

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 45
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2015*

Article 8

Winter 12-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Andrew Monaghan, "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare,'" *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2987.

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The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'

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ABSTRACT: The war in Ukraine has refocused Western attention on Russia and its ability to project power, particularly in terms of “hybrid warfare” through the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine. At the same time, Russian military thinking—and actions—are rapidly evolving. This article reflects on the increasingly prominent role of conventional force, including the use of high intensity firepower, in Russian war fighting capabilities, and advocates the need for a shift in our conceptualization of Russian actions from hybrid warfare to state mobilization.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014, there has been much discussion of Russian aggression in its neighborhood, Russian rearmament—even militarization—and a newly robust and competitive foreign and security policy that threatens both the international order and even the West itself. Much of this debate has had the feel of a response to an unwelcome surprise: few had paid attention to the Russian military since the end of the Cold War (with the partial exception of its successful, but rather moderate performance in the Russo-Georgia war in 2008), and few had predicted the intervention of competent, disciplined and well-equipped Russian special forces in Crimea in 2014.

In their haste to come to grips with what was going on in rather fast moving circumstances, observers traced their way back through recent history using the distorting light shed by hindsight. Some oft-cited older speeches by Vladimir Putin were rediscovered and embellished with other much less widely-known sources to suggest not only that the Russian operation was long pre-planned, but that Moscow had developed a new way of achieving its goals while avoiding direct armed confrontation with the militarily superior West.

One of these less well-known sources was an article published under the name of Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov in the Russian newspaper *Voенно-Промышленни Курьер* in early 2013. Relying heavily on this source, which some considered “prophetic” given the events in February 2014, many Western commentators suggested the Russian operation in Crimea (and subsequently in Eastern Ukraine) heralded the emergence of a new Russian form of “hybrid warfare,” reflected in what has become known as the “Gerasimov doctrine,” the contours

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of which had been set out in that article.¹ This supposedly new form of war conferred numerous advantages on Moscow, observers argued, since it heightened the sense of ambiguity in Russian actions, and provided Russian leadership with an asymmetric tool to undercut Western advantages: since Moscow would be unable to win a conventional war with the West, it seeks to challenge it in other ways. Furthermore, it fits readily into Western debates about the increasing roles of special forces and strategic communications in conflict.

Even as the situation in Ukraine evolved and Russia intervened in the war in Syria, this discussion of “hybrid warfare” became the bedrock of the wider public policy and media debate about Russian actions, particularly about potential further “hybrid” threats to NATO member states, and about how NATO and the EU might respond to and deter them. The terms remain a central aspect of the media and public policy debate in NATO and its member states as they explore and try to grasp Russian “ambiguous warfare.”

At the same time, while the term hybrid war offers some assistance to understanding specific elements of Russian activity, it underplays important aspects discussed by Gerasimov, and offers only a partial view of evolving Russian activity, capabilities, and intentions. One result is thinking about Russia has become increasingly abstract, not to say artificial, as Western observers and officials have created an image of Russian warfare that the Russians themselves do not recognize. Another result is too many have overlooked the increasingly obvious role of conventional force in Russian military thinking.

This article suggests Western emphasis from 2014 to 2015 has been on the *hybrid* aspect of warfare, and now that emphasis needs to shift quickly to focus on *warfare*. In other words, while there are hybrid elements, attention should be re-balanced to include more concentration on the Russian leadership’s development of its conventional warfighting capacity, even on its preparation for the possibility of a major state-on-state war. Indeed, in order not to fall behind evolving Russian thinking and capabilities, it is already time to supersede thinking about hybrid warfare to reflect on Russian state mobilization.

Debating Russian Hybrid Warfare

The labels hybrid warfare and Gerasimov doctrine have spurred and underpinned much discussion about the “Grey Zone” between war and peace, and Russian asymmetric challenges such as economic manipulation, an extensive and powerful disinformation and propaganda campaign, the fostering of civil disobedience and even insurrection and the use of well-supplied paramilitaries. In sum, Russian hybrid warfare as widely understood in the West represents a method of operating that relies on proxies and surrogates to prevent attribution and intent, and to maximize confusion and uncertainty. Conventional force is often obliquely mentioned as a supplementary feature, but the main feature

1 See, for instance, “Ukraine: Russia’s New Art of War,” *Financial Times*, August 28, 2014. G. Lasconjarias and J. Larsen, eds., *NATO’s Response to Hybrid Threats* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2015), brings many of these views represented in the debate together into one volume. For one of the first, also see M. Galeotti, “The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russian Non-linear Warfare,” July 6, 2014 <https://inmoscowshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war>.

of hybrid warfare is that it remains below the threshold of the clear use of armed force. Hybrid warfare is thus tantamount to a range of hostile actions of which military force is only a small part, or “measures short of war” that seek to deceive, undermine, subvert, influence and destabilize societies, to coerce or replace sovereign governments and to disrupt or alter an existing regional order.

Such definitions almost invariably draw on parts of Gerasimov's article, in which he does indeed state that the “role of non-military means has grown and in many cases exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.” He also points to the important roles of special operations forces and “internal opposition to create a permanently operational front through the entire territory of the enemy state,” and the blurring of the lines between war and peace. And of course Gerasimov's article is an important source for understanding Russian thinking, particularly the efforts of the Russian leadership to adapt to warfare in the 21st century, rather than harking back to an earlier period and a return to the Cold War, and how the Russian military has sought to learn how to neutralize the West's “overwhelming conventional military superiority.”²

At the same time, the term hybrid warfare has been rigorously critiqued by some in the Russia-watching community, as well as those in the wider strategic studies field. The main criticisms of hybrid warfare are worth briefly summarizing in four points.³ First, the term hybrid warfare is not new, indeed it has a long history, and in many ways is best understood as warfare. In relation to Russia, the term is often used without an awareness of historical context. The term, as one observer has pointed out, has “drifted far afield from its inventor's original objective, which was to raise awareness of threats that cannot be defeated solely by the employment of airpower and special forces.” Thus the term serves to cloud thinking.⁴

Second, the term hybrid warfare—as intended as a label for Russian actions—does not relate to Russian conceptions of warfare. While many purport to explain Russian conceptualizations of hybrid warfare, its appeal to the Russian leadership and the conditions in which Moscow might deploy such an approach, they do so without either Russian language sources or detailed, empathetic consideration of the view from Moscow, and the Russian leadership's actual approach and the considerable difficulties it faces.⁵ A Russian strategy is thus asserted and assumed, apparently being made in a vacuum, and without all the problems that strategists everywhere face.

Moreover, Russian commentators use the term *gibridnaya voina*, a direct transliteration of hybrid warfare, when they assert that the notion

2 V. Gerasimov, “Tsennost Nauki v Predvidenniye,” *Voenna-promyshlenni Kurier*, February 27, 2013, <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

3 Three good critiques are K. Giles, *What's Russian for Hybrid Warfare?* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, forthcoming, 2016); C. Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” *Military Review* (January-February 2016); S. Charap, “The Ghost of Hybrid Warfare,” *Survival* 57, no. 6 (December-January 2016).

4 A. Echevarria, “Operating in the Gray Zone: An Alternative Paradigm for US Military Strategy,” Strategic Studies Institute, 2016.

5 Empathy, it should be remembered, is not synonymous with sympathy.

of Russian hybrid warfare is a myth.⁶ Russian officials are emphatic that “hybrid warfare” is not a Russian concept, but a Western one, indeed that is something that the West is currently waging on Russia. This suggests that there is insufficient connection between what the West thinks it sees in Russian actions and how the Russians themselves conceive them, and consequently that the Western discussion of Russia is both abstract and misleading. This is an important reason for the strong sense of surprise in the West about Russian actions.

Third, related to this, the way Gerasimov’s article has been used in attempting to understand Russian actions in Ukraine and potential threats to NATO is problematic. The article, an attempt to frame a conceptual response to the complex situation that emerged with the so-called Arab Spring, and grasp how warfare had evolved since the end of the Cold War, and particularly in the twenty-first century, is often pulled out of this context. Indeed, in large part the article reflected a series of longer-term views that had already been taking shape under Gerasimov’s predecessor, Nikolai Makarov, Russian Chief of General Staff from 2008 to 2012. Of course, this had important implications for how Russia understood and operated in Crimea and the war in Ukraine. But the point is that Gerasimov’s article was a response to developments elsewhere, and the perceived evolution of war fighting as led by others, particularly Western militaries.

Moreover, only some conveniently relevant lines of the article are used in the hybrid analysis: important themes in the article are often overlooked, as are Gerasimov’s other statements, and strategic planning documents such as the military doctrine and foreign policy concept. Thus, while the article is important and revealing, much relevant material is missed in the Western discussion, giving an inaccurate indication of how Russian military thinking and capacity is changing.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the label hybrid warfare anchors analysis to what took place in February 2014 in Crimea, even as conditions—and Russian actions—have been changing. Indeed, the hybrid label serves to draw a veil over the conventional aspects of the war in Eastern Ukraine. While non-military means of power were deployed, they relied on more traditional conventional measures for their success. This was amply demonstrated in the battles at Debaltsevo, Donbass airport and Ilovaisk, during which much of the fighting involved high intensity combat, including the extensive use of armor, artillery and multiple launch rocket systems, as well as drones and electronic warfare. During these battles, massed bombardments were deployed to considerable lethal effect—in short but intense bombardments battalion sized units were rendered inoperable, suffering heavy casualties.

Additionally, by continuing to focus on the supposed hybrid aspects of Russian operations, it overlooks the evolution of Russian military thinking and the centrality of conventional force in it. Indeed, the ability to develop and deploy such conventional capability has only become more obvious, exemplified by Russia’s intervention in the war in Syria. Beginning in late September 2015, the scale and impact of Russian force deployed in this war has been significant: in December 2015, human

⁶ See, for instance, R. Pukhov, “Mif o ‘Gibridnoi voine’” [The Myth of ‘Hybrid Warfare’], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 29, 2015, http://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2015-05-29/1_war.html.

rights groups in Syria accused Russia of killing more than 2,300 people, including hundreds of civilians, in indiscriminate attacks that involved the use of vacuum bombs, unguided or “dumb” bombs and cluster munitions.⁷

While Russian officials rejected these accusations as “absurd” and a “hoax,” the statements of senior Russian defense officials themselves do illustrate the scale of the force deployed at tactical, operational and strategic levels. Thousands of tactical and operational sorties have been flown, striking hundreds of targets. At the same time, in support of the forces deployed to Syria, Russia has launched strategic strikes. These have included cruise missile strikes from long-range Tu-160, Tu-195MS and Tu-22M3 bombers launched from Russia, and also cruise missile attacks launched from surface vessels in the Caspian Sea and from submarines in the Mediterranean. Indeed, the Russian authorities themselves emphasize the scale and the strategic nature of the force they are seeking to deploy: supplementing “high intensity” operations with “massive” strategic air raids, delivering “powerful strikes” across Syria’s territory.⁸ In Putin’s terms, Russia has conducted a “comprehensive application of force...allowing [Russia] qualitatively to change the situation in Syria,” and a “great deal has been done over the course of the past year to expand the potential of our armed forces.. and Russia has reached a new level of operational use of its troops, with a high readiness among units.”⁹

This should be seen in the context of other aspects of the evolution of Russian military capability. A prolonged and deep series of reforms to the military has been underway since the Russo-Georgia war in 2008. A major feature of this has been a substantial spending program of 20 trillion rubles (approximately \$640 billion when it was signed off in 2010) dedicated to modernizing the armed forces by 2020, including ensuring that 70 percent of the armed forces’ weapons are modern, and the acquisition of 400 ICBMs and SLBMs, 20 attack submarines, 50 combat surface ships, 700 modern fighter aircraft, and more than 2,000 tanks and 2,000 self-propelled and tracked guns. Although there are some problems in achieving these targets, Russian officials state that by the end of 2015, 30 percent of weapons were new (more in some areas) and this should reach 50 percent by the end of 2016. Thus, while hybrid aspects are important, as one American observer has accurately stated, “while the US military is cutting back on heavy conventional capabilities, Russia is looking at a similar future operational environment, and doubling down on hers.”¹⁰

At the same time, the forces themselves have been learning how strategically to deploy conventional capability. A Russian naval flotilla was deployed to the waters off Northern Australia during the G20 in late 2014, for instance, indicative of the type of deployment that is likely to become more frequent, and the Russian ground forces have undergone

7 Amnesty International, *Civilian Objects Were Not Damaged: Russia's Statements on Its Attacks in Syria Unmasked* (London: Amnesty International, December 2015), https://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/civilian_objects_were_not_damaged.pdf.

8 “Soveshaniye o deistviyakh Vooruzhonnikh Sil Rossii v Sirii” [Meeting on Russia’s Armed Forces Actions in Syria], November 17, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50714>.

9 “Rasshirenoe zasedaniye kollegi Ministerstva oboroni” [Expanded Meeting of the Defense Ministry Board], December 11, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50913>.

10 Bartles, 36-37.

constant exercising at all levels over the last five years.¹¹ As one astute observer has suggested, these exercises have sought to address questions of both quality and quantity of equipment and servicemen, and were in the main about fighting large-scale interstate war. Thus, 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.” The Russian Armed Forces were “most likely capable of launching large-scale conventional high-intensity offensive joint inter-service operations, or ... to put it simply, to *conduct big war-fighting operations with big formations.*” Furthermore, each of the exercises during this period demonstrated ambitions to increase Russia’s military power, and were conducted in coordination with other agencies, suggesting that the focus was not just the fighting ability of the armed forces, but improving the state’s capacity to wage war.¹²

Re-reading Gerasimov – War Fighting in the 21st Century

With this in mind, it is worth reflecting again on Gerasimov’s article and the so-called “Gerasimov doctrine,” particularly in the context of other statements by the Russian Chief of Staff and other senior officials. Four points deserve attention.

First, if it is true that the article points to the increasing importance of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals, it also emphasizes the ramifications of these means—which reveals rather different concerns. According to Gerasimov, the lessons of the Arab Spring are that if the “rules of war” have changed, the *consequences* have not – the results of the “colored revolutions” are that a “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.” “In terms of the scale of casualties and destruction... such new-type conflicts are comparable with the consequences of any real war.” The Russian armed forces therefore need to have a “clear understanding of the forms and methods of the use and application of force.”¹³ This corresponds to the statements by other senior Russian officials about how hybrid-type conflicts can evolve and merge—and draw states into interstate wars that then undermine them. Russian armed forces need to be able both to fight that “fierce armed conflict” and also shut out potential “foreign intervention.”

Second, in the article, Gerasimov went beyond discussing “color revolution-type” conflicts, and also reflected on military power projection and strategic war fighting. Noting piracy, the September 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, and the hostage taking in Algeria, he stated the need for a system of armed defense of the interests of the state beyond the borders of its territory.

He also reflected on American concepts of “Global Strike” and “global missile defense” which “foresee the defeat of enemy objects and

11 Led by the flagship of the Russian Pacific fleet, the Varyag, a Slava-class cruiser, the group was a small but self-sustainable ocean-going flotilla.

12 J. Norberg, *Training to Fight. Russia’s Major Military Exercises 2011-2014* (Stockholm: FOI, December 2015): 61-2. Emphasis added.

13 Gerasimov, *op cit*. Emphasis added.

forces in a matter of hours from almost any point on the globe, while at the same time ensuring the prevention of unacceptable harm from an enemy counterstrike.” Similarly, he pointed to US deployment of highly mobile, mixed-type groups of forces. This suggests that the Russian leadership is deliberating on how to deal with a range of threats that involve the strategic deployment of armed force, including major strikes on Russia and its interests that clearly go well beyond a hybrid nature.

This relates closely to other statements by Gerasimov which point to his concern about the increasing possibility of armed conflict breaking out and threatening Russia. In early 2013—at the same time, roughly, as his article—he also suggested that Russia may be drawn into military conflicts as powers vie for resources, many of which are in Russia or its immediate neighborhood. Thus by 2030, “the level of existing and potential threats will significantly increase” as “powers struggle for fuel, energy and labour resources, as well as new markets in which to sell their goods.” Given such conditions, some “powers will actively use their military potential,” he thought.¹⁴

Again, this corresponds to concerns stated by senior figures about increasing international instability, competition and even war. President Putin, for instance, has stated that the lessons of history suggest that “changes in the world order, and what we’re seeing today are events on this scale, have usually been accompanied if not by global war and conflict, then by chains of intensive low-level conflicts,” and “today we see a sharp increase in the likelihood of a whole set of violent conflicts with either the direct or indirect participation by the world’s major powers.” Risks, he suggested, included not just internal instability in states, but traditional multinational conflicts.¹⁵ Subsequently, he suggested that the “potential for conflict in the world is growing, old contradictions are growing ever more acute and new ones are being provoked.”¹⁶ These points about the perceived need for force projection to defend interests, and concerns about the potential for conflict and even strategic strikes on Russia and its interests are what underpin both the major modernisation programme of the armed forces, the ongoing prioritization of the maintenance and modernisation Russia’s strategic nuclear capacity and the significant investments in the high north.

Third, a central theme underpinning Gerasimov’s article is *readiness*. At the outset, he suggests that in the twenty-first century, we have seen a tendency towards blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared. Yet as he himself states at the end of the article, this is not new: he quotes the Soviet military theoretician Georgy Isserson, who stated before the second world war broke out that “war in general is not declared, it simply begins with already developed military forces.” This is at the heart of the wider Russian approach to international affairs today: the concern about the speed with which conflict and war erupts and evolves, and therefore the need to be prepared for multiple eventualities in the name of defending the state and its interests at a moment’s notice. He quoted Isserson in stating “mobilisation and

14 Cited in “Russia may be Drawn into Resources Wars in Future – Army Chief,” *Russia Today*, February 14, 2013, <https://www.rt.com/politics/military-conflict-gerasimov-threat-196>.

15 “Zasedaniye Mezhdunarodnovo Diskussionnovo kluba ‘Valdai,’” October 24, 2014.

16 “Soveshaniye poslov i postoyannikh predstavitelei Rossii,” July 1, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46131>.

concentration is not part of the period after the onset of the state of war, as in 1914, but rather unnoticed, proceeds long before that.” This corresponds not only with other statements made by Gerasimov and others since early 2013, but with the exercises about moving Russia onto a war footing, in effect state mobilisation to prepare to withstand the test of war.

Beyond Russian “Hybridity” Towards Russian Mobilization

The labels hybrid war and Gerasimov doctrine have served an important purpose—it has energized debate about evolving Russian power and the range of tools at Moscow’s disposal, particularly highlighting the role of information and strategic communication. And it emphasizes the need for better coordination between NATO and the European Union. But at the same time, these labels illuminate only a specific part of what is a much larger evolving puzzle.

And there is a danger that the label is no longer encouraging thinking about Russia, but becoming an unchallengeable artifice: senior Western officials have noted that there is little point in questioning the concept of hybrid warfare because “that ship has sailed.” If this is true, and hybrid warfare has become an orthodox label, then the Alliance will face encroaching mental arthritis at the very moment that it needs to be most adaptable to a changing environment—and in consequence will suffer repeated unpleasant surprises. As another experienced Western official noted, the focus on hybridity in 2014 and 2015 meant that too few were looking at Russian strategic power, and thus were taken by surprise by Russia’s deployment of complex and massive cruise missile strikes on Syria. Thus, if the hybrid “ship has sailed” in the NATO debate, it should beware of icebergs and torpedoes. To avoid such perils, it is time to move on from thinking about hybrid warfare, and towards understanding the implications of the much deeper and wider Russian state mobilization.

Two conclusions flow from this. First, the Russian armed forces are in a period of experimentation and learning. Russian military thinking is rapidly evolving, absorbing lessons from its exercises, events in Ukraine, the war in Syria and how the West is responding to the situation. Indeed, an important undercurrent in Gerasimov’s article was the posing of questions—“What is modern war? What should the army be prepared for? How should it be armed? Which strategic operations are necessary and how many will we need in the future?” This reflects a lengthy and ongoing debate within the Russian military about the nature of war and how best to defend Russian interests in an increasingly competitive international environment. Such debates appear to include questions about the need for constant readiness forces and the requirements for short or longer war fighting, the role of reserves in successfully enduring a longer war, and about Western military capacities. Thus neither Russian capabilities and thinking about war are static, both are evolving quite rapidly.

This is not to suggest that after years of underinvestment and neglect the Russian armed forces have suddenly become invincible. They continue to face numerous problems. But while some Western military observers are painting a picture of a “2030 future” in which Russia has

developed a “new generation” warfare, one in which Russian ground forces would rely on massive salvos of precision rocket and artillery fire, targeted by UAVs and cyber and electronic warfare capabilities designed to blind NATO, we do not have to look as far ahead as 2030 to see precisely that capacity taking shape.¹⁷ This emphasizes the point that the Western understanding of the evolution of Russian military, already playing catch-up in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, should not fall behind either (let alone both) of the twin Russian curves of re-equipment and lesson learning.

Second, the gaps in how the West and Moscow are addressing the similar future operating environment are notable. Perhaps the most important element of this gap is in the approaches to “asymmetry.” In NATO, this has been understood as Russia adopting other, non-conventional means to attempt to off-set Western conventional superiority. It appears, however, that Russian thinking about asymmetry is different, and can include a conventional military superiority in a specific place and at a certain time. Western forces have gained much experience in Iraq and Afghanistan of a specific kind of combat. But the examples of what has happened in Eastern Ukraine, and subsequently in Syria—and what exercises suggest that Russian armed forces are preparing for—are instructive in terms of understanding conventional asymmetry.

To be sure, there is some recognition of this changing picture of Russia. Senior US and other allied officials and generals have noted this Russian conventional capacity and how it might have a negative impact on NATO and allied forces, noting, for instance, Russian anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Furthermore, in early 2016, the United States announced a quadrupling of its military spending in Europe over a two-year period as part of what Defense Secretary Carter stated was a “strong and balanced” approach to reassure Eastern European allies and to deter Russian aggression. “We must demonstrate to potential foes that if they start a war, we have the capacity to win,” he said.

But there are other implications for US defense policy that bear reflection, since the US bears the heaviest burden of NATO's Article V guarantee when it comes to conventional warfighting capacity. Two points stand out, military and conceptual. The military implications particularly relate to the necessary equipment for such an environment. Not all NATO forces are equipped for engagements in which light armored vehicles are vulnerable to massive, intense fire strikes and in which cyber and electronic warfare plays a central role in affecting command and control; indeed, NATO's electronic warfare capacity has withered over years, while Russia has developed its capacity, and NATO also appears to be struggling with how to address cyber threats at both policy and implementation levels. This needs sustained attention.

The conceptual point is perhaps more important. Russia has not been a feature of US defense thinking for 25 years. While it hardly needs saying that much has changed, it is worth noting that during this time, in other conflicts, it has sometimes appeared that US and allied combat superiority has been so marked that the active role of an opponent has

17 P. Norwood and B. Jensen, “Three Offsets for American Landpower Dominance,” *War on the Rocks*, November 23, 2015, <http://warontherocks.com/2015/11/three-offsets-for-american-landpower-dominance>.

been overlooked, that the point that the opponent has a vote has been forgotten. The point about recalibrating away from hybrid warfare—while keeping in mind what has been learnt over the last couple of years—to mobilization is that a better understanding of how and why Russia goes to war is necessary, as is a more flexible understanding of how the Russian leadership might view how that war might be fought and won. It is not clear, for instance, how Western populations would respond to conventional engagements in which there would be heavy casualties on both sides, and the ability to endure such a conflict is open to question. In such circumstances, therefore, NATO as a whole, and even the US itself cannot rely on the automatic assumption that it would win a conventional war.