

Sino-Russian Convergence in the Military Domain

Eric Jacobson

SINCE THE 2014 UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION AND RUSSIA'S MUCH-HYPED "PIVOT EAST," scholars have paid greater attention to Sino-Russian relations, with camps developing around the question of whether the partnership is a genuine realignment or simply a marriage of convenience. However, military elements of this convergence were set in motion long before both the current crisis in NATO-Russian relations as well as the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship. This article argues that Russia and China both see the United States as their main competitor and are developing similar strategies to secure political objectives that fall below the threshold for U.S. and allied conventional responses.

The swift victory of U.S. forces in the 1991 Desert Storm campaign, the 1999 NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, as well as the 1995 Taiwan Strait Crisis forced military planners in Russia and China to devise new methods to secure their political objectives if conflict with the United States erupted. Russian and Chinese officials saw these U.S. actions as proof that the United States remained a belligerent actor that must be deterred from intervening in the internal affairs of Russia and China. In addition, the

early 2000s rise in oil and energy prices and the growth of the Chinese economy allowed for increased investments in the militaries of Russia and China, respectively. With the requisite resources, both countries set out to update their military capabilities and approaches to conflict.

Current Russian Thinking

Current Russian military theory remains consistent with Soviet thinking, with major themes of forecasting, correlation of forces, and forms and methods of actions.¹ Although some Western analysts seized on an article written by General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov² and the notion that Russia was developing a so-called "Gerasimov Doctrine" of hybrid warfare³, an important pillar of Russian doctrine is to eschew overarching models of warfare.⁴ In fact, militaries throughout history have used information campaigns in combination with conventional methods of warfare. According to Timothy Thomas, instead of broad models of warfare, Russia sets out a strategy based on the unique circumstances of individual scenarios, placing particular emphasis on the initial period of war (IPW). If the aggressor gains a large enough advantage during the initial period of war, it can lead to decisive

effects on the outcome of the conflict.⁵ This is especially prescient if available technology advantages the offense over the defense, and Russian theorists believe that the information and cyber domains provide such an advantage.⁶

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Russian operations emphasize this approach to the IPW by calling for quick and decisive action that creates new facts on the ground, but which optimally falls below the threshold for an allied response. In the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Russian forces defeated Georgian forces before the United States and its allies had time to adequately react.⁷ The United States sailed Coast Guard and other vessels into

the Black Sea to signal its intention to deter Russian aggression, but only after Russian forces had already secured key objectives in Georgia.⁸ Later in the 2014 Crimea operation, Russia utilized deniable special operation forces that gradually ramped up into a complete seizure of the peninsula. In Crimea, a quick operation created new facts on the ground. This allowed Russia to alter the strategic correlation of forces by changing European borders via force, without suffering a major conflict with the West. Russia's speedy operation stood in stark contrast to the more deliberative decisionmaking process of the U.S. alliance system. By the time the United States had begun to formulate a counterstrategy, Russia was already in full control of Crimea. Russia's calculus was likely that the appropriate allied response would be a point of discord between the United States and NATO, one that would delay decisionmaking long enough to render the cost of escalation unbearable, and would force the United States to acquiesce to Russian gains.⁹

Current Chinese Thinking

Chinese military thinking retains the same overall strategic vision that was put in place by Mao Zedong. China refers to this posture as “active defense,” and argues that “We will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked.”¹⁰ While China sees this posture as strategically defensive, it allows for offensive operations and actions if they secure overall defensive objectives. For instance, aggressive attacks against U.S. forces in the South China Sea, or against Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) installations in South Korea, would be justified because they fulfil the overall defensive objective of keeping outside powers from threatening China.

While retaining an overall strategy of “active defense,” Chinese thinking is

undergoing an evolution informed by Russia's experiences, and is putting greater emphasis on seizing the initiative in conflict. Chinese military thinking has characterized seizing the initiative as the "single most decisive factor in controlling and winning a war."¹¹ In order to seize the initiative, China would call on the full spectrum of diplomatic, information, military, and economic tools (DIME) up to and including actions in the space and cyber domain, which China views as highly offense-dominant. These military actions would privilege preemptive and surprise attacks that seek to catch the opponent flat-footed and unable to properly respond. One fantastical vignette of such a strategy was published in the book *Ghost Fleet*, which sees a daring Sino-Russian surprise attack on the United States.¹²

Chinese development of Integrated Network and Electronic Warfare (INEW) is also an attempt to assist in seizing the initiative in conflict. Based on Sun Tzu's theories, one hallmark of Chinese thought is that it is best to "win without fighting."¹³ INEW assists in this goal by merging electronic warfare with more strategic network warfare. However, because INEW relies on surprise and deception in order to secure access to networks, its utility is limited to the early phase of a conflict, placing an extra premium on the initial period of war. INEW can also be combined with psychological, public opinion, and legal warfare (collectively referred to as the three warfares) that place an emphasis on nonkinetic efforts to solve crises in China's favor.

Similarities of Russian and Chinese Thinking in the Initial Period of War

Both Russia and China have developed their strategies around conflict with the United States and its allies. Russia views NATO as its largest geopolitical threat, and sees the recent deployment of troops to the Baltic states and Poland, as well as NATO missile defense installations in Poland and Romania, as destabilizing. At the same time, China is deeply concerned with both U.S. THAAD deployments to South Korea, and the U.S. presence in the South China Sea, where China views most features inside the "nine-dash line" as part of its sovereign territory. According to Lora Saalman, Chinese theorists back Russian actions in Ukraine, seeing them as a justifiable reaction to U.S. and European actions to destabilize the former Yanukovych government.¹⁴ Because Russia and China share a similar view of U.S. foreign policy (that of a unipolar hegemon), Chinese theorists are sympathetic to Russian arguments, and have "applaud[ed] Russia for its defiance."¹⁵ In its own context, the Chinese government cites the U.S. rebalance to Asia as a ploy to contain China's growing influence.¹⁶ Chinese policymakers could therefore justify offensive operations to secure defensive strategic interests in the face of perceived U.S. containment of China's legitimate return to great-power status.¹⁷

In addition, China appears to have endorsed the use of deniable coast guard, other nonmilitary, and special forces, and views them as a principal component to seize the initiative in conflict. Dubbed “little blue men,” purported Chinese fishermen have engaged in actions around disputed reefs and islands in the South China Sea.¹⁸ By utilizing fishermen, Chinese officials can both deny that they are connected to the ostensibly independent boats while at the same time using their presence to justify sending more coast guard and military vessels in order to build up an official presence. This process leads to a de facto Chinese annexation of the features, and like Russian actions, also fall below the threshold for an allied response. Similar to the Russian concept of “maskirovka,” a broad approach to military deception, China also relies on various forms of military deception to achieve its objectives.¹⁹

Cyberspace is another domain that has brought Russian and Chinese doctrine closer. While both countries stress information sovereignty, the military utility of cyberspace is also quite similar. Both retired Russian Gen. Charis Saifetdinov’s article in *Military Thought*²⁰ and Ye Zheng’s “Lectures on the Science of Information Operations”²¹ stress that operations in the cyber domain be continuous with no barrier between actions in peacetime and wartime. This is at odds with traditional U.S. approaches to conflict, which set clear boundary lines between different phases of war.

Both countries also utilize deniable operators for cyber operations (especially operations that consist of information operations—i.e., disseminating fake news, troll farms) and hacking to steal information.²² These groups could prove instrumental in attacking vital U.S. or allied command-and-control systems early in a conflict, which would result in degraded combat effectiveness for U.S. military forces.

While China continues to emphasize its active defense doctrine, Russian officials are actively considering the imposition of a preemptive strategy. Some Russian officials retain a view that the West is attempting to keep Russia on its knees, a sort of siege mentality that could justify offensive and escalatory actions from a defensive standpoint.²³ Current Russian nuclear doctrine exists to deter aggression against the state, but also retains a strategy for intra-war deterrence. This intra-war nuclear strategy is often referred to as the Russian “escalate to de-escalate” strategy. Thus, the nuclear realm presents one area of clear divergence between the military thinking of Russia and China. China retains a relatively small nuclear arsenal and a firm no-first-use commitment.

U.S. Responses

Russian and Chinese military convergence presents major challenges to the international order. Russian and Chinese policymakers have studied

approaches to thwart U.S. national interests without drawing the United States and its allies into a full-fledged conflict. This convergence poses the very real danger that the world will become more illiberal and more hostile to U.S. interests in small increments, without ever eliciting a response from the United States that deters aggressive behavior. What can the United States and its allies do to ensure that Russia and China do not benefit from this aggression? As Russia and China modernize their military capabilities, the United States and its allies must realize that the world is headed for an increase in great-power competition and must be prepared to message effectively that it will thwart actions that it deems unacceptable.

Because Russian and Chinese strategy is not aimed at defeating the United States and its allies in high-end battle, but rather to conduct low-level actions designed to exploit fissures in U.S.-led alliances,²⁴ the United States should work to firm up trust and communication in the allied structures to ensure that no state can benefit from aggression against the United States or its allies. Communication and trust can be improved by better coordinating allied response during crises and by establishing channels to regularly exchange concerns during peacetime. This requires allies to have a place at the table to both plan and address concerns with the United States and other partners. While NATO members have the North Atlantic Council as their primary roundtable forum, U.S. allies in the South and East China Sea continue to rely on a patchwork of bilateral treaties with the United States. Given that China's (and North Korea's) strategy is to divide the United States and its allies, the system of bilateral treaties should be enhanced with a similar Pacific Council. Efforts should be made toward enhancing the ability for joint operations, and to encourage buy-in from multiple allies. This would both boost allied capabilities, as well as send a strong signal to potential competitors that U.S. and allied commitments should not be tested. Because Russia and China are devoting more resources toward military capabilities, better alliance coordination will not deter all potential aggression; however, tailored political and military messaging will help protect core U.S. interests (including freedom of movement in the South China Sea, legal borders, and the right to self-determination of independent countries) from low-level salami tactics.

Finally, the United States should recognize that the development of norms for cyber and space capabilities is still in its infancy. As with the U.S. employment of nuclear weapons in World War II, the first major use of such capabilities will have a lasting effect on their use in future conflicts. Therefore, the United States should continue working with Russia and China to identify potential rules of the road in these domains, given that they are offense-dominant and

potentially highly escalatory (especially given the U.S. reliance on space for its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and nuclear command-and-control systems). However, the United States and its allies should also prepare for conflict in degraded conditions and should train with its allies on how to develop comprehensive ground, air, and maritime pictures without relying on space assets that would likely be destroyed by adversary anti-satellite weaponry.

Conclusion

The U.S. military dominance in the 1990s sparked interest in Russian and Chinese military circles on how to develop theories of victory that would enable them to achieve their objectives against the United States. Currently, the two states have reached a consensus that the lowest-risk option is to engage in operations that exploit fissures in U.S.-led alliance structures and frustrate response options. The best method to achieve this is to engage in low-level actions that fall beneath the threshold for military responses and are quick enough to achieve objectives that establish facts on the ground. Russia and China's centralized autocracies advantage their wartime decisionmaking vis-à-vis the United States and NATO. The speed of that process puts the onus on the United States and its allies to respond rather than to deter aggression in the first place. Examples include Crimea, Chinese territorial encroachment against U.S. allies in the South China Sea, and soft-power information operations (i.e., 2016 interference in the U.S. presidential election). Going forward, the United States and its allies should recognize that the greatest threat remains the development of fissures between allies, and should prioritize the development of joint actions that would both develop new capabilities and signal to potential adversaries the firmness of U.S. allied structures.

Eric Jacobson was a research intern with the International Security Program at CSIS.

Endnotes

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