Lessons of the War in Ukraine for Western Military Strategy

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Lessons of the War in Ukraine for Western Military Strategy

NATO is prioritizing conventional military capabilities to deter Russian encroachment on the alliance. Western planners and strategists view the war in Ukraine as a key benchmark that defines future capability requirements. As a result, various adaptive processes are underway within national armed forces.

By Niklas Masuhr

When Russian intervention forces occupied the Crimean peninsula in February 2014 in a coup de main, NATO was still committed in Afghanistan. After more than ten years of counterinsurgency and stabilization operations, the crisis in Ukraine triggered a reorientation towards its original purposes of defense and deterrence. During the same year, at the NATO summit in Wales, it was decided to enhance the speed and capability with which NATO forces could respond to a crisis. The subsequent Warsaw summit in 2016 added rotating multinational contingents in its eastern member states in order to signal the entire alliance’s commitment to their defense. Below these adaptations at the level of NATO, national armed forces are being reformed and rearranged because of the shift in threat perception. This analysis focuses on the military forces of the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. The tactics and capabilities Russia has brought to bear in eastern Ukraine in particular serve as the benchmark according to which these Western forces are being shaped.

Russian Warfare

At first glance, stabilization missions such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan appear to be more complex tasks for militaries to execute than conventional combat against foreign peers. However, a revived Russian military is posing fundamental challenges to NATO and its members, as it has been deliberately designed to offset Western strengths and to capitalize on NATO’s weaknesses since 2008. One major element of these “New Look” reforms was technological; in particular, a focus on highly modern standoff weapons such as long-range cruise missiles, anti-ship and anti-air missiles, and equipment designed to disrupt enemy radio and satellite communications. While Western forces enjoyed unimpeded air superiority and secure communications in Iraq and Afghanistan, neither could be counted on in a potential clash with Russian troops, significantly increasing the risk of casualties.

During Russian operations that led to the occupation of Crimea and the escalation in Donbass, respectively, the government obscured and denied the involvement of its troops. The Kremlin touted units deployed to eastern Ukraine in particular serve as local resistance fighters, and...
entire army formations supposedly consist-
ed of “volunteers currently on vacation”. In
reality, Russia pursued its objectives in both
theaters through a combination of local
sympathizers and Russian troops that at
least initially consisted of low-footprint
special operations and expeditionary forces
without insignia to keep the narrative of
local resistance alive as long as possible.
Apart from this focus on deniability and
ambiguity, the coup de main in Crimea and
later Russian operations in the Donbass
have little in common. The Crimean opera-
tion in particular, carried out by light expe-
ditionary forces, is a unique case since its
success was in part enabled by a local popu-
lation that largely viewed the existing Rus-
sian naval base at Sevastopol as legitimate.

However, in eastern Ukraine, a similar ap-
proach resting on a minimal Russian pres-
ence was markedly less successful, as sepa-
ratist militias were driven back by the
Ukrainian army despite being supplied
with weapons from Russia. In order to sal-
vage the military situation, Russian armed
forces conducted two large-scale offensives
in August 2014 and January 2015 involv-
ing thousands of troops, which enabled
Moscow to negotiate favorable ceasefire
agreements at Minsk. In combat, these
troops primarily used massive artillery fire
to destroy Ukrainian units from afar. Sepa-
ratist militias were deployed as screening
forces to reduce casualties among Russian
regulars and to spot and identify targets for
the artillery. Additionally, Russian forces
were equipped with anti-air systems and
sophisticated electronic warfare equipment
in order to keep the Ukrainian air force at
bay. The core of Russian regulars was only
used in combat against significant Ukrai-
nian targets using traditional equipment
such as main battle tanks, as well as mod-
ern communications and reconnaissance
drones.

Besides its ground forces, the modernized
Russian military is equipped with standoff
weapons such as ballistic missiles and air-
and sea-launched cruise missiles – not to
mention Moscow's large arsenal of strate-
gic nuclear weapons. These long-range sys-
tems explicitly serve to deter a local conflict
from escalating at Moscow's expense, for
example via a Western military interven-
tion. As such, they allow Russian forces to
be deployed with a low footprint, primarily
relying on local proxies, special operations
forces, or private contractors while rein-
forc ing the appearance of a local resistance
movement – as opposed to an outside mili-
tary intervention.

It should be noted, however, that the Rus-
sian interventions in South Ossetia,
Ukraine, and Syria have been, and continue
to be, executed in vastly different contexts
with distinctly identifiable approaches. Ac-
cordingly, it is not possible to codify Rus-
sian military action in a “playbook”, as is
often assumed. Similarly, conceptual pillars
of contemporary Russian warfare revolve
around traditional arguments put forth by
Soviet military theorists, even if in recent
history the emphasis has been placed more
on non-military and unconventional means.
As such, the often implied image of a ‘new
Russian way of war’ does not hold up.

**US Land Forces**

The US Army has undergone several sig-
ificant transformations in recent years,
each designed to focus the force on a par-
ticular challenge in line with national secu-
rit y priorities. The last of these transforma-
tions was the attempt spearheaded by
prominent generals, such as David Petraeus,
to rearrange the Army's structure and doc-
trine in order to conduct counter-insurgen-
cy, stabilization, and counter-
terrorism operations. However, with the Russian military re-
turning to the forefront of US threat perceptions, planners
and thinkers have realized that old
assumptions and dogmas are
obsolete. Previous assumptions
about how to fight a conventional war cen-
tered on the notion of US superiority in ev-
ery relevant element of modern warfare, in
particular through air superiority and as-
 sured real-time communications.

However, the recent Russian investments
mentioned above have leveled the playing
field, especially its anti-air weaponry, long-
rangle artillery, and electronic warfare capa-
bilities designed to jam US satellite and
radio communications. US Army doctrinal
documents since 2014 make this problem
quite explicit. The main assessment is that
Russia and China in particular have found
a way of employing military force that off-
sets US superiority and capitalizes on flaws
in the US logic of war. As such, Russian
operations in Ukraine have obvious global
implications for the Pentagon. The notion
that a quick, surging military effort can de-
feat any adversary appears to have become
a thing of the past. The reaction is a broad-
ening of the conceptual sphere in which
the US Army conducts operations. This
means that next to the traditional domains
of air, sea, and land, the new domains of
outer space, cyberspace, and the electro-
magnetic spectrum are viewed as relevant
domains in which to conduct warfare. The
nascent doctrine designed to deter Russia
and China in the future, *Multi-Domain
Operations*, seeks to synchronize activities
in all domains quicker and more effectively.

Additionally, the Pentagon expects future
conflicts to be fought in a “grey zone”. This
means a space between peace and war in
which military means are deployed covertly
and merge with intelligence and propagan-
da activity – as observed in Crimea and
Donbass. In those crisis scenarios, premu-
mary or disproportionate military action on
the part of Western forces risks a loss of
public legitimacy and could serve as a justi-
fication for open (or at least less covert)
Russian intervention. To be able to respond
to such conditions, the US Army has estab-
l ished *Security Force Assistance Brigades*,
consisting of experienced soldiers capable
of training and advising friendly countries’
troops within their own borders. For one,
this step intends to bolster the host mili-
tary’s ability to resist encroachment or out-
right invasion – the Ukrainian army could
be a potential candidate – without high
material costs. On the other hand, the
Army considers forward-deployed training
missions to be an advantage if US or
NATO troops are sent to reinforce the host
nation in the event of a crisis. The assump-
tion is that the training teams would al-
ready have forged links with the local mili-
tary and population, which would enable
reinforcing units to operate more easily in
the relevant socio-political context –
deemed a necessity in a “grey zone” context.

However, the escalation into conventional
fighting seen in eastern Ukraine points to
the risks associated with not preparing for
this kind of warfare. Accordingly, the US
Army has started to adapt its troops’ train-
ing and equipment in order to ensure supe-
riority over Russian contingents. For ex-
ample, Army troops are being trained to
conceal themselves from drone-mounted
modern sensors and to operate without re-
al-time communications and navigation.
In terms of equipment, the US land forces
are primarily attempting to regenerate their
artillery capabilities for effective suppres-
sion of any Russian counterpart, if neces-
The British army's changed priorities are reflected in its aspirations with regards to equipment and procurement. During operations in Afghanistan, the introduction of mine-resistant transport vehicles was fast-tracked; conversely, the focus is now on upgrading the Eurofighter Typhoon jets have been modified with ground-attack capabilities. Apart from these equipment-related changes, British forces are stepping up training programs in the Norwegian arctic in order to assist in the defense of NATO's northern flank. Royal Marines in particular are expected to reacquire arctic warfare skills after conducting more than ten years of counter-insurgency.

With regard to operating in a "grey zone" conflict, the British military has made two major adaptations. For one, a new unit (77 Brigade) was stood up that is designed to confront strategic propaganda, especially within digital media, and to conduct information operations itself. Additionally, the British army, much like the US Army, albeit on a smaller scale, concentrates the ability to train, advise, and assist foreign militaries overseas. These Specialised Infantry Battalions are thus designed to relieve the regular infantry of the burden of training missions in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

The Bundeswehr

Similar to its allies, Germany views the deterrence of Russian encroachment on eastern NATO states as the Bundeswehr's primary task in the foreseeable future. In order to do so, the German Defense Ministry has announced several course changes with regards to increasing personnel and equipment after years of quantitative decline. Berlin has realized that previous cuts have hit the military's conventional side particularly hard, which it now seeks to revive – even though stabilization missions are officially deemed of equal importance. As such, the army's currently hollowed-out divisions are supposed to be reinforced incrementally, and ready to be fully fielded by 2032. In a first step, the Bundeswehr wants to contribute a fully staffed and equipped brigade to NATO's Spearhead Force by 2023. However, these aspirations are contingent upon a significant and sustained increase in defense spending – which, as of early 2019, is anything but assured.

In addition to plans for increasing the size of the German armed forces, two innovative approaches stand out: Germany's focus
on NATO’s Framework Nations Concept (CSS Analysis Zapfe/Glatz No. 218, December 2017), and the creation of “mission packages” to give the forces more flexibility. The former concept describes the permanent integration of allied troops into German command structures. This authority does not extend, however, to automatic deployment decisions, which remain under the jurisdiction of national governments and parliaments. French troops placed under German command would not automatically be activated to conduct combat operations as part of the German unit. Accordingly, the main advantage of the concept lies in enabling allied national military forces to train with a much larger higher scope and scale than they could aspire to individually – and to practice skills required for conducting joint operations over long distances. For example, since being integrated into the Royal Dutch Marines, Germany’s naval infantry has had access to an amphibious warfare ship, a type of vessel the German navy does not have.

Secondly, the Bundeswehr views unit specialization for a specific type of mission, such as stabilization operations, as a luxury it cannot afford, instead opting for a single set of forces to conduct all relevant missions. For example, an infantry battalion is assumed to be capable both of conducting patrols in Mali and contributing to deterrence and defense in the Baltic states. In order to retain flexibility, mission packages are being created that will be attached to deployment units to contribute relevant experience and equipment without the unit itself having to be specialized.

Regarding the dimensions of procurement and equipment, the main aim is to regenerate previously cut capabilities. The German army is set to receive new artillery systems, including an increase in its munitions stockpile, as well as new infantry equipment. Additionally, the fleet of aging heavy transport helicopters is to be replaced by modern models. Another big-ticket defense project is the replacement of the Tornado aircraft and its ground-attack capability.

Financial and Cultural Divergence
Each of the three analyzed states is visibly attempting to leave behind the era of counter-insurgency and to embark on modernization programs. Each of the three analyzed states is visibly attempting to leave behind the era of counter-insurgency and to embark on modernization programs, including an increase in its munitions stockpile, as well as new infantry equipment. Additionally, the fleet of aging heavy transport helicopters is to be replaced by modern models. Another big-ticket defense project is the replacement of the Tornado aircraft and its ground-attack capability.

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