

Russia's Ambiguous Warfare and Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps

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Abstract. The Russian Federation used ambiguous warfare strategies to annex Crimea in 2014 and propagate Ukrainian instability. Rapidly generated, highly trained, and well-disciplined Russian forces on the ground in Ukraine unofficially coordinated with pro-Russian separatists to conduct psychological operations, intimidation, and bribery among the population to undermine nationalist resistance. Illustrating warfare's expanding reach, these activities obscure the factors that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization traditionally uses to identify the need for the cooperative defense of a member nation. This summary of a CNA-organized meeting of experts captures these topics and their implications on the U.S. government's current warfighting strategy.

Keywords: Gerasimov Doctrine, Russia, Ukraine, Crimea, Donbass, Baltic states, Spetsnaz, U.S. Marine Corps, *maskirovka*, ambiguous warfare, warfighting strategy, unmanned aerial vehicle, drone use

In 2014, “little green men”—strongly suspected to be Russian Federation soldiers—surged into Crimea and drove out all elements and symbols of Ukrainian authority.¹ Peace now prevails on the Crimean peninsula under Russian control, but as of this writing, war still rages in Ukraine's eastern region of Donbass, where Russian-backed separatists wield Russian weapons, drive Russian

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tanks, and reportedly fight alongside unacknowledged Russian troops to wage war against the Ukrainian military.²

Annexing the Crimean peninsula and supporting instability in Ukraine's eastern provinces, the Russian Federation and its armed forces have used so-called ambiguous warfare to great tactical and operational effect (map 1). This brand of warfare, or Gerasimov Doctrine, involves rapidly generating highly trained and disciplined forces who enter the battlespace out of uniform and in coordination with local supporters, using psychological operations, intimidation, and bribery to undermine nationalist resistance.³

Although direct confrontation between U.S. Marines and Russian Federation forces is unlikely in the near future, other nations and nonstate actors that Marines may encounter within the battlespace are closely observing Russia's use of ambiguous warfare. Since these potential adversaries will likely modify their own warfare strategy and tactics, the Corps must also understand the lessons from Crimea and Ukraine and how other adversaries might militarily adapt as a result of Russia's success.

Ambiguous Warfare and the Gerasimov Doctrine

Although formally undefined, U.S. government professionals have used the term *ambiguous warfare* since at least the 1980s to refer to situations in which a state or

Map 1. Ukraine following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea



Adapted by MCUP.

nonstate belligerent actor deploys troops and proxies in a deceptive and confusing manner with the intent of achieving political and military effects while obscuring the belligerent's direct participation. Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine clearly align with this concept, and discussion participants pointed out that it was not a new concept for Russia.

The events in Crimea and Ukraine were foreshadowed by an article published by the Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov.⁴ Gerasimov urged the academy to study and engage in the formulation of new doctrine and tactics to win future wars by explaining the rules of war have changed:

In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template.

The experience of military conflicts—including those connected with the so-called coloured revolutions in north Africa and the Middle East—confirm that a perfectly 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. . . . 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.

The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.

All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces. The open use of forces—often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation—is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.⁵

Experts in the CNA discussion agreed that the Gerasimov Doctrine evolved out of necessity, driven by Russian vulnerability rather than strength. Russia currently perceives itself to be reacting to a pressing external threat from a powerful adversary: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In December 2014, President Vladimir Putin signed the revised Russian Military Doctrine, which identifies NATO and its enlargement as a fundamental threat to the Russian homeland. Anticipating that the Russian Federation's largely conscript military forces would not prevail against NATO in conventional combat, the Gerasimov Doctrine advocates the use of a modern version of partisan warfare that targets an adversary's weaknesses and avoids direct, overt confrontations. Gerasimov

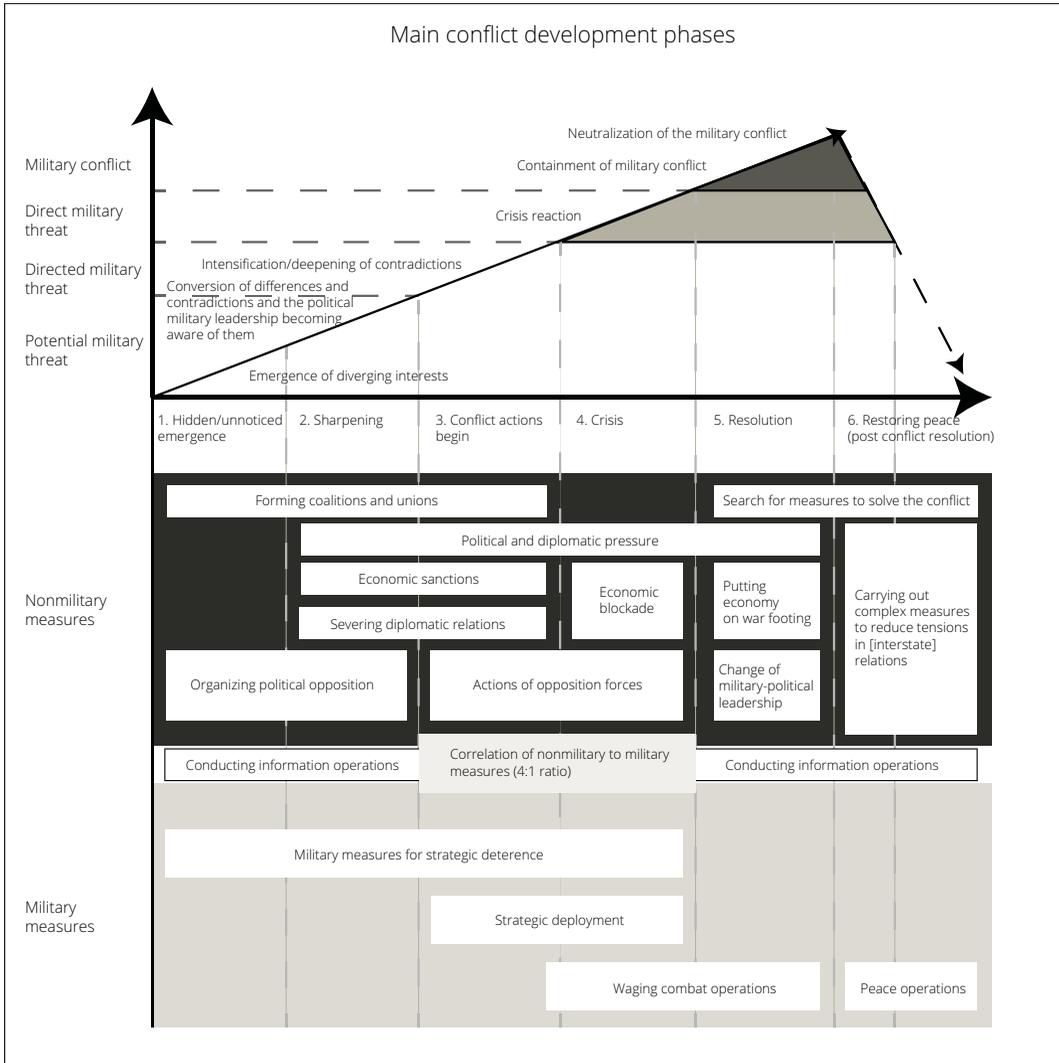
proposed a 4 to 1 ratio of nonmilitary to military measures. The nonmilitary measures in Gerasimov's doctrine include efforts to shape the political, economic, and social landscapes of the adversarial state through subversion, espionage, propaganda, and potentially a combination of these acts with cyberattacks. Grounded in *maskirovka*, the Soviet doctrine of denial and deception, use of ambiguous warfare keeps opponents wondering and hesitating by resolutely denying Russian involvement while working through as many agents as possible.⁶ In Ukraine, for example, third-party deniable (covert) agents included pro-Russian loyalists and local paramilitary commanders, as well as local gangsters who spotted an opportunity for profit and power.

During the discussion, an expert described how Russia applied Gerasimov's concepts in six main phases: emergence, sharpening, initiating, crisis, resolution, and restoration. Figure 1 illustrates that, although the phases are not sequential, they contain overlapping actions. In the emergence phase, Russia uses ethnic and pro-Russian populations within the target state to foment protests and resistance to the country's government. Potentially, these actions initiate tension in the target country by generating backlash and discrimination against ethnic Russians by the government and majority populations. In essence, Russia activates a self-reinforcing mechanism to escalate conflict.

In the sharpening phase, Russia uses economic warfare and political pressure to intimidate, coerce, punish, and undermine governments in target states to further weaken them. In the initiating phase, Russia uses ambiguous military and security personnel to infiltrate the target country and activates criminal networks to further foment unrest and ignite open conflict. In the crisis phase, the military isolates government positions, seizes key terrain, and destroys the defense and security apparatuses of the target country. In the resolution phase, Russia conducts information operations to deny involvement and sow doubt and discord in the minds of foreign governments about the developing situation and possible responses. The restoration phase concludes the offensive; Russia consolidates its gains within the target country, takes actions to de-escalate the conflict and reduce tensions, and installs a government amenable to Russian influence.

As one expert noted, ambiguous warfare requires the deliberate integration of military and nonmilitary forces, and while it is a less expensive form of warfare than open, conventional war, it does not always lead to a clear military outcome. Another expert commented that credible escalation dominance is key to making ambiguous warfare work and added that Russia has adeptly maintained a carefully calibrated balance between low-intensity, ambiguous actions and credible, high-intensity (possibly even nuclear) threats.⁷ Clearly, Russia's military has put Gerasimov's ideas to good practice in Crimea and Ukraine, though overwhelming success in Crimea has not been similarly replicated in eastern Ukraine to date.

Figure 1. Phases of Russia's ambiguous warfare



Adapted from Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kurier, No. 8, 27 February 2013 by MCUP.

Russia's Military and Special Forces

The Russian Military

To get a better sense of how Russia's military operationalizes Gerasimov's Doctrine, meeting participants discussed the structure of the Russian military generally, as well as its special forces, the Spetsnaz, specifically. One expert who has extensively studied the Russian military commented that nuclear weapons still play a central role in Russia's strategic thinking by allowing Russia to maintain a credible deterrent against Western action, as well as put forth a significant threat as part of the fourth phase of ambiguous warfare.

Russia also maintains a considerable military force with a sizeable reserve.

For example, one expert noted that, in less than one week, Russia could mobilize about one army (four brigades) and one airborne brigade. That said, however, Russia's military is spread thin over the longest land border of any single country. Additionally, Russia sees threats in all directions. As such, the experts discussed how Russia's military is aligned into different military districts. The Western District—the district concerned with Ukraine—has a large share of Russia's air force and air defense assets arrayed against possible NATO air threats from the West. Southern District forces are based in the volatile Caucasus region, which includes the Russian republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. Russians may now consider Crimea to be part of the Southern Military district, but the United States does not recognize the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. Eastern District forces protect the largely unpopulated eastern flank of Russia against potential threats from China. The Central Asia District largely serves as Russia's strategic reserve. This posture provides Russia's military with a limited ability to mass forces in any one direction without leaving gaps in the nation's defense elsewhere. Because ambiguous warfare does not require the higher resource demands of a sustained conventional campaign, the Russian armed forces find it an attractive option to mitigate the impact of overextended border defenses.

One expert noted that, unlike the West, Russia does not think about employing its military forces in terms of Services, such as army, navy, or special operations forces. Rather, its forces are primarily geared toward “fighting power” or “political impact” and use organizational constructs that place fighting power in support of political impact.

The Spetsnaz

One of Russia's major forces for political impact, the Spetsnaz played a significant role in the government's actions in Crimea and Ukraine. As Russia's special purpose forces, the Spetsnaz have historically conducted deep reconnaissance and nuclear missions, as well as disrupted adversary command and control structures in the context of large-scale conventional warfare. More recently, the force has gone through a painful but ultimately successful adaptation process to fight small wars more effectively.

In the past, the Russian military lacked a doctrinal base for small wars; however, in the wake of significant challenges in Russia's wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, the military purposely evolved the Spetsnaz toward a more deliberate role in small wars. In 2011, Russia reorganized the Spetsnaz to serve as a support element to its ground units, as opposed to its traditional role supporting Russia's main intelligence directorate, the Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye (GRU). In 2012, Russia created its own special operations command, Komanda Spetsialnogo Naznacheniya, which was given oversight of the Spetsnaz for a time. The bureaucratic battles, however, in the Kremlin continued and, by

2013, the Spetsnaz returned to their original supporting role with the GRU. The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the threats of terrorism that accompanied them were used to justify a major expansion of the Spetsnaz, and all of its units were brought to full strength.

Due to this level of readiness, one expert considers the Spetsnaz perhaps the GRU's most important political asset to their risk-taking organization and likely to remain so, given their practice of employing unorthodox agents, such as private sector individuals, warlords, mercenaries, and organized crime syndicates to conduct unconventional operations and ambiguous warfare. All present at the discussion agreed, however, that not all Spetsnaz are Tier 1 operators similar to personnel in U.S. military units, including the Army's Delta Force, the Navy's Seal Team 6, and the Marine Corps' Special Operations Command.⁸ Of approximately 17,000 Spetsnaz, perhaps only 500 are trained as Tier 1 operators, while as many as 20–30 percent of the total number of Spetsnaz personnel are conscripts as opposed to professional special operators. In essence, these special purpose forces closely resemble U.S. light infantry intervention forces.

Russia's Current and Future Application of the Gerasimov Doctrine

Crimea

Russia's Crimea operation in late February 2014, apparently long considered a viable military option, went relatively smoothly. In the first-of-its-kind documentary, "Crimea: The Way Home," broadcast in Russia on 15 March 2015 (first anniversary of Crimea's disputed independence referendum), Russian president Vladimir Putin boasted that he had given the order on 22 February 2014 to rescue embattled Ukrainian leader Victor Yanukovich who had just fled Kiev and to "start working on returning Crimea to Russia."

In a 3 September 2014 article in the *Military-Industrial Courier*, cited by the Jamestown Foundation's *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Colonel-General Anatoly Zaitsev enumerated the successes of the Crimea operation. Russia's normal resupply activities for its naval base leased in Sevastopol formed a convenient cover for the insertion of elite forces and equipment. Russian forces maintained strict radio silence, thus foiling NATO monitoring efforts. Partisan teams of Russia's Spetsnaz and naval infantry forces moved quickly and covertly throughout the peninsula to take control of key infrastructure. These teams isolated Ukrainian bases by cutting communications and disorganizing the Ukrainian troops' support systems. Simultaneously, Russia applied information warfare techniques to persuade Ukrainian forces to switch sides.⁹

Ultimately, Russia's operations in Crimea resulted in the annexation of key terrain for the Russian military at very low cost. Certainly, these operations surprised the West and served as a wake-up call regarding Russia's future intentions in the region.

Donbass, Eastern Ukraine

In April 2014, a pro-Russian insurgency erupted and quickly intensified within the Donbass coal mining region in Ukraine. The heartland of former Ukrainian president Viktor F. Yanukovich, Donbass borders the Russian Federation and most of the population speaks Russian.

Advised by Russian GRU officers, an odd collection of deniable agents—such as foreign volunteers, paid mercenaries, radical Russian nationalists, local mobsters, and former members of the disbanded Ukrainian Berkut special police force—took control of government institutions and key infrastructure in Luhansk and Donetsk, and proclaimed the cities independent people's republics. Despite the many factors favoring Moscow's design for the Donbass operation, experts discussing the operation doubt it went exactly as planned. The Russians found less support for the separatist agenda in Donbass than they had expected. The deniable agents who first assumed power in the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics were harsh, erratic administrators who often alienated the local population. Donbass residents able to escape the fighting did so by either going to Russia or by moving to safer areas in Ukraine. Military coordination among the separatists was poor, and they used sophisticated Russian-supplied equipment recklessly, as seen in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 on 17 July 2014.

By massing 40,000 troops on the Russian side of the border, Moscow heightened uncertainty and temporarily paralyzed decision making within the Kiev government while simultaneously deterring the West from offering significant military aid to Ukraine. Russian forces crossed the border at will, frequently under the cover of white-painted humanitarian convoys.¹⁰ In August 2014, the Ukrainian military regrouped, closed in on separatist strongholds in Donbass, and reclaimed 65 towns and villages. It looked as though the military endgame was approaching. At that point, the Russians were forced to take on more visible roles to prevent the defeat of the self-proclaimed republics. All the while, Moscow continued to deny Russian military presence in eastern Ukraine, while orchestrating an unrelenting media campaign to reinforce the narrative that the Russian-speaking population needed to be rescued from right-wing fascist extremists and chaos.

In September 2014, talks to halt the fighting in Donbass were held in Minsk, Belarus, under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Representatives from the Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Donetsk People's Republic, and the Luhansk People's Republic signed a cease-fire protocol known as Minsk I. It failed.

In February 2015, a second cease-fire agreement known as Minsk II was negotiated under OSCE auspices, though it remains imperfectly observed. Ukraine is unable to control its border with Russia, and Russia continues to resupply the separatists. Some experts predicted further escalation of tensions in the coming

months as a prelude to Russia's renewed push to create a land bridge to Crimea. Others believed that Russia does not have the wherewithal to expand the conflict zone substantially but will continue engaging in low-intensity conflict in the Donbass region.

Having made multiple trips to the Ukrainian front line recently, an expert shared the following observations about Russia's ambiguous warfare:

- Forces operate unmanned aerial vehicles and remotely piloted vehicles proficiently throughout the battlespace to gather operational intelligence and lock-on tactical targets, achieving approximately 10–15 minutes of separation between drone reconnaissance and strike missions.
- Separatists use horrific violence extensively to cow populations. Russian separatists not only abduct, torture, assassinate, kill en masse, rape, and execute prisoners, they also record their activities and post the videos on the Internet.
- Field units resupply under the guise of humanitarian convoys; a direct, observable correlation exists between these convoys and separatist activities.
- Mechanized infantry conscripts do not fight as well as such contract units as the Spetsnaz, and conscript units suffer disproportionate casualties. Ground maneuver units employ a combination of contract and irregular forces.
- T-90 main battle tanks, protected by reactive armor, remain central to high-intensity combat. Deep armored raids are prevalent on the dispersed battlefield, and the T-90's reactive armor deters most single-warhead infantry-fired antitank weapons used by NATO forces.
- Body armor and body armor piercing ammunition overwhelm normal infantry, especially when delivered with night vision and snipers.
- Artillery and multiple-rocket launchers propel advanced munitions, which caused 85 percent of all casualties in Ukraine and reduced battalion-size units to combat ineffectiveness in a single strike. These weapons become more effective when used in combination with remotely piloted vehicles' target acquisition capabilities.
- Light infantry fighting vehicles succumb on the modern high-intensity battlefield without tank-equivalent protection.
- Air defense components densely overlap to keep Ukrainian Air Force close air support and attack helicopters, which lack sophisticated electronic countermeasures and air defense suppression capabilities, out of the battlespace.
- Armies lack digital radios and depend on national communications networks that are vulnerable to jamming, interception, and real-time targeting.

Five Lessons on Russian Aggression from Crimea and Eastern Ukraine

The assembled experts agreed that five lessons could be learned from Russia's activities in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea:

1. Russia's ambiguous warfare strategy requires fertile soil. Russian-sponsored operations in neighboring lands have been more successful with support from large ethnic Russian populations and have fallen short in areas where those conditions do not exist.
2. Moscow's aggression strategy arises from plans, not impulses. With operations in Ukraine planned and prepared well in advance, Moscow may have similar plans for other former Soviet states.
3. Russia's residual fear of NATO means the government avoids a blatant Article V trigger.¹¹ Ambiguous warfare stems from this weakness, but Russia's lack of traditional state power should not be equated to a lack of serious threat.
4. A nation-states' national defense depends on credible, integrated military and security forces. Ukraine has underfunded its military since the end of the Cold War, failed to modernize its forces, and constantly hobbled its own security efforts by tolerating corruption. Additionally, steps taken to eliminate conscription negatively impacted military morale and effectiveness. Countries with aggressive neighbors should heed this lesson. Furthermore, potential target states should foster collaboration, cooperation, and connectivity among not only their own military and security forces, but also allied forces.
5. These nation-states' political stability necessitates the integration of Russian descendants and immigrants into the national identity. Otherwise, dissension develops among the pro-Russian population that creates an entry point for Moscow to influence the internal affairs of neighboring states.

Russia's Next Moves

Russia aspires to replace the current Western-dominated world order with one in which great powers divide the world into internationally recognized spheres of influence. Seizing pieces of Ukraine will probably not be enough to achieve this goal. In the near term, however, the experts assembled agreed that Russia is likely to shift its aggression toward the Baltic States and Black Sea region.

The Baltic States

The three small Baltic seaside states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were part of the former Soviet Union and are home to sizable Russian-speaking popula-

tions. With their standing armed forces at about 5,000–10,000 troops each, the Baltic States certainly perceive themselves to be vulnerable despite their membership in NATO. Should Russian aggression occur against the Baltics, the offensive would likely take the form of ambiguous, destabilizing operations to avoid triggering NATO's Article V. This strategy sows doubt in the minds of the populations of the Baltic States about Western resolve to defend them and contributes to Moscow's goal of undermining the NATO Alliance.

When the Baltic republics joined NATO in 2004, they were encouraged to develop niche military specialties rather than worry about territorial defense, which the international community thought unnecessary. Each nation's government is addressing this mistake, but finding a solution will take time. The national armed forces of Lithuania meanwhile have no current mandate to intervene in internal affairs, while the police and the ministry of interior of the Republic of Lithuania share responsibility for domestic security and would be the first to respond to an influx of pro-Russian actors similar to the Crimean annexation. Lithuania's efforts to develop a more comprehensive defense plan involve coordinating all national bodies of executive power. A January 2015 pamphlet written by the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense titled *How to Act in Extreme Situations or Instances of War* even instructed Lithuanians on surviving foreign occupation and organizing nonviolent resistance.

Black Sea Region

Russia's seizure of Crimea and its continuance of military operations in eastern Ukraine changed the strategic balance in the Black Sea region. With Moscow's military presence no longer constrained by former legal agreements with Ukraine, Russia can fully exploit Crimea and its former Ukrainian air bases, using both as a platform to project power. This base access enabled the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation to deploy conventional and nuclear capabilities of Tupolev TU-22M3 Backfire-C medium-range bombers and Iskander-M (9M72) short-range ballistic missile systems to the peninsula by 2016. An ambitious modernization program underway for the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol will add six new frigates, six new submarines, several smaller naval vessels, and possibly a Mistral-class amphibious assault ship. The fleet and other military units enhance Crimean antiship and antiaircraft capabilities. Russia's air defense systems in Crimea reach nearly half of the Black Sea while surface attack systems reach almost all of the Black Sea area. These military systems create a strong line of defense for the Russian homeland.

Historically, a Russian military build-up of this magnitude on the northern shore of the Black Sea would be of great concern to Turkey. The prospect of Russian–Turkish energy collaboration, however, may prove a critical factor toward mitigating Turkish concerns. Vladimir Putin, the current Russian president,

recently announced that, instead of completing the South Stream pipeline for Russian gas under the Black Sea to Bulgaria, construction will instead link the pipeline with existing Turkish systems. In contrast, Russian companies are investing in shipping companies and port facilities on the Turkish Black Sea coast, which are also useful for gathering intelligence and serving as entry points for Russian forces if necessary.

Seeking reassurance, Romania and Bulgaria (NATO members) and Moldova and Georgia (Partnership for Peace members) look to NATO and the European Union (EU) for security support because they are also targeted by active Russian influence operations.¹² Romania's foreign minister, Titus Corlăţean, openly expressed concern over Russian pursuits in the region.¹³ Bulgaria depends heavily on Russian energy supplies and military equipment maintenance and was subject to intense Russian pressure to go forward with its long-planned role as the entry point for the South Stream pipeline. But when the EU demanded Bulgaria suspend construction on the pipeline while it investigated the way contracts were awarded and then froze political talks between the EU and Russia over the crisis in Ukraine, Russia announced that the South Stream would not be built.¹⁴ Moscow hobbles Moldova and Ukraine by controlling the pro-Russian separatist enclave of Transnistria and trammels Georgia by formally controlling the foreign and security affairs of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, located within Georgia's internationally recognized national borders.¹⁵ Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are also focal points for Russia-linked organized crime in the region in the regard that local gangsters meld with Russian-backed forces to metastasize organized crime in eastern Ukraine. This social and political evolution suggests that we can anticipate further strengthening and utilization of criminal networks around the Black Sea littoral region.

The Future of Ambiguous Warfare: Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps

Beyond understanding and studying the Gerasimov Doctrine as it has been applied to ambiguous warfare in Crimea and Ukraine, the Marine Corps must be able to view the strategy more conceptually. Just as the experts left the discussion with more questions than answers, Marines should extend their learning to consider such questions as:

- How did the Russians arrive at and apply this doctrine?
- Where has it been successful and where has it failed?
- What are the offensive lessons from its application?
- What are the adversarial lessons from Russia's actions?
- Can ambiguous warfare be applied in other theaters?
- How might other potential adversaries adapt this doctrine?

Return to High-Intensity Conflict

While the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine has shown that ambiguous warfare can be highly kinetic and extremely intense, the assembled experts noted that battalion-size forces have been rendered combat ineffective in a single wave of artillery strikes. Discussion participants considered the following implications:

- What kind of expeditionary crisis response force does the Marine Corps need to be successful in this environment?
- What does combined arms and maneuver warfare look like in this environment, particularly when U.S. forces will have lost much of their technological edge, along with air and information superiority?
- Can a modern Marine Corps infantry survive on this kind of battlefield? What impact will sustained high casualty rates have on how we fight, especially given political sensitivities?
- Could the armored vehicles being used and developed by the Corps survive on the modern battlefield?
- Does the Marine Corps have a partner in this kind of fight? How will Marines integrate with those allies and other Joint forces (e.g., special operations forces) to operate on an ambiguous battlefield?

Fighting in the Information Environment

Moscow has displayed its ability to launch covert and overt information operations on a mass scale to global, regional, and local audiences. It has also shown the ability to rapidly spread carefully crafted lies and disinformation to generate discord at local and international levels. Marines must begin framing Military Information Support Operations by answering how the Corps will

- counter hostile messaging in an ambiguous warfare theater;
- transition counter messaging efforts from early in the enemy's campaign of street protests, agitation, and subversion to the later campaign of open warfare; and
- overcome political and strategic decisions that limit and constrict the use of Military Information Support Operations on the battlefield.

Political and Economic Subversion

Because the initial phases of ambiguous warfare are often hard to detect, experts agreed that nation-states might maintain a persistent presence in at-risk countries as one way of sensing the application of Gerasimov's concepts. With that in mind, the Marine Corps must consider

- how to work with allied and partner nations to counter political and economic subversion in at-risk countries;
- what partnerships the Marine Corps and U.S. military can build with allied military, security, intelligence, or policing institutions in a stable, preconflict environment to inhibit ambiguous conflict;
- which foundations of cultural knowledge are most beneficial during each stage of ambiguous warfare; and
- if additional education and training on building and sustaining relationships with local actors would be beneficial.

Official versus Nonofficial Armed Forces

The complicated network of ambiguous actors Russia employed in Crimea and Ukraine intertwined irregular and proxy forces, special forces, militias, criminal syndicates, and unidentified regular military forces. These relationships necessitate an examination of how future adversaries will challenge and exploit U.S. rules of engagement by incorporating nonofficial and official forces.

Insights for Strategic Planning

Participants in this discussion clearly recognized the importance of understanding Russia's employment of ambiguous warfare in Crimea and Ukraine as well as what the strategy might mean for future Marine Corps force structure, capabilities, operations, and tactics. Russia's use of population shaping measures before the hostilities phase included leveraging Russian-speaking populations in target countries. A *mélange* of ambiguous actors, including special forces, militias, and criminals; resupply missions disguised as humanitarian assistance convoys; and deliberate disinformation and misinformation about events on the ground furnished particularly effective components of Russia's ambiguous warfare strategy. Participants also pointed to how Russia's unmanned aerial vehicles provided near real-time targeting information for artillery strikes. In addition, reactive armor, horrific violence, and advanced munitions were particularly effective tactics on the ground to intimidate and subdue local populations as well as counter Ukrainian national defense forces. Thinking more broadly, experts considered how these elements of Russia's strategy and tactics could be generalized to other regions of the world and be employed by potential U.S. adversaries, such as China and Iran.

The implications of Russia's ambiguous approach are mostly at the Marine Corps' strategic level. At the tactical level, the actions of Russia's panoply of forces are no less ambiguous than other forces Marines have faced during the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. As such, panel participants felt that the basic principles of Marine Corps warfighting remain valid in this kind of environment. Moreover, the situation in Ukraine—while ambiguous in attribution—still

amounts to state-sponsored warfare with a high intensity battlespace that looks significantly different from Iraq or Afghanistan. Success in this environment demands Marines consider how to apply their warfighting principles on a battlefield that may include the instantaneous loss of air, fire, and information superiority; rapid fluctuations between highly lethal, low- and high-intensity actions; significant increases in casualty rates; interspersed fighting among populations familiar with extreme violence; and unlimited adversary warfare in the information space. Perhaps the best way for the Marine Corps to prepare for the future of ambiguous warfare is to answer this question: if the Corps gets the call to fight, how will it overcome the loss of all advantages?

Notes

This article was taken in part from a CNA report published in 2015 titled *Russia's "Ambiguous Warfare" and Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps*, coauthored by Mary Ellen Connell and Ryan Evans. It summarizes a discussion among experienced regional specialists, senior military officers, and internationally renowned security experts that was coordinated by CNA on 25 February 2015, which followed the Chatham House Rule of nonattribution to encourage a candid exchange of ideas between participants. Experts did not quote official sources during the meeting; however, supplemental information has been added to expand readers' purviews. For more on Chatham House Rule, see Royal Institute of International Affairs, "Chatham House Rule," <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about/chatham-house-rule>.

1. Russia amalgamates forces that cannot be accurately categorized into traditional units that have become known colloquially as "little green men." See Anton Shekhovtsov, "Who Is Afraid of the 'Little Green Men?'," *Intersection Project*, 21 September 2015, <http://intersection-project.eu/article/security/who-afraid-little-green-men>.
2. Russia began staging logistical support for military operations in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine at least as early as December 2014. See James Rupert, "Thousands of Russian Troops in Airport Push," *Newsweek*, 23 January 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/thousands-russian-troops-airport-push-301608>; and Gianluca Mezzofiore, "Igor Strelkov: I Started War in Eastern Ukraine," *International Business Times*, 21 November 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/igor-strelkov-i-started-war-eastern-ukraine-1475982>.
3. For more on the distinction between nonlinear and hybrid warfare, see Roger McDermott, "Myth and Reality—A Net Assessment of Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare' Strategy since the Start of 2014 (Part One)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 184 (17 October 2014), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42966&no_cache=1#.VjufITThjNj.
4. Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science in Prediction," *Voenno-promyshlennyi kur'er (Military-Industrial Courier)*, 27 February 2013, http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf.
5. As quoted in Mark Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War," *In Moscow's Shadows* (blog), 6 July 2014, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>.
6. For more on miskirovka, see Charles L. Smith, "Soviet Maskirovka," *Air Power Journal* (Spring 1988), <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/api/apj88/spr88/smith.html>; and Paul Huard, "'Maskirovka' Is Russian Secret War: Sneaky Tactics Are an Old Russian Tradition," *War is Boring* (blog), 26 August 2014, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/maskirovka-is-russian-secret-war-7d6a304d5fb6>.
7. Escalation dominance refers to controlling conflict tempo. See Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965).
8. For more on special operations forces' tiers, see Nick Irving, "How Would Our SOF

- Perform in North Korea?,” *Special Operations Forces Situation Report* (blog), 12 April 2013, <http://sofrep.com/19396/how-would-our-sof-perform-in-north-korea/>.
9. Roger McDermott, “Myth and Reality—A Net Assessment of Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare’ Strategy since the Start of 2014 (Part Two),” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 185 (October 2014), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/cdm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42972&cHash=a0aafae8f09b44fb11874373984c8b87#.VknXGoSof8s.
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 12. NATO’s Partnership for Peace program allows nation-states to build cooperative relationships between individual NATO allies as well as the collective organization. See NATO, “The Partnership for Peace Programme,” 31 March 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50349.htm.
 13. Titus Corlăţean, interview by Lally Weymouth, 30 April 2014, *Washington Post Opinions*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-russian-threat-is-a-reality/2014/04/30/ac19c2d0-cffb-11e3-937f-d3026234b51c_story.html.
 14. Tim Boersma, “The Cancellation of South Stream is a Pyrrhic Victory, At Best,” *Up Front* (blog), Brookings Institution, 18 December 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/12/18-south-stream-pipeline-boersma>
 15. A narrow strip of land bound between the Dniester River and the Ukrainian border, Transnistria initially declared its independence from Moldova in 1990, but has never been recognized by the international community. A 2006 referendum brought the issue to bear again, with the additional intention to join Russia.