

Russia's Use of Military Force as a Foreign Policy Tool IS THERE A LOGIC?

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Samuel Charap¹
International Institute for Strategic Studies

Russia has used its military beyond its borders with unprecedented frequency in the period since the invasion of Crimea in February 2014. Depending on how one counts, there are up to five cases of the use of force that followed Crimea:

- Support for the insurgency in the Donbas from March 2014.
- Direct military intervention that culminated in Ilovaisk in late August 2014.
- Intervention that ended with separatist seizure of Debaltseve in January-February 2015.
- Intervention in Syria from September 2015.
- Brinksmanship in the skies and on the seas with NATO and other Western militaries.

This behavior has understandably raised concerns about a new Russian militarism, particularly following the Syria intervention, Moscow's first major military operation outside the former-Soviet region since Afghanistan. A close examination reveals significant commonalities across the post-2014 cases, which suggest that there is a pattern or even logic to Russian behavior. Given the nature of the current international environment, it is likely that they will not be the last such cases.

Compellence and Coercive Bargaining Processes

All cases of the Russian use of force since 2014 share a fundamental similarity: Moscow deployed its military in order to achieve a policy goal. Tactical military objectives were driven by the policy mission; put differently, there have been no purely military goals. Russia's use of force is thus best understood as a means of coercion. As Thomas Schelling writes in his 1966 classic *Arms and Influence* (2008 edition, p. 5): "the difference between coercion and brute force is as often in the intent as in the instrument. To hunt

¹ [Samuel Charap](#) is Senior Fellow for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

down Comanches and to exterminate them was brute force; to raid their villages to make them behave was coercive diplomacy, based on the power to hurt.”

Schelling classifies coercive military acts as either deterrence, aimed at preventing adversary behaviors, or compellence—threatening or taking action to force the adversary to do something. The adversary must do that thing for the pain to stop. As Schelling notes, compellence entails “inducing his withdrawal, acquiescence or his collaboration by an action that threatens to hurt, often one that could not forcibly accomplish its aim but that, nevertheless, can hurt enough to induce compliance” (p. 79).

The Russian cases of the use of force clearly were acts of compellence. For example, the devastation of the Ukrainian forces at Ilovaisk did not result in their total defeat but did demonstrate Moscow’s willingness to hurt, and thus (at least temporarily) forced Kyiv to change its behavior. Russia’s intention was not just to change the Ukrainian military’s behavior; it also forced President Petro Poroshenko to the negotiating table and produced Minsk I. As Vladimir Lukin, the former Russian Ambassador to the United States who has been involved in Ukraine policy in several capacities since 2014, [said](#): “Forget about DNR and LNR. The objective [of the August 2014 counteroffensive] is to explain to Poroshenko that he will never prevail ... [The Kremlin] will send in however many troops are necessary to make Poroshenko understand this and sit down at the table with whomever Putin wants.”

We should therefore understand the military component of Russian policy as one element of a broader coercive bargaining process related to political outcomes. Schelling notes that “this kind of conflict ... is a process of bargaining—of threats and demands, proposals and counter-proposals, of giving reassurances and making trades or concessions, signaling intent and communicating the limits of one’s tolerance, of getting a reputation and giving lessons” (p. 135).

There is no firm line between war and diplomacy in such a conflict. Seen in this context, the six cases fit into three distinct coercive bargaining processes. All the Ukraine cases were elements of Russia’s campaign to block Ukraine’s Western integration that began in the summer of 2013. The Syria intervention is part of the international bargaining process over the civil war that dates from 2011. And the NATO brinksmanship seems to be linked to the efforts Russia has been undertaking for many years to push back against increased military activity—particularly U.S. military activity—along its borders.²

² Schelling explicitly describes brinksmanship as a form of compellence through “manipulat[ion of] the shared risk of war”: “It involves setting afoot an activity that may get out of hand, initiating a process that carries some risk of unintended disaster. The risk is intended, but not the disaster.” The risk is “exploited [in order] to intimidate” (pp. 99, 91, 102).

Common Threads

The three processes are similar on a number of levels. First, and most importantly, the use of force has come after other non-kinetic means have been tried and are seen to have failed. Put differently, the use of force is a last resort. Russia tries to achieve its objectives using diplomacy, economic pressure, threats, etc., and only when it still has not succeeded does it resort to the military tool. In the six months before the invasion of Crimea, Moscow threatened and then implemented economic sanctions (July-September 2013), offered a whopping \$15 billion in economic assistance (December 2013), and engaged in diplomacy with the West (the February 21, 2014 agreement) prior to using the military. In Syria, Moscow had engaged in extensive diplomatic outreach, conducted arms transfers, and even attempted to organize the opposition before concluding that the only means of getting a settlement on its terms was to use the military to change the balance. A key implication is that we should see Moscow's *failures* to get what it wants as warning signs for potential use of force.

But Moscow often fails to get what it wants. It only has intervened when the stakes are perceived to be high relative to other regional or global crises. Worst-case scenario outcomes in either Syria and especially Ukraine—and in the clash with NATO—would have been very detrimental for Russia's security (as seen by the Kremlin). All three coercive bargaining processes that reached the threshold for the use of force were thus tied into core national security or "regime security" concerns. In addition, Moscow's objective has been to prevent or reverse (perceived) geopolitical loss, not to make new geopolitical gains. Russia wanted to *return* Ukraine to its orbit after the Maidan revolution seemed to snatch it away; *sustain* the regime in Syria from rebel overthrow; and *block* new NATO deployments in an area where previously there had been none. We have yet to see military force used to extend Russian influence where it did not exist before or dramatically change existing balances in Russia's favor.

The military operations in all three processes share several important characteristics as well. Moscow has used just enough force to get the policy job done, but not more. For example, the late August 2014 intervention only came when the approach of using separatist proxies was on the verge of catastrophic failure. That intervention itself was limited; no high-end capabilities were employed, and the majority of the forces massed at the border never crossed it. As soon as the Ukrainians agreed to Minsk I, the Russian regulars largely left. Schelling notes that the limited use of force is a characteristic of coercion: "coercive warfare can be conducted by degree, in measured doses, in a way that purely military engagements—'battlefield engagements'—tend not to be" (p. 172). Schelling identifies three reasons. First, in coercive warfare violence is important mostly because of its knock-on effects: "coercion depends more on the threat of what is yet to come than on damage already done. The pace of diplomacy, not the pace of battle, would govern the action; and while diplomacy may not require that it go slowly, it does require that an impressive unspent capacity for damage be kept in reserve" (p. 172).

Second, the speedy use of overwhelming force is needed to achieve military objectives, but not it might not be needed to achieve political ones. Finally, and most importantly, the objective of coercive warfare is to “make the enemy behave,” not to annihilate him (p. 173).

Finally, Russia has portrayed the use of force in all these cases as consistent with international law. In Crimea, the Black Sea Fleet basing agreement and the principle of self-determination were invoked. In the Donbas, the Russian leadership denies the fact of the intervention itself. In Syria, the Kremlin regularly notes that the military is there at Assad’s invitation. These arguments serve two purposes. First, they provide a veneer of international-legal “legitimacy” that allows Russia to bolster its reputation as a responsible great power. Second, they signal the Kremlin’s peculiar form of commitment to the international system as defined by the UN Charter. By Russia’s standards, under which the P5 have the right to bend the rules when necessary but should always claim to be following them, its actions have not been “revisionist.” Revisionism, in this view, entails not just breaking the rules, but flaunting the violation.

It is important to note that armed compellence can be self-defeating: coercive pressure can sometimes produce resistance, not compliance. Schelling uses the example of the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, which spectacularly failed to achieve the objective of ending the latter’s support for the Vietcong. In Ukraine and Syria, the use of force has been far more effective at getting the West to the table than it has been in inducing compliance from actors on the ground. Even a significant escalation in Ukraine could not generate support for accepting Russia’s terms for a political settlement. And while the bombing in Syria succeeded in repeatedly getting U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on a plane to Moscow and Geneva, the Syrian opposition has proven more resistant to such coercion.

Conclusions

Two conclusions can be drawn from the analysis presented here—one reassuring, the other disconcerting. On the one hand, the clear patterns identified suggest that there is a logic to Russian behavior, and that this limits the number of other potential circumstances that might lead to another military intervention.³ We should look for cases where the stakes are high for Russia, and Moscow is seeking to prevent a perceived geopolitical loss. The operational environment should allow for avoiding a direct clash with the U.S. military. Outside of the near abroad, it is difficult to think of circumstances that meet these criteria at the moment. However, a regional crisis in the Middle East or Eastern Europe could easily create those circumstances in the future. In any case, before force is used we are likely to see Moscow try and fail to get what it

³ Small counterterrorism operations abroad are not considered here since these have been going on in limited ways for many years.

wants using other means. Preventative diplomacy might help stop this escalation before Russia falls back on the military tool.

On the other hand, the logic of Russia's actions suggests the potential for unintended Russia-NATO conflict is high and likely to grow. We are in the midst of a coercive bargaining process between Russia and NATO in the Baltic region. Russia's compellence efforts so far have not worked, and have already produced resistance, not compliance: NATO responded to Russia's brinkmanship by increasing rotational deployments, boosting the Baltic air policing mission, and so on. In addition to the brinkmanship moves, Russia has already started increasing manpower and building new infrastructure in the Western Military District. If the logic identified here holds, we should expect further efforts to compel a change in NATO's behavior.