

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Moscow's Calibrated Coercion in Ukraine and Russian Strategic Culture

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Executive Summary

- Russian operations in Ukraine are driven by a senior-level policy decision to pursue a persistent but indecisive conflict—as opposed to a decisive “big war”-type military operation or a truly “frozen” conflict (i.e., without regular bloodshed). This paper terms the tactic *calibrated coercion* and the outcome a *simmering conflict*.
- Calibrated coercion seems to be somewhat of a departure from the strategic-cultural preference for quick military operations with overwhelming force to produce decisive outcomes.
- The simmering effect, however, is consistent with Russian approaches to managing problems.
- Thus far, this approach has produced results, but its effectiveness over the long term remains a question mark.

This paper analyzes Russia's use of force in Ukraine since the end of major combat operations in February 2015. The conclusion of Minsk II, as the peace agreement signed that month is known, marked the last major battle of the Donbas conflict. In the immediate run-up to the negotiations and in their immediate aftermath, Russian forces and their proxies were engaged in intense ground combat with the Ukrainian military and volunteer battalions. Control over the key transit hub of Debaltseve shifted from the Ukrainians to the separatists. Since then, however, there have been no significant Russia-backed offensive operations in the Donbas for more than four and a half years. The line of contact (LoC) has been essentially static.

Yet kinetic activity has certainly not ceased. There has been a steady trickle of Ukrainian casualties, periodic shelling, and exchange of fire across the LoC. Ukraine is forced to spend nearly 5% of its gross domestic product on defense. The conflict significantly shapes Ukraine's domestic politics, injecting instability into an already combustible post-revolutionary situation. And it ensures that Russia has a say over Ukraine's future.

Russia's approach to the conflict can be termed *calibrated coercion*. Moscow has used its proxy force in the Donbas to maintain a consistently "simmering" conflict that serves as a lever of influence over Ukraine as a whole. Moscow has neither sought a major escalation in the conflict nor permitted a stable ceasefire; the degree of coercion has thus been calibrated at a certain level. This paper situates calibrated coercion, and the resulting simmering conflict, in the broader context of Russian strategic culture. The evidence presented here suggests that the Kremlin's policy objectives have shaped the Russian military's operations in ways that run contrary to the preferences of military leadership.

"Big Wars," Decisive Victory, and Russian Strategic Culture

Following Jack Snyder, "Strategic culture can be defined as the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation."¹ Soviet and Russian strategic culture was fundamentally shaped by the experience of World War II and the nature of the total defeat of Nazi Germany. Victory in a conflict came to be seen as the brute-force obliteration of the enemy until it fully capitulates. Avoiding the kind of prolonged, devastating counter-offensive that cost the Soviet Union millions of lives led to an emphasis on decisive, quick victories through the application of overwhelming force. This "big war paradigm," as Dima Adamsky notes, has "dominated Russian military thought for decades."² Robert Cassidy writes that the big war approach is

characterized by heavy tank and mechanized formations, massed and echeloned to conduct breaches of dense defenses, followed by rapid advance into the enemy rear to encircle and destroy him. These offensives are supported by air ground attack, long-range artillery, and airmobile assaults throughout the depth of the enemy's defense.³

It was arguably this approach to war that led to the failure of the Soviet Red Army in the campaign against the mujahedeen in Afghanistan and to the defeat of the Russian army in the first Chechen war. In both cases, Moscow pursued a counterinsurgency campaign with big-war tactics: indiscriminate shelling of urban areas, carpet bombing targets using "dumb" munitions, large frontal assaults on enemy positions, and little to no attempt to bring civilian non-combatants onsite.

Since Chechnya, the Russian army has certainly made great strides in modernization, training, and doctrine. In particular, the emphasis on World War II-style large-scale operations has been abandoned in favor of a more flexible approach with a focus on rapid maneuver. However, certain elements of the big-war mentality clearly persist in Russian strategic culture. Particularly,

¹ Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, R-2154-AF, 1977), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R2154.html>.

² Dima Adamsky, "From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1-2, 2018, p. 48.

³ Robert M. Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes Of Asymmetric Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), p. 11.

senior military leaders often express a preference for decisive operations using overwhelming force leading to a quick victory. In a conflict, as Scott Boston and Dara Massicot note, “Russia would most likely seek to achieve its objectives quickly and then attempt to terminate the conflict on the best possible terms. . . . It is therefore highly likely that Russian operations would feature a swift *coup de main* and then transition to defense and consolidation of gains.”⁴ In other words, the Russian military has adapted the core tenets of the big-war approach—the emphasis on decisive, quick victories through the application of overwhelming force—to the realities of modern warfare.

Big-War Approach Versus Calibrated Coercion

Indeed, even during the Ukraine conflict, when the regular Russian military was directly involved in the active phases of fighting, the Russian strategic-cultural preference for big war–style decisive operations was evident. In the intervention in late August and early September 2014, which culminated in the battle of Ilovaisk, and again in January and February 2015 in the offensive that ended with the seizure of Debaltseve, the Russian military came in with overwhelming force and dealt punishing defeats to the Ukrainians.⁵ In both cases, Russia pushed the LoC rapidly into territory that had been held by the Ukrainian authorities. Although these were essentially one-off operations—not even campaigns, let alone an entire war—they demonstrated the preferred Russian *modus operandi*: Win quickly by overwhelming the enemy.

Since the end of the battle for Debaltseve and the signing of Minsk II, there have been no Russian attempts to move the LoC farther into Ukraine or to degrade significantly forward-deployed Ukrainian military forces. Moscow has relied on a relatively lightly armed force that largely comprises locals—i.e., Ukrainian citizens— even though the force is reportedly led, trained, and equipped by Russian officers. Even according to the Ukrainian government’s own estimates, the locals outnumber Russians by 17 to 1.⁶

There has been regular, low-level fighting across the LoC, with often-daily loss of life on both sides.⁷ That low-level engagement has been punctured by periodic escalations, such as the fighting around the town of Mariinka in summer 2015. This calibrated coercion has drained Ukraine of financial, human, and political resources and put Russia in position to have a decisive say in the international diplomacy regarding the crisis. But Moscow has not sought military victory—e.g., a routing of the Ukrainian military or a significant expansion of rebel-held territory. If the Kremlin so chose, it could decimate the forward-deployed Ukrainian forces in

⁴ Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, PE-231-A, 2017), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE231.html>.

⁵ The Russian military presence during the battle of Ilovaisk has been comprehensively documented. See Shaun Walker, “New Evidence Emerges of Russian Role in Ukraine Conflict,” *The Guardian*, August 18, 2019. On Debaltseve, see Amos C. Fox, “Battle of Debal’tseve: The Conventional Line of Effort in Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine,” *eArmor*, Winter 2017, <https://www.benning.army.mil/armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2017/Winter/1Fox17.pdf>.

⁶ “Ukraine at OSCE: Russian Corps in Donbas Larger Than Some European Armies,” Ukrinform, July 3, 2020, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-defense/3056146-ukraine-at-osce-russian-corps-in-donbas-larger-than-some-european-armies.html>.

⁷ See Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Daily and Spot Reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine,” undated, <https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports>.

hours using either precision-guided ground-based munitions or its uncontested control of the airspace. (The Ukrainian air force, such as it was, has been grounded since summer 2014 after several of its planes were shot down over the rebel-held territory.) Rebel forces could seize further territories in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where popular attitudes suggest widespread discontent with the government in Kyiv.⁸ But instead of allowing the Russian General Staff to fight and win a winnable war, the Kremlin appears to have asked the military to fight with one arm behind its back, relying on a relatively rag-tag local-dominated ground force, which does not attempt to achieve victory and, in its current state, would be unlikely to carry out a successful offensive even if it were to try. In short, the Russian military's operations in the Donbas have been a function of the dictates of the Kremlin's policy objectives, not the requirements of battlefield commanders or plans drawn up by the General Staff. This has frustrated many hawkish observers in Moscow. One wrote that the "basic rule" that "war should be fought until victory . . . has been ignored due to political considerations, and as a result the military successes of the [Russia-backed] rebel forces have been reduced to a minimum."⁹ In other words, this approach turns the big-war logic of decisive victories achieved quickly through the application of overwhelming force on its head.

Simmering Versus Freezing

Tatyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff provide a useful 2x2 framework for understanding Russia's political considerations for the Ukraine conflict. They argue that Moscow's ideal outcome would be a friendly (i.e., geopolitically non-aligned or Russia-leaning) and stable Ukraine, and its nightmare scenario would be an unfriendly or hostile Ukraine that is also stable. Acceptable, if not ideal, outcomes are for Ukraine to be friendly and unstable or unfriendly and unstable.¹⁰ Having accepted the impossibility of achieving a friendly Ukraine in the short to medium term, Russia's calibrated coercion campaign guarantees that an unfriendly Ukraine will remain unstable. If a frozen conflict is referred to as such because of the lack of bloodshed, the constant low-intensity fighting in the Donbas has created a simmering effect. The simmering effect saps Ukraine's already-strained budget; warps its political discourse; injects instability into its politics; and makes it an unattractive candidate for integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

In addition to keeping Ukraine off kilter, the simmering conflict also serves several secondary Russian objectives. By avoiding any direct, overt involvement of the Russian military, it allows the Kremlin to maintain its narrative about the exclusively civil nature of the conflict and to deny the fact of the Russian military presence on Ukrainian soil. Relatedly, a simmering conflict clearly falls below the threshold that would incur more Western sanctions.

The deliberate simmering of the Donbas conflict differs importantly from Russian tactics in the other protracted conflicts in the region, often referred to as the frozen conflicts. In the Russian interventions in Moldova and Georgia in the early 1990s, Russia sought to end the fighting once it had achieved certain objectives: denying the central governments control over the separatist

⁸ Brian Milakovsky, "Understanding the 'Under Control' Donbas," Kennan Cable No. 16, April 2016.

⁹ Aleksandr Sharkovskii, "Чем так похожи Донбасс и Сирия," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, February 16, 2016.

¹⁰ Tatyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, "The Logic of Competitive Influence-Seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the Conflict in Donbas," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2018.

regions and forcing them to agree to ceasefire deals that provided for Russia-led peacekeeping. These deals produced a true freezing effect—there was no bloodshed—even if a political settlement proved elusive. Unlike in the Donbas, there certainly was no deliberate simmering of the conflict by Moscow after the ceasefires were signed. In Moldova, this frozen state has lasted from 1992 through the present. There has not been a combat death in breakaway Transnistria in more than twenty-five years. In Georgia, the conflicts over the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were similarly frozen until Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili mounted a concerted effort during his first term in office to reintegrate those territories. Since the 1994 ceasefire until the months leading up to the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Abkhazia experienced almost no fighting. There were few skirmishes in South Ossetia until 2004, when Saakashvili launched an anti-contraband operation there, and those largely died down until 2008. Since the 2008 war, Russia has sought a deep freeze through a variety of efforts effectively to sever the two regions from Georgia, including by posting Russian border guards at the administrative boundary lines; shutting down many crossing points; and, in South Ossetia, launching a “borderization” campaign of delineation.

Over the course of almost three decades of experience with these frozen conflicts, it seems that Moscow has come to recognize the limits of the leverage they create. When there is no active fighting, Moscow might have effective control over the disputed territory, but it retains little leverage over political decision-making in the conflict-affected country as a whole. For example, the ongoing conflict in Transnistria does not provide Russia with influence over the day-to-day conduct of Moldovan foreign policy. The territorial dispute does allow Russia to maintain an effective veto on possible Moldovan membership in the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization because the members of both organizations do not want to import a conflict with Russia. But the conflict does not provide a lever over decision-making in Chişinău.

In these cases, the frozen conflict provides what can be thought of as passive leverage: the veto over membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions. In the Donbas conflict, there is a territorial dispute, but it is coupled with ongoing low-level bloodshed (the simmering effect), which provides active leverage because Moscow can influence the course of events in Ukraine beyond the boundaries of the separatist region. The difference points to the Kremlin’s divergent aims in the three conflicts: Although a de facto veto over Euro-Atlantic integration might be enough in Georgia and Moldova, Moscow appears to seek greater active influence over decision-making in Ukraine.

Although simmering and freezing represent different tactics, Russia’s approach in all three cases (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) shares a fundamental continuity that is deeply rooted in strategic culture: long-term acceptance of a suboptimal status quo. As Adamsky notes, “Russian tradition cultivated a self-image of being less inclined toward active pragmatism. . . . Coupled with the continuous negative historical experience that favored low expectations about what can be achieved, it thwarted a tendency toward optimistic practicality or rational action. . . . Problems are dealt with by ignoring them.”¹¹ This element of strategic culture exists in tension with the

¹¹ Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 51.

big-war mentality, with its emphasis on rapid achievement of decisive outcomes. However, the approach to problem-solving is a strategic- or policy-level consideration, not an operational preference of the military.

In the Donbas, for example, the Russian preference is that Minsk II—an agreement, it should be remembered, that Moscow imposed at the barrel of a gun—be implemented according to its understanding of the document. The simmering conflict scenario is clearly not ideal for the Kremlin, but it appears prepared to accept that outcome—seemingly indefinitely. There certainly have been no signs over the past five years that Moscow is seeking to press the issue. In Georgia, Moscow appears to have stopped trying to convince other states to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent. In Moldova, Moscow appears to have given up on achieving a settlement after the failure of the 2003 Kozak Memorandum and now appears ready to maintain its military presence in Transnistria—again, seemingly indefinitely. The lack of neat and clean outcomes does not appear to perturb the Russian leadership. Problems, after all, are not meant to be solved. The contrast with U.S. strategic culture and the premium it places on problem-solving is striking. As Adamsky notes, “Conquering the wilderness bred a frontier pragmatism that was translated into an engineering, problem-solving ethos. . . . A belief evolved in [American] popular culture that problems could always be solved.”¹²

Challenges

After nearly five years of calibrated coercion and the resulting simmering conflict in Ukraine, some of the challenges associated with the tactic have become clear. First, signaling intentions is difficult when coercion is doled out in small doses over long periods. Russia’s message was clear at Ilovaisk and Debaltseve: Short but extreme coercion coincided with a diplomatic process in which Russia made its demands clear. Once Moscow got what it wanted at the talks, the level of coercion was dialed back significantly. Since February 2015, however, it is unclear whether Russia has attempted to send any particular signal with its actions, except for the general message that Moscow would not allow the conflict to be frozen and thus forgotten. Moreover, it is difficult for both analysts and governments to know whether any of the small escalations that have occurred along the LoC since February 2015 have been deliberate or inadvertent—and, if the latter, which side initiated.

This foginess has been compounded by a second challenge: Russia cannot completely control its proxy forces. There is evidence that chains of command are imperfect, which is unsurprising, given that the force largely comprises poorly trained local recruits. Moscow is likely learning valuable lessons about proxy warfare based on its Ukrainian experience. Finally, a third challenge results from the reality that the adversary has a say in the course of the conflict. For example, the Ukrainian military under former President Petro Poroshenko reportedly regularly

¹² Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 2010, p. 81.

advanced into the “no man’s land” between the sides along the LoC.¹³ Clearly, these moves sparked escalations, if only because of the very proximity of the forces. Russia and its proxies cannot unilaterally determine the intensity of the conflict.

Conclusions

The calibrated coercion campaign in Ukraine and the resulting simmering conflict provide some important insights into Russian strategic culture and strategic behavior. Calibrated coercion represents a departure from the Russian strategic-cultural emphasis on the big-war approach of seeking a decisive, rapid, and overwhelming victory. Russian military leaders are being told that they cannot fight to win, and the fighting they can do is strictly limited to holding the line with a highly circumscribed set of capabilities made available.

The result of the calibrated coercion campaign, the simmering conflict in the Donbas, does differ from the frozen conflicts in post-Soviet Eurasia. The difference demonstrates that the Donbas conflict should not be lumped in with the others. First, the Donbas is not frozen, and Russia does not want to freeze it. Moscow’s objectives are more far-reaching: not just a veto but an instrument of control over decision-making in the capital. However, Russia’s lack of effort to legitimize its military presence in the Donbas—in fact, its ongoing denial of that presence—and its resistance to freezing the conflict suggest that Moscow wants to keep open the prospect of a settlement that allows for withdrawal. Minsk II, after all, provides the instrument of control that Moscow seeks without requiring it to subsidize the rebel-held areas of the Donbas and keep up the insurgency. Yet the simmering conflict model and the frozen conflict model do share one commonality, deeply rooted in Russian strategic culture: a view that problems are not meant to be solved, and suboptimal circumstances can be accepted.

Lawrence Freedman, the eminent scholar of strategy, has written that “the Ukraine conflict provides more examples of bad strategy than good,” and “the biggest failures [in that conflict] were Russian.”¹⁴ After nearly five years of calibrated coercion, it seems clear that Moscow is engaged in a long game. It is likely too early to judge the tactic’s success or failure at this stage.

¹³ See Artur Gor, “‘Ползучее наступление’: как Украина забирает свое на Донбассе,” *Apostrof*, February 6, 2018, <https://apostrophe.ua/article/society/accidents/2018-02-06/polzuchee-nastuplenie-kak-ukraina-zabiraet-svoe-na-donbasse/16802>.

¹⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 96, 99.

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