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ARGUMENT

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I'm Sorry for Creating the 'Gerasimov Doctrine'

I was the first to write about Russia's infamous high-tech military strategy. One small problem: it doesn't exist.

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Everywhere, you'll find scholars, pundits, and policymakers talking about the threat the "Gerasimov doctrine" — named after Russia's chief of the general staff — poses to the West. It's a new way of war, "an expanded theory of modern warfare," or even "a vision of total warfare."

There's one small problem. It doesn't exist. And the longer we pretend it does, the longer we misunderstand the — real, but different — challenge Russia poses.

I feel I can say that because, to my immense chagrin, I created this term, which has since acquired a destructive life of its own, lumbering clumsily into the world to spread fear and loathing in its wake. Back in February 2013, the Russian newspaper *Military-Industrial Courier* — as exciting and widely read as it sounds — reprinted a speech by Gen. Valery Gerasimov. It talks of how in the modern world, the use of propaganda and subversion means that "a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war."

It largely passed unnoticed, but Robert Coalson of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the U.S. government-funded TV and radio service broadcasting to Russia and other unfree countries, picked up on it and translated it. He sent it to me and, with his permission, I published the translation on my blog, with my own comments.

A blog is as much as anything else a vanity site; obviously I want people to read it. So for a snappy title, I coined the term "Gerasimov doctrine," though even then I noted in the text that this term was nothing more than "a placeholder," and "it certainly isn't a doctrine." I didn't think people would genuinely believe either that he came up with it (Gerasimov is a tough and effective chief of the general staff, but no theoretician), less yet than it was a "programmatic" blueprint for war on the West.

But then came the annexation of Crimea, when “little green men” — commandos without insignia — seized the peninsula with scarcely a shot fired. This was followed by the Donbass war, fought initially by a motley collection of local thugs, separatists, Russian adventurers, and special forces, accompanied by a barrage of lurid Russian propaganda.

Suddenly, it seemed that Gerasimov had indeed been describing what was to come, had we but realized it. Prone, as ever, to overcompensation, Western mainstream opinion swung from ignoring Gerasimov’s pronouncements to enshrining them as some kind of bleeding-edge blueprint for a new way of war.

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The problems with this formulation are numerous, though. Gerasimov was actually talking about how the Kremlin understands what happened in the “Arab Spring” uprisings, the “color revolutions” against pro-Moscow regimes in Russia’s neighborhood, and in due course Ukraine’s “Maidan” revolt. The Russians honestly — however wrongly — believe that these were not genuine protests against brutal and corrupt governments, but regime changes orchestrated in Washington, or rather, Langley. This wasn’t a “doctrine” as the Russians understand it, for future adventures abroad: Gerasimov was trying to work out how to fight, not promote, such uprisings at home.

But is this just a case of a pedantic scholar splitting hairs? There is no denying that the West is facing a multivector, multi-agency campaign of subversion, division, and covert political “active measures” by Russia. Does it matter what we call it? Isn’t that “placeholder” term as good as anything else?

But words have weight; they frame our understanding of that campaign, of how it works, and what it does. Without being aware of it, clinging to this inaccurate moniker also limits and misdirects us in our attempt to grasp and thus combat it.

First of all, there is no single Russian “doctrine.” If anything, their campaign is dangerous precisely because it has no single organizing principle, let alone controlling agency. There is a broad political objective — to distract, divide, and demoralize — but otherwise it is largely opportunistic, fragmented, even sometimes contradictory. Some major operations are coordinated, largely through the presidential administration, but most are not. Rather, operations are conceived and generally carried out by a bewildering array of “political entrepreneurs” hoping that their success will win them the Kremlin’s favor: diplomats and spies, criminals and think-tankers, oligarchs and journalists.

Secondly, we should not be thinking of this primarily in military terms. What we call “hybrid war” in Russian thinking is actually two separate things. What Gerasimov was talking about was the use of subversion to prepare the battlefield before intervention, precisely the kind of operations used in Ukraine.

Breaking the chain of command, stirring up local insurrections, jamming communications — these are all classic moves that hardly began in Crimea.

However, if Gerasimov and the generals think of “active measures” as a prelude to armed operations, the Kremlin’s national security specialists also regard them as an alternative. The Russians may get much wrong, but they are aware that NATO is a formidable enemy, and the odds are that its Article 5 guarantee of mutual defense would hold. In effect, NATO member countries are out of bounds for direct military action. How can a country with an economy perhaps the size of Canada’s, an army that is still going through an expensive modernization and already bogged down in two wars, and precious little soft power compete with a larger, richer coalition of democracies?

The answer is precisely by turning its democratic norms and institutions against itself, by opening existing fault lines, and by taking every opportunity to neutralize the West. This is a textbook case of what George Kennan called political war: “the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures ... and ‘white’ propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of ‘friendly’ foreign elements, ‘black’ psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.”

The point is this: If the subversion is not the prelude to war, but the war itself, this changes our understanding of the threat, and therefore our best responses. Maintaining serious armed forces as a deterrent is still necessary, but perhaps more emphasis ought to go on counterintelligence and media literacy, on fighting corruption (always a boon for the political warriors) and healing the social divisions the Russians gleefully exploit.

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Of course, the Gerasimov doctrine is an exciting term, and the man himself an unsmiling and craggy bruiser, an appealing frontman for those eager to portray Russia as a land of thugs and bullies. But by implying a military-led campaign and one with coherence and tight command, it also leads us to misunderstand the threat and miscalculate the response.

It also means we fail to appreciate how U.S. actions look to the Kremlin and the extent to which they have inadvertently contributed to President Vladimir Putin’s grand narrative of a Russia under threat from an insidious West. He is largely wrong, but not entirely so. Either way, if we also want to try to end the current confrontation, as well as fight off Russia’s political war, we need to understand the motivations behind it.

The “Gerasimov doctrine” was never meant to mean anything, and it doesn’t. It’s time to move past it.

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