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The Kremlin is always in a war state of mind

Interview by Octavian Manea



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General Hodges, your operational biography spans different battlegrounds, multiple campaigns, and ultimately different wars: Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2006), the Afghan surge (2009-2010) and culminating in commanding US Army Europe (2014-2017) in the post-Crimea annexation security environment. In a way you've seen both the post-9/11 security environment and the effects of the return of the great-power competition. Seen through your operational experience, how has the character of war changed?

The character of war has changed most significantly in terms of the speed with which things happen. Obviously, the speed of weapons and platforms

is part of it, but also the speed with which information, including disinformation, is able to spread and confuse us. Ultimately the introduction of the unmanned systems, of drones in the air as well as maritime – they are relatively cheap and have the ability to swarm – will create a whole new set of problems. So a change in terms of the speed of weapons, speed of information and events, as well as the growth of unmanned systems. In the next 10 years this change is going to explode because of capabilities like AI, quantum computing, machine learning, big data, that will accelerate in an exponential way the speed I am talking about, and offer new ways of war.

What does this transformation of war imply for European security and NATO more broadly?

The first thing is the willingness to recognise that actually there is a threat from the Kremlin as well as from the Chinese Communist Party. We know from history, from thousands of years of human history, that if you only appease or try to avoid escalation you are guaranteed that you are going to continue to deal with it. We know this and yet that seems to be the prevailing diplomatic approach. If we want to be serious about deterrence, about protecting our citizens and interests, you have to have a strong capability, not just military but in all domains – including a strong economy, a strong societal resilience, with people that trust their government and their liberal democratic institutions. That to me is the number one issue facing Europe, and that's why our book was a call to arms to our European allies to understand that it is not only about 2%, but about having real capabilities and making the necessary investments.

The second aspect of this is the recognition that the Kremlin is always in a war state of mind. That doesn't mean it is always kinetic. But they will use everything from the threat of nuclear war to putting 100,000 troops on your border, to using force, to changing borders, to disinformation, to threatening to turn off your gas. In the end, this is Russian warfare. They've always used all of the elements of power. They don't think in terms of at war – not at war. It is a constant sort of pressure that seeks to create and exploit cracks, gaps, vulnerabilities, whether that is through cyber, the threat of nuclear strike, huge exercises, the seizure of boats, disinformation, the use of energy as leverage. For them it is one continuum. Understanding this mentality that the Kremlin is always in a war state of mind will help Europe be better prepared to better deter and protect transportation infrastructure, but also to have air and missile defences, to protect the key airports of Europe from missile strikes.

A core component of the book you co-authored this year, *The Future of War and The Defense of Europe*, is the image of 5D warfare (use of disinformation, deception, disruption and destabilisation, reinforced through implied threat of destruction) with Russia as the main practitioner as we speak. The past few months have revealed the contours of a 'multi-domain' Russian destabilisation campaign in NATO's eastern neighbourhood - a progressive build-up of conventional Russian military power near the Ukrainian border, attempts to 'weaponise' migrants at the Polish and Baltic borders, and a drop in Russian gas deliveries to Europe just prior to the winter season. Let's explain in more detail what 5D warfare is all about.

Because the character of war has changed and how the Russians use so many different combinations and sequences of their capabilities to achieve their outcome, they don't think in terms of at war – not a war. We have a hard time categorising so that we can understand it. That's why you hear about the Gerasimov doctrine. I think General Gerasimov would be happy to know that he was given credit for this even though it is not his doctrine. And of course people call it the grey zone because it is not quite obvious, Article-5 type of action, but it is more than just disinformation. Some people call it below the line, just short of becoming Article 5. So this reflects efforts by the West to try and understand so that we can recognise it and deter it, and if necessary, so we can defeat it. That's what 5D, or whatever other device one creates to understand this, is about. To me this is a healthy sort of debate because the key to successful deterrence in my view is recognition, speed of recognition. Think about what every European capital and the US are doing right now. We are all trying to figure out, what is the Kremlin up to? what are they really doing? what are their intentions? There are so much conflicting reports in the open sources and the uncertainty that Kremlin loves that we are not quite sure what they are really going to do or where they are going to strike, if they are going to strike – and because of all this

fog most capitals are paralysed, because they don't want to do something that escalates, they don't want to be seen as provocative which is ridiculous. What provokes the Kremlin is inaction, what provokes the Kremlin is weakness, that is what gives them the opportunity. 5D is about understanding who it is, recognising it fast enough so that you can have the speed of decision to do whatever is needed, and the speed of assembly to move capability and send the message that we see what you are doing.

This speed of recognition is more just than realising that there is just disinformation, disruption and all the associated activities, but requires real policy changes so that we can share intelligence and information. The Romanian Navy will know what is happening in the Black Sea much faster than the US Navy. Romania is NATO but it is not Five Eyes. Do we have the policies in place that would allow good intel sharing between Romania, US, Ukraine and Georgia, so that we can have an unblinking eye to what is happening in and around the Black Sea?

How should the US and Europe respond to the Russian multi-domain pressures? One of the main ideas at the core of US defence policies is that of 'integrated deterrence'.

I agree with the Biden administration that we should be leading with diplomatic power that is backed up by strong military and economic power. And it is most effective when it is the US with all the members of EU working together. The combined diplomatic and economic power is huge. The issue will be: the Kremlin, when they look across the table, do they see us together? Or do they say, 'I don't think the Germans are serious'? If the soft power is unified and backed up by credible threat (including these sanctions that we keep hearing about), and if the Russians really believe that, I think they might back down or at least stop. But if they think that this is only the US, and even then still kind of waffling around, they will keep moving.

The Kremlin has put themselves in a situation where it is a very expensive deployment of troops and equipment. You can't just leave that in the field forever and do nothing without having something to show for it. Either he's got to get some significant concessions from the West so that it can declare victory and bring the troops back, or is going to have to do something to justify it. The Kremlin's declaration that what is happening in the Donbas feels like genocide worries me. This is classic Kremlin: setting the conditions to justify the intervention of Russian troops on humanitarian missions to protect the Russian citizens living in the Donbas. When you talk about soft power, when he sees disunity or he believes that the resolve is not really there, then it invites further aggression.

I would also like to see us find a way to get the initiative. Why are we always reacting to whatever the Kremlin does or says, instead of having them respond to us? For example, it could be something as tactical as providing a new weapon capability or a ship visit in around Ukraine; or it could be the deployment into Romania or Poland of additional capabilities that have long range that could hit the Russian Navy, the Black Sea fleet and Sevastopol. Those are things that would cause the Russians to think that the US or NATO have really put into position capabilities that could hurt. Something more interesting to me is providing capability to Ukraine that enables them to reach Sevastopol with anti-ship missiles, for example. That needs to be something that should affect the calculations of the Commander of the Black Sea Fleet.

The one that is most interesting to me however is the Montreux Convention. But that will require us to fix the relationship with Turkey. Turkey generally does a very good job of implementing and enforcing the Montreux Convention. But it is also well known that the Russian submarines violate it all the time. If Turkey was confident that the West would support them, then they could begin to squeeze the Straits a little bit and punish the Kremlin every time a Russian vessel violates

the Convention. That would start getting attention. This is an area where we could exert some pressure. There's got to be some creative ways to do things where we get the initiative, instead of always responding to whatever they do.

You've been at the forefront of the NATO adaptation since 2014. While NATO's posture changed significantly after Crimea, it remains very much a work in progress. The contours of the 1990s posture are still there: a light/tripwire footprint in the East with the bulk of forces in Western Europe, all connected through a strategy of deterrence by reinforcement. Are we effectively postured to deter a *Blitzkrieg fait accompli*, which in the end is the most plausible theory of victory for a disgruntled revisionist power? Professor Lindley French warns about perpetuating a Maginot-like deterrence hole, a thin crust of deterrence. What else needs to be done in terms of really having a credible deterrence posture?

The alliance has done a good job since 2014, and really since the NATO summit in Warsaw, to improve capability, to improve the level of readiness. We are much better now than we were 7 years ago. There is no doubt about that. We should also be careful not to overestimate the capabilities that the Russians have. They do have thousands of nuclear weapons, they have unlimited natural resources, but I am not terribly impressed with their ability to conduct long-term sustained operations. They can move a lot of stuff very fast, they have very good electronic warfare capability, they're continuing to improve their long-range strike capabilities. But when you add the 30 nations of NATO plus partners in terms of population, economy, military strength, money it dwarfs what they have. So one of the keys is acting together.

Strategically, we have to continue having a strong nuclear deterrent. That means you have to be modernised, you have to practice and exercise decision-making, making sure that the nuclear sharing-agreements such as

with Germany remain in effect. It is a crucial aspect of the nuclear deterrent. We also have to reduce our vulnerability to the areas where the Russians do have an advantage, which is of course energy. Everything that we can do to reduce our energy dependence on Russia contributes to our deterrence capability.

More specifically to NATO, there are four of five things where we've got to improve, and the EU and the Alliance together are going to have to work together to improve most of them.

First is the intelligence sharing, to recognise what is happening fast enough to make the necessary decisions to prevent the crisis from happening. So getting the policy, the technology right, and making sure we have an unblinking eye, to see everything. NATO only limits it, so we have to figure that out.

We have got to improve our air and missile defence. If the Kremlin is willing to use force against a NATO country, then they've already made the decision that they are going to strike seaports, airports and transportation infrastructure. They have to do that because they know that our real strength comes from the reinforcement of and enabling of SACEUR's AOR. That means seaport, airports, rail, bridges are essential. Right now, we absolutely cannot protect our critical infrastructure and our European citizens from a Russian missile strike. There won't be one missile at a time, but a barrage, attacks on multiple points of Europe and swarms of drones going after every sensor, so we are definitely not prepared for that.

I don't think that we exercise enough at the level of sophistication and difficulty. We do a lot of exercises and there is a lot of good work that goes on. But what you almost never see is an exercise where we fail. I believe in the principle of 'train to fail'. If we don't push and give the enemy the chance to think on his own and disrupt him, then we never truly get to the point of improving or identifying where the gaps are. I am talking about a force on force where the enemy is a free-thinking opponent that can use all the tools.

Military mobility is something that I will continue to argue for, because I think that if we are not able to move as fast or faster than the Russian Federation forces (if they think they can capture a part of allied territory before the Alliance can react), then the risk of them making a terrible decision goes up. Military mobility is about giving political leaders options, the ability to move quickly to prevent a crisis, or prevent a crisis from escalating. Improving the legal-diplomatic part, but also improving the infrastructure, having enough bridges that can carry Abrams and Leopards, tunnels that are big enough to allow vehicles to go through, and of course having enough capacity. *Deutsche Bahn Cargo* can only carry one and a half armored brigades simultaneously as total. That is completely inadequate. The cyber-architecture that enables transportation is got to be protected. A cyber-strike that knocks-out the port of Bremerhaven is just as bad as an Iskander missile.

Another dimension is the command architecture. We've got so many headquarters, and this is the nature of alliances, but if we are serious we've got to address some important issues about who does what and who has what authority. We are still not clear about the role of JSEC after almost three years. It is still not clear what the roles of the JFC Brunssum, the Multinational Corps NE in Szczecin and the two divisions within the EFP boundaries and the NFIUs are. The fact that we have Enhanced Forward Presence in the North and Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea creates vulnerabilities. We need a three-star HQ that wakes up in the morning smelling Black Sea air every morning – a joint all-domain HQ.

Lastly, for the Alliance, getting coherence on the Eastern Flank so we don't have gaps both physically, but also mentally, remains vital. There is a mental gap between the Baltic and the Black Sea region where you've got enhanced forward presence vs tailored forward presence. If you have a coherent flank, then you think differently about integrated

air and missile defence, which is a theater requirement. You think differently about military mobility, about the need to be able to move rapidly from the Western Europe into the Baltic region to the Visegrad region or down into the Black Sea region. A coherent flank improves your thinking.

Let's reflect a bit on the broader consequences of Russia investing massively in counter-power-projection bastions to neutralise some of the traditional features of the Western way of war. There are observers that emphasise that this is a defensive-oriented development. On the other hand, it is the ideal cover for achieving local escalation dominance in an effort to dominate strategic pieces of real estate. How can their effect be counter-balanced?

We may have overestimated a little bit what's there, particularly Kaliningrad. The picture you always see are these death rings around it. But those are not impenetrable walls. They show the effective range of a system. We are a little bit wiser now about what's really there and how to neutralise it. And frankly, I think Kaliningrad is probably a liability for Russia more than it is an asset. Our ability to get sea control in the Baltic Sea is significant. Just count the number of allies, plus Finland and Sweden, and I think we have the advantage if we needed to. The Black Sea is a different story. We don't have the same numerical superiority; we are restricted by Montreux, and the Russian capabilities in Crimea can range almost everything in the Black Sea. It is a different challenge, but nonetheless if we had to, a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic could neutralise it – whether we are talking about cyber or blocking the straits. That is always an option.

There is a third sort of bubble, and that is the one in Syria in Tartus; this is another place where I think we can get the initiative to tell the Russians that if you do anything, if you expand any further, we are going to blockade your base in Tartus. That will take real courage, but we need to find other places to make them worry about what they are doing.

What would you like to see in the Black Sea in order not to become a strategic black hole? In the end, it is where the Russian revisionism started to manifest, starting with Georgia back in 2008.

We've got to raise the priority of the Black Sea region. We have to compete there in the diplomatic space, the information and economic spaces, not just militarily. We have to think about the Black Sea as the place where Russia, Europe, the Middle East and Eurasia all come together. If you take the Black Sea region from the bottom of the map and put it in the middle of the map then it completely changes how you think strategically. In this context, we need three things:

- 1) A published strategy for the Black Sea region that incorporates diplomacy, information and the economy, not just military. A comprehensive strategy for the region that helps turn this European–Eurasian economic corridor into a real thing that will benefit any nation in the region, but also everybody connected by the Danube river.
- 2) An improved relationship with Turkey, where they don't distrust the West and we don't distrust them, is key.
- 3) Lastly, I would want to see a US Navy ship on the Black Sea just about every day within the constraints of the Montreux Convention. But that would mean we have to have the Black Sea at such a high priority that the Navy would have to have the resources prioritised to go there. Right now, it is not enough. Montreux was not the limit. The limit was the priority and the numbers of ships. If you have a strategy, then you get a higher priority and more ships dedicated there.

We may face the potential consolidation of a Russian military presence in Belarus. What would such a development imply for Poland, the Suwalki Corridor and the Baltic states, as well as for the NATO strategy of deterrence by reinforcement? What would be the strategic implications of this new military reality?

Having Russian ground troops permanently based in Belarus is a problem... the Suwalki Corridor immediately becomes much more vulnerable to being cut off, thus isolating Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the rest of NATO. Such a consolidation also complicates the defence challenges for Ukraine, stretching Ukraine's defences significantly further North and West.



This interview was conducted by Octavian Manea who is a PhD researcher at CSDS. He is interested in great power transitions, the changing character of conflict as well as the implications of such alterations for the US-led alliance system.

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