

COMMENTARY AND REPLY

On “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare’ ”

Miguel Peco

This commentary responds to Andrew Monaghan’s article: “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare’ ” published in the Winter 2015–16 issue of Parameters (vol. 45, no. 4).

Andrew Monaghan suggests “the war in Ukraine has refocused Western attention on Russia and its ability to project power, particularly in terms of ‘hybrid warfare’” (65). Using the label “hybrid” in fact could result in overlooking the evolution of Russian military thinking, which contemplates “the increasingly prominent role of conventional force, including the use of high intensity firepower, in Russian warfighting capabilities” (65). As a consequence, the author warns that “NATO as a whole, and even the US itself cannot rely on the automatic assumption that it would win a conventional war” and suggests recalibrating away “from Hybrid warfare to mobilization” (74, 65). State mobilization, or *mobilizatsiya*, is a concept included in the military doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014) referring to measures for activating resources and capabilities in order to achieve political aims. According to Monaghan, mobilization provides a “more flexible understanding of how the Russian leadership might view how that war might be fought and won.”

Monaghan’s analysis on the implications of the hybrid warfare phenomenon is insightful, and the proposal about the need to refocus on the reality behind that label is consistent and pertinent. The concern the author highlights the most—how to deal with a supposed Russian conventional military superiority “in a specific place and at certain time”—however, is arguably not the highest priority, or at least not the first one that NATO may have. At the political level, NATO’s main concern is a potential blockade of its reaction mechanisms, which are constrained by the threshold set in Article 5, as well as an eventual lack of consensus among member states. At the military level, nuclear capabilities are more worrisome than conventional ones, especially when their potential use is contemplated under the concept of de-escalation as an extension of conventional war. For these reasons, I would suggest that, instead of state mobilization, a better framework for analyzing the implications of a potential conflict between the Russian Federation and NATO is what has been labeled “strategic deterrence” (*strategicheskoe sderzhiwanie*).

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The Author Replies

Andrew Monaghan

Miguel Peco argues that instead of “strategic mobilization,” a better framework for analyzing the implications of a conflict between NATO and Russia is “strategic deterrence,” which he terms *strategicheskoe sderzhivanie*. This, he offers, is because a supposed Russian conventional military superiority is not NATO’s highest priority, which at the political level is a potential blocking of its decision-making and reaction mechanism, and because Russian nuclear capabilities are more worrisome than conventional ones.

These are important points. As I note in my article, understanding Russian capabilities is not only about Russian conventional capability: Moscow has both prioritized the maintenance, modernization, and even enlargement of its nuclear triad, and also rehearsed how this might be used. Indeed, one of the main points of the article was to draw the emphasis away from understanding Russia through the prism of “measures short of war” and to highlight that by 2015 Russia had been preparing its armed forces for a regional confrontation with possible escalation into using nuclear weapons for at least four years; in other words, big warfighting operations with big formations. Nuclear capabilities are sewn into Moscow’s defense and security thinking and posture, and it would be a mistake to see Russia’s conventional and nuclear capabilities as somehow separate.

Peco’s point about deterrence raises two further questions. First, while deterrence has become a central feature of the debate about the Euro-Atlantic community’s relations with Russia, many policymakers and analysts alike have argued deterrence theory and practice has been largely forgotten by the Western policy community in the post-Cold War era and are having to be relearned. Moreover, *strategicheskoe sderzhivanie* is too limited a framework for analyzing the implications of potential conflict with Russia: it is just one pillar of strategic deterrence—deterrence by denial. To this should be added deterrence by punishment—in Russian, *ustrasheniye*.

And these are the reasons state mobilization is the main framework for thinking about Russia today and for the foreseeable future. Deterrence is primarily about the adversary, about understanding what and how that adversary thinks and operates, why the adversary acts as it does, and what will deter it from acting. Without such an understanding, deterrence cannot work—indeed, without understanding the differences between *sderzhivanie* and *ustrasheniye*, the wrong signals may be sent, and signals from Moscow incorrectly understood, if received at all. State mobilization is a concept that illuminates Russian activities across the whole state, including the essential elements of how Moscow conceives warfighting at the strategic level. It is the foundation, therefore, for much Russian activity, incorporating readiness and state resilience, as well as escalation and Russia’s own efforts to establish deterrence.