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Principles of Russian Military Thought

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to identify the enduring principles at the basis of Russian military thought, offering an alternative to the contemporary analytical mainstream – which deems Moscow's military behavior to be revolutionary and unprecedented. This is based on comparative analysis of Russian official military discourse and practice between 2008 and 2016. Critical inspection of the two Military Doctrines approved during this timeframe and of various military drills will reveal a series of rhetorical and operational recurrences. Notwithstanding numerous changes at the international and domestic levels that could have had an impact on Russian military behavior, no substantive shift is distinguishable. These empirical findings will constitute the basis for a reconstruction of Russian military thought. Through a deductive method, we will be able to reconstruct the ultimate assumptions granting them logical coherence and legitimization. Far from being incomprehensible, Russian military thought will be presented as the adaptation of classical strategic principles to contemporary contingencies.



Introduction

The recent recrudescence of the East-West confrontation has favored the flattening of mainstream analysis of Russian strategic behavior along two major directives. On the one hand, Russia is equalized *tout court* to the Soviet Union. As during the Cold War, Moscow has become an often-used synonym for Evil. Consequently, an implicit tendency to describe and face Russia via old paradigms has emerged and consolidated. Interestingly, however, a second rhetoric emerged. In contrast to the first one, the second rhetorical expression conveys a sort of astonishment for Russian military operations, as something new, revolutionary, and never seen before. Indirectly, this rhetoric justifies Western manifest unpreparedness to face Moscow's actions.

While previous scholars critically addressed the former argument through different studies looking at systemic and domestic levels, critiques to the latter are numerous but still in expansion (Colombo, 2014; Monaghan, 2015; Bandow, 2016). This article expands prior research, by undermining the assumption about the revolutionary nature of Russian military behavior. The article does not dismiss *tout court* the observations about Moscow's hybrid or non-linear strategies because these strategies are an evident reality. However, the article dismisses the related assumption according to which these strategies constitute a revolution in the Russian way to use force, as well as in military thought in general.

In the first section, the article presents an analysis of Russian official discourse and practice in military affairs. By interpreting and contextualizing Military Doctrines and drills, the analysis illuminates the pivotal elements of Moscow's approach to security. The choice of looking into Military Doctrines is classical. Military doctrines are relevant because these documents are the result of discussions between military and political elites. As such, doctrines present the reader with military-strategic views that are either widely shared or non-negotiable. In either case, Russia's documents illuminate the assumptions underpinning its military outlook.

For the same reason, military exercises offer the opportunity to observe Moscow's military behavior without the need to deal with real conflict. To consider military operations proper, such as those in Georgia, Ukraine or Syria, would be an option but bearing in mind Clausewitz's differentiation between absolute and real war, to search for enduring military principles in the chaos of actual war would prove difficult.¹ In fact, fate, uncertainty, and the flow of events may lead actors to

¹ With "absolute war," Clausewitz meant the pure concept of war, in other words the nucleus of its immutable specific characteristics. "Real war" indicates instead the historically contingent forms in which war presented itself. Given the intervention of elements of attrition such as fear, uncertainty, fatigue or simply case, "real war" tends to present itself with different characteristics than those of its idealized "absolute" variant.

implement strategies in contradiction with their principles of action, thus hindering analysis in this article. On the contrary, these problems do not affect drills and doctrines, which favor the interpretation of underlying principles.

For practical purposes, the period of analysis is from 2008–2016. This timeframe is significant because of the numerous structural and environmental changes that took place. On the international level, the distribution of power changed, the global financial crisis affected economic fortunes, and new conflicts exploded. On the Russian domestic level, a constant verticalization of power went hand in hand with frequent periods of social distress, globalization put even more pressure on the Russian economy and society, new technologies emerged, and the Medvedev-Putin relationship succeeded at the presidency of the Federation. All these changes had the potential to affect the course of Russia's security policy. If there was a revolution in Russian military affairs, then it should be credibly explainable on the basis on the above-mentioned changes. In practical terms, comparative analysis should be able to single out relevant qualitative shifts in the regular iterations of military exercises, as well as in the content of doctrines.

Quite the contrary, however, the analysis would unveil strong continuities in Russian military thought and practice. These continuities constitute the object of analysis in Part 2, in order to demonstrate that classical concepts of security studies are sufficient to understand the complex system of Russian military thought.

1. Rhetorical and Empirical Clues on Russian Military Thought

1.1 Peace and war in the Military Doctrines

The Russian Federation's Military Doctrines (MiDs) offer guidelines for the State to organize, ameliorate, and employ its armed forces in relation to the expected nature of future wars. In a way, it is the strictly military counterpart of the Foreign Policy Concept (FPC), and similarly to it a declination of the wider National Security Strategy (NSS). The latest versions of MiDs date back to 2010 and 2014 and a comparison would be useful because two different presidential administrations drafted the documents under different political contexts.

Different from the cases of NSS and FPC, the two versions of the MiD do not present considerable dissimilarity in formal nor in substantial terms: both the logical structure and, more importantly, the underlying concepts have maintained the same shape throughout time (Oliker, 2015). A latent more explicit, stronger nervousness is certainly present in the 2014 edition, given the worsened state of

East-West relations. However, there is no meaningful shift in language or semantics. MiDs 2010 and 2014 are in great part the result of a copy and paste process, with entire sections that have not undergone the slightest mutation; and the few points added in the latter version, given the technical nature, do not constitute a relevant change in register.

The absence of relevant changes may surprise even more if one observes it is not just the 2014 edition that is a copy of the 2010 version, but also this latter version is in great part a re-proposition of the 2000 version written at the time of the first Putin's presidency (Giles, 2010). In substance, the same document has been in force for fourteen years; seventeen if one considers that at the time of writing Russia published no new MiDs. Indeed, collateral documents of narrower nature, governmental declarations, and security sector reforms show some updates in Russian military posture. Nonetheless, the general implant remained as static as the content of the MiDs.

A firm feature of both 2010 and 2014 versions is a holistic approach to military security, entailing a multiplicity of perils and instruments that fall outside the range of strictly defined military issues to embrace a wider range of political, economic, and non-violent domains (2010: §.4; 2014: §.5). Russia defines military security on multiple levels, going down from the State to the society to the individual and cutting across internal and external spheres (2014: §.8a). Themes evolving around the use of force remain crucial in the two texts, but the perspective is not limited to them because we can understand from the content of the MiDs that force-based military means are put on the same level of other leverages, for example political and economic in nature. Both in peacetime and in wartime, the use of force is for Russia a legitimate tool whose employment – to be in line with legal principles, documents say – does not imply any particular exception with respect to regular policy (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2010: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation §20; 2014: § 22, 23).

A few incidental references to the Ukrainian scenario represent a novelty in the MiD 2014.² Nonetheless, this does not change anything in the substance of the text. In fact, even in this context the general features and dynamics of military reality remain unaltered with respect to 2010. In security terms, the main characteristic of the historical conjuncture addressed by the documents – that spans, it is worth remembering, from 2000 until 2014 – seems to be the “integrated employment of military force and political, economic, informational or other non-military-measures” (2010: §12(a); 2014: §15(a)). While it is clearly true for today's warfare, arguably it was not at the beginning of the millennium. Still, the fact that Russia

² See, for example, *Voyennaya doktrina* (2014): §12(l, m, n).

perceived and continues to perceive conflicts in this way is in line with not only the holistic approach underlined above, but also with what has recently become famous as “Gerasimov Doctrine” (2013: 1–3).

This is no surprise for the MiD 2014, since one year before Gerasimov published an article about the features of new wars. However, the presence of the same reasoning in older documents – such as the MiD 2010 – hypothesized a more rooted and less personalistic origin of such a vision. Consequently, Gerasimov’s stance is the result of a consolidated Russian view of military affairs, more than a revolutionary proposition (Galeotti, 2013). In other words, Gerasimov invented nothing but just took stock of beliefs generally spread among Russian military elite. Moreover, the textual evidence in the MiDs provides further denial of the erroneous idea that Gerasimov laid down the basis for a new and typically Russian way of war. This is not to deny that Russia has been applying irregular, non-linear, hybrid, or any other buzzword, strategies especially since the Ukraine crisis; however, these strategies are neither new, nor a Russian product (Popescu, 2015). Instead, these strategies are part of a more generalized trend, of a *new normal* in contemporary conflicts characterized by the blurring of war and peace, of military and non-military means, as well as the ascension in importance of scientific applications and social forces. The result is a qualitative mutation of the nature of war. Simply, Russia has been receptive of these changes, and able to use them at its own advantage.

Recognizing the multifarious nature of contemporary conflicts, Russia develops a series of concerns and priorities. A striking recurrent feature is the insistence on the time factor. On the one hand, Russia highlights the need to develop forces deployable *operativno* – in other words rapidly and decisively. The mutated nature of conflicts allegedly makes it necessary, by pushing to its limit the decisiveness of the initial stages of war and requiring quick mobilization and operations in order to avoid sudden defeat (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2010: §12(e, f),14; Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2014: §15(c, d, e)). On the other hand, and in a quite contradictory way, in both MiDs it looms large the risk of an extension *ad infinitum* of the period of war itself, to be avoided at all costs not to trap Russia into a slow agony and a permanent state of war (2010: §12(g); 2014: §15(g)). Hence, it shines through the documents an image of war as something oscillating between the opposite temporal forms of extreme rapidity and painful prolongation. Both are conditions that Russia wants to avoid on its own skin, but that could be useful to inflict on the enemy.

Moscow tends to prioritize mobility, the strengthening of command and control (C2), and the predisposition of a state of permanent readiness not only for the armed forces but also for society as a whole, which has to support with material

and spiritual resources the hypothetical armed effort (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2010: §31, 33; Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2014: §36, 40–42). The former dimension of support is described in terms of economic production and readiness of the industrial complex (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2010: all title IV; Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2014: §.43, 44, 52, 53). The other immaterial facet deals instead with patriotic education and devotion to the Motherland – in other words, the spiritual affinity between citizens and the Nation, up to the point citizens mobilize in the great mass of a warring society (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2010: §33(g), 34(p); Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2014: §38(h), 39(r)).

The planned use of armed forces in peacetime, in case of imminent threat, or wartime is the same in both MiDs 2010 and 2014 (2010: §27–29; 2014: §32–34). They also stress in the same way two particular forms of conflict: nuclear and informational. The attention towards information warfare is in line with the compenetration among conflict domains and between the dimensions of peace and war, as we observed above (Johnston, 2015). As for what regards nuclear weapons, according to Moscow their use does not represent any particular taboo – as it is for the use of force in general. Two are the main occasions when they could be fired: as a response to a prior use of Weapons of Mass Destruction or in case of existential threats, even of conventional nature (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2010: §22; Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2014: §27). In this sense it seems that nuclear weapons are considered in a quite classical way, as deterrents or second strike tools. This posture is less aggressive than MiD 2000's, where Russia conceived the use of nuclear weapons only in case of “critical situations” – but without any indication of what these critical situations were (Giles, 2010: 2). The progressive improvement of Russian conventional forces may explain such shift in nuclear posture (Klein–Pester, 2014; Galeotti, 2017). With more efficient and efficacious armed forces, the relative weight of the nuclear arsenal declined and pre-emptive strike is now applicable via conventional troops, without necessarily resorting to nuclear warheads. Clearly, the latter still represent a crucial feature of Russian security, but today more in terms of prestige than of sheer power (Blank, 2010; Colby, 2016; Zysk, 2017).

Overall, from the texts of the MiDs we could intend that the Russian Federation has “a lot to defend against” (Oliker, 2015; Putin, 2012). The self-perceived legitimate Great Power status always on the background brings about a proliferation of interests and, as a consequence, of perils. These perils, in Russian perspective, are both internal and external and to react to them the main instrument of security – the armed forces – should adopt a holistic strategy, preparing to multiple

contingencies and concomitant attacks (Virtahjru–Rantapelkonen, 2015). Once again, the good old rhetoric of the “besieged fortress” comes to the surface, and Moscow wants to be well prepared and self-sufficient in the face of any dangerous eventuality (Virtahjru–Rantapelkonen, 2015; Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2010: §46(c), 53(c)).³

1.2 Military drills: strategic and snap exercises. How Russia prepares for future wars

War is made not only of words and thoughts, but also and mainly of practical actions. After having analyzed the official discourse concerning security, it would be worth to look at how Russia translates in real life actions and maneuvers the guidelines laid down in the texts. As mentioned in the Introduction, for methodological reasons the article does not deal directly with actual military operations, but with drills and exercises.⁴ Both are planned well before their actual occurrence and for this reason are mainly immune to political conjunctures and ongoing military necessities; principles of military thought should be better understandable by looking at them. Being based on long-term visions, exercises are by definition sort of “tentative perspectives” developed by the military establishment according to a priori assumptions underpinning their professional outlook. Hence, if there was a revolution in Russian military thought, we should be able to detect it in the features of exercises.

When compared to Western ones, in other words NATO, Russian drills are relevant firstly in quantitative terms. Data available for the timeframe considered show a considerable disproportion both in terms of the total number of exercises and in the number of personnel involved: Moscow’s drills more than double those of the West.⁵ Yearly since 2008, we had at least one large-scale exercise focused on one or more strategic directions, plus a variety of side drills of lesser scale, to which Russia have added a growing number of “snap exercises” or inspections since 2013. In addition, the quantity of units and soldiers taking part in these exercises has been constantly growing, always outnumbering participants in NATO military games. For

³ See also: de Haas, Marcel (2010): *Russia’s Foreign Security Policy in the 21st Century. Putin, Medvedev and Beyond*, Routledge Contemporary Security Studies; Lipman, Maria (2015): Putin’s ‘Besieged Fortress’ and Its Ideological Arms, in Lipman, Maria–Petrov, Nikolay (ed.) (2015): *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?*, Palgrave MacMillan UK.

⁴ The Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation provides on its website a list and short account of each of its military exercises, available at: <<http://structure.mil.ru/mission/practice.htm>> (in English: <<http://eng.mil.ru/en/mission/practice.htm>>).

⁵ For data on the years 2013–2015, see: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2016): *Power Projection: Comparing Russian and NATO Military Exercises*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 27.8.2015, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/data-visualization-nato-russia-exercises/27212161.html>>. However, note that for each year all snap exercises are summed in a single indicator.

example, if we consider the emblematic year of 2014, Russia's strategic drill *Vostok* counted up to 155,000 participants – more than doubling the sum total of participants in the several NATO drills practiced during that year.

Certainly, the frequency and range of Russian drills is a topical case of “muscle flexing,” “saber rattling” or, simply put, a kind of threatening attitude displayed with the aim to intimidate adversaries and magnify one's own Great Power image. However, at a deeper level, the quantitative aspects illustrated above let us immediately understand two issues, respectively. On the one hand, the considerable activism of Russia is an indicator of a greater need of having exercises with respect to other military subjects like NATO. The possible reasons are twofold: first, problems of efficiency and coordination, which still have to be overcome; second, the enduring and omnipresent feeling of insecurity voiced in the MiDs. On the other hand, the magnitude of Russian military drills shows a peculiar understanding of how to participate to war. Coupling a pronounced worst-case logic with an evident operational gigantism, it signals that according to Moscow the next war would be an all-out one, of regional character, taking place along different strategic lines contemporarily (Saradzhyan, 2016).

This leads us to put numbers aside and discuss the qualities of the drills conducted by Russia between 2008 and 2016. In 2008, Russia held in the Eastern military district (MD) the strategic exercise named *Stabilnost*. The Russian army participated together great part of the navy – Northern and Baltic Fleets included—and Belarusian forces (STRATFOR, 2008). The scale of the exercise tested the ability for strategic deployment and the inter-operability of all branches of the armed forces, even nuclear operation units. However, the event grew even bigger the next year with *Osen 2009*, one of the major Russian drills ever. Indeed, it was a sort of “umbrella exercise” for three different games, which took place all in the Western MD and that, even if formally independent, entailed the convergence within the same strategic direction of different operational lines, with the participation of all armed services. Credibly the hypothetical enemy was NATO, but there is no certain element in support of that. What we know is that these multifaceted scenarios and exercise elements depicted a large-scale conventional confrontation against a technologically advanced adversary (Vendil, 2016: 121).

The substance of things did not change with *Vostok 2010*, which took place in the Eastern MD (Vendil, 2016: 121). The following year, even if less personnel participated in *Tsentral 2011* with respect to the previous two iterations (12,000 versus 20,000), the scale of operations was still considerably large. The entire Central MD was covered and all CSTO allies were involved. Moscow conducted *Tsentral* as an inter-service and inter-agency exercise, in other words involving all branches of armed forces, as well as those services entrusted to domestic security

for example FSB, FSO (Vendil, 2016: 121–122; Konovalov, 2011).⁶ The scenario was one of total and deep mobilization and it put into practice the rhetoric of internal-external com-penetration permeating Russian MiDs. The exercise overlapped in time and partly in space with another one of minor scale but compatible aims–*Shchit Soiuza*–conducted jointly by Russian and Belarusian forces (Andreev, 2011). *Shchit Soiuza* was an integral part of the wider strategic context of *Tsentr*, contributing to the result of a high-level decision-making training in a scenario of inter-service operations following divergent operational lines that could either reinforce one another or allow for escalation (Norberg, 2015).

Escalation had a crucial role also in *Kavkaz* 2012, since nuclear forces trained together with other armed branches. While the exercise maintained its inter-service nature, the inter-agency aspect was downscaled – but not eliminated. In fact, the forceful resolution of an internal conflict erupted near Southern borders was one of the possible scenarios staged by the exercise (Hedenskog–Vendil, 2013: 46). An alternative interpretation of *Kavkaz* points instead to the training of Russian armed forces to repel a conventional attack coming from South, with the involvement of other major powers and contemplating again the use of nuclear forces – as it was, *mutatis mutandis*, for *Tsentr* (Norberg, 2015: 30–31). Indeed, these two possibilities do not exclude each other, if one considers the direct link between internal and external security and the nature of contemporary conflicts envisaged by Moscow in the MiDs. C2 received a lot of attention, but *Kavkaz* gained relevance also because it coupled once again with a parallel complementary exercise (Ministry of Defence of Russia, 2012). This minor drill took place in a different operational direction – in the Kola Peninsula, Western MD –, yet linked to *Kavkaz* as to stage a regional war along two fronts. Nuclear submarines were deployed and exercises to protect and launch nuclear weapons implemented. In October, Russia held the largest nuclear drill in its history (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2012: 33–34; Hedenskog–Vendil, 2013).

The following year, the Western MD mobilized with *Zapad* 2013. Staged as usual in the Baltic area – between Belarusian territory and Kaliningrad – it involved all armed branches on multiple levels, in inter-service and inter-agency modality and with a particular accent on strategic mobility, reserve mobilization, and civil-military cooperation (Norberg, 2015: 34–37). The West considered the exercise with anxiety – Baltic Republics firstly – not only because of its proximity but also because of the historical memory of *Zapad* 1981. It was the largest drill ever executed by Moscow (then, USSR) and the greatest show of the Kremlin’s Operational Maneuver Groups,

⁶ To be clear, the FSB (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*) is the Russian federal agency responsible for (counter)espionage and internal security, heir of the KGB. The FSO (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Okhrany*) has instead competences restricted to the security of State officials and related federal properties.

aimed at breaking NATO front with mechanized troops, and directly hit the Alliance's nucleus from the rear (Mizokami, 2016). Even if not explicitly stated, in 2013 as well the most probable scenario was that of an all-out war against Western powers, an eventuality "diplomatically concealed" by Moscow by referring in its public declarations to exercises for the repulsion of not better defined "terrorists" – a word that in Russian parlance means everything and nothing (Tikhonov, 2013; Hedenskog–Vendil, 2013: 45–46). As in previous years, side drills of minor scale were conducted – even if not contemporarily. However, the striking feature of year 2013 was the reintroduction of the so-called "snap exercises" or inspections, after their suspension for budgetary reasons in 1991 (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2013). Performing in-between limited war and conventional, strategic deterrence, inspections have two main aims. On the one hand, to show competitors the high readiness of all branches of Russian forces. On the other hand, to test the latter's ability to mobilize quickly, operate jointly, and redeploy efficiently in particular around the strategic core of Russia – in other words the Moscow district (Hedenskog–Vendil, 2013: 47; Norberg, 2015: 38–44).

In 2013, Russia held 11 snap exercises, which grew in number and complexity in the following years. Likewise, the large-scale strategic exercises that took place in 2014, 2015, and 2016 were reiterations of the already discussed *Vostok*, *Tsentr*, and *Kavkaz*, respectively. Even more than in previous versions, they tested the ability to deal simultaneously with competing operational directions within one strategic framework, rapidly, across enormous distances, and with the joint contribution not only of all armed forces but also of the entire system of resources at the disposal of the Nation (Persson, 2016: 52–54).

Looking at the whole set of iterations discussed so far, it seems that Russia is interested in building a force capable to rapidly react to threats thanks to its stable permanence in a state of high readiness. Both regular exercises and surprise inspections frequently test this ability, by continuously putting under stress the dividing line between the states of peace and war. As a consequence, Russian armed forces assume a state of semi-permanent mobilization. Recalling the link between internal and international security so frequently stressed in the MiDs and the considerable inter-agency aspects of Russian drills, it is logical to assume that such a mobilization extends from the armed forces to society as a whole. The war envisaged by Moscow is ideally of regional scale and of inter-State nature, characterized by inter-service and inter-agency operations tailored to face even nuclear exchange. Indeed, Russia never experienced conflicts with these characteristics so how could Russia explain it. On the one hand, it would be worth recalling the already mentioned detachment from absolute and real war. On the other hand, Russia has evidently tried to base its military planning not on wars

already experienced but on those it expects to face in the future. It is open to debate whether reliable forecasts or Moscow's own pre-constituted ideas are at the basis of these expectations. However, this debate may not exist if one considers that a priori principles are fundamental for making predictions about the future (Gerasimov, 2016).

Another constant feature of Russian military drills is the attention to mobility, which acquires high relevance at all levels of war making from the strategic down to the tactical level. This feature echoes in the over-abundance of parallel operational lines along which the drills were carried on, in the maneuvers conducted by units, as well as in the "mobility" across the types of force used. Conventional displays of force intermingle with irregular and nuclear operations, and so do the military and non-military dimensions of mobilization. No surprise if one considers the stress put in the MiDs on the integration of conventional and non-conventional coercive methods. Coherently with MiDs, the cause and consequence of such multifaceted nature of mobility is credibly the abundance of threats perceived by Russia all around itself, impinging on different levels of security.

Numerical superiority seems to play a paramount role in Russia's approach to warfare. Throughout years, an increasing number of units and vehicles have participated in the exercises, as to show a commitment to build up an asymmetric advantage in quantitative terms that echoes Cold War confrontation. Not by chance, this trend went hand in hand with a harshening political rhetoric, but there is no exclusive correlation. On the contrary, the attention towards the numerical factor seems to symbolize once again the idea of a Great Power military model, well rooted in Modern Age warfare – but with an additional dose of nuclear weapons.

2. Reconstructing Moscow's Military Thought

The analysis of the content of Russia's MiDs and of the features of its military exercises highlighted a series of continuities and enduring elements. Taking stock of what observed, it is possible to abstract through an inductive method some general principles ideally constituting the core of Russian military thought. They are the logical underpinnings that grant coherence to the empirical observations of Part 1 and bind them together in an organic whole.

At the basis of Russian military thought there are two sets of principles. A first set deals with intentionality, to be intended here as the relation between politics and war making. More precisely, intentional principles describe when Russia maintains appropriate to use force in the conduction of international relations. In this sense, intentionality is not a re-labelling of political interests at large, deducible directly from the political identity of a State without necessarily passing through a scan of

its military policy. The second category of principles is operational in nature and deals with how Russia would use force and conduct military operations. Obviously, it would not be a mere description of the tactical moves of troops or Russian order of battle. Operational principles offer instead a series of a priori assumptions guiding Moscow in the deployment of force, theoretically valid for all scenarios.

In this part of the article, the locution “use of force” means “deployment of military means.” In some occasions, the more general term “coercion” would substitute “use of force,” especially when considering that for Russia to participate in a conflict does not necessarily imply the activation of the army. Similarly, the term “conflict” is the obsolete version of “war.” While the latter term indicates a state of flagrant hostility characterized by violence, the former indicates a context potentially leading to such a condition, but still not characterized by the resort to violent means.

2.1 Clausewitz at the Kremlin: force as a legitimate tool to manage international relations

Russian MiDs highlighted a peculiar holistic approach to security and an integrated view of coercive methods. According to Moscow, military means lie on the same level of other methods of influence, for example political and economic in nature. Bringing this logic to its extreme implications, war becomes just one among the tools a State could choose to serve its political goals. As such, it is to be interpreted in the context of a State’s full range of policy options, without any stigma attached to it. Both in peacetime and in wartime, the use of force is for Russia a legitimate tool whose employment does not imply any exception with respect to regular policy.

As an “ordinary” instrument of Russia’s conduct in international affairs, force becomes just one among the vast variety of means at its disposal, deployable without the necessity of specific conditions – or at least with lesser restrictions than a Western actor may conceive. The resort to violence is for Russia a political act no less than sitting at the discussion table with diplomats or enforcing economic accords (Robinson, 2016). However, it is better not to overestimate this proposition. It is not to say that, eventually, Moscow would indiscriminately apply force or fall prey of a warring frenzy that would draw the world, for no particular reason, into World War III. The observation above according to which “violence is for Russia a political act” implies such guarantee. The use of coercive methods remains within the political domain, subdued to the logic of politics and thus to the overarching political cognition of Russia – however controversial it could be. In this sense, Moscow respects the Clausewitzian logic of strict subordination of the military

sphere to the political one, of *Zweck* to *Ziel* (Wirtz, 2015: 32–33).⁷ Force should serve political purposes, not merely military ones.

For simplicity, we are mentioning the use of force, but we should consider that the same applies to the threat of its use. What T. Schelling referred to as “diplomacy of violence” is for Russia an equally legitimate tool for the conduction of political life (Schelling, 1970). Such a strategy lingers in-between peace and war and is based on a virtual display of fire-potential, at the service of deterrence, compellence, or simply propaganda. Historical records show that Moscow resorted more than once to the “diplomacy of violence”. It was the case of the re-deployment of the core of the Northern Fleet in the Mediterranean, operated between October and November 2016 – an event that not by chance could be labelled as “gunboat diplomacy” (Fink, 2016; Bartoncelli, 2016; Fasola, 2016).

At this point, a question arises spontaneous: is such a state of things peculiar of Russia? Is it only Russia that sees war as a declination of politics and the use of force as a legitimate act? In general terms, the logic behind this reasoning is all but exclusively Russian. Voiced by Clausewitz in the XIX century, its roots date back to Modern history and constitute a corpus of knowledge crucial even for contemporary military theory. Theory, however, does not always match with practice. From a Western perspective, the use of force is not considered as a legitimate tool of international conduct; political aims should be pursued by non-violent means, while the use of force should remain a last resort option. To put it simply, for the West it is not admissible that the Ministry of Defense takes over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the main institution regulating inter-State relations; this would be considered an anachronism and a political failure. European States’ refusal of such an eventuality arises, in a somehow Freudian fashion, from the rejection of Europe’s thorn past—the Great Other in opposition to which the EU and its members construct their policies. In the case of the United States, the international use of force is indeed quite frequent but still dissonant with national cognition and rhetoric and applicable only outside of the Western regime.

On the contrary, Russia follows the Clausewitzian *dictum* in both practice and rhetoric. While MiDs and the semi-permanent mobilization of Russian troops through continuous exercises gave clues about this logic, actual international conduct may confirm it. Interestingly, the continuity between politics and war seems to go both ways: not only is there a small step from a “normal” political

⁷ For an overview on Clausewitz, in addition to its masterpiece *On War*, see: Paret, Peter (1986): Clausewitz. In: Paret, Peter (ed.): *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: pp. 186–216. It is worth remembering that, according to Clausewitz, *Ziel* is the political goal of a campaign, formulated by decision-makers independently from military considerations; at the opposite, *Zweck* is the military objective of a campaign in other words to defeat the enemy and win the war.

action and a forceful one, but also, in times when violence is enforced, there is a rapid willingness from Russia to scale down and suspend the use of force in order to convert military involvement into political opportunity (Robinson, 2016). It fits within the “push to the limit” and “knows when to stop” operational recurrences individuated by M. Skak – or, more simply, an argute strategy of the *fait accompli* (2016). Both the cases of Ukraine and Syria are examples of this practice. In a way, these conflicts appear as pretexts for Russia to gain recognition as a necessary subject of global affairs and world stability. Hence, the final goal of Russian campaigns goes beyond the military success of operations on the ground. To sit at the table of global leaders is in itself a success – no matter if sanctions are applied.

The Russian interpretation of the Clausewitzian linkage between war and politics echoes the ambiguous internalization of the division between peace and war that emerged from the analysis of MiDs, consequence of a holistic approach to security and of the stress on the need to maintain both armed forces and society in state of permanent high readiness. The quantitative aspects of Russia’s military exercises and their mixed inter-service and inter-agency dimensions put into practice this latter need. Beneath the surface of this military outlook, there is the assumption that international confrontation in general and war in particular are more than a sheer clash of cold iron and material forces. In Moscow’s eyes, conflict and strategy have strong social components. They are both influenced by the degree of social cohesion; and in turn, they actively influence society. This kind of mutual relation surfaces in the textual analysis of MiDs and is implicit in both Gerasimov’s doctrine and the logic we have been employing in this section. In fact, here we could find new echoes of Clausewitz, who saw war as a clash between opposite wills decided by an act of force. Because of the inherent spiritual dimension present in this vision, war (international conflict in general) assumes a chameleonic form as sum total of rational, irrational, and a-rational components that confer importance also to the impersonal forces of culture and politics. In this sense, according to Russia, war is not so different from other socio-interactional phenomena such as commerce, in as much as both entail a relation of interdependence between different units with given preferences.

Overall, Moscow attaches to the use of force and war a complex meaning. This cognition is likely to have consequences also in operational terms. If conflict has a constitutively holistic and non-linear nature, then also its conduction should have the same character.

2.2 Pre-emption and the Russian obsession for time

Russia pays particular attention to the time factor. On the one hand, MiDs discuss it in relation to the preparedness of armed forces and the length of conflicts. On the

other hand, drills train armed forces to reach *operativnost*, and stress the importance of mobility as well as the ability to strike in depth. Russian military maintains a semi-permanent state of readiness. Both the perceived over-proliferation of threats and the frequency of military drills contribute to this outcome. While MiDs clearly present Russia's low confidence in long conflicts, short ones raise concerns as well. In fact, both risks and opportunities would rest in a shorter timeframe, complicating the timely avoidance of the former and the enjoyment of the latter.

The *file rouge* giving coherence to these bits of Russian military outlook is an inclination to perceive the initial phase of a war as the decisive one (Covington, 2016: 36–38). While we do not know exactly how long is the timespan covered by this “initial phase,” we do understand that in Moscow's view the result of the entire confrontation would depend on that limited period. Bringing this logic to its extreme implications is as if the first move would determine by itself the winner and loser of a conflict. If Russia assumes it, then it would be necessary to perform at the highest levels since the first moves of the conflict. Consequently, to seize the initiative becomes a crucial need for Russia, which once again resumes Modern Age military thought – from Jomini to Moltke to the German School (Palmer, 1986; Shy, 1986; Holborn, 1986; Rothernberg, 1986).

Once set the decision to attack, to search for initiative is quite reasonable. Probably, no military officer in the world would disagree with this assertion. However, the peculiar aspect in Russian military thought lies in the fact that the logical relation between offensive strategy and the quest for the initiative is reversed. In fact, it is the a priori, semi-philosophical assumption about the decisiveness of the initial period of war that brings about the Russian aggressive, pro-active posture in security affairs – not the other way around, as it normally is. Indeed, every State and even NATO has developed rapid deployment corps to face crises (NATO, 2015).⁸ It is an undeniable truth, but the difference still applies. In the case of Russia, in fact, not specific corps, but the whole security system is in a state of permanent mobility and able to perform at high levels of readiness. *Operativnost* does not apply just to contingent, specific crisis, but to the management of entire conflicts. Ultimately, all of this does not contribute to a reactive posture, as for the West, but to a proactive one. Bringing this logic to its extreme consequences, we assist at the

⁸ In the case of the United States, the rapid reaction force par excellence (special forces excluded) are the Marines. Rapid deployment and pre-emption have a particularly important role in Washington's military strategy. With this regard see: Pauli, Robert J. (2017): *Strategic Preemption. US Foreign Policy and the Second Iraq War*, Routledge; Boot, Max (2009): Whatever Happened to Preemption? The Bush Doctrine after Bush. *Foreign Policy*, 7. 1. 2009, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/01/07/whatever-happened-to-preemption/>>.

paradox according to which in order to avoid a hypothetical war, where Russia could lose, Moscow would actually start one.

From a purely theoretical perspective, it could be difficult to define such a posture as clearly defensive or offensive. However, there is no need for sharp definitions. To recall Clausewitz once again, defense does not necessarily match with passivity. To be successful, defenders as well should assume an aggressive posture, concretizing in this way the dialectic between offense and defense. In the case under exam, Russia transforms preemptively defense into offense – at least on the operational and tactical levels. On the strategic level, the differentiation does not acquire much relevance since Moscow always assumes the presence of some existential threat. Therefore, each measure implemented would have a politically defensive character.

In practical military terms, the pre-emption principle described so far revolves around the so called “readiness gap” – in other words the period needed for a security system to be mobilized and ready to face a threat. On the one hand, defenders need to shorten it as much as possible in order to reduce the impact of the initial surprise and promptly react to an attack. On the other hand, offenders should exploit the gap to their own advantage as much as possible; in fact, it is the timeframe when they could theoretically achieve the greatest military objectives, while the opponent strives for mobilizing the troops. Consistently with previous observations, Russia deals with the readiness gap by avoiding its emergence – in other words through a preemptive action that forces the enemy to deal with its own readiness gap, before it could do so against Russia.

In these terms, the time factor could be relevant for the use of nuclear weapons, too. MiDs and drills let us understand that Russia may use them for three main purposes: deterrence, second-strike, and controlled escalation. In either case, nuclear weapons fit well in the pre-emptive paradigm and the obsession for rapid conflicts. In fact, they could help to downsize further the risks implied by the readiness gap – either *ex post* or *a priori*. In case Russia did not manage to avoid attack, the nuclear arsenal could provide a quick (even if not cost-less) way out of the conflict. Otherwise, if Russia dealt properly with the time factor, the nuclear arsenal could be useful to prevent the enemy to attack *tout court*.

This time-related principle may logically underpin also Russian information warfare and reflexive control theory. While they do not consist in a direct use of force, they both have a multi-level impact on the enemy’s ability to act and attack. Interfering with C2 or even the top of the decision-making process, they bring about confusion and disunity among enemy ranks. In this way, they downscale the enemy’s capability to organize its forces—either proactively or reactively instead favoring Russian preemptive strategy.

2.3 Russia's organicistic conception of military affairs

In Russia's military thought, the pre-emption principle couples with a second operational belief that stands at the basis of a holistic conception of war (Covington, 2016). Looking in particular to MiDs, it is clear that Russia intends conflict in non-conventional terms, as something not necessarily restricted to the military domain and inextricably intertwined with the social dimensions of domestic and international politics. Conflict, war, and the use of force become parts of a complex social tissue, and are in themselves the sum total of different dynamics and levels of interaction. Philosophically, we could say that Russia interprets conflict under an organicistic perspective.

Two main aspects should be underlined. Firstly, military exercises from 2008 to 2016 show that Russian "warring organicism" implies in operational terms the synergic contribution to conflict of all types of units, coordinated by a strong C2 system. Both internal and external security services, both civil and military branches participate in the use of force, each with its specific role. If with add to this the considerations previously cast about societal mobilization, it is as if the entire Russian society would participate in the conflict whatever its scale. Additional evidence of such an organicistic reasoning could lie in the search for massification and numerical advantage as well as in textual evidence. In fact, MiDs described the survival, unity, and integrity of Russia as dependent from the coordination and integration of civil and military spheres, spiritual and material forces.

Secondly, Russian organicistic principle could be interpreted as the interaction à-la-Gerasimov among different levels of conflict – conventional, nuclear, irregular, informative, etc. –, all converging within the same strategic direction to support Moscow's *Ziel* and *Zweck*. The result is a non-linear method of warfare, asymmetric by nature. Moving beyond the paradigm of hybrid warfare, it fits with the tool of indirect rule, too. We employ this term coherently with the content of a recent CSIS study on Russia's soft-means of compellence. In those pages, H.A. Conley *et alia* described and analyzed how Moscow "creates a circuitous and opaque network" made of local corruption and patronage "that influences sovereign decision-making and reduces governance standards" in Central and Eastern Europe, with the purpose to maximize its own economic and political leverage in the region and delegitimize the status quo in these countries (Conley–Mina–Stefanov–Vladimirov, 2016). Indeed, this technique is a practical translation of the organicistic operational principle discussed previously. Solicited by a congenital feeling of precariousness and the "besieged fortress" syndrome, Moscow tries to deconstruct the status quo of surrounding countries before they could consolidate as strongholds of forces allegedly nefarious for Russia's existence. Resorting to a mix of non-military means

that lie outside the dynamics of traditional confrontation, Russia penetrates others' sovereign domain to preserve its own. In case this should fail, the natural continuation of this strategy would be the hybrid/non-linear use of force mentioned above – of which Ukraine is an example. In either case, we see at work both of the operational principles we identified: pre-emption *cum* organicism.

Overall, it seems that Russia conceives every conflict as a total conflict. Not only war is everywhere – as S.R. Covington put it discussing Russian strategic culture –, but also everything (Covington, 2016). Moscow depicts and uses force outside of Westphalian standards. In other words, conflict is not a purely inter-State affair involving regular troops. On the contrary, as said, it is a social affair impinging on different dimensions. Consequently, it is logical to expect that Russia would drag not just the enemy's army but its society as a whole into conflict. In practical terms, Moscow would try to hit the enemy on multiple levels and multiple fronts, with multiple means. The Ukrainian case seems to work as immediate confirmation of this affirmation. However, the logic illustrated here has a second facet. In fact, warring organicism implies at the same time a total involvement of Russia as well – which could be as positive as negative. It is reasonable to maintain that Moscow's visceral fear of color revolutions and their consideration as proper conflicts have their cognitive legitimization in the above-mentioned negative side of organicism (Kalikh, 2007).

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to identify the enduring principles at the basis of Russian military thought, offering in this way an interpretative alternative to contemporary analytical mainstream – which deems Moscow's military behavior to be revolutionary and unprecedented. The suitable period identified for analysis comprised the years between 2008 and 2016. In fact, this timeframe was replete of both international and domestic changes that could have caused some shifts in Russian military thought and behavior. If they had an impact, we should have been able to individuate traces of it in both discourse and practice. On the contrary, we found strong elements of continuity.

In Part 1 we conducted a comparative analysis between the two editions of the Russian Military Doctrine published in the chosen timeframe (2010 vs. 2014), and among the various iterations of military exercises held in the same period. No relevant shifts in military perspective and practical conduct surfaced. On the contrary, the objects of analysis displayed relevant elements of continuity; core features of Military Doctrines and Russian drills remained unchanged throughout time. The most important among these features are a holistic non-classical

approach to security; the fear and opportunity of the integration of military means with political, economic, and other coercive methods; the attention paid to the time factor, as well as to mobility and social mobilization.

Part 2 critically inspected the evidence provided above and deducted two sets of principles granting logical coherence and legitimation to Russian military behavior. Intentional principles set the relation between politics and conflict, defining *when* it is appropriate to use force. In the case of Russia, it was possible to frame its “military intentionality” resorting to Clausewitz’s theorization of war. According to Moscow, the resort to conflict is a legitimate instrument of international conduct. The use of military force or any other intrusive means of coercion does not need any state of exceptionality: it is an ordinary tool to serve political goals. We should therefore expect that Moscow would resort to violence with lesser restrictions than a Western actor would. In this sense, the empowerment of the Ministry of Defense is not for Russia a failure of foreign policy – as it is instead in the West. It is just another way to deal with other States, alternative to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Operational principles define instead *how* to use force and conduct military operations. The analysis identified two of these principles: a first one focusing on preemption and a second one evolving around an organicistic conception of conflict. The former constitutes the basis of Russia’s apprehension for the initial phases of war and sets a preference for an offensive posture. Consequently, Russia tends to assume a semi-permanent state of mobilization that includes not only the military sphere but also the entire Nation. This brought to the discussion of the second operational principle, according to which society should share together with the armed forces the burden of a conflict – whatever its dimensions. In fact, Moscow perceives conflict as more than a simple encounter of armies on the ground: it is a social affair impinging on non-military dimensions. As such, however, it could be present even without armies on the ground. Accordingly, for Russia conflict (and war) could lie everywhere and everything could become a tool of conflict. From this perspective, hybrid war and indirect methods of influence find their logical underpinning.

The military principles that individuated by the analysis were valid in 2008 as in 2016, and throughout the whole period comprised between these two years. This article identified these principles because of the strong recurrences in Russian official military discourse and practice. Therefore, we can assert that Russia has not displayed any recent revolution in its military thought and behavior; they have been consistent with a fixed set of assumptions about conflict and the use of force. In addition, the nature of these guiding principles makes us reject the proposition according to which Russia has a revolutionary approach to warfare.

Clearly, there is a Russian-specific way to approach conflict and use force. This article was exactly about it. However, it is not something unprecedented and incomprehensible. In fact, Russia's approach to conflict is perfectly understandable through the prism of mainstream security studies and the comparative reference to classical makers of strategy – especially Clausewitz and Modern Age officers. The Russian way to use force is conceivable as the adaptation of the main concepts of that scholarship to Russian experiences and conditions. No new concept needs to be invented, as old ones are flexible enough.

The descriptive aim of this article may not be suited for casting policy prescriptions. Nonetheless, the identification of the founding principles of Russian military thought could help to relate to Moscow with greater consciousness, in three ways. First, we could expect that for Russia it would be admissible to use force even in occasions when it is unconceivable for the West. Second, as considerations about timing are at the center of Russian military outlook, to subtract the control of the time factor to Russia could be a good way to contrast its preemptive posture. Third, to learn more about Russia's organicistic conception of conflict could help us to understand better Moscow's fears and how to turn against the Kremlin its own non-linear strategy.

The article's findings highlight the importance to acquire a historical perspective in dealing with military affairs. Military policy is not a purely technical issue devised in accordance with ever-changing environmental conditions. As any other policy decision, it is never cast out of a *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, decisions in military policy are the adaptation to the contingent reality of operational schemes sedimented throughout time as the result of historical events.⁹ To properly understand a State's military behavior, researchers should contextualize it not only with respect to the recent past (as we did), but also to a long-term historical perspective. In the case of Russia, it would mean to compare contemporary military thought with Soviet and Imperial ones. While to some extent they would clearly differ, they would probably show strong continuities as well. In particular, we could expect the persistence of elements such as the importance of the social dimension of conflicts, of mobility and readiness, and a holistic conception of security.¹⁰

⁹ On the link between history and political identity/behavior see: Cruz, Consuelo (2000): Identity and Persuasion: How Nations Remember their Past and Make their Futures. *World Politics* Vol. 52, No. 3: pp. 275–312, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054115>>. A “historically informed” approach to security has been sustained in particular by: Katzenstein, Peter J. (1996): *Cultural Norms and national Security. Police and Military in Postwar Japan*, Cornell University Press. Today, researchers of strategic culture are the ones following more closely Katzenstein's suggestions. For an overview, see: Biehl, Heiko *et alia* (ed.) (2013): *Strategic Cultures in Europe. Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent*, Springer VS.

¹⁰ On imperial and Soviet military thought see: Neumann, Sigmund–von Hagen (1986), Mark: Engels and Marx on Revolution, War, and the Army in Society; Pinter, Walter (1986): Russian Military Thought: The Western Model and the Shadow of Suvorov; Rice, Condoleezza (1986): The Making of

However, this long-term diachronic comparison should not bring us back to the “Russia as Soviet Union” paradigm mentioned in the Introduction. While a strong knowledge of Soviet military thought would enable us to understand how to confront Russia on the military plan, to treat Russia as the Soviet Union would be scientifically erroneous and a mistake from a wider political perspective.

Besides this historical path, further research could evolve comparatively while maintaining a focus on contemporary Russian military thought. It would be interesting to discover the common aspects between the military thoughts of Russia and other relevant international actors – for example the United States, China, and India, if any. The comparison between Russia and the United States would be particularly relevant in as much as they have today a conflictual relation. To find (dis)similarities in their military thought could shed more light on the way their relationship could evolve and help to better face these dynamics. Indeed, throughout this article we have already had the opportunity to highlight some points of contact between Moscow’s and Washington’s approaches to the use of force. However, a structured comparative analysis could say more about these superficial observations and, in case of confirmation, explain why the military thoughts of two constitutively different actors share common features.

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