Putin, Clausewitz, and Ukraine

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Russia has applied limited war as a means by which to achieve its political goals since the early 1990s. Conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan displayed Russia’s willingness to use the defense of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers as a justification to undermine the territorial integrity of neighboring states in order to maintain its influence over the former Soviet Bloc.[i] However, Russia escalated its formula of limited war through indigenous ethnic forces when it annexed the Crimean Peninsula. The separatist struggle that ensued in Eastern Ukraine marked a return to Russia’s traditional model, but with increased visibility from the West, and economic sanctions that Russia did not see with its previous endeavors.

Going back to Clausewitz, Russian President Vladimir Putin is attempting to balance the trinity of passion, military means, and political aims in executing a plan that relies on friction and mass to succeed on the ground. However, the real question might not be whether Putin’s strategy is Clausewitzian, but whether he is choosing the correct means by which to accomplish the goal of increasing Russian influence along its borders.

Clausewitz would laud Putin’s ability to use war as a way of achieving political ends. Russia only chose to initiate hostilities after other forms of political power had failed to maintain its influence over Ukraine such as gas subsidies and support to the regime of Viktor Yanukovych, especially towards joining Russia’s burgeoning Eurasian custom house.[ii] However, the removal of Yanukovych and the immediate shift of the new Ukrainian government towards Europe caused Russia to respond with military force through the annexation of Crimea and subsequent support to separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Russia views these actions as its best chance to maintain its influence over a state that it cannot “lose” to Europe.

Russia will continue to view Ukraine as absolutely essential to its national security framework as Russia considers the expansion of NATO and the potential deployment of land- and sea-based missile defense systems near its border as encirclement by the West.[iii]

Russia has used the passion of ethnic nationalism both domestically and within the Russian Diaspora to justify its military intervention in Ukraine. Konstantin Dolgov, the Foreign Ministry official in charge of defending the right of ethnic Russians living abroad, remarked that, “the bacteria of neo-Nazism is spreading across Europe.”[iv] At the same time, Vladimir Putin has publicly vowed to defend “Russian citizens” and “Russian speakers” from this perceived danger of persecution at the hands of fascist radicals including offensive action if necessary.[v] This rhetoric is popular in Russia and amongst ethnic Russians in Ukraine as many see the actions of the new Ukrainian regime as a direct challenge not only to Russian national security, but also as a threat of a “fascist” regime against ethnic Russians. However, the danger of overly relying on the passion of the population rises as support fades, and Russian public support for its government’s interventionist policies has continued to wane. As economic sanctions take their toll on the
Russian economy combined with a devaluation of the ruble and eroding standards of living, “enthusiasm for war and isolation is diminishing fast.”[vi] If this is the case, Russia might have to face the possibility of waging an unpopular war in Ukraine[vii] and falling into recession in 2015.

Shifting from the strategic to the operational and tactical levels, Russia is leveraging the Clausewitzian concepts of friction and mass to its advantage in Ukraine. The persistent ambiguity over Russian overt military involvement due to a lack of information coming out of Eastern Ukraine has been advantageous to Russian strategy as it causes friction and a fog of war to develop for both Ukrainian forces and the international community. Russian news media has greatest access to the region as reporters embedded with separatist units provide a propagandized version of the conflict for consumption both in Russia and, more importantly, with the targeted Russian Diaspora in Eastern Ukraine that watches predominantly Russian television.[viii] The idea that information technology has somehow lifted Clausewitz’s fog of war does not apply when Russia is able to maintain information dominance over the narrative coming out of Eastern Ukraine.[ix]

Despite taking advantage of friction during the initial phases of the conflict, Russia was also the victim of this concept when separatists shot down Malaysian Airlines Flight 777. Despite publicly blaming this tragedy on the Ukrainian government, Putin had to mitigate this event through a massive propaganda campaign within Russia and by temporarily limiting overt support to separatist rebels even as Russian troops continued to mass on the border.[x] During this time, the Ukrainian military seemed poised to reclaim all the territory that separatist rebels had seized at the beginning of the conflict.

When faced with the decision of whether to allow Ukrainian advance or escalate the conflict further, Russia decided to mass additional weapons, armor, and personnel in Eastern Ukraine with immediate effects. The Russian application of mass allowed the separatists to regain the offensive and extend their territorial control in the east. Had Russia decided not to mass combat power at this decisive moment, the conflict in Ukraine could have either ended with a restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty over the breakaway region, or forced Russia to escalate further to a conventional invasion.

According to Clausewitz, the nature of the commander is essential towards the execution of a military campaign to achieve political ends. However, he warns that the military and political structures should be separate with the former subordinate to the latter. In Russia, Vladimir Putin has essentially combined the roles of military commander and political leader, driving Russian political policy and the military means by which to achieve those goals. Putin has displayed characteristics of a leader that Clausewitz equated to “genius” such as decisiveness, political awareness, and determination, in the execution of a nuanced strategy to expand Russian influence.[xi] However, Clausewitz also understood that leaders must be able to alter actions and decisions based on the effectiveness of a strategy. Whether Putin can do this is still undetermined, but his staunchness in continuing to execute a strategy that alienates the states he wants to influence, seems counterintuitive.

As Clausewitz used historic examples to display general concepts, comparing Russian strategy in Ukraine with pre-WWI sheds historic light on Russian behavior. Prior to WWI, Russia equated its great power status to territorial expansion and influence over its Slavic Diaspora in the Balkans as Czar Nicholas II drove the decision-making process based on the nature of the authoritarian regime. However, this obsession with expansion led Russia to decline as defeats in the Russo-Japanese War and Crimean War weakened its status prior to 1914, and WWI led to social revolution.[xii] Today, Russia is executing an aggressive strategy to reclaim its great power status through a hybrid of conventional and irregular warfare under the auspice of protecting the Russian Diaspora. However, this obsession with destabilizing the territorial integrity of neighboring states, now including territorial expansion in Crimea, has weakened Russia financially and encouraged states within its perceived sphere to move towards the West. Russia is
following concepts from Clausewitz in Ukraine, but might be selecting the wrong strategy to achieve its political goals.

Works Cited


End Notes


[ii] Ibid, 63.


[vii] According to the Economist article “Russia and Ukraine: Putin’s People” from 13 December 2014,
“Over the past nine months opinion polls find that support for the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine have fallen from 74% to 23%.”


About the Author

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Captain Alex Deep is currently a Master of Arts in International Relations and International Economics candidate at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), focusing on Strategic Studies. Alex was previously assigned to 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. During his most recent combat deployments, Captain Deep served as a Special Forces Operational Detachment – Alpha Commander operating throughout Eastern Afghanistan, and Chief of Operations for Special Operations Task Force - Northeast. Captain Deep has been selected to instruct International Relations and Comparative Politics at the United States Military Academy upon completion of his studies at Johns Hopkins SAIS.


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