

# European Cold War presumptions about conflict – And Why Russia Doesn't care

A paper for Ohio State University

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (eight years after their initial occupation of Crimea and an ongoing territorial war in the Donbass region), NATO's response, and the Russian military performance in Ukraine has been entirely predictable. It is interesting to examine this through the prism of military theory, defence policy and politics post-Cold War, which is a story about failures of imagination, and a tale of two bodies of knowledge that passed each other like ships in fog: completely missing the signs, the moments and the signals of imminent collision. Most of all, this is a story about the attention economy: to what timescales the relative political audiences work to.

Military Theory – adaptation and evolution

In terms of military matters, the divergence of Western and Russian theories of warfare since the end of the Cold War has been remarkable. On the one hand, a Russian linear progression of military intellectual advancement within stringent fiscal boundaries attempting to balance their historical culture of fighting against a leadership under political pressure to find smart, fast and cost-effective ways to win wars without ethical boundaries. On the other hand, the West focused on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism (in increasing margins from 1994 and then almost exclusively after 2001), where the professionalisation and lethality of forces for these specific missions progressed considerably. But the West also sacrificed high intensity war fighting capability for these constabulary roles. This is not simply materially, but also ethically, morally and intellectually.

Given the success of the Reagan administration's aggressive approach to the USSR in the High North, and the 1982 Air Land Battle doctrine – as much responsible for Soviet collapse as the high spending research and development programmes – it is somewhat surprising that Western military orthodoxy enjoyed its unswerving pursuit of decapitation strategies: reinforced by fast success in Kuwait and Iraq. Fast, easy wars were the predicted futures – the military buying into the political mantras of Responsibility to Protect, hearts and minds, and long-range policing actions.

The reality of this in terms of capital equipment left most Western armies and militaries with huge recapitalisation programmes that have been placed at risk by deferment and making realistic modernisation of heavy war fighting capabilities unaffordable and undeliverable. NATO militaries are shadows of their former selves, despite their ability – on paper – to mass a considerable weight of capability between them.

In intellectual terms, the situation is even more grave. Slimmed down academic and staff training now places a higher emphasis and rewards on financial skills rather than intellectual ones. The lack of depth in Professional Military Education, and the learn-by-rote approach

to teaching, for example, almost solely Clausewitz has narrowed the gaze of leaders and caused fixation on fewer and fewer theories of strategy.

But perhaps the most worrying element of Western military decline is in the change in attitudes of the fighting human – especially in comparison to adversaries. It is natural that militaries strive to reflect the societies which they come from, but slightly more important that they retain the courage, grit, determination, stamina and mental fortitude to defeat the hardest possible opponent. There are signs here that the West is falling behind – ironically because it has moved so far in terms of the moral and ethical standards to which it holds itself accountable. (Porch)

Contrast this with non-Western states, those who have not shifted their moral compasses in the same direction as those from the West. After the collapse of the USSR, Russian spending on military capability fell dramatically. Investment focused on rocket and missile technology, electronic warfare, and spiral upgrades of platforms that focused on high intensity warfare (artillery, tanks, and autonomous vehicles). Whilst their overall capability might not have advanced in the same way as in Western militaries, they have certainly been watching and learning from Western campaigns. The ‘Shock and Awe’ campaign of 2003 was an important moment for the Russian General Staff and their political leaders.

Indeed, both sides – East and West – have been fascinated by the idea of a Revolution in Military Affairs for some decades. If Russian investment has favoured an electronic warfare and missile capabilities, the West has been betting heavily on digital technology and militarised commercial products since that aforementioned Air Land Battle doctrine, alongside the arrival of Precision Guided Munitions. There is a considerable amount of literature on both sides about RMA – or Military Technology Revolution for the Russians - yet neither of their beliefs seem to have held water. The promised nirvana of Network Centric Warfare never arrived in the West, but neither did MTR for the Russians. All that Field Marshall Gareev predicted would come to pass simply hasn’t delivered. As some have pointed out, the Russian military has been weaving between a Delphic or Cassandraian approach to MTP resulting in few real gains being made.

By comparison, Russian conventional forces have been tested (and been testing new equipment) in Chechnia (2004), Georgia (2008), Syria (2013), Crimea (2014), and latterly across northern and sub-Saharan Africa (since 2017). They have been waging unconventional warfare across Europe in increasingly aggressive forms since 2012: the most obvious of these being the use of nerve agents in the UK in 2018. None of these drew a response from Western states – with the exception of some minor sanctions and the usual expulsion of diplomats. This is an important point to note: whilst the West may have shifted the way they have fought, and thought about fighting, the Russian military do not appear to have been through the same shift in morals: how they fight reflects this, but it also reflects how the politicians have been viewing each other.

#### Comparative Defence Policy and Politics

Since the late 1970s/early 1980s there has been a widely held but unspoken orthodoxy in the West that another European War could never happen: certainly not on the scale and

duration of the two major World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As the generations that fought these wars started to take a back seat in politics, national security discussions, and foreign policy narratives, the drive towards a liberalised world focused on domestic rather than international issues became deeply entrenched in the minds of European leaders.

Over time, and particularly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, European leaders increasingly brought into the idea of “The End of History”: Fukuyama’s thesis on humanity’s political progression through modern history became the lingua franca of the mantra of Europe’s new leaders. Focus was swiftly shifting to the US plan to ‘beat’ the USSR through economic means. Some European states adapted this view rapidly (Thatcher’s UK among them), shifting defence spending from the 1970s into social spending and domestic political agendas. Europe in the early 1990s saw this trend increase in pace, marginalising their own defence capability: This was the much remarked upon Peace Dividend – shifting spending in favour of wider domestic programmes, savings and more balanced budgets.

Despite claims of complacency that might have been levelled as a result of violence in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, the key players in Europe continued the military spending cuts and shifted from an interventionist series of strategies that saw them distance themselves from the national security assumptions that had underpinned the fragile peace of the Cold War.

The consensus was of Russia as a ‘sickman of Eurasia’ rather than as a declining superpower to be taken seriously. There was a widely held belief that Russia was not simply a declining power but that her economy was in such turmoil that terminal decline was a forgone conclusion within a decade. The threat spectrum to Europeans became mainstreamed into terrorism and humanitarian interventions: military forces became redirected to these tasks and scale in warfighting capability was largely considered unnecessary. When the US signalled a shift away from the ability to conduct two regional wars simultaneously, European states saw this as an opportunity for further cuts in spending on defence and militaries. The NATO spending target of 2% became so ambiguous that almost any expense could be included within it, allowing states to appear almost compliant while letting their militaries waste away.

In Libya, NATO – and France, Italy and the UK in particular – suffered a major shock: their inability to conduct high intensity military operations without US support against a considerably inferior adversary was a shameful performance. Worse still was the grandstanding by politicians who had failed to understand the basics of grand strategy and sustainable end states. Not even the strategic shocks of military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the failures of highly professional, well-equipped and motivated Western forces, could reverse the ambivalence of Europe’s political class to military thinking (and spending).

From Russia’s perspectives, the West – and NATO – had become relatively weaker militarily, had experienced a series of defeats in their recent operations, and had been unresponsive to Russian interventions and activities across Europe and the near-abroad (Africa). Alongside a perceived encroachment of NATO territory right up to Russia’s borders – counter to what Moscow understood to be a guarantee in 1989 – gave the impression that neither NATO,

nor the wider West, was concerned about Russian actions – whether as mercenaries, peacekeepers, unconventional forces, or conventional operations. From the perspective of Moscow, the lack of Western response was implicit agreement that Russian actions and military activity could continue and would not merit a response.

What might this mean?

Russian forces have had considerable success with the revised fighting doctrine – How they fight if you will – in Georgia, Crimea, Donbass, Sub Saharan Africa, Syria, the Arctic, the Balkans, and elsewhere on the globe. Yet in Ukraine over the first 50 days of fighting there have been considerable failures in the functioning of their military. These related exactly to these experiences and tensions that have been occurring across the Russian military for the past twenty years. There are three considerable issues here above all the minor tactical analysis: First, they forgot and underinvested in the basics of logistics as an enabler of warfare (a historically normal Russian approach). Second, the Russians lacked and misemployed firepower in the initial assault; combined with an air force unable to undertake close-air-support in the same way Western militaries are able to. Third, an appalling plan based on the dubious theories of RMA and decapitation strategies.

Observations on what has happened in Ukraine over the first two months of fighting, about the performance of each belligerent, about leadership, red lines, brinkmanship, insurgencies, rationality, logistics, economics, iron and steel versus cyber and space (et al.) are running rampant. There are valid questions about why the Russian forces, and their political leadership, developed the plan they did – one that wasn't just poor, it was terrible and executed disastrously.

But the most important question to be addressed remains “how will this end”? Alongside that sits the corollary, “How do we know [it will end like that]”? For these conundrums there seems to be a gap in the discussions by experts. This reflects the realities of warfare: no one knows which way the fickle hand of fate will turn. But that does not mean that tackling these questions can simply be deferred until later. There are important considerations that have much longer-term implications than simply discussing Ukraine and Russia.

A humbled Russia?

If Russia eventually achieves its aims in Ukraine, it could set Moscow on a new course: economically and militarily. If Russia is beaten however, it will place the regime in Moscow in a difficult position with the associated danger whereby the use of force might become not just attractive again, but necessary for regime survival. Europe has been here before with echoes of Germany between the World Wars being aired privately in some quarters. In defeat, economic disaster would become a real spectre, leaving Putin in a precarious position that could require even more radical decisions to justify his actions. In countering this, the West would need to either rapidly ease sanctions to avoid a default in Russian sovereign debt, or to consider an economic aid package on a scale not seen since the [Marshall Plan](#). Failure to support the Russian economy - even to provide it with a modicum of growth - would not just make Russia the sick man of Eurasia but could back Moscow into

a position where extreme options become rational decisions. Avoiding that must become a priority in an eventual peace deal.

Such an agreement must provide the key element that Putin has promised his people, as well as being his own 'off-ramp': Recognition of Russia as a Great Power, which in turn requires that the eventual peace accord must be between the US and Russia, and that Russia will need reacceptance back into the international community as soon as possible after hostilities commence. The balance between appeasement and future conflict prevention will be exceedingly difficult.

What lies in store for NATO?

NATO's primary mission until 1991 was containment of Russia: thereafter it has been trying to do much and achieving little. In 2022, and arguably from 2008 onwards, NATO's wider deterrence failed. That's not to say that there wasn't a Grand Strategy across European capitals and indeed in NATO. Just that the Strategy was built on – let us be kind – dubious assumptions and a false understanding of Russia, indeed the whole world.

What is more, NATO has developed a myopic view of Russia in recent days. How can this conflict – and the wider relationship with Russia – end in a way that does not involve either continued conflict or national collapse. That must start with going back to basics: critically trying to better message and signal Moscow and understand Russian messaging and signalling too.

The attention economy

As of 2022, President Putin of Russia had been in power in Russia since 2000 in one guise or another. During that period he has seen Western leaders come and go – including five US presidents. It was the year of the first crew in the International Space Station and seven years before the first iPhone launched. There are few signs that he will leave office in the near future and no indications of a serious political opposition to his continuing rule. His attention, ambition, and perspectives span decades. In contrast, Western leaders increasingly live in a political environment that is defined by days, let alone weeks, and elections occur with a regularity – to a Russian – that makes constant campaigning, policy changes, pivots, revolutions, and economic a part of the fabric of their existence. The Western and Russian political attention economies work to different timelines, along with their respective judgements, perspectives, decision-making and relationships. As the old Afghan proverb goes, "You've got the watches, we've got the time." It is the underlying imbalance in outlooks that makes communication and messaging truly complex and fraught with danger.

The danger of Versailles

Ending wars is rarely anything other than a Gordian knot. Through history few leaders have been able to deliver a lasting peace: treaties are often written by those still immersed in the passion and emotion of the conflict leading to painful economic circumstances and short periods of peace but as harbingers of greater long term, even more violent conflict. The

desire for revenge, reparations, and the demonisation of enemies often cloud the judgements of leaders especially after a short war; perhaps exacerbated in a world which has forgotten the harsh realities of combat despite recent violence in Syria, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, Mali, and Georgia. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is unlikely to have an easy solution: one hopes today's decision-makers are up to the task of finding a recipe for peace that views the long-term as a priority over short term ceasefires. That, in itself, will not bode well for Ukraine.

The final point here returns to that of the development of Russian military theory. It would be unwise to expect Russia to simply end military intellectual progression. More likely, the Russian General Staff will self-correct and focus on training, logistics, combined arms operations, and a shift away from the RMA and decapitation military strategies. It would also be wise to guard against any predetermined view of the future that places Russia at the bottom of the pile in terms of military capability. The Frunze Academy is one of the most intellectually curious and experimental professional military education establishments in the world: there are a myriad of military strategies on the shelf developed there. We can only hope that they continue to pick poor plans in the future.

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