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Special Features of the Russian– Ukrainian Armed Conflict

Az orosz–ukrán háború érdekességei

Russia's position in the ex-soviet region as a country with natural geopolitical interest toward neutrality and/or alliance with neighbouring states is in direct confrontation with Western European and U.S. ambitions in that region. Ukraine always represented a red line for Russia, who decided to act to preserve its regional interests. Russia intervened in a very uncommon way, utilising the new generation warfare. The article analyses the special features of the Russo–Ukrainian war in Eastern Ukraine.

Keywords: Ukraine, hybrid warfare, Russian intervention

Oroszország hatalmi érdekei a volt szovjet érdekszférában teljesen ellentétesek Nyugat-Európa és az USA érdekeivel. Ukrajna mindig is egy határvonalat képviselt Oroszország számára, ezért amikor úgy tűnt elveszítheti befolyását a régióban, úgy döntött beavatkozik, hogy megőrizze hatalmi fölényét a térségben. Oroszország egy nagyon sajátos, és tegyük hozzá rendkívül sikeres módszert választott a beavatkozásra, egy újfajta hibrid háború formájában. A cikk ezen beavatkozás sajátosságait elemzi.

Kulcsszavak: Ukrajna, hibrid hadviselés, orosz beavatkozás

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*"I would like to remind you Alexander III, our emperor, who once said that Russia has just two allies, the armed forces and the navy."
Vladimir Putin*

Introduction

Since spring 2014, there has been an armed conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. What started as a relatively bloodless intervention in the Crimea has grown into an unfinished, serious armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

This war has many surprises. First of all, even the best security experts in 2013 did not think that a war on land would soon take place in Europe and the East–West opposition would intensify again, evoking the Cold War atmosphere. Second, very few people in the West have been paying attention to Russian “new generation” or “hybrid” warfare, and even the NATO was unexpectedly affected by its Ukrainian manifestation. The third surprise is how little effort has been made by both the European Union and the U.S. to support Ukraine from a military point of view, even though the fighting has been expanding in scope and intensity for years [1].

Strategic Aspects of the Conflict

Ukrainian strategy

After the creation of the independent Ukrainian state, the history of Ukraine is divided into several periods. One of these significant periods was the ambition to join the EU and NATO. These foreign policy goals were supported by the international engagement of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and all political and military efforts to obtain Western guarantees to preserve its independence.

Like many other countries in Eastern Europe, Ukraine did not have a serious military strategy after declaring its independence from the Soviet Union. There was no foreseeable security threat or financial resources to modernise the army, so why waste time on the strategy? The Ukrainian army, which was once one of the largest ex-Warsaw Treaty armed forces, was steadily decreasing, and the luxury of modernisation was rendered impossible by the existing military budget [1].

After the collapse of the Yanukovich regime, when the Russians unexpectedly invaded the Crimea, deployed troops on the Russian–Ukrainian border and actively supported the East-Ukrainian conflict, the Ukrainians had to make up for the lost 20 years in two months [1].

At the time of the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine had no effective strategy, only an outdated army.

Russian strategy

In 1999, a former KGB agent, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin came to power in Russia, and in 2005, a famous statement, according to which “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”, predicted changes in European security policy [10].

Historically, Russia's most important defence strategy is to keep a potential opponent away from Russian borders, dating back to the time of Tsar Peter the Great. According to the ruler of the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries, Russia is only safe if it conquers the surrounding countries, thus preventing any direct attack on Moscow. (Both Napoleon and Hitler experienced the effectiveness of the principle.) In fact, today NATO is about 160 kilometres away from St. Petersburg, while that distance was 1,600 kilometres at the time of the Soviet Union [7].

Based on this, it is understandable that a Western-friendly Ukraine is an unacceptable option for the interests of Russia.

Behind the intervention in Ukraine was a Russian army, modernised in the light of the experience of the wars against Chechnya and Georgia [5], applying the principles of the “Gerasimov doctrine”. This title is based on an article published in March 2013 by the Russian Chief of Staff, considered by many to be a revolutionary milestone in the hybrid war [17]. In fact, the concept of Russian next-generation warfare is the result of a long, organic development process in which Gerasimov's writing is only one link (and not the last one!), despite its unusually high international attention due to the Ukrainian war. Interestingly, the article's narrative is defensive all the time, meaning that the general does not write about how Russia should wage war, but how the West wages war on Russia [4], [9].

The most important feature of the Russian hybrid warfare is the more coordinated use of military and non-military assets. Non-military assets include diplomatic and economic pressure, the use of secret service activities and special operations, cyberattacks, the use of criminal groups and psychological and information operations that require the use of traditional and electronic media [9], [20], [21].

However, hybrid warfare is not some kind of ultimate secret weapon: it does not replace military power; it is just a new way of applying it, combined with the effective exploitation of the non-military weaknesses of the targeted state and society. If the threat of a military attack can be eliminated, the range of tools available to the hybrid attacker will be significantly reduced immediately. In Ukraine, however, all conditions were met to exploit the potential of the hybrid warfare [9].

The implementation of the new Russian strategy was so ingenious that by the time the Ukrainians realised who are the “little green human beings”, they had practically lost the entire Crimea.

Special Features of the Operations

Mobilisation and deployment

While the annexation of the Crimea succeeded in a few weeks without a single gunshot in the spring of 2014, the unrest in Eastern Ukraine has turned into a protracted armed conflict. On April 15, in spite of the fact that Russian military exercises were constantly taking place along the border and there was always the danger of a Russian attack, the government in Kiev decided to use regular armed forces against the separatists, and initiated the so-called “Counter-terrorism operations” [9].

Despite the obvious difficulties – outdated organisational structure, lack of modernisation, lack of rapid reaction force – the Ukrainian army made the largest mobilisation in Europe since World War II, and has moved 15 brigades to the area in order to stabilise the region [1], [2].

The Russian deterrent force near the border was over 40,000 [18]. The deterrence was all the more credible because the war in Georgia in 2008 has shown that Russia is ready and capable of launching a conventional war against its weaker neighbour by invoking the protection of its own citizens [9].

Unlike in the Crimea, Moscow never officially acknowledged that it had anything to do with the separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine, although Russian support was clear from the beginning.

The most effective forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk Separatists were armed with Russian weapons; they used Russian equipment and military vehicles. They were often without identifiers, but wearing Russian type uniforms and even the Russian officials referred to them as members of the local resistance. The truth is that most of them were highly skilled Russians.²

In August of 2014, when the Ukrainian army was winning, Russian regular forces showed up in the area, also without any identifier [9].

Initial Ukrainian successes

After the transitional peace talks failed, a comprehensive Ukrainian operation was launched in the summer of 2014 against the rebels. The operation had three main objectives: first, to reduce the territorial base of the separatists, especially in areas where they received less support; second, to close the Russian–Ukrainian border, thereby cutting the supply lines of the rebels, and finally, to block the rebellious Luhansk and Donetsk provinces.

A great example of the successful use of Special Forces in operations is the battle of Sloviansk.

In early July 2014, the Ukrainian Special Forces and the 95th Airborne Brigade re-occupied Donetsk’s third most important city in a quick, decisive battle. A special unit of 60 people infiltrated the city centre. When the rebels noticed that the enemy

² By mid-August 2014, only a few hundred special operations troops and up to 10,000,000 volunteers, mercenaries, and a few dozen half-regular units could participate in the battles [10].

were getting behind their posts, they immediately fought the invaders. Meanwhile, the forces of the 95th Brigade began to encircle the city. This initiated panic among the separatists, fearing that they would be cut off from their supply lines. Afraid of being trapped, they retreated 50 kilometres from the city, leaving their posts behind. Even the Ukrainian forces were surprised by the huge success [1].

After that in early August 2014, the 95th Airborne Assault Brigade executed a raid on enemy lines [1]. The 95th was the most skilled unit in Ukraine, which was even reinforced with two battalions of armoured infantry, a tank battalion and a self-propelled artillery battalion by mid-summer. The brigade crushed the positions of the separatists all the way to the Russian border, splitting the two “People’s Republics” [1].

During the operation, in order to avoid civilian casualties, artillery and armoured forces were deployed to a minimal magnitude; this has led to protracted fighting in villages and cities, mainly involving the infantry [1].

Because of the successful Ukrainian operation, the Russians began to weaken Ukrainian forces in mid-July with artillery strikes across the border. In six weeks, 53 artillery shots were fired at 40 different targets. The most devastating of these was the decimation of two Ukrainian mechanised battalions near Zelenopillya [1]. As a consequence, the Ukrainians had withdrawn and surrendered large sections of the border to the Russian-backed forces, effectively giving the Russian military complete control of over 100 kilometres of Ukraine’s south-eastern border. The Ukrainian Air Force played a crucial role in the initial success. The light-armed, undisciplined separatists were essentially unprotected from Ukrainian combat aircrafts and helicopters. In particular, the Sukhoi Su-25 crash planes and Mi-24 helicopters caused heavy losses to the rebels. The psychological impact of the air strikes was also significant and severely weakened the morale of the separatist teams, which were mainly local and Russian volunteers at the time.

Russian counter offensive

Because of the Ukrainian offensive, the separatists were forced to defend and retreat everywhere, and in the summer of 2014, this desperate defence suddenly turned into an offensive. Throughout July and August 2014, large infusions of new weapons and soldiers crossed the border to join the separatist fight against the Ukrainian Government. One such weapon transported across the border was the T-72 main battle tank. Not only had the Ukrainian military never used this tank in the conflict, but several variants of the tank spotted in Eastern Ukraine were never possessed by the Ukrainian military because they were updated versions of a tank that Russia never exported. The first recorded T-72 on Ukraine’s battlefields appeared in the hands of the infamous Vostok Battalion mentioned earlier, and the tanks were later spotted at key battles across Eastern Ukraine, including Ilovaisk, which were major turning points in the war.

In the last week of August 2014, when the Ukrainian victory seemed almost certain, 6 Russian battalion tactical groups crossed the border to attack Ukrainian forces by surprise from the rear. The intervention force swept through the surprised Ukrainian light and mechanised battalions, weakened by artillery strikes in previous weeks [23].

The Russians were able to join the separatists in Donetsk in less than a week, and in addition, surrounded the regular and voluntary Ukrainian combat forces stationed near Ilovaisk. When the Ukrainians dispatched more troops to attempt to break the siege, they quickly found themselves outgunned. During this battle, Chechen fighters, equipped with BTR-82A armoured personnel carriers that were only put into service in the Russian military in 2013, played a key role in closing the trap on the Ukrainian troops. Although Putin promised a free retreat for the trapped soldiers, he did not keep his promise. The retreating Ukrainian forces received a massive artillery fire that forced them to flee on foot, leaving their equipment and the wounded behind. The separatists shot some of the wounded, others imprisoned them and the less fortunate were tortured [1].

As the Ukrainian military rapidly lost territory over the next week and with Russian troops poised to launch an assault on Mariupol, Poroshenko negotiated a ceasefire with Putin at a meeting in Minsk, Belarus. The ceasefire only partially froze the conflict.

Following the successful summer offensive, the Russians embarked on a powerful winter campaign on January 17, 2015, disregarding the Minsk Ceasefire Convention.



Figure 1.

The main terminal of the Donetsk International Airport is hit by shelling [26]

Russian-backed forces worked to consolidate their victories by proceeding to shell various Ukrainian military positions every day. The particular interest to the Russian-backed separatists was Donetsk Airport, a strategically important position at the northwest corner of their capital city, and the site of perhaps their most humiliating defeat. In Donetsk, the defenders were able to create a supply line, although not very stable, and artillery support was available. Despite this favourable operational situation, the Ukrainian forces, who became known as “Cyborgs” for their stalwart defence of the position, came under increasingly heavy artillery, rocket, sniper, small arms and tank attack [25]. After 240 days of successful defence, the shelled terminal collapsed along with the Ukrainian defenders, and buried the Ukrainian hopes. After losing the airport, the defenders dug into their prepared defence positions along the line of villages west of Donetsk, which they had been able to hold.

The fighting in Donetsk only set off another wave of fighting in the area around the city, particularly near Debaltsevo, on the road between Donetsk and Lugansk.

Anti-Kiev militants, led by elite soldiers using Russian tanks and weaponry, such as T-72 models only used by the Russian military, led the assault on Debaltsevo, surrounding a large number of Ukrainian soldiers and inflicting heavy casualties on them. In the third week of the winter campaign, the forces stationed there have been slammed by the separatists on three sides because of the nonstop attacks. Putin also used this advantageous position to negotiate a full-fledged Minsk II ceasefire. Just a week after the conclusion of the negotiations, the Russian war machine was in action again. The fire of a long-range Russian MLRS and the debilitating seizures of more modern Russian tanks forced the Ukrainian forces to flee. The Ukrainian 128th Mechanised Rifle Brigade equipment was completely lost, the soldiers escaped on foot to a nearby forest. With a huge effort, a stable defensive line was built 30 km away, which stopped the Russian advance [1], [24]. The success of the Russian offensive was due to the non-precision artillery strikes guided by unmanned aerial vehicles and the superiority of the Russian armed forces in the massive area combined with unmanned aerial vehicles. From June 2014, to neutralise the Ukrainian Air Force, Moscow began supplying separatists with light air defence weapons, primarily shoulder-fired anti-air missiles. The rebels were able to shoot at least seven Ukrainian aircraft between June and July, including an Iljushin Il76 heavy transport aircraft with forty paratroopers on board and three Sukhoi Su-25 ground attack aircraft. Due to severe losses, the Ukrainian Air Force ceased operations over Eastern Ukraine by the end of summer 2014³ [1], [25].



Figure 2.

Operational situation after the Russian intervention [3]

³ A terrible memento of the separatists' air defence capability was the Malay BOENIG-777 passenger aircraft, which was allegedly shot down on July 17, 2014, causing the death of 300 innocent civilians.

Following the Minsk II Ceasefire Agreement signed on 12 February 2015, the intensity of the fighting decreased significantly, but the ceasefire was not achieved under this Convention either.

Tactical and Technological Innovations

The most important tactical and technological innovations of the conflict are as follows [1]:

- Ubiquitous presence of unmanned aerial vehicles
- Increased lethality of indirect fires
- Antitank guide missiles and the armed counterrevolution
- Declining survivability of light infantry vehicles

Bulk deployment of drones

Unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as drones, have been part of modern warfare for some time. The Russo–Ukrainian War was also able to show new ways of applying them. Although both sides used the drones, by mid-July 2014 the Russians almost flooded the air with them. At least 14 different types were observed during the summer offensive, which can be divided into 5 main categories [1]:

- Very long-range strategic surveillance high-altitude UAV
- Long range higher-altitude fixed wing drone flying over Ukrainian positions beyond Brigade rear area
- Medium-range fixed wing drone used in target acquisition and real-time engagement with less than 15-minute response time, associated with Uragan and Smersh Multiple Launch Rocket Systems
- Short-range fixed wing drone particularly associated working with BM-21 MLRS targeting
- Very short-range tactical quad-copter used for scouting defence positions and post-strike Battle Damage Assessment (BDA)

The astonishing thing about the Russian use of drones is not the combination of vehicles themselves or their unique features, but rather their capability to combine multiple sensing platforms into a real-time targeting system for massed, not precision, fire strikes. This is a different approach from Western warfare, because NATO looks at drones as a long-range detector, apart from the few and very expensive combat types like the Predator. The Russian method is based on three fundamental pillars: the sensor platforms, which are often used at multiple altitudes over the same target with complimentary imaging; a command and control system, which webs their input and provides a strike order; and an on-call ground-based delivery system which can produce strikes within short order [1].

Increased lethality of artillery fires

According to unofficial statistics, artillery fires on both sides caused approximately 85% of the losses. It happened because of the heavy use of new-generation sub-munitions, top-attack and thermobaric ammunition types, mainly used by the Russians. In addition, the Russians have substantially increased their ratio of rocket launchers to artillery so that, in the Donbas, it is now nearly 40%, so they almost doubled the amount.

Table 1.
Main types of MLRS used in the conflict [1]

Type	Calibre	Range	Type of Ammunition
BM-21 GRAD (Hail)	40 round 122 mm rocket	20 km	traditional
BM-21 1 GRAD (Hail)	40 round 122 mm rocket	30 km	traditional, dual-purpose improved conventional munition
TOS-1	12 round 220 mm rocket	6 km	thermobaric
BM-27 URAGAN (Hurricane)	16 round 220 mm rocket	35 km	traditional, dual-purpose improved conventional munition, thermobaric
BM-30 SMERCH (Whirlwind)	12 round 300 mm rocket	90 km	traditional, dual-purpose improved conventional munition, thermobaric

The Russian emphasis on the massive use of area fire is in stark contrast to the Western concern over the last decade with precision strike. While individual artillery strikes in NATO member states usually appear at brigade level, in Eastern Ukraine Russian battalions already had this capability [1].

Russian artillery devices outnumbered Ukrainians in number and range. A good example for the dramatic effect of the combination of new types of ammunition and MLRS is the destruction of two Ukrainian mechanised battalions in the summer of 2014 near Zelenopillya.

The increasing role of main battle tanks

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 showed how effectively anti-tank infantry can fight against tanks. In Eastern Ukraine, due to the lack of modern anti-tank devices (“tandem” warheads, and “top-attack” munitions), this trend was reversed and older Ukrainian tanks were unable to compete with modern Russian tanks.

At the outset of the conflict, separatists had the same types of tanks as Ukrainian regular forces (T-64, early T-72, T-80, both sides equipped with explosive reactive armour).⁴ However, with the Russian offensive in the late summer of 2014, more advanced tank types, like the T-72B3 and T-90, appeared [22]. The technical superiority of the T-72B3 and T-90 is well illustrated by the loss ratios. Against tanks of equal generation and capability, the Ukrainian gunners had generally been able to achieve a favourable loss exchange ratio. However, when the modern T-72Ms were introduced,

⁴ ERA = Explosive Reactive Armour.

Ukrainians lost three tanks to every one killed. In five company-size engagements documented where T-90s participated, the Ukrainians took double their normal losses and there is no evidence they were able to kill a single T-90 [1], [26].

The appearance of the T-90s was also a decisive moment in the battles of Luhansk (September 2014), Donetsk (January 2015) and Debalceve (February 2015). The anti-tank missiles of the Ukrainians were ineffective against the active defence system of the T-90s (Arena system). Only the artillery could keep the modernised Russian army away.

Declining efficiency of Light Infantry Vehicles

Since the end of the Cold War, armoured vehicles have become increasingly prominent in the world's armies. However, the experience of the Russo–Ukrainian war strongly questions the survival of these types of combat vehicles in modern wars. Light infantry vehicles are particularly decimated by sub-munitions and thermobaric type artillery ammunitions. The effects of this were also obvious on the battlefield: troop losses were so high that soldiers on both sides prefer riding on top of the vehicle. Assaults tend to be conducted with dismounted rather than mounted infantry; and the vehicles mounting the automatic cannon tend to be used for providing cover-fire from a distance rather than advance with the infantry [1].



Figure 3.

Ukrainian servicemen patrol in Donetsk in 2014 [26]

Conclusions

A few years ago, NATO seemed to be losing its significance. European members of the Alliance spent less and less on armaments, while U.S. foreign policy turned more and more toward the Middle East and then Asia.

The organisation was originally set up in 1949 precisely to prevent Soviet military expansion. As the first Secretary General of NATO, Hasings Ismay said: "The purpose of the NATO alliance is to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." [19]

NATO has developed a fundamentally cooperative policy with Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the revived Russian superpower policy has created a new situation.

The war under the new Russian doctrine poses a serious challenge, because its essence is that the aggression is implied, and does not cross the threshold over which NATO should introduce Article 5. Still, there is no war because the Russian TV talks about nonsense things.

The conflict with Russia should not be extensive, meanwhile deterring the Russian military force remains the key purpose, especially where Russia has been posing physically the most significant threat: the Baltic States, Poland and Romania [8].

In 2014, NATO Allies in Wales agreed to implement the Readiness Action Plan. The size of the NATO Response Force has tripled to 40,000, with a Spearhead Force at its core able to move within days. Eight small headquarters have been established in Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia to facilitate training and reinforcements, if needed. NATO began to adapt its defensive posture in response to major changes in the security environment – changes that have rendered that environment more complex and demanding.

In the face of these changes, the Allies agreed at the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016 to further strengthen the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture in order to better protect their citizens and to enhance NATO's efforts to project stability in its neighbourhood. One of the most important decisions of the NATO summit was the approval by the military alliance of a rotating battalion of about 4,000 people in Poland and the three Baltic States in response to the threat posed by Russia. NATO soldiers are stationing under four different headquarters in four countries: American in Poland, Canadian in Latvia, British in Estonia and German in Lithuania. The latter is perhaps the most important development of the current summit: the deployment of the German army within Europe, and right on the fringes of Russia, clearly indicates that one of the three doctrines that was agreed upon when NATO was founded, i.e. to hold the Germans down, is not valid anymore [13], [15], [14], [16].

NATO must also step in to stop Russian disinformation propaganda. In recent years, internet portals of unidentified origin, thousands of trolls spreading Russian propaganda about the refugee crisis or about the United States have proliferated across Europe. Brexit has only worsened the problem set; indeed, political uncertainty in Europe poses a security risk in itself. This uncertainty is precisely what Russia wants [6], [12], [14], [27].

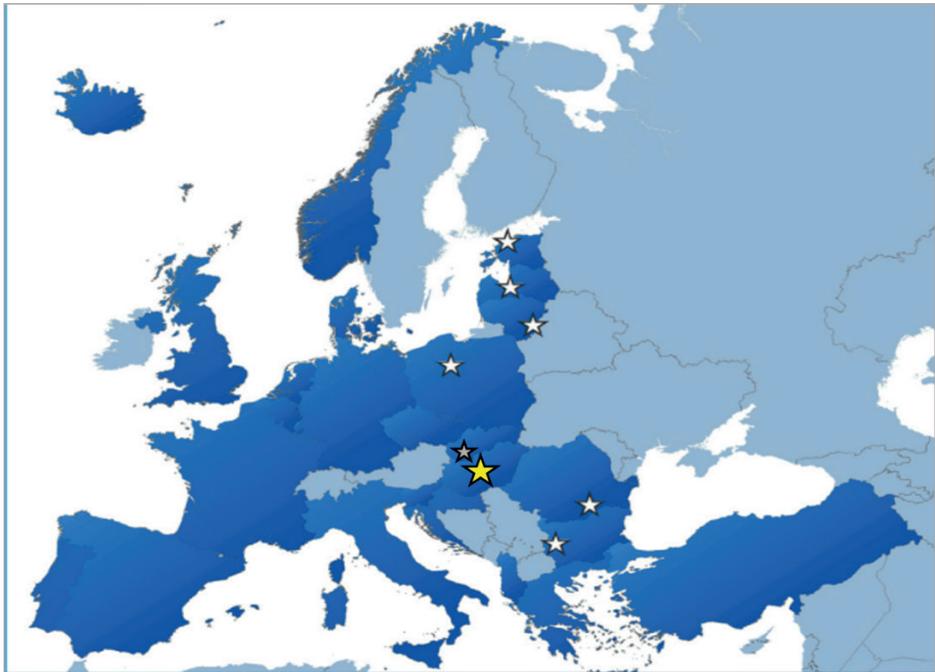


Figure 4.

NFIUs established in Europe (Compiled by the author from [28])

One thing is for sure: Russia took a step ahead of NATO and showed the world that if anyone violates Russian interests in the world, they have to face grave consequences.

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