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Russia's Art of War
State Branding by Other Means
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“War is the continuation of politics by other means,” observed the Prussian military theorist [Carl von Clausewitz](#) ^[1] in his classic treatise *On War*. Although the aphorism has become axiomatic almost to the point of cliché, it is an especially apt prism for understanding [Russia's increasingly adventurous foreign policy](#) ^[2].

Take Russian President Vladimir Putin's [penchant for “hybrid warfare,”](#) ^[3] or the combination of traditional military methods with the manipulation of information for strategic gain. In many ways, Moscow's recent interventions in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine are explicit exemplars of Clausewitz's maxim, albeit with a twist. For Clausewitz, war was simply another way to achieve relatively concrete strategic objectives, such as security, which could not be otherwise realized through politics. Russia's recent wars in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, however, have been military expressions of its government's desire to lend truth to its pretensions to superpower status. In all three conflicts, Russia's local interests were debatable, if not negligible; instead, their purpose was first and foremost to demonstrate, for both domestic and international audiences, that Russia is a great power with global reach and aspirations. For the Kremlin, war is state branding by other means.

MIXED SIGNALS

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has consistently sought to position itself as a peer to the United States and NATO—sometimes as a partner and sometimes as a competitor. Such status anxiety was most infamously expressed in Putin's 2005 comment that “the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” More recently, the official [2015 Russian national security strategy](#) ^[4] document is laced with references to Russia's instrumental role in managing major global crises and cites “transforming the Russian Federation into a world power” as a key national interest.

Russia's strategic intentions crystallized in August 2008 during its brief war with Georgia, which had launched an offensive to recapture the Moscow-backed breakaway province of South Ossetia. Russian troops quickly intervened to defend their separatist client, decisively crushing

the Georgians. The EU-backed Tagliavini Report [5] assigned blame for the five-day war to both sides, but the initial spark—the report claimed that Georgia fired first—almost did not matter. Russian troops, whose military exercises [6] suggested that they had anticipated the conflict weeks in advance, showed no hesitation in defeating the Georgians and pouring into South Ossetia, in what was Moscow's first foreign combined-arms combat operation since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Russia's overwhelming force and the incompetence of the Georgian military meant that the outcome of the war was never really in doubt. Yet on August 10, with Georgian forces already retreating from South Ossetia, Russian troops opened a second front in Abkhazia, another breakaway region supported by Moscow. Two days later, Russian naval infantry landed in the Georgian port city of Poti. Over the next several weeks, well after the cessation of hostilities, Russian forces drove deep into Georgian territory unopposed, compounding the country's military defeat.

Put differently, the nominal Russian objective—to repulse advancing Georgian forces in South Ossetia—was achieved relatively quickly, but Moscow broadened its operational scope nonetheless. In fact, the Russian military's expansion of the conflict into Abkhazia and its thrusts into the Georgian interior had little to no effect on the outcome of the war. And despite its comprehensive victory, Russia largely withdrew from undisputed Georgian territory, leaving the Georgian government humbled but still intact. From the Russian perspective, Georgia was more a convenient showcase [7] for Russia's renewed military might than an adversary to be suppressed—an opportunity for Moscow to use the accouterments of modern warfare to demonstrate its strength to both the Russian people and the wider world.

Syria offers similar glimpses [8] into this new Russian rationale for war. Moscow claims that it is intervening in the Levant in order to combat terrorism, but that is an unconvincing assertion. Russia, of course, is certainly not immune to militant Islamist terrorism. But Syria, for the Russian government, was less a source of threats than a safety valve [9] that drew Islamist resources and personnel away from the North Caucasus insurgency, which by the 2010s had calmed down considerably. Other purported rationales, such as the revitalization of Russia's position in the Eastern Mediterranean, are marginally more credible but would hardly seem to justify such a far-flung and extended operation. Rather, Syria is functioning more as a global showcase for Russian power than as a strategic imperative for the Kremlin.

Russia has been officially at war in Syria since 2015, but active Russian military assistance to the Syrian regime goes as far back as the early days of the civil war. Throughout that time, Russia has announced both escalations and “withdrawals,” the latter on two separate occasions—in March 2016 and again in January of this year. January's announcement was timed to the departure of the problem-riddled aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*, which itself had little military value in-theater and may have been deployed as an awkward promotional stunt [10] for the Russian defense industry. These expansions and contractions of Russian engagement, timed to the international news cycle, had the effect of buttressing Moscow's claims to great-power status. Although the Russian government has seized military and strategic gains where available, these were not the motivating reasons behind intervention.

In Ukraine, too, grand ideological or military projects—such as the aborted “Novorossiia” [11] attempt to carve a united pro-Russia state from Ukrainian territory—were conducted in service of, and in subordination to, the larger goal of telegraphing Russian power [12]. As in Syria and Georgia, the Russian government uses the war in Ukraine primarily as a means of leveraging domestic and international opinion and not necessarily territorial or military gain; cease-fires come and go, only to be broken by Russian-backed forces timed to maximum advantage [13].

In all three conflicts, Russia’s strategic dividends have been far more symbolic than concrete. In terms of military outcomes, the interventions are largely ambiguous, but they have successfully projected an image of a globally powerful [14] Russia. Turning the traditional formula for hybrid warfare on its head, recent Russian military operations have become adjunct to the country’s information warfare—the informational element shaped the military campaign and not the other way around. And the primary informational theme in all three military campaigns has been Russia’s reemergence as a great power.

NO LOGO

Moscow’s military prestige projects [15], combined with its use of information warfare, are a surprisingly efficient means of undermining Western dominance. Russian interventions, although lacking NATO’s capabilities in terms of scale and sophistication, benefit from first-mover advantage. Indeed, halfhearted U.S. and European participation in these conflicts suggests a strategic indifference toward their outcomes and, by extension, agnosticism toward the maintenance of traditional interstate norms. By contrast, a relatively weaker but more motivated Russia has been able to position itself as a regional power broker well beyond what its raw economic or military weight might suggest.

This Russian brand of hybrid warfare, which combines military and symbolic goals, is unlikely to end with Syria. With the Russian economy still in a difficult state and Western geopolitical decline proceeding apace, Moscow is even more likely to use military operations to fortify its image globally and consolidate political support domestically. A perception of national greatness, as opposed to prosperity, is increasingly the basis of the Kremlin’s new social contract [16]. In 2014, the Russian polling nongovernmental organization Levada Center found that 68 percent of Russians saw their country as a superpower—the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union that a majority have done so.

Whether the Russian leadership orders new interventions is an open question, but its willingness to use the instruments of war for brand maintenance should factor into Western thinking about managing ties with Moscow. Russian military interventions are typically interpreted in Western capitals as tactical opportunities that, in the absence of robust Western attention and involvement, Moscow has chosen to exploit. Yet even if Russian interventions are not always pursuing concrete strategic objectives, they do share a common rationale—one that suggests that future Russian adventurism is not only plausible but likely. Understanding this logic opens the door for other states to consider how Russia might best be discouraged, deterred, or defeated. If Russian goals are primarily symbolic and informational, it stands to reason that this is the domain within which it must be most aggressively contested.

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