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General Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov: A Thinking Soldier



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"It is not enough to take into account today's challenges, it is necessary to predict the future".

—General Valery Gerasimov

Introduction

It is not often that a serving General becomes the subject of intense international scrutiny and yet when one does, it is usually for achievements in a major war effort that his nation and army has engaged in. Seldom are new doctrines or new methods of engaging in war attributed singularly to a charismatic soldier. General Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov, Hero of the Russian Federation, Chief of General Staff (CoGS) of the Armed Forces of Russian Federation and First Deputy Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, since 9 November 2012, has gained both fame and notoriety during the course of his eventful command. Having been appointed as the CoGS in the aftermath of corruption scandals in the Ministry of Defence leading to major

Key Points

- General Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov has played a key role in the modernisation of the Russian Armed Forces based on the 2008 military reforms agenda.
- One of his major contributions is in the cognitive domain where he has encouraged creative and innovative thinking at all levels in the RAF.
- 'New type warfare' as analysed by the General facilitates an understanding of contemporary methods of war-fighting.
- Russian interventions in Crimea and Ukraine are examples of textbook efficiency in execution of a theoretical concept.



organisational overhaul by Russian President Vladimir Putin¹ and the rather lack-lustre performance of the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) in the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008², General Gerasimov has overseen long due reforms, that started in 2008, in the structure, personnel management, equipment, training and thought-processes of the RAF.³ This has led to a tsunami of interest in the RAF capabilities and methods of war-fighting under General Gerasimov among the strategic community of Russia's western adversaries, NATO and USA, especially as a consequence of the Wars in Donbass, the annexation of Crimea and the Russian intervention in Syria. It, therefore, behoves an analysis of the command of General Gerasimov and the putative Gerasimov Doctrine, contentiously attributed to the General. The aim of this issue brief is to highlight the contribution of General Gerasimov in the transformation of the RAF from a Second World War relic to a modernised military force and derive lessons for contemporary methods of war-fighting.

The Making of a General⁴

Born in the city of Kazan, the capital of erstwhile Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) or contemporary Tatarstan, in 1955, perhaps martial qualities came naturally to a young Valery, in the city, whose name literally means 'cauldron'⁵ and which has been on the crossroads of the marauding Mongols, the Turks and the Russian Tsars, before falling to Ivan the Terrible and later being witness to bloody rebellions.⁶ He was educated in the Kazan Suvorov Military School, one of the many secondary schools specialising in military subjects in Russia. He graduated from the Kazan Higher Tank Command School in 1977 and commanded from a platoon to a battalion in the Northern Group of Troops, in Poland and the Far Eastern Military District, on the Russian Pacific coast. Having later graduated from the Military Academy of Armoured Troops in Lefortovo, Moscow, he went on to command a tank regiment in the Baltic Military District. He then commanded a motorised rifle division in the North-Western Group of Troops in the St. Petersburg region. Sometime after his graduation from the Military Academy of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff, he was appointed the commander of the 58th Army in the North Caucasus Military District during the peak of the Second Chechen War. It was during this war and the episode of the arrest of Yury Budanov (a Russian Army Colonel who was convicted for the kidnapping and murder of a young Chechen girl) that prompted Anna Politkovskaya, the renowned Russian journalist, writer, human rights activist and critic of the Chechen conflict, who was herself later assassinated, to say about him that he was "a man who was able to preserve an officer's honour".⁷ He was head of the Main Directorate for Combat Training of the Russian



Armed Forces before going on to command the Leningrad Military District and then the Moscow Military District. He was appointed as the Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in December 2010 and later, in April 2012, became the commander of the Central Military District, the largest Russian military district covering the Volga, Ural and Siberian regions with bases in the Central Asian states, before being elevated as the CoGS in November 2012. On his appointment as the CoGS, he has been variously described by Russian commentators as "an accomplished general [...] who has demonstrated that he is a thoughtful leader and a good organiser" and "a very competent person, a true patriot".⁸ Recipient of numerous personal awards, he was conferred the highest honorary title, "Hero of the Russian Federation", which "is awarded for services to the state and people associated with a heroic feat".⁹

What Sets General Gerasimov Apart?

Nothing in the profile of General Gerasimov is extraordinary in comparison to a long lineage of equally qualified, worthy, decorated and battle-hardened Generals of the Russian Army. How then is he different and charismatic? Perhaps it is General Gerasimov's unusually immense mandate and the faith reposed in him by President Putin, who in a televised interview soon after the former's appointment advised him "to press on with reforms to modernise the armed forces and [...] to improve relations with the defence industry", the latter being a tacit admission of the tensions that had been brewing between the defence industry and the Ministry of Defence under the stewardship of the preceding Minister of Defence and CoGS, as Putin went on to say, "we have recently run into changing demands of the defence industry from the Defence Ministry. Of course we must strive to have cutting edge items, but we need a certain stability too".¹⁰

The Russo- Georgian war of 2008 exposed major weaknesses in the structure and equipment of the force as well the leadership and performance of its troops, even though it ended in a spectacular victory for the RAF. The then Russian CoGS Gen Makarov lamented:

"To find a lieutenant colonel, colonel, or general able to lead troops with a sure hand, you had to chase down officers one by one throughout the armed forces, because those career commanders in charge of 'paper regiments and divisions' just could not resolve the tasks set [...] eighty-three per cent of Army units were numerically incomplete and only 17 per cent were combat ready. Of the 150 regiments in the Air Force only five are permanently combat ready, while in the Navy half the warships stand idle at anchor".¹¹



The reforms agenda was set by the then Minister of Defence Anatoliy Serdyukov and pursued with vigour but it inevitably ran into controversies with the defence industry, the General Staff and veterans eventually leading to his sacking along with the CoGS General Marakov consequent to a scandal involving ministry assets.¹² This brought General Gerasimov to the scene. Since 2012, he has pursued the ongoing reforms doggedly, lending them a character of his own, as the RAF gradually transforms from a Soviet- era behemoth, known for its massed tank and artillery set- piece battles; to a modern, highly mobile, flexible force engaging in new- type of warfare¹³, all along ensuring tranquillity in the industry- ministry relations while retaining the trust of the President and in the process becoming the longest serving CoGS in the history of the USSR/ Russian Federation.¹⁴

However, all the above are the least of his claims to fame. What really sets him apart is his contribution in the cognitive domain of the RAF. Gen Gerasimov has 'led a rejuvenation of military thought in Russia, motivating professors and instructors to train officers at the General Staff Academy in ways to use their knowledge to develop new concepts in military art and forms and methods of fighting. Officers are encouraged to be innovative and creative in these activities'¹⁵ He has himself set the bar by underscoring the importance of Promethean thinking in his numerous articles, lectures and presentations at the Academy of Military Science and other places.

The Gerasimov Doctrine

In January 2013, shortly after taking over as the CoGS, General Gerasimov delivered a talk on the topic "The main trends in the development of forms and methods of using the Armed Forces, the urgent tasks of military science to improve them", at the general meeting of the AVN (Akademiya Voyennykh Nauk or the Academy of Military Science). Its transcript was published in the Russian newspaper VPK¹⁶ (Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kur'yer or the Military-Industrial Courier) and would have largely gone unnoticed in the strategic community but for its subsequent publication, translated from the original, in a blog by a prolific London based lecturer and author of several books on Russian security affairs, Mark Galleoti, who snappily titled it "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War".¹⁷ Soon thereafter came the annexation of Crimea in 2014 followed by the Donbass War and the Gerasimov Doctrine became the flavour of choice among the European and US strategic community. Whether or not General Gerasimov's views, accentuated in his numerous talks and writings, qualify as a Doctrine is a moot issue but there is much to be gleaned from them about current Russian



military thinking and the manner in which wars have been fought by the RAF in the past decade.

The essence of General Gerasimov's views is 'New-type Warfare', which has the following attributes:¹⁸

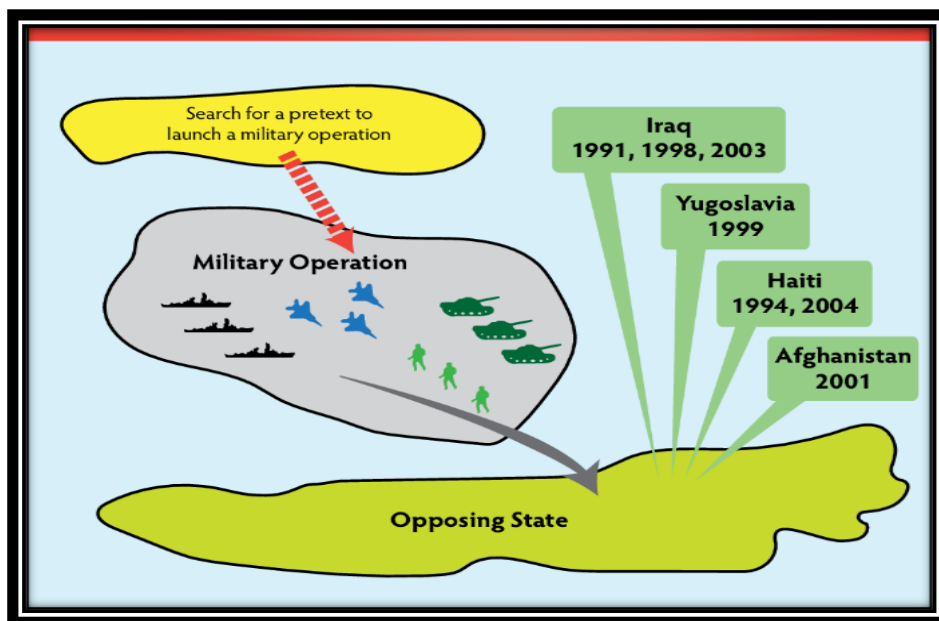
- Use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures, applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population, supplemented by military means of a concealed character. Peacekeeping and "crisis regulation" operations can be used at a certain stage as open military employment of forces to achieve specific goals.
- Use of mobile, mixed- type groups of forces, acting in a single intelligence-information space with new command-and-control systems has greatly reduced the spatial and temporal distances between opponents. The differences between strategic, operational and tactical levels, as well as between offensive and defensive operations are being erased.
- Use of special-operations forces and internal opposition, as well as informational actions, to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state.
- Use of no-fly zones, blockades and private military companies.
- Use of modern automated complexes of military equipment and research in the area of Artificial Intelligence, battlefields filled with walking, crawling, jumping and flying robots and fully robotized units capable of conducting independent military operations.

General Gerasimov draws these lessons from his understanding of the events during the Arab Spring and the NATO led military intervention in Libya in 2010-11. However, most elements of the new- type warfare are the precise template applied by Russia in the Crimean Peninsula, the War in Donbass in 2014 and their intervention in the Syrian Conflict from 2015 to date. Building on General Carl Von Clausewitz's views that 'war is only a continuation of state policy by other means', General Gerasimov postulates that 'the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown and in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness'. Typical of the professional arrogance of a military commander facing a superior adversary, he ominously asserts that:¹⁹

- No matter what forces the enemy has, no matter how well-developed his forces and means of armed conflict may be, forms and methods for overcoming them can be found. He will always have vulnerabilities and that means that adequate means of opposing him exist.
- Any academic pronouncements in military science are worthless if military theory is not backed by the function of prediction.

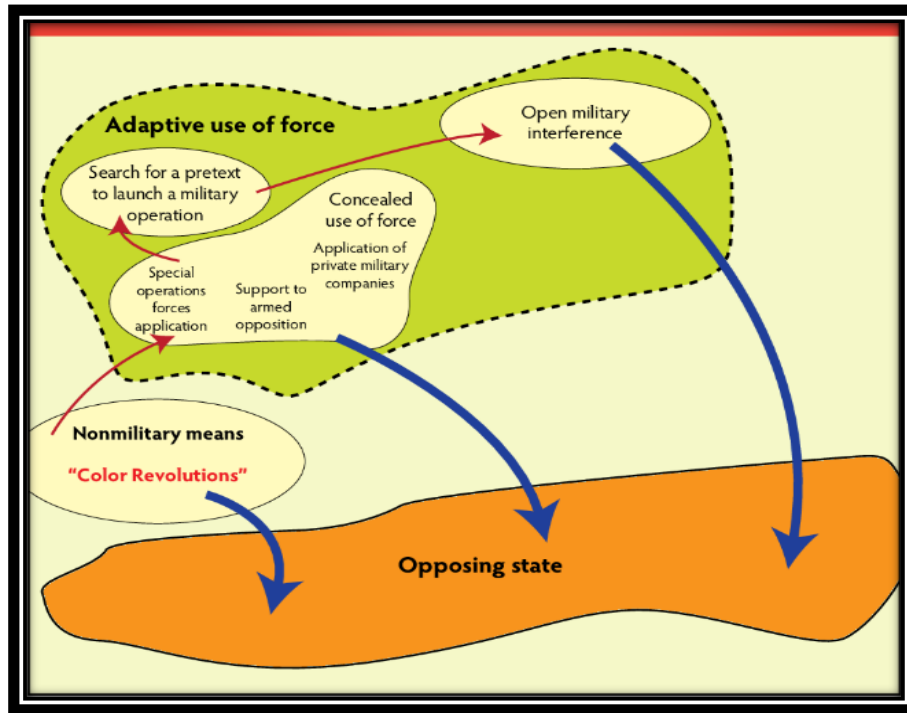
The last statement highlights the importance he lays on AI and scientific modelling in the future of warfare. In May 2014, General Gerasimov gave a presentation at the Third Moscow Conference on International Security. It would be of interest to view some salient aspects of General Gerasimov's thought process through excerpts of his presentation at the AVN, as noted in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 1: Traditional Approach For Achieving Politico- Military Goals



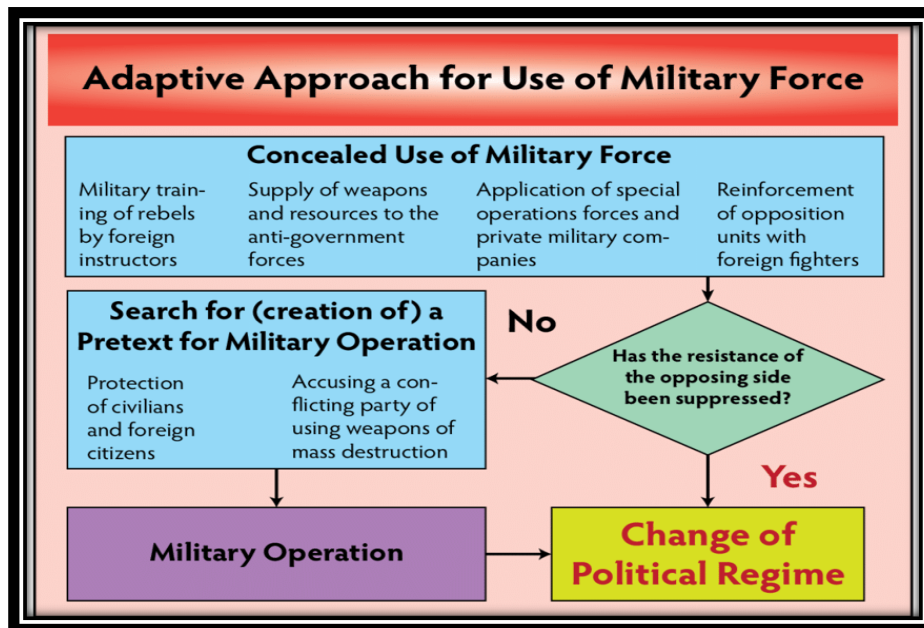
Source: Adapted from a briefing given by Gen Gerasimov during the Russian Ministry of Defence's Third Moscow Conference on International Security²⁰

Figure 2: “New” Approach For Achieving Politico- Military Goals



Source: Adapted from a briefing given by Gen Gerasimov during the Russian Ministry of Defence's Third Moscow Conference on International Security²¹

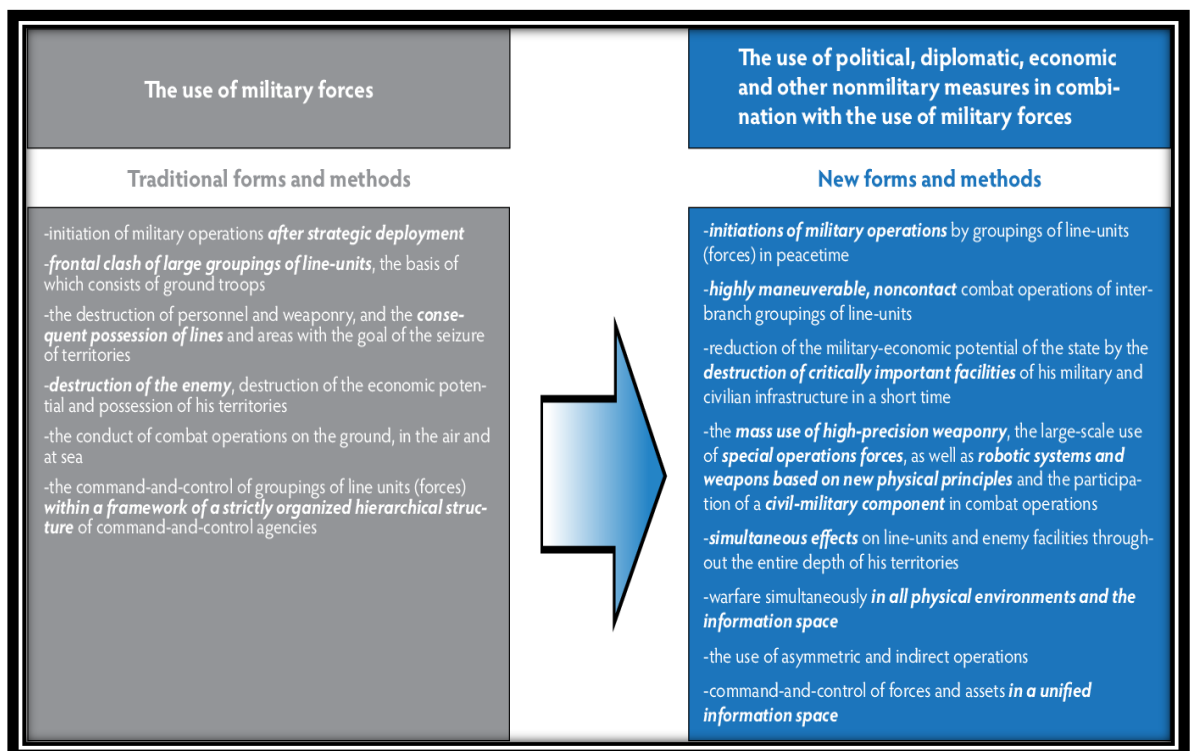
Figure 3: Adaptive Approach For Use of Military Force



Source: Adapted from a briefing given by Gen Gerasimov during the Russian Ministry of Defence's Third Moscow Conference on International Security²²

In the Russian Military thought process, the wars of the 1990s and 2000s and the various colour revolutions have been read as US interventions with the political aim of effecting regime change. Events that may have been set in motion by genuine grievances and resultant uprisings of the local population are believed to have been engineered deliberately by the Western nations to further their political agendas and increase their influence across the former Soviet Republics or its allies. From creating pretexts for traditional large scale application of military force as in Yugoslavia in 1999 and Iraq in 1991 and 2003 to the adaptive approach adopted during the crises in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Georgia and Ukraine, all interventions have allowed the US and Europe to fight low cost wars at the expense of local populations.²³ Gen Gerasimov explains the practical process of the adaptive use of force in another detailed graphic from his article published in VPN. While he may be constantly referring to the presumptive US hybrid war methodology, he is deliberately or unwittingly hinting at the wars that Russia is preparing for and the aim towards which most of the military reforms are targeted.

Figure 4: Use of Military Forces



Source: Adapted from Gen Gerasimov's article in *Voyenno- Promyshlennyy Kurier*, 26 February 2013, translated by Charles Bartles²⁴



Besides the focus on new-type warfare in his writings and talks at various fora, General Gerasimov emphasises some recurring themes, which point to his multi-dimensional views on the nature of threats faced by Russia and the preparedness required to meet them. These are as follows: -

- The distinctions between War and Peace have become blurred.
- The ability to forecast threats several decades into the future and advance planning and preparation to counter them.
- Need to develop a strong, non-nuclear conventional deterrence by means of precision weapons based on new physical principles and robotics.
- Dominance of the information space through earth, aerial and space-based platforms leveraging IT, mass and social media.
- Need to develop a robust, dependable and infallible C4ISR architecture which is adaptable to the dynamic nature of future wars and conversely to develop the ability to interfere with or destroy the adversary's corresponding systems.
- Deniability to ensure that military actions are within the norms of international laws and conventions.
- Coordination between the civil-military complex to meet threats and wage successful wars, which may be described as a 'whole of govt affairs'.

As General Gerasimov exhorts his officers, academics and scientific community to inculcate bold and creative thinking, he has laid the foundations for the varied, successful military interventions that Russia has embarked on post 2014, in its quest for Regional Dominance, after two ignominious decades following the breakup of the USSR.

Russia is At War/Peace

It is not the intent of this paper to describe the Russian military interventions in its neighbourhood in the past few years in detail. However, it is important to consider the salient methods employed by them and derive lessons to understand the emerging nature of warfare. The description is based on western analysis of the events and the role of the RAF because Russia officially denies any military involvement in the annexation of Crimea or the War in eastern Ukraine.

Figure 5: Map of Ukraine and Crimea (as on 22 February 2014)



Source: <https://geology.com/world/ukraine-satellite-image.shtml>

Annexation of Crimea: Feb Mar 2014

Crimea formally became a part of Ukrainian SSR in 1954 as a transfer by decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet from the Russian SFSR.²⁵ It has a long shared lingual, cultural and social affinity with Russia²⁶ having been a part of the Russian Empire since the 18th century. Russia and Ukraine both maintained substantial naval and army assets in its Black Sea ports even after the break-up of the USSR with related basing agreements. After the Ukrainian revolution and the ouster of the pro- Russia President Viktor Yanukovych on 22 February 2014, Russia annexed Crimea in a swift operation that lasted less than a month, ending with the referendum on 16 March 2014 that formalised the annexation.²⁷ Even though the annexation is not recognised by most countries, Crimea, administered as a Russian federal territory, continues to be under de facto Russian control ever since.

The methods employed by Russia and the sequence of actions that followed are enumerated below:²⁸

- Battalions of Spetsnaz, airborne units and other forces were mobilised close to the straits between Russia and Crimea.



- A Russian citizen was installed as the Mayor of Sevastopol, the largest city in the peninsula. Simultaneously columns of units present in the peninsula arrived in the city in APCs.
- A landing ship brought some Special Forces troops to Sevastopol.
- Russia launched a snap inspection (exercise) involving about 1.5 lakh troops in its Western and Central Military Districts. The drill was used as a cover to move troops close to the Ukrainian borders as a threat in being.
- Reinforcements were brought in to Crimea under existing transit agreements but without informing Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian units in Crimea were besieged in their bases, ships in harbour were blockaded and routes to the mainland blocked.
- Efforts were made by propaganda, psychological pressure and inducements to trigger defections among Ukrainian ranks with partial success.
- Landlines from Crimea to the mainland were severed, mobile communications jammed and local TV channels shut down thus cutting off most communication channels to the mainland. The information domain was totally dominated by Russia by beaming in propaganda content through Russian Radio and TV channels, speeches by senior officials and extensive use of social media. This began well before the actual operations and continued even after its completion.
- Special forces subunits organised local militias and joined them in disguise to take over the Parliament building and the airport. Russian soldiers, dressed as local police, maintained law and order. In fact, these soldiers earned the sobriquets 'Polite- People' or 'Little Green Men'²⁹, dressed as they were, in military greens without any insignias and were perceived by locals as polite, professional men.
- The political process was activated for a parliamentary vote on secession from Ukraine, by pro- Russia local leaders, followed by the referendum for accession to Russia.
- Subsequently, the Ukrainian bases were seized without resistance and soldiers permitted to depart for the mainland. The military hardware was later returned to Ukraine.
- The entire operation started on 24 February 2014 and by 18 March 2014 the annexation and control over Crimea was complete.

Total victory was Russia's in this campaign as they were swiftly able to achieve all their political aims with few losses. However, it was achieved in an environment where the



adversary was in total disarray (a provisional government having just taken over after the revolution in Kyiv), the area of operations was in the close neighbourhood with pre-positioned forces under existing arrangements and the adversary was demoralised and lacked a modern, efficient and effective military force, while Russia was able to field its best trained troops due to the small force levels involved.

War in Eastern Ukraine: March 2014 to Present

While victory in Crimea was achieved rather easily due to the element of surprise, as Russia launched a totally unanticipated and audacious operation in an area that could be completely isolated, the campaign in Ukraine was against the comprehensive forces of Ukraine with the potential of a NATO intervention, at a time when all concerned had already been alerted by the Crimean episode. Local protests in Eastern Ukraine, primarily in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts collectively called Donbass, broke out at the time of the eponymous Maidan Revolution in Kyiv, near simultaneously with the proceedings in Crimea. The trajectory of subsequent events is described below:³⁰

- The initial protests were organised by local, pro- Russia elements with anti- Maidan sympathies demanding devolution of power, federalisation and protection of the Russian language.
- Cyber-attacks were launched against Ukrainian govt websites by Russian entities. A focussed information campaign through TV channels, social media and speeches by senior Russian leaders including President Putin was started to discredit the Maidan Revolution and mobilise the public in support of the separatists, both in Ukraine and Russia.
- The early protests were controlled with relative ease by the Ukrainian forces and the protest leaders arrested.
- Soon thereafter, new leadership emerged. Many of those were Russian citizens and veteran paratroopers who had fought with the Russian Forces in various earlier campaigns and were decidedly in favour of acceding to Russia.
- Thus an armed insurgency began which was allegedly supported and equipped by the GRU, the intelligence wing of the RAF, with heavy weapons including shoulder fired anti- aircraft missiles. The Wagner Group, a mercenary group suspected to be funded and trained by the GRU, was also reported to be fighting in support of the separatists.³¹



- A large number of Ukrainian helicopters and transport aircrafts were shot down by the insurgents.
- Russia had already concentrated large forces along the borders during the Crimean campaign and this tied down bulk of the Ukrainian Army away from the insurgency.
- By the beginning of May, volunteers from Russia arrived in large numbers and pitched battles broke out on the streets of Donbass.
- In mid- May the separatists organised a referendum, without any legal oversight, and a vast majority voted for self- rule.
- In the last week of May, the separatists suffered a major setback in the Battle of the Donetsk airport. Thereafter, RAF started supplying mechanised and armoured vehicles, artillery and medium air-defence equipment to the separatists. These were likely being operated by the Russian volunteers, who were suspected to be RAF regulars. By this stage the Ukrainian Air Force was virtually ruled out of effective combat due to the losses suffered and the air defence organised by the separatists.
- However, by August, Ukraine had managed to drive a wedge between Donetsk and Luhansk and was close to completely encircling them. At this stage, the RAF launched a conventional attack with about 4000 mechanised troops and soundly defeated the opposing Ukrainian force.
- A brief ceasefire followed and in February 2015 the RAF launched a second attack, once again defeating the Ukrainian force. This defeat pushed Ukraine into signing a ceasefire agreement highly favourable to Russia, granting special status to the Donbass region and being obliged to amend its constitution for greater decentralisation.
- The conflict remains ongoing till date with numerous skirmishes and CFVs.
- Russia has in the meanwhile concentrated on equipping and training the separatists with the aim of converting them into a dependant, conventional and professional force.

While resounding victories were achieved in small- scale battles during the war, the achievement of Russia's political aim is open to conjecture. It is unlikely that the aim was to annex the Donbass region as Russia had an opportunity to launch large forces and defeat the Ukrainian Armed Forces, but it did not. This may have been due to concerns regarding NATO intervention or international opprobrium, which could be foreseen. It is probable that the aim was limited to creating leverage in Ukrainian political affairs by keeping the



insurgency in a frozen state in perpetuity and negating Ukraine's alignment with NATO and EU.³²

Russia has also been involved in Syria since 2015 with its Air Force carrying out an extensive aerial campaign in support of the Syrian Government forces. Spetsnaz and Special Operation Forces have been deployed in relatively small numbers for security of its assets, training of Syrian forces on Russian supplied equipment and reconnaissance missions for targeting purpose,³³ but not in direct combat operations, an indication that probably Russia never intended to get ensnared in a protracted messy war. The Wagner Group fighters are reported to have been involved in the actual fighting even prior to formal Russian entry into the arena. By its decisive aerial intervention Russia has turned the tide of the civil war with the Syrian forces retaking most of the lost territory.

Lessons From the Russian Method

General Gerasimov, in all his writings and presentations, may have been lamenting the unscrupulous methods employed by the US in the wars during its days of unipolar hegemony but he has effectively used a similar blue print with exceptional successes in a very short period. Some of the lessons that emerge from these Russian campaigns are highlighted below:-

- Nations must develop the ability to foresee the future, identify threats several years ahead and prepare for them well in advance.
- Wars are ideally conducted by a coordinated effort of all the civil-military resources of a country.
- Military interventions must be resolute and decisive.
- Information operations are an essential element in any campaign and must be launched well before the actual operations commence. These must be coordinated at the highest national level, based on a premeditated theme and must be specifically targeted using all available resources of mass and social media. Social media plays a decisive role in contemporary propaganda operations.
- Cyber warfare to deny essential services and disrupt command and control networks can create unexpected windows of opportunity that may be exploited to prepare the battle space.
- The possibility of exploiting the protest- potential of the population must be explored.



- Conventional deception continues to be as important as ever despite the plethora of ISR resources available today.
- Conventional non- nuclear deterrence is essential to safe guard against threats below the threshold of full-scale war.
- Deniability is essential to stave off pressure from the current international order, till conditions are created for justifiable military intervention. This can be in the garb of humanitarian or peace keeping missions.
- Special Forces, suitably disguised, must operate in the entire depth of the adversary. Private Military Companies can also be used to facilitate such missions.
- Rapid mobilisation, deployment and manoeuvrability of integrated units/ formations are the essence of modern warfare.
- Invest, if one must, in innovative ideas. Modern forces must be trained to think on their feet and react to rapidly changing scenarios.
- A fail safe and seamless C4ISR network is indispensable.
- There is no substitute for modern, cutting edge technology.

Conclusion

General Gerasimov arrived at the helm of the RAF in 2012 at a time of upheaval and turmoil. The Russian army organisations and equipment had been shown to be largely archaic and obsolete due to the poor economic performance of the country over the previous two decades resulting in limited efforts at modernisation. It had initiated an ambitious reform programme in 2008 that was to transform the forces into a modern war machine over the next two decades. And yet, the reforms had nearly run aground due to the resistance from the General Staff, the economic uncertainties, political pulls and pressures from the defence industry, very vocal criticism from the veteran community and corruption/ moral scandals. Despite all the difficulties and being individually placed on the sanctions list by EU and several other countries³⁴ as also the US trade sanctions on many Russian defence companies, he was able to take the reform agenda, as decreed by President Putin in May 2012, full steam ahead. By 2017, he was able to report substantial improvements in cadre restructuring, equipping of the strategic forces and other units, space assets and modernisation of equipment with state-of-the-art technologies.³⁵ This transformation was happening at a time when the country was simultaneously engaged on multiple fronts in politico- military confrontations.



While the nebulous theories constructed around the concepts of hybrid wars, compound wars, political wars, asymmetric warfare and new generation warfare have been around for some decades now, perhaps General Gerasimov is the first practitioner of the new- type warfare that takes into account all the older concepts and yet brings to the table an element totally Russian. How effective will these methods be in territories beyond the old Soviet areas of influence remains an uncertainty. But it is undeniable that from a period when the Russian adversaries in the west had stopped paying attention to its military prowess due to its decline from the peaks it had earlier achieved, the clock has been turned back and the RAF, its forms and methods, are once again the subject of intense scrutiny. Indeed, Gen Gerasimov, with his thorough professionalism, integrity and dextrous ability to navigate the civil- military interface, has been a worthy Commander of the Russian Armed Forces.

End Notes

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