hybrid Warfare'

Currently we have a difficulty with language and vocabulary, with any sort of agreed definitions to describe Hypercompetition clearly, and using the vocabulary of kinetic, classic war can be misleading.

- Under Hypercompetition everything can be turned into a weapon, e.g:
- Cyber
- Subversion, espionage
- Religion, ideals and ideology
- Culture and language
- Psyops, deception
- Information, influence, strategic communications and lobbying
- Economic measures
- Organised crime
- Assassination and dirty tricks
- Money as investment
- Energy supplies
- Economic measures
- Bribes, corruption
- Business practice
- Aeroplanes, lorries and cars

To take this further it is clear that what we can call *Ambiguous Warfare* combines the weapons of Hypercompetition, described above, with

- All the forms of proxies and disownable use of forces, contractors, militias, 'little green men', troops in disguise etc which we have seen in Ukraine since 2014
- Plus the classic use of conventional forces
- Plus the (threat of the) use of nuclear weapons.

This is the new warfare we now have to be able to fight. In Ukraine we have seen the evolution of Ambiguous Warfare in a particular form, as Russia experimented with the tools at its disposal and learned accordingly. But this is not just a question of Russia and Ukraine. Russia has been using the weapons of Hypercompetition against the West for years. It is a *strategic* challenge we now face across the board, not simply a challenge over the future of Ukraine. But this seems to be only poorly understood in Whitehall, and we consistently underestimate the effort Russia has been putting into this assault on us. In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the gravity of this situation is well understood. It reminds us of Clausewitz's dictum that 'The aggressor is always peace-loving. He would prefer to take over our country unopposed. To prevent his doing this we must be both willing and prepared to make war'.

In modern terms, this means war using all the forms of power listed above, including the kinetic ones. To try to define these simply as 'hard' and 'soft' power is really not adequate and can even mislead. There is nothing soft about any of these powers when used as a weapon, least of all information. The real enemy can be an idea rather than a person, as is the case with IS luring young people to Syria. It is in no small measure thanks to Russia's interference in the US Presidential Election that the information weapon, at least, is now coming to be acknowledged as a problem. President Trump himself has helped to contribute to a more widespread understanding of the problem of fake news. Information, of course, has always been a potent weapon. But modern technology has greatly multiplied its effect; and information in its turn multiplies the impact of other tools of Hypercompetition, including the kinetic.

It is in no small measure, thanks to IS, that the information weapon, at least, is coming to be acknowledged as a significant problem, increasing in effect

exponentially. Ironically, in concentrating on understanding, albeit rather belatedly, Russia's use of information as a weapon/tool of Hypercompetition, we have tended to play down the relevance of classic 'kinetic' military power in Europe. The political imperative to cut defence spending has made it embarrassing to acknowledge that classic kinetic warfare is still everywhere important, even if its relative utility has changed. New forms of power have *not* rendered it obsolete. Indeed, in some parts of the world, such as in the Indian sub-continent, it still retains much of its 20th Century significance. In Europe, it is a key - and increasing - element in Russia's development of Ambiguous Warfare.

As European countries have reduced their forces and defence cost inflation has cut their size even further, making equipment and manpower become unaffordable on a large scale, and as our societies are ever more unwilling to suffer losses in lives, finance and lifestyle, we need to study carefully how to employ kinetic force, now available to us on a much smaller scale, as part of our own ability to fight Ambiguous Warfare. This includes the use of nuclear weapons and our ability to mount a credible, effective deterrence to all forms of threat. With much reduced conventional forces, this poses a particular challenge.

From a Russian perspective, the weakness of the West's military response to aggression in Ukraine presents an opportunity to step up their strategic challenge. This has brought the Russian military more into the frame, which we will discuss later. Frederick the Great quipped that 'Diplomacy without armies is like music without instruments'.

The renewed importance of strategy

Like any other form of conflict and warfare, Hypercompetition and Ambiguous Warfare have evolved from earlier concepts and are continuing to evolve. As they involve the use of all forms of power, they do not sit naturally within any single government department. Yet for maximum effect these many forms of power must be used coherently. To do this, to be able to generate, deploy and employ all these forms of power effectively requires us to be able to think and act strategically, across all departments of government.

In recent years the UK's capability for national strategy-making has atrophied. Many politicians today oppose the idea of a national (or Grand) strategy because it

would limit their ability to introduce policies for political expediency. To restore this capability for strategy we will need to:

- Recognise the nature of today's 'war'
- Have a clear understanding of our interests and objectives
- Create new mechanisms for strategy-making
- Educate and promote strategic thinkers
- Create an appropriate command system for implementation of the strategy
- Ensure popular understanding of, and support for, the strategy adopted.

Only strategy will enable us to cope with the complexity of the eco-system in which we find ourselves today. Strategy enables us to understand and cope with the fact that our allies in one context are also our competitors in another. Russia's ability to work with China is a good example of this in practice.

If, when we are dealing with Russia, we compartmentalise the problem, such as Ukraine, and look for solutions only in Ukraine, we will be outmanoeuvred. Russia will counter-attack in the Arctic (a crucial region in current Russian strategic thinking); or through its supply of energy; or by taking advantage of the situation as it has in Greece; or in making it difficult to get a solution in Syria or with Iran; or by withdrawing investments; or by causing trouble for us in Latin America – where already the most widely watched and trusted foreign media is *Russia Today*.

Furthermore, as I address below, Russia is now developing and exercising its concepts for using its armed forces as a more effective tool of strategy, and developing its ability to dominate escalation in a crisis. Only a strategic approach on our part can cope with this level of complexity. Strategy also enables the attainment multiple objectives, contributing to success. For example, within a few days of Russia's invasion of Eastern Ukraine, it was impossible to get any Western investment into any country bordering on Russia. For a while even Poland was considered an increased risk.

The implications of Ambiguous Warfare for structuring our armed forces

The implications of the above for our armed forces are considerable. Even if a future government increases defence spending, we will never be able to hold permanently within the military the people we need to be able to wage Ambiguous Warfare, using all the forms of power listed above. Nor, on 2% of GDP, can we maintain all the forces we would need to match all the possible threats which tomorrow's world could throw at us.

We need to evolve our armed forces so that they can be *truly* adaptable. That means understanding what constitutes a critical mass for each function and maintaining that mass in a way which allows us to expand quickly when we need to, and to contract again when the need has passed. It means understanding that a capability is only militarily usable when we have it in adequate capacity to survive losses. Expansion needs to be available for all forms of power, not just for kinetic force. Our armed forces must be able to be used for a wide variety of tasks, not just for fighting – something we are traditionally good at; but there is a danger that we will neglect those 'new' skills in order to spend more on keeping traditional weapons.

The now absolutely fundamental adaptability-requirement for effective forces brings with it two other requirements. The first is the need for a new understanding of reserves as crucial for all future operations; and new structures (e.g. the UK's 77 Bde and Security Management Gateway Interface) to harness talent in using new forms of power for Ambiguous war, integrating reserves and regulars effectively. This will require a culture change, particularly amongst regulars. The second is the need for a significant increase in our intelligence capabilities and capacities to give us maximum possible warning of new threats to counter, or opportunities to exploit, in the national interest.

Today, intelligence must cover a much broader spectrum so as to deal with all forms of power used as weapons in Ambiguous Warfare, but not forgetting the classic kinetic forces, including nuclear. Intelligence organisations, even more than the rest of the forces, must be able to expand and contract quickly, accessing the expertise needed – expertise (capabilities and capacities) which the military could never afford to maintain within a regular force structure.

Old models of the intelligence process are no longer sufficient. Concentrating on finding the nuggets of secret intelligence that will provide the answer is no longer enough. It must be supplemented by the ability to exploit the mass of open source

material available. This in turn may require the ability to identify, harness and empower those on the ground who have the knowledge and skills to understand and navigate the open source material, identifying what is important and what is not.

To organise this requires different structures, processes and skills. In many circumstances, both at home and abroad, it will require deep cultural knowledge as well as, for example, the trust of the communities with which we might be working to reduce radicalisation. As our own national institutions are overtaken by change and become dysfunctional, intelligence officers face an increasing problem of getting their message across in the face of bureaucratic obstruction and vested interest, or of the demands of political expediency. If a clear pathway is not prepared, the intelligence process can fail well before or at the final hurdle.

Putin and Russia's strategic challenge

The extent to which Russia's strategic challenge to the West can be laid entirely at Putin's door can be debated. But there can be no doubt that, in defining Russia as different from the West, as not needing the West, and as morally superior to the West, Putin has set Russia's course for the foreseeable future. His information and influence campaign has nowhere been more successful than in Russia itself. As evinced by the now vituperative rhetoric coming out of Moscow, Putin has let the genie out of the bottle. He has successfully made an enemy of the West in the eyes of many of his people and in the eyes of virtually all of Russia's defence and security establishment – the Power Ministries' Army, Interior Troops, Emergency Troops, Intelligence and Security Services. Their sense of affront and resentment of the West today is palpable. Any successor to Putin would find it difficult to change this, even if he wanted to. The West is seen as hostile and out to get Russia; Russia will be secure only when it controls its neighbours; a zero-sum gain seems the only feature of relations with the West.

Putin's objectives are generally agreed by analysts to be twofold: to stay in power, which includes maintaining his personal wealth and to restore Russia's position in the world, lost with the disintegration of the USSR. For a West which has spent much of the last 25 years trying to include Russia, to make it a partner, to persuade Russia to 'become like us' and embrace our values, this is a slap in the face to the West and particularly difficult to come to terms with. It is hard to undo the organisational changes that made NATO bring Russia closer to the Alliance to the extent that it did.

Ukraine and the Baltic States

Ukraine is the crucial element in Putin's vision to restore Russia for two reasons in particular. Firstly, in terms of re-establishing Russia's pre-eminence in countries on its borders. If Russia can dominate Ukraine, other, smaller countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia will lose heart and succumb more easily. They are all watching the Ukraine as a test case. Secondly, if Ukraine were to join the West it would provide a model for Russia itself, demonstrating an attractive alternative to Putin's world view and his plans for Russia. At the moment the only realistic opposition to Putin comes not from the democratic movement but from oligarchs who do not want to be cut off from Europe. A westernised Ukraine could be attractive to the ordinary people who can currently see no alternative to Putin's vision.

Ukraine is now set to be a very long-term problem between Russia and the West. Putin's invasion has done more than any Ukrainian Government to create a sense of nationhood and mobilise civil society in Ukraine. When the crisis started, it seemed that the problem hinged on the fact that the kind of Ukrainian government which would be acceptable to Putin would never be acceptable to the West. Today, it is clear that the kind of Ukrainian government that would be acceptable to Putin would never be acceptable to the majority of the Ukrainian people.

But, as we noted above, Ukraine is only one element in Russia's strategic challenge to the West. Russia's pressure on the Baltic States is now a serious concern. This is not so far a threat of armed intervention or all-out invasion. As long as that could trigger a reaction from NATO/EU it would make the action counter-productive. Rather, Russian policy is aimed at cowing them into accepting that they should take no action without first taking Russia's interests into account – a kind of self-censorship.

But, the last year has seen a rapid evolution of thinking, attitude and now action in Russia. The Army is back on the scene as an important player in Russian foreign policy.

The revival of the Army's role in Russian grand strategy

When Putin came to power in 1999⁴, he laid much of the blame for the collapse of the Soviet Union on the uncontrolled drain on the economy made by the military. Russia maintained a military which was large in comparison to its immediate neighbours and could still intimidate them, but it was only a fraction of the size of the Soviet Army and did not have the latter's massive mobilisation capacity. Not surprisingly, it maintained much of the Soviet doctrinal thinking and concepts of weapon design and acquisition – a valuable heritage. But it lost much of its former sense of purpose and political influence. Putin preferred to conduct his strategic challenge to the West by developing and learning to use the weapons of Hypercompetition – arguably the chief KGB legacy.

In other things, Putin's attitudes betray his soviet origins. He recognises that, just as in Soviet times, the West is vastly stronger than Russia overall – in economic terms; in technology and cyber; in the health and robustness of its societies and its political systems. Moreover, the gap is getting wider. He also, of course, recognises the West's weaknesses and divisions, and has played his poor hand of cards very well in order to exploit these. But as a good student of Marx, he knows that, when the chips are down, then in any conflict with the West in which the West has time to mobilise and operationalise its many advantages, Russia will lose. In vain do EU officials protest that the EU has no military arm. To Putin, that is exactly the role NATO plays at the grand strategic level.

The last Russian ruler to try to improve Russia's competitiveness was Gorbachev. He attempted internal reform and it cost him his job. Putin will not make this mistake. He is trying to improve Russia's competitiveness by changing the environment – the ecosystem in which Russia – and we – exist. He is breaking the rules of the post-war world in order to remake them in Russia's interest. He is out to change the European Security System which he, and now most of Russia, sees as 'encircling, suffocating and trying to dismember' Russia, just as was the case in Soviet times. Russia's domestic ailments and foreign policy reverses, such as the 2014 Maidan⁵ events in Ukraine, the coloured revolutions, the Arab Spring, the drop in the oil price etc. are portrayed not as being result of Russia's own incompetence or as the incidental effects of globalisation, but as a direct result of Western hostility. Conspiracy theory wins every time in Russia.

4 Putin became Prime Minister in 1999 and President in 2000. He reverted to being Prime Minister in 2008, being re-elected President in 2012. Presidential elections are due in 2018.

5 See footnote 3.

But, as we noted above, the Western order is itself looking a bit shaky. Western interventions to impose a Western order (in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria) have resulted in disorder. Putin is offering a new kind of order. Some countries prefer his model (say, the recent Argentinian President Cristina Kirchner). In Russia, this manifests itself as traditional xenophobia and extreme nationalism, and in the strategic challenge we have been describing. It is into this framework of thinking that the Russian military have inserted themselves and, in doing so, have found a new sense of purpose.

Making the military tool useable again

The military have re-established themselves in Putin's eyes as having a real political utility. Firstly, in cooperation with the Federal Security Bureau (FSB), they have made a significant contribution to the success of Russia's campaign in Ukraine. In doing so they have evolved and refined the use of military forces as an important element of Ambiguous Warfare. In recognition of this utility, Putin has given the task of organising the employment of all forms of power and developing accompanying doctrine to the General Staff, who have set up a special HQ in Moscow to this end. Their understanding of 'doctrine' includes not just best practice but also future concepts; it is a disciplined framework of thought, not a stultifying process.

Secondly, and most significantly, we are seeing the development of a new operational concept for employing the Armed Forces. The General Staff are developing the utility of classic military power as an important element of Ambiguous Warfare. Putin, it seems, appreciates this new, useful role the Russian Armed Forces can play in advancing his objectives and helping to 'break out' of Russia's perceived 'encirclement' by the West. We are now seeing the result: greatly increased defence spending; new weapons prototypes; aggressive rhetoric; and demonstrative tactical challenges, such as bomber flights along our shores.

This new military concept owes a great deal to Soviet strategic and operational thinking, but must always be understood as being an important element of Ambiguous Warfare, e.g. combined with the Hypercompetition designed to break up the integrity of NATO and the EU (e.g. Greece, sanctions). This increased strength of the military in policy does not mean that Putin will let the military dominate Russian policy and strategic thinking as they did in Soviet times. But it does mean that the Russian military have now become a useable weapon/tool of policy once

again. This faces us with a very serious challenge indeed. The best recent example of this new Russian strategic thinking can be seen in two exercises conducted in 2015, which, taken together, deliver an interesting message.

Internal Exercise. Between 2-10th April 2015 the Interior Ministry troops (70% of whom are now regular rather than conscript) conducted a large-scale, operational-strategic exercise code named 'Zaslon 2015'⁶. Announced as being held to deal with circumstances similar to Ukraine's Maidan, it included defence of state borders, supporting civil order, and the protection of built up areas and infrastructure objectives. It covered most of European Russia, viz. the North West, Central, Volga, North Caucasus, Southern and Crimean Federal Districts. For the exercise scenario, the situation 'developed as it has recently done in a neighbouring country', necessitating the deployment of troops on public order, anti-terrorist and anti-extremist duties, where they faced hostile crowds throwing bottles and stones.

Coordination of the troops with the civil authorities, the FSB and Federal Narcotics Control Service was exercised, as were their whole range of special weaponry, including individual equipment, tear gas, water cannon, conventional military equipment and weapons, and non-lethal weapons. This whole 'anti-Maidan' exercise could equally have applied to putting down trouble in the Baltic States, Belarus or Russia itself.

External Exercise. A month earlier, in March 2015, the Russian MOD Armed Forces had been put through an even larger scale, no-notice 'snap' exercise, a wash-up report of which was delivered to Putin by Russian MOD Shoygu and CGS Gerasimov on 24th March. Attached below at Annex A is a transcript of the briefing. This evaluation of the snap test of the Russian Armed Forces' combat readiness demonstrates that it was a truly strategic exercise involving multiple Theatres. Moreover, there was no scripted scenario; the forces' reaction times were in minutes and hours; the Command Post Exercises which accompanied the Field Training Exercises in the Military Districts involved the whole Armed Forces; the different Theatre troops were deployed for different tasks; and Belarussian Forces were integrated into the Russian command system.

The strategic thinking behind the exercise seems to have been to deny the West access to key strategic areas; a kind of 'pre-emptive forward defence'. One of the main implications of this is that, in event of any escalating crisis, Russia would

6 Zaslon is translated as 'backstop' or 'barrier'.

deploy its military at a very early stage in the crisis, giving the West a much shorter reaction time than perhaps we have hitherto been expecting.

This stratagem – to move so quickly that the Russian Forces can seize and hold strategic objectives before the West can react, thereby presenting us with a *fait accompli* – is totally consistent with traditional Russian and, before that, Soviet military doctrine. Crimea is an excellent example. It is conceived as a defensive measure designed to neutralise the West's perceived superiority in modern technology and our domination of the global economic and political system. It is also, therefore, a deterrent to our attempting to use or threaten the use of force at all in event of such a crisis. This deterrent is backed up by nuclear weapons to neutralise our use of the nuclear card. It is also consistent with other aspects of their doctrine which we have seen displayed in Ukraine, such as the manipulation of the form, scale and tempo of an operation so as to keep below our reaction threshold.

The more effectively this forward conventional and nuclear shield can be preemptively established, in comparison to our ability to deploy forces rapidly forward, the more emboldened Russia will feel to press its challenge across the board, taking advantage of what Putin sees as the West's divisions; our lack of appetite for confrontation; our preoccupation with other concerns; and our unwillingness to contemplate or prepare for war over 'a small country, far away, of which we know nothing', shades of 1914.

Unfortunately, the West no longer has the tools we had in the Cold War to track and respond to Russian actions. We have lost much of our capacity for conceptual thinking on nuclear strategy. We have lost our intellectual 'critical mass' to understand deterrence, as well as too much of our military conventional deterrence capacity – the conventional 'deterrent ramp' we had during the Cold War – and much of the conventional forces that used to support the nuclear submarines. We have no NATO 'Indicators and Warning' mechanism to monitor preparation and escalation, so as to keep our political leaderships aware of the situation on the basis of shared understanding. We have lost the capability to educate and exercise *together* our political and military leaderships in strategic thinking and acting.

It is important to appreciate that the reaction of our political, military and economic/financial establishments, both national and international, to every Russian military

and diplomatic activity is closely monitored by Russia. We have traditionally underestimated the effort Russia exerts in this activity, just as we consistently underestimate the effort Russia exerts into trying to shape our perception of events. During the Cold War we understood that we were in strategic competition. Putin's actions make it clear that we are, once again, in a deadly serious strategic competition, even if the global environment and weapons employed are in many cases different. But neither our populations nor, it seems, our political leaderships, understand this. The US Presidential election of 2016 and any interference by Russia add new dynamics, requiring substantial inquiry, analysis – and a separate essay. The jury is out in more senses than one.

The means and ways may be ambiguous but the end is not. The West is facing a direct strategic challenge from Russia/Putin to which it is not yet responding adequately, and which some in Europe are not even willing to recognise. The West's consequent *failure* to react adequately may be interpreted in Moscow as the West's *inability* to react, and may encourage further Russian action which will make things even worse. It is no longer unthinkable that *Hot Peace* might become *Hot War*.

Annex A

Russian Minister of Defence Shoygu's and Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov's Report to President Putin on the March 2015 'Snap Exercise'.

Vladimir Putin had a working meeting with Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu and Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces Valeriy Gerasimov. During the meeting they assessed in particular the results of the large-scale test of the combat readiness alert of the Armed Forces, conducted outside the standard exercise schedule, which took place in March 2015. 1710hrs, 24 MAR 2015, Moscow, the Kremlin. Translation: Chris Donnelly

V. PUTIN: Sergey Kuzhugetovich⁷, a phase of the active work relating to the latest sudden test of the Armed Forces has concluded, this time in those regions that you had designated during our initial decision to carry out those activities. I note that this is only the beginning of this year's training for the Armed Forces. I know that on the whole you assess the results as positive. Let's talk about this in more detail.

S. SHOYGU: Thank you, Vladimir Vladimirovich. In accordance with your instruction, a no-notice test was carried out from 16 -21 March and, following your supplementary instructions, the Southern Military District, the Eastern Military District and the Baltic Fleet were included.

The main objective was to assess the real capabilities of the newly formed joint strategic command of the Northern Fleet to ensure the country's military security in the Arctic region, as well as to build up groups of forces at short notice on other strategic axes.

Apart from that, it was important for us to establish how effectively the Russian Federation's newly created National Command and Control Centre could resolve command and control issues.

On 16th March, the Air Assault troops, formations and units of the Northern Fleet, and command elements of the long range and military transport aviation, were brought to full combat readiness.

Within the first few days we had verified the temporary norms for bringing troops to the highest degree of combat readiness. On the next day, formations and units from

⁷ Formal patronymics apparently were used between Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Sergey Kuzhugetovich Shoygu, but not for Valeriy Gerasimov.

all military districts, including the Baltic and the Black Sea Fleets, were activated on the other strategic axes.

All together up to 80 thousand service personnel, 12 thousand major pieces of equipment, 65 naval ships, 15 submarines, and more that 220 combat aircraft and helicopters were deployed.

The special feature of this test was that the troops acted on isolated axes according to a single plan, and command and control was exercised by the Russian Federation's National Centre for Defence Command and Control.

The task you set us In May of last year - that most activities of this type should be controlled by a single lever, by a single button – this task has been tested and, on the whole, has proved sufficiently effective thanks to the employment of all supplementary assets: the newly formed National Centre and the centres in the military districts.

In the Northern Fleet the ships at permanent readiness were deployed into the Barents Sea, where they formed four groups to hunt foreign submarines, sweep for mines and help civilian vessels caught in the battle zone. The strategic missile submarines were also exercised. Aircraft of the military-transportation aviation dropped Spetsnaz sub-units from the Air Assault Troops on the Kola Peninsula, on the islands of the Novaya Zemlya archipelago, on Franz Joseph Land [in the Arctic Circle], and elsewhere.

In a very limited time, despite the difficult weather conditions, the air assault troops reinforced the Northern Fleet's grouping of forces and secured critical infrastructure sites on the islands.

Battalions from the tactical groups of the Motor-Rifle Brigades carried out a march in thick snow in the training area near the state border, where they conducted tactical exercises. By this means we avoided templated tasks and pre-scripted scenarios. Practically every hour we were given amendments to the axes of action for the tactical battalion groups.

Sub-unit commanders exercised control based on data from all types of intelligence and reconnaissance, and on reports from subordinates on the real situation. Naval Infantry sub-units were landed on an undefended coast in winter conditions for the first time.

Throughout these tests, significant attention was paid to the versatile use of the Northern Fleet's aviation. Ship-borne fighter, bomber and anti-submarine aircraft provided cover for the transport and air assault on the Novaya Zemlya Islands and on Franz Joseph Land.

You checked out Franz-Joseph's Land and, as you probably remember, this is quite a long trip by sea. Naturally, therefore, all this time we provided cover by all types of aviation so as to secure the assault landing of the land forces grouping. At the same time, the aviation was also hunting foreign ships and submarines.

In the Baltic we conducted tactical exercises to cover the state border with sub-units of the 25th and 138th separate Motor-rifle Brigades, along with the 76th Assault-storm Division. The forces grouping in the Kaliningrad Oblast was reinforced by rebasing 8 aircraft from operational-tactical aviation.

The whole Baltic Fleet tackled combat readiness problems, submarines hunting and destroying the main adversary's ships, and sailing in difficult weather conditions. Coastal troops were deployed onto training areas where they exercised all training and combat tasks.

Supported by army aviation helicopters from the Southern Military District, units from the 7th assault-storm division and the 810th naval infantry brigade exercised improving their mobility and ability to re-group quickly at long distances by combining methods. Naval aircraft from the Black Sea Fleet carried out strikes on potential air and naval adversaries in the South-West of the Black Sea.

Sub-units of the 11th Engineer Brigade exercised loading and railway transportation designed to support a pontoon bridge across the Kerch Strait. By my decision, in view of the worsening floods in the country and following appeals by governors, the brigade was re-directed to provide aid to the population.

In the Central Military District, standard timings for creating a force grouping for a peace-keeping/enforcing duty were verified. Special attention was paid to manning them with contracted service personnel able to be employed in different regions. Monitoring activities and tactical training for peace-keeping/enforcing were conducted on training areas, as well as training for long distance deployment.

The Eastern Military District worked on how to reinforce troops on the [far Eastern] island of Sakhalin. Strategic bombers and fighters made routine overflights of the seas of Japan and Irkutsk.

This order of testing enabled us objectively to evaluate the planning and command and control capabilities of the headquarters being tested and, of subordinate forces – their capabilities to do their designated tasks. Currently, all command elements and forces are returning to their permanent locations in an organised fashion.

To demonstrate openness and transparency, all European countries were officially notified through the OSCE at the start of the troops' activities. This was done despite the fact that the parameters of the exercises did not exceed the established limits and that we did not need to do this.

In this way, the first snap exercise for this year has been completed. After the no-notice exercises of 2013 and 2014, we drew serious conclusions and we briefed these to you. Many of the things that then hindered us have been removed. We will brief you separately on the details that we are still analysing.

V. PUTIN: Good. Valeriy Vasilyevich, how does the General Staff assess the command and control capability, coordination and communications?

V. GERASIMOV: Vladimir Vladimirovich, our assessment is that the Joint Strategic Command of the Northern Fleet is now an effective Joint Strategic Command. For the first time during this training we transmitted command and control signals according to a new scheme, from the General on duty at the National Centre directly to the naval strategic nuclear forces' weapons systems. I checked this personally, finding myself in the Northern Fleet, and I must report both that the combat crews are trained sufficiently well, and that we have a reliable system of command and control and transmission of signals that can guarantee the reception and confirmation of those signals.

V. PUTIN: Good.

Chris Donnelly CMG TD BA

Chris Donnelly is a Defence, Security and foreign Affairs specialist. After Manchester University, Chris became a lecturer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst from 1969-72, and joined the Intelligence Corps TA with whom he served until 1990. From 1972 he was a member of the Soviet Studies Research Centre at Sandhurst and Director between 1979-89. From 1985-89 he held the appointment of Adjunct professor Carnegie Mellon University and subsequently at Georgia Technical University.



Between 1989 and 2003, Chris was Special Adviser for Central and East European Affairs to the NATO Secretary General. He then became the Founder and head of the Advanced Research and Assessment Group, of the UK Defence Academy and Senior Fellow until 2010. His publications include *Red Banner* (1989), *War and the Soviet Union* (1990), *Gorbachev's Revolution* (1991), *Nations Alliances and Security* (2004) and numerous articles on Russian and Eastern European defence and security.

He is currently the Director of the Institute for Statecraft, London.

Illustrations and credits

Back cover, top. Looking east from the fortress, Tallinn, 2009. Estonia became independent of Russia in 1991, joined NATO in 2004 and currently (July-December 2017) holds the Presidency of the European Union. 'From March 2017, 800 British soldiers of the 5th Rifles Battle Group deployed to Estonia, with 300 vehicles, including Challenger 2 tanks, Warrior infantry fighting vehicles and AS90 self-propelled artillery pieces. British troops will play a leading role in Estonia and support our US allies in Poland, as part of wider efforts to defend NATO. Our rising defence budget means we can support those deployments in the long-term and strengthen our commitment to European security', asserted the British Defence Secretary, Sir Michael Fallon, in a *Guardian* interview, 18 March 2017.

Back cover, lower. Stern view of the Russian Aircraft Carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* (launched 1985), passing through the English Channel on 25 January 2017, on passage to the Mediterranean and Syrian theatre. *Daily Star*.

This page, below. 'Writing on the wall'. Graffito on a wall close to the Russian Orthodox Cathedral (built 1905) in the formerly Catholic German Hanseatic city of Tallinn, capital of Estonia, 2009.



