

Countering Russian Hybrid Warfare

by **Nicholas J. Stafford**

Russia's recent operations in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and Georgia have disrupted a generation of relative peace and stability between Moscow and its Western neighbors. This, and China's growing challenge to U.S. interests, has caused a dramatic re-appraisal of priorities in the U.S. where "great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security."¹ In light of the return to great power competition, the U.S. Army has accelerated its efforts to incorporate the technological advancements of the Information Revolution in a new conceptual approach that will inform the development of U.S. military doctrine and capabilities—Multi Domain Operations (MDO).

The U.S. Army in Multi Domain Operations 2028 describes how U.S. ground forces, as an integral part of joint and combined forces, will compete, fight, and win in all domains—space, cyberspace, air, land, maritime—against peer adversaries between 2028 and 2040.² Army forces enable the Joint Force and interagency efforts to seize and maintain the initiative in competition by deterring conflict and adversaries' attempts to expand the competitive space below the threshold of armed conflict.³ The concept envisions three main phases: competition, armed conflict, and a return to competition. Although the MDO concept accounts for both Chinese and Russian approaches, Russia is used as the pacing threat.

The MDO concept explains how great power competitors intend to fracture U.S. alliances and partnerships through a combination of diplomatic and economic actions: unconventional warfare; information warfare; exploitation of regional social, ethnic, or nationalistic tensions; and the actual or threatened employment of conventional forces. In essence, adversaries aim to expand the competitive space by generating instability and creating political separation between allies—notably the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The desired result is strategic ambiguity which inhibits

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the speed and precision of friendly recognition, decision, and reaction to adversary activities.⁴

This article argues that, in the competition phase, the MDO concept neglects a key element of the operational environment, the human terrain that is a critical requirement and vulnerability of the Russian operational center of gravity. As a result of this neglect the MDO concept, in traditional “American Way of War” fashion, is focusing on deterring and fighting Large Scale Combat Operations and fails to properly consider the importance of this human terrain as a position of relative advantage.

This article recommends that the U.S. Army needs to escape from the traditional American Way of War and see its role as part of a broader, whole-of-government and comprehensive, approach.

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Russian Hybrid Warfare

In the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and war in Georgia, many analysts, military services and intellectuals, including the former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and former National Security Advisor Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, used the term “hybrid warfare” to help describe the complex and evolving crisis in Ukraine. The crisis, pitting the national government against separatists, Russian ultra-nationalists, proxy fighters, and Russian Military Main Intelligence Directorate (*Glavnoye razvedyvatel’noye upravleniye* – GRU) personnel, did not fit neat Western categories of war.⁵ General Barno referred to this crisis as an example of a “shadow war” which can threaten U.S. interests through “strategic

disruption” and where ambiguity is the defining characteristic.⁶ In this sense, hybrid threats provide the “perfect” conundrum: the injection of so much uncertainty that NATO might collapse under its own principle of allied consensus.⁷

Despite having a similar view to the U.S. on the future of the operational environment, Russia is approaching the problem in a very different way. Russia is experimenting with unconventional means to counter hostile indirect and asymmetric attacks, but Russia also sees conventional military forces as being of the utmost importance in its hybrid strategy.⁸ Despite the subtle differences, all the terms around hybrid warfare point to the same thing: Russia is using multiple instruments of power and influence to pursue its national interests outside its borders. The objectives of Russian hybrid warfare are best summarized as: 1) capturing territory without resorting to overt or conventional military force; 2) creating a pretext for overt, conventional military action; 3) using hybrid measures to influence the politics and policies of countries in the West and elsewhere.⁹

However, several conditions are necessary for Russian hybrid operations. The first condition is that hybrid forces can only be deployed in Russian-speaking regions, where they are ethnically and culturally transparent and cannot be easily detected. The second is that hybrid forces must arrive covertly, a condition that favors Russia’s near-abroad. The third condition is that covert deployment presumes border controls are poor and state power is weak in the target country.¹⁰ While the Baltic states are vulnerable to Russian covert violence, especially in the Ida-Viru County, Estonia or Daugavpils, Latvia, they will be far harder to destabilize than Ukraine as they have greater control over their territory, stronger internal security forces and, crucially, support from NATO.

A vulnerability of hybrid warfare is that it requires local escalation-dominance. War is “hybrid” in the sense it combines

aspects of insurgency-type irregular warfare and conventional force, where the threat of escalation, and use of conventional forces, deters forceful retaliation.¹¹ When operating close to its own borders, Russia can easily introduce additional force elements to a conflict. However, if Russia were forced to operate away from its borders, it would be significantly harder to rapidly and successfully combine the different irregular and conventional forces to achieve coherent effects. Russia has been able to exploit Western fear of direct military confrontation in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria, but it may not be able to achieve the same effect in the Baltics where NATO's resolve is stronger.

Russian tactics, techniques, and procedures are supported by persistent, rather than plausible, denial of Russian operations, even in the face of photographic evidence and firsthand testimonials. Of interest is the use of unidentified Russian agents, usually SPETSNAZ, to organize and lead protests and paramilitary operations, as well as the use of armed civilian proxies (Night Wolves motorcycle club), self-defense militias, and Russian paramilitary "volunteers" (Cossack, Chechen, Serbian and Russian Bns) instead of, or in advance of, regular troops.¹²

The MDO concept identifies the operational center of gravity for Russian actions in the competition phase as "the close integration of information warfare, unconventional warfare, and conventional forces."¹³ Interestingly, these three elements of Russian hybrid warfare closely parallel the three phases often associated with Mao Tse Tung's Concept of Revolutionary Warfare: the political phase (organization, consolidation, and preservation); the unconventional warfare phase (progressive expansion); and the conventional phase (decision, or destruction of the enemy).¹⁴

Like Mao, who demonstrated the ability to switch between these phases as circumstances required, Russian hybrid warfare can combine these elements, at any stage, to achieve

objectives. As recent events in Eastern Ukraine demonstrate, Russian actions below the level of armed conflict share many characteristics with an insurgency.

However, the MDO concept's description of the Russian operational center of gravity fails to capture the critical requirements and vulnerabilities of Russian hybrid warfare. Critically, it omits the requirements for Russian hybrid operations to be conducted in Russian-speaking regions, where Russian forces are ethnically and culturally transparent, cannot be easily detected, and can arrive covertly.

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The American Way of War

A classic "American Way of War" approach to problem-solving seems to influence the MDO concept heavily. In his seminal work, *The American Way of War*, Russell Weigley established the paradigm that many scholars use to explain the American military tradition. Hans Delbrück suggested that there are two kinds of military strategy: annihilation and attrition. Weigley argues that most modern U.S. military strategies preferred wars of annihilation and closing with the enemy for a "decisive battle" over wars of attrition.¹⁵ Colin Gray's characteristics of American warfare augment the idea that U.S. military thinkers tend to focus on large, conventional, symmetrical battles:

1. Apolitical—often lacking a clear political objective.
2. Astringent—military objectives do not necessarily achieve political objectives.

3. Ahistorical—the U.S. is still future-orientated.
4. Problem-solving and optimistic approach.
5. Cultural ignorance continues to hamper U.S. strategic performance.
6. Technologically dependent.
7. Firepower focused.
8. Large-scale—Huntingdon, “bigness not brains is our advantage, and we should exploit it.” It is not a problem; it is a condition.
9. Profoundly regular—the U.S. is better at regular warfare.
10. Impatience.
11. Logistically excellent.
12. Sensitive to casualties.¹⁶

These values are prevalent in the MDO concept, which focuses on building the capability to “penetrate” adversary anti-access/area denial systems in order to demonstrate a credible deterrence, and, if necessary, win a decisive war through the rapid annihilation of enemy military forces.

By contrast, Russia is focusing on achieving political objectives without fighting, and only escalating to armed conflict when they have a decisive advantage. Russia has exploited the absence of U.S. global presence to secure objectives without requiring large-scale combat. The Russian approach more closely resembles Sun Tzu’s theories of war as opposed to the Clausewitzian approach favored by the U.S. military. There is a danger that the MDO concept focuses on the kind of armed conflict the U.S. military traditionally wants to fight and overlooks the myriad of problems inherent in competition. Far more likely is that other powers echo Sun Tzu and Mao and avoid the U.S.’s

strengths and instead attack its weaknesses by continuing to conduct their hybrid warfare operations below the level of armed conflict. As Mao wrote: “In guerrilla warfare, there is no such thing as a decisive battle.”¹⁷

Given Russian preferences for achieving objectives below the threshold of armed conflict, this paper argues that the MDO concept focuses too heavily on preparing the U.S. for confronting the most dangerous scenario—armed conflict against a near-peer enemy—as opposed to the most likely scenario of continued attritional competition in the “gray zone” of conflict. While the U.S., and its allies, must be prepared to conduct Large Scale Combat Operations, they also need to be able to defend their interests in competition.

The MDO concepts description of the threats seems to be at odds with its recommendation for how to best to counter them. This article will now examine how this gap stems from the failure to the MDO concept to recognize the importance of the human terrain to Russian’s hybrid warfare operations, and how the concepts may fail to contest this terrain as part of a U.S. response.

The Center Of Gravity in Competition

The MDO concept states that the military fulfills three roles in the competition phase: 1) the conduct of intelligence gathering, deception, and counter-reconnaissance; 2) the defeat of enemy information and unconventional warfare, principally through the support of partners; and 3) the maintenance of credible deterrence.¹⁸

The MDO concept self-defines the role of the military in competition. In doing so, the concept assumes that partners and agencies will deal with Russian and Chinese exploitation of social, ethnic, or nationalist tensions. The concept places competition in these areas on the periphery of military responsibility, resulting in an unbalanced focus on solving conventional military problems in the future operating environment. This bias toward conventional

Ties To Russia

The Kremlin says Moscow will strive to protect the interests of Russians and Russian speakers wherever they may be. We look at the regions where the greatest concentrations of Russian citizens, ethnic Russians and native Russian speakers live, outside the borders of the Russian Federation.



Figure 1. Ties to Russia

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warfare may inadvertently expose a gap in the responsibilities and capabilities between the roles of the U.S. military and those of other U.S. agencies.

The U.S. military is arguably as uncomfortable and unwilling to get involved with political activities before conflict as they are after conflict (Dr. Nadia Schadlow outlines the possible causes of the U.S. military's post-conflict hesitation in her "American Denial Syndrome" theory).¹⁹ Often, this results in military organizations not considering the political aspects of an enemy's center of gravity. Despite considerable successes during large-scale combat, Antulio Echevarria II observes that "the new American way of war appears to have misidentified the center of gravity in [Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM], placing more emphasis on destroying enemy forces than securing population centers and critical infrastructure and

maintaining order."²⁰ This sentiment emphasizes the need to develop those capabilities required during competition as well as those needed in armed conflict. To appropriately understand competition requirements, the U.S. military must critically analyze the competitive environment.

Identifying a center of gravity during competition allows the U.S. to focus its efforts against that center. However, as Celestino Perez argues in *Addressing the Fog of the COG*, defining a center of gravity can be difficult.²¹ This paper argues that the MDO concept characterization of the Russian operational center of gravity overlooks the critical requirement of Russian-speaking (or ethnic Russian populations) within the target country.

In regions where Russia conducts "gray zone" strategies, such as Ukraine and the Baltics, one of the critical requirements of Russian power is the target nation's Russian-speaking population. These populations, whom

the Russians have historically vowed to protect and advance, constitute “vital ground” that offers “positions of relative advantage” to the competitors in the human terrain. Russia cannot effectively execute its hybrid warfare approach without support from Russian-speaking populations in states close to its borders. The Russian-speaking populations are also, therefore, a critical vulnerability of the Russian operational center of gravity.

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Russian forces operate where they are ethnically and culturally transparent and cannot be easily detected. This provides Russia with a significant advantage in the conduct of unconventional warfare. For example, Russian-speaking populations within the Baltic states represent the most fertile recruiting demographic for separatist movements and covert violent action.²² Russia uses information to enable this political fragmentation. Most of the Russian-speaking populations in Estonia and Latvia get their views on history and current events from Russian television channels that are directly subordinate to the Kremlin and used as a mechanism of propaganda. As a result, Russian-speakers, exist in a “separate information space”²³ that remains unchallenged by the U.S. and its NATO allies.

In order to succeed in the competition phase, NATO and the U.S. must compete to win the support of these key demographics. Success in competition then, if viewed in business terms, is providing the best value proposition. The MDO concept must take steps to expand the competitive space and provide a greater value proposition to target populations than Russia. By avoiding focusing on competition in this light,

the MDO concept risks ceding these “positions of advantage” to Russia and failing to deny enemy actors key points of leverage. Not only could this prove unhelpful for the pursuit of U.S. interests in the competition phase, but it may also result in the U.S. entering an avoidable conventional conflict.

In contrast, securing the key human terrain in competition can deny Russia, or any adversarial force or ideology for that matter, access to those vital demographics. This denial reduces a competitor’s options for achieving objectives below the threshold of armed conflict. Therefore, winning over the local populations through unified action with partner nations and agencies is the most effective way to achieve one of the MDO aims in competition: “seize and sustain the initiative in competition by deterring conflict on terms favorable to the U.S. and defeating an adversary’s efforts to expand the competitive space below the threshold of conflict.”²⁴

In many ways, the Russian threat below the threshold of armed conflict resembles a state-directed or state-sponsored insurgency, meaning that the U.S. and its allies should conduct stability operations during the competition phase, lest it surrenders the initiative and influence to Russia. To address this need, the U.S. Army should add a fourth task to the MDO concept to frame what the Joint Force seeks to achieve during the competition phase: “conduct stability operations to win the support of key local populations.” By doing so, the Joint Force can deny adversaries freedom of action and counter adversaries’ efforts to expand the competitive space below the threshold of armed conflict. Stability operations enable the U.S. to promote its interests and access through presence and engagement, carefully tailored to the unique demographic realities in each state. Conducting stability operations, therefore, represents a logical approach in situations where the U.S. needs to rebalance power, expand the competitive space, and reduce the influence of competitors.

The U.S. and its allies already have many of the tools to compete for influence amongst local populations, having spent two decades engaged in counter-insurgency campaigns. Several approaches synonymous with effective counter-insurgency strategies are very relevant to countering adversaries' ability to compete in the current or future operating environments: separating the insurgency from their support base (the local population and external state), winning the local populations "hearts and minds," and assembling an effective intelligence apparatus to identify the grievances and requirements of the local populace and insurgent forces.

In basic terms, these all contribute to making needs-based assessments and emplacing the correct structures to compete and win. The U.S. Army needs to see its role in competition as part of a broader whole government approach and comprehensive approach. The long-term goal should be for the key demographic to support the host nation government while remaining actively hostile, or at least ambivalent, to the encroaching power.

Conclusions

The MDO concept seeks to solve five problems posed by China and Russia in competition and conflict. The first, and perhaps most fundamental problem extends from the question, "How does the Joint Force compete to enable the defeat of an adversary's operations to destabilize the region, deter the escalation of violence, and, should violence escalate, enable a rapid transition to armed conflict?"²⁵ This article proposes that the MDO concept must adopt a broader vision for competition, which looks beyond the traditional American Way of War and develops other "ways" of achieving U.S. strategic goals. Success in this realm, while requiring time and effort, offers an opportunity to enhance American interests and global order without the vast expense of blood and treasure that Large Scale Combat Operations against a peer competitor might entail. Local populations represent vital human terrain that must be secured to win in competition and to assure success in war, particularly in an operating environment characterized by dense urban terrain and democratized technology.

The author believes that part of the solution to this problem is making local populations a focus of a whole-of-government approach as well as Joint Force activity in multi domain competition. Identifying key populations, working with agencies and partners, and adapting existing U.S. stability doctrine to secure those demographics can enable success in competition. **IAJ**

Notes

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