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Russia's New Military Doctrine

NATO, the United States and the "Colour Revolutions"

Margarete Klein

Russia's new Military Doctrine is characterised by its close linkage of foreign and domestic threat perceptions. While the former relate to NATO and the United States, the Kremlin's concerns over the latter revolve around the spectre of a Russian "Maidan". To prevent that, and to assert its claims to a zone of influence in the post-Soviet space, Moscow is in particular expanding its "non-linear" warfare capabilities. This is precisely the point to which the West has to date failed to find an adequate response.

President Vladimir Putin signed the new Russian Military Doctrine into effect on 25 December 2014, replacing the version of February 2010. It was drafted by a Security Council working group, and had been commissioned before the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in July 2013. So as well as representing a response to the current conflict escalation, the document also addresses broader changes in Russia's domestic and foreign policy environment.

Focus on the United States and NATO

Like the 2010 version, the new Military Doctrine distinguishes between military dangers and threats. Dangers are precursors of threats that contain the "real possibility of the outbreak of a military conflict". Scenarios relating explicitly to NATO and implicitly to the United States continue to top the list of external military dangers,

with explicit mention of "expanding the bloc", the desire to "move military infrastructure" closer to Russia's borders, and the "deployment (buildup) of military contingents of foreign states" in neighbouring states. The latter would include the Readiness Action Plan that NATO agreed for its eastern European members in September 2014. The Doctrine also mentions NATO's expansion and its "desire to endow the force potential" of the Alliance with "global functions" in violation of international law. What this is driving at is out-of-area operations conducted either without a UN mandate (Kosovo 1999) or supposedly in violation of one (Libya 2011).

The Kremlin fears that Washington is undermining the strategic balance of power. While both countries still possess nuclear arsenals of similar dimensions, Moscow now lags behind – in some cases a long way behind – in developing new conventional defensive and offensive capabilities.

ties. In line with this, the new Doctrine classes as military dangers “strategic missile defence systems”, “the intention to station weapons in space”, “deployment of strategic nonnuclear precision weapons systems” and – explicitly for the first time in 2014 – “global strike” capabilities. The passages on cyberwarfare and “subversive activities of special services” are also new.

The list of “military threats” has not changed since 2010. But in a context of tension, more of the outlined scenarios now apply to the United States and NATO: “an abrupt exacerbation of the military-political situation (interstate relations”, “a show of military force” through exercises in Russia’s neighbourhood or “obstructing” state and military command and control, for example through a “global strike”.

Transnational Dangers and Regional Conflicts

Even if the analysis of dangers and threats focuses rather more strongly than before on NATO and above all the United States, it is by no means restricted to Western actors. Attention is also directed towards transnational dangers, which are listed in greater detail than in 2010: global extremism and terrorism, cross-border organised crime, and arms and drug smuggling. Russia is particularly concerned to guard against spill-over effects on its vulnerable southern flank. It is worst affected by drug smuggling from Afghanistan, where the Kremlin fears that the ISAF withdrawal will boost such activities and give free rein to Islamist organisations. Already today there are several hundred Russian citizens fighting with the Islamic State.

The Military Doctrine also directs closer attention to developments in Russia’s immediate neighbourhood. This is a direct consequence of the Ukraine crisis, as well as an expression of a generally heightened Russian assertiveness in the post-Soviet space. The establishment there of regimes that “threaten Russian interests” is categorised as a military danger, as are “inter-

ethnic and interfaith tensions” and “territorial claims against the Russian Federation”, which gain a sharper edge in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea.

Fear of a Russian “Maidan”

The real new aspect the Military Doctrine, however, consists in the close linkage of foreign and domestic risks and the increased emphasis placed on the latter. Two scenarios are uppermost: Firstly, the possibility of ethnic and religious strife escalating and eroding the internal cohesion of the multi-ethnic state. Such tensions are visible in Islamist tendencies in the North Caucasus, as well as growth in Russian nationalism.

But most space is devoted to the second scenario: “activities aimed at forcibly changing the constitutional system of the Russian Federation”. The Military Doctrine reveals just how strongly the Moscow leadership fears for the stability of its authority and how vulnerable it feels to societal protest. The legitimacy of Putin’s system is rooted above all in its economic success. And that is now threatened by the impact of Western sanctions and the low oil price. Here the Russian leadership keeps a particularly watchful eye on “activities intended to have an information effect on the population, above all on young citizens”, which alludes to the dangers it sees emanating from social networks and the new media.

The Military Doctrine makes no departure from Moscow’s tendency to “securitize” domestic problems. The Kremlin describes the Arab Spring and the “colour revolutions” as externally instigated processes and sees itself as the target of western regime-change plans. Alongside the military might of NATO and the United States, the soft capabilities of the European Union are also increasingly perceived as a danger. This narrative construct serves to suppress domestic dissent and externalise blame for political and economic failures.

Non-Nuclear Deterrence

The Military Doctrine also offers insights into how the Kremlin intends to respond to the identified risks. Moscow continues to rely on nuclear weapons for deterrence, asserting its right to use them in response to both nuclear attack and a large-scale conventional attack that threatens the existence of the Russian Federation.

However, given the new conventional capabilities of the United States and foreseeably also China, Moscow no longer regards nuclear deterrence as offering adequate protection, and has therefore introduced the new concept of “non-nuclear deterrence”. This means expanding its own network-centric and “global strike” capabilities. The Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, has already announced that the procurement programme for 2016–2020 will place particular emphasis on precision weapons, information and reconnaissance systems, and automated command systems.

Non-Linear Warfare

While “non-nuclear deterrence” is primarily intended as insurance against states with the most modern conventional capabilities, “non-linear warfare” is Moscow’s preferred military instrument for asserting its influence in the post-Soviet space.

Although the specific term “non-linear warfare” does not actually appear in the Military Doctrine, Gerasimov explained in February 2013 what it means to the Russian leadership. In the twenty-first century, he said, the distinction between war and peace has become blurred because wars are no longer formally declared by states. This alters the rules of war, requiring what the Doctrine calls the “integrated use of military force and of political, informational, and other non-military measures”. This approach is supplemented by indirect and asymmetrical forms of deployment, in the sense of the use of special forces, armed irregulars and private military companies. These means permit an open military intervention to be disguised, as do “exploitation

of protest potential within the population” and “externally financed and guided political forces and social movements”.

These concepts in fact describe rather precisely Russia’s actions in Ukraine. In view of the relative “success” the strategy has enjoyed in the eyes of the Russian leadership, it must be assumed that they will continue to expand these capacities. One indication is a strengthening of the special forces, with a dedicated “special operations command” established in 2013. Because “non-linear warfare” also involves armed units from the interior ministry, the ministry of emergency situations and the intelligence services, as well as defence ministry forces, the command systems for such a comprehensive approach have to be expanded. And that is precisely the purpose of the new National Defence Management Centre founded in December 2014.

Mobilisation of Society and Economy

The comprehensive stepping up of “mobilisational preparation” is a new aspect in the doctrine. The emphasis here is less on the armed forces themselves, than the mobilisation and disciplining of society and economy in an effort to block a “Maidan scenario” occurring in Russia.

Special arrangements are provided for the financial sector and the fiscal and monetary systems in the event of mobilisation. This gives the Kremlin instruments with which to intervene more efficiently in the economy in the event of crisis – as well as leverage to ensure the loyalty of the oligarchs.

In the interests of expediting the mobilisation of society, the Doctrine calls for a strengthening of “military-patriotic education” and “improving” security in the sphere of information. Sharper interventions in freedom of expression and the media, above all the internet, can thus be expected. The “Strategy for Countering Extremism” adopted in November 2014 also has the same thrust.

Fewer Opportunities for Cooperation

The Military Doctrine reflects the tense state of relations between Russia and the West. The potential for direct and indirect conflict results less from any flexing of military muscles such as Russian aircraft flying close to NATO borders or announcements of arms purchases; ultimately, in view of the economic crisis, it is dubious whether the latter will be implemented in full. The real challenge consists in the “non-linear warfare” that Moscow may in future apply in other post-Soviet states. NATO, and the European Union too, must find adequate responses. In the military sphere it is not helpful that conventional arms control has been deadlocked for years. In fact this is precisely the aspect that needs to be adapted to take account of “non-linear warfare”, for example by including other armed organs or permitting foreign observers to observe smaller exercises at least close to the borders. The question for the European Union will be above all to strengthen the resilience of its eastern members and especially its post-Soviet partners, for example through a joint energy strategy or better integration of their Russian minorities.

The second challenge is that shows of military strength may be compensating for internal as well as external weakness. If economic troubles lead to political crisis, Kremlin could be tempted to escalate conflicts with the West in order to justify interventions in economy and society.

At the same time the opportunities for military cooperation with Russia are evaporating. All that the new Doctrine mentions is a “dialogue of equals” with NATO and the United States – while intensifying cooperation with Belarus, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the two separatist entities Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Nonetheless, Moscow’s new Doctrine still asserts interest in cooperating with the West on fighting terrorism and Islamist extremism, on reviving arms control and on strategic missile defence. NATO and the

European Union should pragmatically grasp the opportunities for cooperation that exist there. But they should abandon the illusion that there could be positive spill-over effects for the general state of relations.

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