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RUSSIAN CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF ON “HYBRID WARFARE”

Excerpts from the article by Alexander Golts

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...In 2013 the current chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov (before the annexation of the Crimea and the secret war in the Donetsk Basin), outlined the parameters of what would subsequently be called “**hybrid warfare**” and the “Gerasimov doctrine”: “In the 21st century, the line between war and peace is getting blurred. Wars are no longer declared; once they begin, they no longer proceed according to a predictable pattern. The role of nonmilitary methods in achieving political and strategic goals has increased; the effectiveness of these methods has in a number of cases significantly surpassed the power of weapons. Emphasis in employing methods of warfare is shifting toward the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other nonmilitary measures, along with social protest potential.”

Missile euphoria

At a March meeting of the Academy, Gerasimov presented a new report. At first glance, it did not seem to contain any sensational provisions. As before, the military chief insisted that “there is a trend toward the disappearance of boundaries between peace and transition to a state of war”; and as before, he equated “social protest potential” with terrorist and extremist formations, as well as with regular enemy troops.

Nevertheless, he also said something new: In a future conflict, “the boundaries of the theater of military operations will expand significantly, encompassing areas with military and production facilities located at a considerable distance from zones of actual combat operations.” Furthermore, Gerasimov stated: “Enemy industrial facilities and state administration systems will be priority targets for attack. In addition to traditional means of warfare, the information sphere and outer space will be actively involved.”

And this is precisely what foreign analysts took note of. “The new technology Gerasimov discusses would allow Russia to conduct deep strikes within enemy territory, thus ‘pushing’ the actual fighting far from Russian borders and Russian vulnerability to Western precision-guided weapons,” says Sam Bendett, a research analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses.

Understandably, the source of the General Staff’s new approaches and hopes was the euphoria over long-range precision-guided cruise missiles. The latter were first used on Oct. 7, 2015, when ships from the Caspian Flotilla launched a strike against targets in Syria. Speaking about those launches, Vladimir Putin made no secret of his delight: This was proof that Moscow not only has powerful weapons, but also that “Russia has the will to use these weapons if it is in the national interests of our state and of the Russian people.” And clearly this signal was not addressed to notorious international terrorists.

It needs to be said that Soviet (and then Russian) leaders were extremely upset about the fact that during Operation Desert Storm almost 40 years ago and then 10 years later, during the intervention in Yugoslavia, the Americans demonstrated their standoff capability in destroying enemy targets with Tomahawk cruise missiles. This is precisely why Russia used both sea-launched and air-launched cruise missiles in the Syria operation without any particular need – solely to demonstrate its new capabilities.

As a result, Gerasimov said at the meeting of the Academy of Military Sciences: “In each strategic sector, groupings of long-range air- and sea-launched cruise missile carriers that can ensure deterrence in strategically important districts have been created.” Some media outlets such as NTV, Rossiiskaya gazeta and Kuryer VPK, reported that Gerasimov also spoke about the deployment of longer-range ground-launched cruise missile groupings. If this is the case, then Moscow decided to declare its intention to violate the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate- and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF).

Be that as it may, it follows from the General Staff chief’s remarks cited above that this refers above all to ship groupings in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Pacific Ocean, covered by air defense forces. As for air groupings, they can be discussed only hypothetically: Cruise missile carriers are strategic bombers deployed in one place – at an air base in Engels, near Saratov.

Nonnuclear but strategic

It is telling that the chief of the General Staff reported on groupings of “carriers,” not the deployment of missiles themselves. At present, according to official data, the military-industrial complex manufactures at most 150 Kalibr [sea-launched cruise missiles] a year (the number of air-launched missiles is even smaller), whereas the US has between 4,000 and 7,000 Tomahawks. However, the Russian General Staff’s calculations are based precisely on these weapons: “In the future, advanced precision-guided weapon systems, including hypersonic ones, will allow the core of strategic deterrence to be transferred from the nuclear to the nonnuclear sphere.”

At first glance, the idea of nonnuclear strategic deterrence (which is a unique product of domestic military thought) looks rather pointless. After all, the essence of the generally accepted understanding of deterrence is to convince a potential enemy that if it risks attacking you, it will incur unacceptable damage. Until recently, it was

believed that such damage (i.e., the destruction of a state) could be caused only by nuclear weapons. However, today, an approach whereby unacceptable damage can be inflicted by powerful nonnuclear weapons is gaining popularity. Russian military theorists write in particular that the threat of a salvo of several hundred cruise missiles that would hit administrative centers, nuclear power stations and other major industrial facilities can have a deterring effect.

Intentionally or not, this theory originated from the American concept of the Prompt Global Strike that was put forward a decade ago. In the first half of the 2000s, American strategists did not want to destroy the strategic missiles that were no longer necessary to stand up to Moscow. It was proposed to install conventional warheads on those carriers so as to use them in local conflicts, primarily in combating rogue nations and terrorists. However, Russian strategists thought it was all about them (meaning the Americans intended to wipe out Russia's nuclear capabilities with conventional weapons, which would involve fewer casualties and less destruction than nuclear weapons). Thus, Moscow assumed this meant the Kremlin's political will to launch a retaliatory strike with its remaining missiles would be broken. And since a potential enemy had decided to install conventional warheads on strategic carriers, then Russia, too, began to develop its own strategic nonnuclear capability. This is how the theory of nonnuclear strategic deterrence came about.

In reality, these theoretical exercises have little to do with how future wars will play out. In case of a massive launch of ballistic or cruise missiles, the opposing side, of course, would have no way of knowing what kind of warheads were installed on the incoming carriers – nuclear or conventional. Without a doubt, it would retaliate based on the worst-case scenario – i.e., with nuclear weapons. "Reliance on both offensive and defensive nonnuclear strategic weapons does not rule out but rather entails a limited use of nuclear weapons," write Aleksei Arbatov, Vladimir Dvorkin and Pyotr Topichkanov in their brochure devoted to threats arising from mixing nuclear and conventional weapons.

Why, then, did the Russian General Staff need all this reasoning about nonstrategic deterrence? Most likely, this is an attempt by the domestic military elite to overcome the so-called "nuclear impasse" – i.e., the notion that when a country has nuclear missile capabilities that guarantee the launch of a retaliatory strike, it has no need to modernize its weapons. Which naturally irked both the military and the military-industrial complex. You cannot gain very much from maintaining reliable but obsolete weapons in a state of combat readiness. Now, with new missiles, everyone will have a lot of well-paid work to do. And the fact that this unrestrained deterrence itself increases the threat of confrontation keeps the General Staff busy.

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