

# Liminal Manoeuvre and Conceptual Envelopment: Russian and Chinese Non-Conventional Responses to Western Military Dominance since 1991

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## **Abstract**

This article summarises key arguments from the author's work, in *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, on adaptive responses to Western conventional superiority since the end of the Cold War in 1991. It argues that US and Allied dominance in one particular, narrowly-defined, extremely expensive and extraordinarily technology-dependent form of battlefield manoeuvre forced all adversaries, state and non-state, to adapt in order to survive. The Russian response produced an emerging form of ambiguous warfare the author describes as 'liminal manoeuvre', which seeks to ride the threshold of detectability and present an ambiguous signature to Western intelligence systems and decision-makers, before launching rapid combat operations to seize key objectives, then de-escalate tension. The aim is to enable a negotiated solution, using objectives seized as bargaining chips. The Chinese response, which the author calls 'conceptual envelopment', expands the definition of war to include trans-military and non-military activities that Western planners may struggle to recognise as warfare at all, until too late. The implications for future inter-state warfare include greater risk of miscalculation, declining effectiveness of the Western military model, challenges in prioritisation of threats, and the need for a mix of conventional and non-conventional capabilities as part of the Western response.

## **Keywords**

Russia, China, Hybrid Warfare, Grey Zone, Liminal Manoeuvre, Conceptual Envelopment, Fitness Landscapes, Adaptation, Evolution, Information Warfare, Cyberwarfare, Political Warfare, Three Warfares, Unrestricted Warfare.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The fall of the Soviet Union on Christmas Day 1991—which Vladimir Putin called “a major geopolitical disaster of the century”<sup>1</sup>—made the United States the world’s sole superpower. Coming eleven months after the stunningly rapid defeat of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, the Soviet collapse left the Western military model, practised by America and its Allies including NATO, as the dominant approach to high-intensity warfare. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, this model carried in itself, the seeds of its own obsolescence.<sup>2</sup> Precisely because it was so dominant, it forced all adversaries to adapt to survive, rendering Western conventional superiority increasingly irrelevant over time.

This article examines two non-conventional adaptive responses—a Russian method I call ‘liminal manoeuvre’, and a Chinese approach I describe as ‘conceptual envelopment’—to Western conventional dominance, and their implications for future warfare. Before examining these responses, however, we should define the model to which they were reacting.

## **DEFINING THE WESTERN MILITARY MODEL**

Designed for the late Cold War concept of Airland Battle, what became the Western model saw its combat debut not on NATO’s central front in the 1980s, but during the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>3</sup> It can be summarised as a form of intense, technologically-enabled joint air-ground manoeuvre that applies speed and overwhelming combat power across a narrow but deep frontage. It combines massed precision firepower (from aircraft, naval platforms, missile systems and mobile artillery) with rapid penetration and envelopment by networked, armoured ground forces. It calls for air superiority (ideally complete air, sea and space supremacy) and relies to an extraordinary degree on space-based systems including GPS; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); and globally networked communications. Against an adversary like Saddam Hussein or, more recently, Islamic State, who is willing to stand and fight in the open, it offers rapid battlefield dominance.

Though their first combat outing was 1991, the US Army’s ‘Big Five’ platforms—the Abrams tank, Apache attack helicopter, Bradley fighting vehicle, Blackhawk helicopter and Patriot missile—originated from acquisition programs of the 1970s and concepts of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Thus the model is now half a century old, presenting an enduring ‘pacing threat’ for adversaries.<sup>5</sup> New capabilities have of course appeared since 1991—fifth-generation aircraft, advanced missiles and autonomous systems—but these are incremental improvements on a warfighting method that has remained relatively static for decades.

## ADAPTIVE PRESSURES

Western mastery of this form of battle (now considered ‘conventional’) created adaptive pressure on adversaries, yet simultaneously presented vulnerabilities they could exploit.

Adversaries faced an environment with seven key features:

- (1) NATO/Allied air superiority, but with Western air forces able to apply only a limited weight of air power in any one place because of vastly expanded operational areas, and frequently partnered with less-than-capable local ground forces;
- (2) Extremely tight legal and political constraints—including self-imposed humanitarian and coalition caveats—on allied action in post-1991 conflicts;
- (3) Pervasive electronic surveillance by Western intelligence, but with collection outpacing analytical capacity, allowing adversaries to hide in a tsunami of electronic traffic as mobile phones, internet access, satellite communications and fibre-optic networks proliferated through the 1990s;
- (4) A massive explosion of electronic connectivity starting around the year 2000, offering vastly expanded opportunities for propaganda, precision engagement, and remote or offset Command-and-Control (C2);
- (5) Pervasive handheld ‘smart’ consumer electronic devices proliferating since the mid-2000s, along with distributed information support platforms such Google Earth, GPS, geographic information systems (GIS) and weather applications;
- (6) Adversary ‘hugging’ of Western systems, as US and Allied forces became so dependent on GPS, satellites and cellphone networks that they could not disrupt these systems without hampering their own operations; and
- (7) A high degree of technical and mechanical skill among increasingly urbanised, connected and technologically literate populations.

In effect, with Western allies becoming the apex predator, all adversaries were forced to adapt to a combat ecosystem that punished certain behaviours—massed formations, open deployments, large units, poor signature management—while rewarding others. Table 1 shows a range of traits that the environment selected for:

**Table 1—Adaptive Traits for which the Operating Environment Selects**

<u>Trait</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Evolutionary effect</u>
<i>Stealth</i>	Ability to blend into the physical, social and electronic or informational	Emergence of low-contrast adversaries operating in the

	background of a given operating environment, adopting ‘adaptive colouration’ to disappear when threatened	clutter of complex human, physical and electronic terrain
<b><i>Dispersion</i></b>	Ability to move and fight dispersed, concentrating for specific operations to overwhelm a weaker enemy, then dispersing again	Proliferation of collaborative and remote-engagement capabilities, reduced force densities on the battlefield, distributed operations and swarming tactics
<b><i>Modularity</i></b>	Ability to operate in small bands that can survive the destruction of other groups, and regenerate new ones if necessary; fielding modular organizations with multipurpose weapons and easily configurable mobility and communications systems	Preference, on the part of numerous (and otherwise different) adversaries, for structuring as a larger number of smaller teams using cheap, multi-role or swing-role platforms, rather than a small number or more capable or costly teams or platforms
<b><i>Autonomy</i></b>	Ability to operate for long periods without orders or direct communications with other elements, reducing electronic signature and improving survivability	Reduction in interceptable electronic communications, alongside a proliferation of semi- or fully-autonomous combat groups in adversary forces
<b><i>Infestation</i></b>	Ability to ‘infest’ urban environments by melding with the physical fabric of built-up environments, blending into the terrain	Increased prevalence of urban combat against amorphous adversaries exploiting complex terrain
<b><i>Hiding in electronic plain sight</i></b>	Ability to operate within the clutter of giant volumes of electronic traffic, avoid attracting analysts’ attention or triggering an operational response, even while under surveillance	Proliferation of apparently leaderless, ad hoc, cell-based or network-based adversaries with little command structure and ambiguous electronic communications
<b><i>Hugging</i></b>	Ability to get close to protected populations/sites, piggy-back on systems (GPS, Google Earth, smartphones, cellphones, Internet) that opponents cannot shut down because they need them	Emergence of weapons, communications systems and other capabilities that rely on combinations of repurposed consumer equipment
<b><i>Media Manipulation</i></b>	Ability to goad an adversary into disproportionate civilian casualties or property damage, then exploit errors through a media backlash	Tactical camera, social media and field propaganda teams proliferating within all adversary forces
<b><i>Political warfare</i></b>	Ability to manipulate/mobilize supporters through mass comms, social media and diaspora networks, leverage protest	Emergence of linkages between battlefield operational units, distributed political and

	movements and interest groups, while hampering an opponent’s ops, unity and legitimacy	psychological warfare capabilities, and ‘amplification networks’ plugged into traditional and social media
<b><i>Techno-hacking</i></b>	Ability to rapidly repurpose consumer systems in combat settings, to develop precision or collaborative-engagement systems (implying both hardware and software skills)	Proliferation of distributed guerrilla factories or unconventional warfare workshops for the production of DIY weapons and communication systems
<b><i>Connectivity</i></b>	Ability (correlated with urban, tech-educated populations) to exploit electronic systems to access data, know-how and collaborative tools to hack hardware/software, integrate military hardware into improvised systems	Optionally-connected forces with the ability to operate across a range of profiles from fully autonomous with zero communications, to fully connected
<b><i>Reach-back/Reach-forward</i></b>	Ability to mobilize remote capabilities (diaspora, online knowledge, global/regional networks) to generate local effects	Creation of a virtual global hinterland for support, resources, manoeuvre and sanctuary by state and non-state adversaries

The fitness landscape created by Western dominance thus shaped the evolution of all adversaries, whatever their starting point, toward similar outcomes. But not all adaptive strategies are the same, as the distinctive Russian and Chinese approaches suggest.

## LIMINAL MANOEUVRE AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The Russian military was in free-fall in the early 1990s, as the Soviet breakup triggered mass layoffs, equipment shortages, collapsing budgets and a reorientation from low-readiness mass forces structured for war with NATO toward smaller, readier units designed for limited wars in former Soviet space. By 1995, a disastrous war in Chechnya, persistent low-intensity conflict in other Caucasian republics and frozen conflicts on Russia’s borders, underlined the urgency of reform. Task-organizations like the Battalion Tactical Group emerged in response, while special-purpose, internal-security and intelligence troops proliferated.<sup>6</sup>

By the turn of the century, NATO’s eastward expansion and Balkan intervention had spooked Russian planners. The ‘Race to Pristina’ in June 1999, when Russian airborne troops dashed into Kosovo to seize an airport ahead of NATO, indicated that *coups de main* by fast-moving elite units, rapidly reinforced by conventional troops, could create negotiating leverage for diplomatic success—in this case, Russia’s assertion of an independent sphere of operations in Kosovo.<sup>7</sup> After 2000, Russia made concerted efforts to rebuild high-intensity combat capabilities while further expanding special-purpose, cyber and intelligence assets.

In August 2008, the Five-Day War in Georgia highlighted new Russian political warfare and cyber-militia capabilities, along with improvements in armoured, amphibious and air forces. But Russian analysts saw failures in readiness, equipment, C2 and ISR, spurring the New Look Reforms, the most comprehensive overhaul of Russia's forces since 1991.<sup>8</sup> The 2011 Libya campaign (which, contrary to American assurances, rapidly morphed from a humanitarian intervention into a regime-change effort that killed Muammar Gaddafi) angered the Kremlin and gave impetus and anti-Western focus to reforms. Those reforms—responses to Western dominance in general, and to provocations such as NATO expansion, Libya, and the 2013 Ghouta chemical attack, when Washington stated then failed to enforce a 'red line' before ceding the diplomatic initiative to Moscow—enabled an emerging Russian style of warfare I call 'liminal manoeuvre'.<sup>9</sup>

Liminal manoeuvre is an adaptive response to two contrasting features of the environment. The first is that pervasive communications, social media and ISR now make truly clandestine operations impossible.<sup>10</sup> The second, however, is that constraints on Western decision-makers—who must not only detect but also prove the existence of a hostile operation, then convince publics and coalition partners to respond—mean that clandestine operations are no longer strictly necessary. Ambiguous activities (in physical or cyber-space) can achieve sufficient temporary obfuscation to enable a Pristina-style *coup de main*, creating facts on the ground that diplomats can exploit to negotiate political outcomes. Of critical importance, these activities are sequenced along a campaign timeline driven by an opponent's decision-making processes, rather than ISR capabilities or operational posture.

The goal is to remain below the opponent's 'detection threshold'—at which the opponent's ISR detects an operation—as long as possible during pre-combat 'shaping'. Once the operation is detected, ambiguity (through signature manipulation, 'political engineering'<sup>11</sup> and psychological warfare) can delay the opponent attributing the operation to its sponsor. Once this 'attribution threshold' is crossed, the imperative switches from stealth to speed: a *coup de main* by special-purpose forces with rapid conventional follow-up to seize key objectives in the first hours, followed by diplomatic de-escalation, as troops consolidate control over assets that become bargaining chips for negotiation. Simultaneously, political warfare obfuscates the situation, distracts and dissipates any response, and floods targets of disinformation with a "firehose of falsehood."<sup>12</sup> Key features of liminal manoeuvre are:

- **Decisive shaping** in which the pre-combat phase of a campaign is decisive; ideally, by the time opponents detect the operation, they have already been defeated, while the campaign may never progress to open combat if objectives can be achieved during the shaping phase;
- **Integrated manoeuvre** including cyber, economic, information, political and kinetic actions along a timeline driven by enemy decision processes (not enemy sensors);
- **Disruptive ambiguity**. Liminal manoeuvre is not covert but ambiguous, seeking to disrupt and impede enemy decisions and thereby extend the mission window for seizure of key objectives. This may be achieved by obfuscating military signatures, using liminal actors (such as volunteers, criminal groups, cyber-militias or private military companies) or both;

- **Escalate to de-Escalate.** Once the attribution threshold is crossed, liminal manoeuvre discards stealth for speed, surprise and violence of action. The goal is to gain key objectives then negotiate, obfuscate and downplay to slow (or prevent) an opponent’s response; and
- **Facts on the Ground.** Liminal manoeuvre presents adversaries with a *fait accompli* then negotiates from a position of strength, with military action setting the conditions for diplomatic success.

Georgia, eastern Ukraine and Syria exhibit some features of liminal manoeuvre, but the most comprehensive example is Crimea in 2014. In that case, months of preparation shaped a campaign triggered by the collapse of Viktor Yanukovich’s government under internal pressure in late 2013 and early 2014. Yanukovich was ousted on 22 February 2014 and, that night, decision-makers met in Moscow to initiate the operation. On 24 February, localised uprisings broke out across Crimea. On 25-26 February, ‘defense groups’ formed and began calling for Russian intervention, with Unconventional Warfare teams linked to Russian military intelligence (GRU) advising them.<sup>13</sup> On the evening of 26 February, Russian special-purpose forces with sanitized vehicles and uniforms stripped of insignia (the ‘polite little green men’) seized key locations and were rapidly reinforced by general-purpose forces.<sup>14</sup>

As this occurred, the Kremlin was loudly assuring NATO and US officials that this was a short-term humanitarian operation. Moscow continued its soothing rhetoric during a two-week operational pause, even as Russian forces in Crimea quietly consolidated control. President Putin told reporters on 4 March that Russia had no intention of annexing Crimea, claiming operations complied with agreements over Russia’s Black Sea Fleet “while insisting [Crimea’s] residents have the right to determine the region's status in a referendum later this month. Crimean tensions, Putin said, ‘have been settled.’ He said massive military maneuvers Russia has conducted involving 150,000 troops near Ukraine's border were previously planned and were unrelated to the current situation.”<sup>15</sup>

Then, after two weeks of de-escalatory diplomacy—and back-channel communications to Germany emphasizing the danger of conflict with Russia for Germany’s midwinter oil and gas supplies—on 18 March, Russia sponsored a referendum on Crimea’s future. The next day Russian and Crimean leaders signed an accession treaty annexing Crimea to Russia, and the following day the Duma approved the annexation. This sequence—decisive shaping, ambiguous (not covert) destabilization, sudden seizure of objectives, a period of de-escalatory rhetoric supported by political warfare, then a diplomatic coup exploiting new facts on the ground—is characteristic of liminal manoeuvre.

## CONCEPTUAL ENVELOPMENT

For its part, China in the early 1990s was a rising power—growing in prosperity but suffering political after-effects of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre<sup>16</sup> when the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) commanders refused to fire on the people, creating concerns about their reliability.<sup>17</sup> A purge of disloyal officers—and the establishment of a new internal security force, the People’s

Armed Police—was ongoing in 1991 when the Gulf War delivered a huge shock to Chinese strategists.<sup>18</sup>

China had armed Iran in its war with Iraq in the 1980s, watching Iran’s slow and bloody defeat by Saddam Hussein, only to see Saddam’s forces brutally crushed in less than 100 hours by a US-led coalition that suffered historically low casualties and achieved astounding success by applying the new Western model. The implication—that China was at least two steps behind the West and needed urgent military modernisation—was clear, and Chinese analysts began intensive efforts to adapt in response.<sup>19</sup>

The need for modernised air and maritime capabilities to match China’s traditionally dominant ground forces was hammered home in 1996, during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, when the PLA proved impotent to prevent an American aircraft carrier strike group and an amphibious assault ship sailing between Taiwan and the mainland.<sup>20</sup> This “injury to Chinese pride [prompted] an intensive program of double-digit investment, foreign acquisitions (primarily from Russia and the Ukraine) and indigenous resourcing to turn the PLA into a force capable of imposing Beijing’s will within its immediate neighborhood and, eventually, beyond. China’s embracing of an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy...was a direct response to the humiliation it suffered in 1996.”<sup>21</sup> Then in May 1999, US aircraft bombed China’s embassy in Belgrade during the air campaign prior to NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, an act Washington called an accident but which Chinese leaders (and the Chinese people at large) have always seen as both a deliberate attack and “an act of barbarism.”<sup>22</sup> Henceforth PLA planners began treating the United States as a pacing threat.

Also in 1999, however, a different strand of Chinese thinking emerged with the publication by PLA senior colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui of *Unrestricted Warfare*, an analysis that took the 1991 Gulf War as its starting point, explicitly seeking ways to render the Western model irrelevant by going outside its conceptual boundaries.<sup>23</sup> This approach—which I term ‘conceptual envelopment’—recognised certain weaknesses in the Western model, such as reliance on advanced technology including space-based systems, prohibitively high cost (which the authors likened to “shooting birds with golden bullets”), the casualty-aversion of Western societies, and an extremely narrow focus on battlefield victory rather than broader warfighting outcomes.

To offset it, Qiao and Wang recommended expanding China’s concept of war to include ‘trans-military’ and ‘non-military’ operations, confronting the United States across such a wide zone of competition that Western planners would struggle to perceive what they were dealing with as warfare, while NATO and allied militaries would lack the tools (or the authority) to respond effectively even if they did. Table 2 lists some non-traditional forms of warfare.

**Table 2—Trans-military and Non-military War Operations**

Military	Trans-military	Non-military
Atomic warfare	Diplomatic warfare	Financial warfare
Conventional warfare	Network warfare	Trade warfare
Bio-chemical warfare	Intelligence warfare	Resources warfare
Space warfare	Psychological Warfare	Ecological warfare
Tactical warfare	Guerrilla warfare	Economic aid warfare

Electronic warfare	Terrorist warfare Virtual warfare (deterrence)	Regulatory warfare Smuggling warfare Drug warfare Sanction warfare Media warfare Ideological warfare
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Adapted from Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui (1999) *Unrestricted Warfare*, p.146

By 2003, elements of Unrestricted Warfare were formalised in China’s ‘Three Warfares’ doctrine, which recognised—in addition to conventional combat—three forms of non-kinetic warfighting including strategic psychological operations, overt and covert media manipulation and exploitation of national and international legal systems (or ‘lawfare’).<sup>24</sup> Alongside the ‘Three Warfares’, China’s technical and commercial espionage program continued efforts to acquire foreign military and industrial technology, while the PLA built advanced cyberwarfare and biowarfare capabilities and modernised air, maritime, land, missile and nuclear forces. China put immense effort into its military space program, competing with the United States in space, but also rendering dependence on space-based systems such as GPS and communications satellites—the Achilles heel of the Western model—a critical vulnerability.

Beyond these military and trans-military efforts, the past two decades also indicate non-military efforts to sidestep Western military superiority. These include supply chain manipulation, with China inserting itself as an essential supplier for virtually all Western countries including the United States; pursuit of advanced technologies in bio-engineering, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and 5G antenna manufacturing; control of critical commodities including rare-earth minerals; attempts to influence standards for new technologies to China’s advantage; export of technologically-enabled mass surveillance and social control systems; and—through the Belt-and-Road Initiative—commercial penetration to deter or disrupt Western influence without direct military competition. We might summarize the key features of Chinese conceptual envelopment as follows:

- **Expansion of the concept of war** to include non-military and trans-military war operations alongside an aggressive campaign to modernise conventional air, land, maritime, space, cyber and information warfare capabilities;
- **Attempts to pose a cognitive ‘bandwidth challenge’** for opponents, overwhelming them through an extremely wide range of simultaneous challenges so that they struggle to perceive or prioritise among threats;
- **Targeting the grey zone** between war and peace, crime and commerce, diplomacy and war, and domestic and international space, to avoid Western strengths in each of these categories by targeting the conceptual seams between them;
- **‘Three Warfares’** methods of information warfare, as described earlier, including strategic psychological operations, “public opinion warfare” and lawfare; and
- **Conventional modernization** as part of what Qiao and Wang call a ‘side-principal rule’, whereby conventional capabilities (such as China’s new aircraft carriers, submarines and

fighter aircraft) keep opponents focused and spending in their conceptual comfort zones, while simultaneously enveloping them through flanking trans-military and non-military activities.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE INTERSTATE CONFLICT**

The implications for future war of Russian liminal manoeuvre and Chinese conceptual envelopment are concerning. The first and most obvious is that Western (in particular, US) dominance over conventional warfighting, as it has existed since 1991, is clearly waning. As both Russia and China have developed a global media presence with the ability to influence world public opinion, expanded their footprint by building or purchasing military bases around the world, developed advanced information warfare and cyber capabilities, modernised conventional and nuclear missile forces and turned outer space into a warfighting domain, peer and near-peer competitors are more able to take on the Western alliance in a conventional fight than at any time since the Cold War.

Likewise, since both Russia and China are pursuing combination strategies—neither fully focused on conventional warfighting, nor solely engaged in liminal manoeuvre or unrestricted warfare—Western powers cannot simply reorient toward non-conventional challenges. Rather, within limited budgets, amid a global pandemic and economic downturn, they need to focus across the full range of challenges. This is difficult enough for the US military; for middle-power Allies such as Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, keeping up across an ever-wider array of traditional and non-traditional threats is even harder.

Finally, most concerningly, we have noted that both Russian and Chinese approaches pursue warfighting goals in ways that Western decision-makers may not recognise as military. In Russia's case, liminal manoeuvre rides the threshold of detectability, remaining ambiguous right to the point of action, so that Western societies may remain oblivious (or unable to agree on a response) until too late, or unsure that an attack is occurring even as it takes place. In China's case, the risk is that when adversaries—as Beijing and Washington appear increasingly to be—have vastly different concepts of warfare, two dangerous things can occur. First, as for Russia, if an adversary like China with a far broader concept of conflict pursues what it considers to be a warfighting strategy against Western societies, we may remain unaware of that fact until we are already defeated. Second, and more concerningly, Western leaders may be engaging in activities they consider normal peacetime interaction including 'trade wars', bans on Chinese companies and technologies, imposition of tariffs or support for democracy movements—whereas China, with its much broader conception of warfare, may interpret these as acts of war and respond accordingly.

## CONCLUSION

It is no criticism of the Western model of warfare, as it emerged in 1991, to note that it is now on the point of becoming irrelevant or obsolete as a result of adversary adaptation. Indeed, in some ways it is a testament to the astonishing effectiveness of Airland Battle that, having been invented during the Cold War for NATO's central front, it proved so successful in 1991 that an entire generation of adversaries has been forced to treat the US military, and any US ally that fights using the same conventional approach, as the apex predator in a conflict ecosystem where every adversary must adapt merely to survive. The selection pressure on adversaries—including, but by no means limited to Russia and China—has been so intense that each has adopted distinctive approaches to offset Western dominance. Yet, as I noted in the first section, despite their varying natures and different starting points, all adversaries (whether states or non-states) have been responding to the same fitness landscape created by Western dominance since 1991, in which certain behaviours are punished and others rewarded. As a result, even though specific approaches differ, all Western adversaries are pursuing some form of avoidance strategy, focusing on stealth, modularity, ambiguity, media manipulation, technology hacking, the ability to hide in plain sight, and the exploitation of urban or complex physical and human terrain.

As we consider the implications of these Russian and Chinese approaches for future war, this suggests that Western forces will increasingly face warfare in a crowded, cluttered, highly connected, predominantly urban environment, against a mix of state and non-state actors, all of whom are applying irregular methods designed to overwhelm us through a massive number of small, ambiguous challenges, or adopting non-conventional avoidance strategies to offset our narrow superiority in traditional forms of war.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> President of Russia (2005) *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*, transcript in translation; Kremlin.ru, 2005. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

<sup>2</sup> Portions of this article are drawn from David Kilcullen (2020) *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Farley, “What if the US Army’s ‘Big Five’ Weapons Programs Had Failed?”, *The National Interest*, 24 July 2020. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/what-if-us-armys-big-five-weapons-programs-had-failed-165555>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> For a definition of a ‘pacing threat’ the need to update the classic Airland Battle model see Timothy A. Walton, “Securing the Third Offset Strategy: Priorities for the Next Secretary of Defense”, in *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 82: 3<sup>rd</sup> Qtr 2016. pp. 6-15. [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-82/jfq-82\\_6-15\\_Walton.pdf](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-82/jfq-82_6-15_Walton.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> I use the direct Russian translation ‘special-purpose forces’, (Spetsnaz, *Войска специального назначения*), rather than ‘Special Operations Force’ (SOF) here to avoid conflating Western SOF roles with the more political and intelligence-focused function traditionally performed by Spetsnaz, which have often fallen under intelligence agencies.

<sup>7</sup> See BBC News, *Confrontation over Pristina Airport*, BBC.co.uk, 9 March 2000. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/671495.stm>. And see: Paul Beaver, Nicholas Watt and Tom Whitehouse, “Race for Pristina”, *The Guardian*, 11 June 1999. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jun/12/nicholaswatt>.

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas Braun, “The Russian Military in 2020: Russia's Way Back to Power Projection? Implications for NATO” in *Connections*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 2012. pp. 67-78.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of these events see David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: The Unravelling of Western Counterterrorism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016. pp. 80-82 and 71-74.

<sup>10</sup> In this context, ‘clandestine’ operations occur when the existence of an operation remains undetected; ‘covert’ operations occur when the operation is detected but the identity of its sponsor remains unknown.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of ‘political engineering’ see Anna Karpova, Dmitry Karpov and Yuriy Kruchkov, “Russia's New Engineering Policy in Global Politics, *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 166, 2015. pp. 530-535. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814067056>.

<sup>12</sup> See Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “*The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*”, RAND Corporation, Washington DC, 2016. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

<sup>13</sup> See US Army Special Operations Command, “Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014”, Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies (ARIS) Program, Fort Bragg, 2018. pp. 43-45. [https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/ARIS\\_LittleGreenMen.pdf](https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/ARIS_LittleGreenMen.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> The ‘polite little green men’ (*вежливые зеленые человечки*) were drawn from a combination of Naval, Airborne and Army units, often operating under control of, or in close coordination with, elements of Russian military intelligence, and facilitated by the fact that Russian forces were already present on the Crimean Peninsula in bases guaranteed by the 1994 treaty that established independent Ukraine.

<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, “Putin: ‘Russia has no intention of fighting Ukraine’”, *WJLA*, 4 March 2014. <https://wjla.com/news/nation-world/ukraine-putin-says-russia-has-right-to-use-all-means-to-protect-russians-in-crimea-100760>.

<sup>16</sup> Casualty estimates vary widely, from less than 300 (claimed by official Communist sources) to more than 10,000 reported at the time in a since-declassified British Embassy cable. See Timothy Brook, *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA: 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Brook, *op. cit.* and Andrew Jacobs and Chris Buckley, “Tales of Army Discard Show Tiananmen Square in a New Light” in *The New York Times*, 3 June 2014. [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/world/asia/tiananmen-square-25-years-later-details-merge-of-armys-chaos.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/world/asia/tiananmen-square-25-years-later-details-merge-of-armys-chaos.html?_r=0).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Farley, “What Scares China's Military: The 1991 Gulf War” in *The National Interest*, 24 November 2014. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-scaries-chinas-military-the-1991-gulf-war-11724>.

<sup>19</sup> See Andrew Scobell, David Lai and Roy Kamphausen (eds.), *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples' Wars*, United States Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA, 2011. <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2163.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Elleman, *Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the US Navy*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2014. p. 130.

<sup>21</sup> J. Michael Cole, “The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis: The Forgotten Showdown Between China and America”, *The National Interest*, 10 March 2017. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-third-taiwan-strait-crisis-the-forgotten-showdown-19742>.

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