Posted on the CEEEP website
Date: May 05, 2021

THINK TANK DEL EJÉRCITO DEL PERÚ

The Chancellery and the Hybrid War: The Lavrov Case in the Russian Conflicts of the 21st Century

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Summary

This article shows and analyzes the important work of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, as a core element of the strategy developed by the Kremlin in its conflicts in the 21st century. In this sense, the importance of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the direction and execution of this strategy, whose theoretical basis has been called the "Gerasimov Doctrine", is highlighted. Likewise, the fundamental concepts, sources and operating procedures of this doctrine are cited, which the West - originally - called Hybrid War. For this, two of the conflicts in which Russia has participated in the course of the 21st century are presented, such as the cyberwar between Russia and Estonia, in 2007, and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, in 2014.

Keywords

Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Hybrid War - Gerasimov Doctrine – Kremlin

Introduction

In modern history, the relationship between the Foreign Ministry and the armed forces of a country –mainly during an external crisis- tends to be one of strategic coordination. Both institutions work to achieve the national political objective and develop actions in their respective fields, although under separate but closely coordinated directions. However, in the Russia of the 21st century, this relationship between foreign policy and defense has been altered. The Foreign Ministry has put aside its usual coordination role to assume a directive role, both in planning and in the execution of actions to face a conflict. This has been happening under the precepts of the Gerasimov Doctrine; that means, the application of the Hybrid War adapted to the international context, the geographical reality, the combative potential and the Russian national interests.

This article analyzes the directorial work carried out by the Russian Foreign Ministry in the development of this war model, highlighting the role played by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. For this, the concepts associated with the Gerasimov Doctrine are specified and the main actions of Lavrov during the Russian conflicts against Estonia, in 2007, and against Ukraine, since 2014, are analyzed.

Gerasimov Doctrine: Hybrid Warfare in Russia

In 2007, Lieutenant Colonel Fran Hoffman, a US Marine, was the first to mention the concept of Hybrid War and define it as the incorporation of a range of different forms of warfare, including conventional capabilities, tactics and irregular formations, criminal disorder, as well as terrorist acts that include coercion and indiscriminate violence.[1] From there, countless later definitions would be developed by theorists from all over the world, the Russians being the ones who - quickly - would take the leading role.

By 2013, General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces and First Deputy Minister of Defense, would publish a first essay in the Russian specialized magazine VPK entitled "*The value of science is in the ability to foresee what will or could happen in the future: The new challenges require rethinking the ways and methods of conducting combat operations.*" Both in this work and in subsequent ones, Gerasimov would show the different and atypical operational actions that Russia had already been developing and that it would continue to deploy throughout its conflicts in the 21st century. For this reason, various specialists called this philosophy the "Gerasimov Doctrine", since the strategy developed by Russia in its various conflicts during this century was based on it.

This way of waging war by Russia has a very particular strategic vision. The operational concept is developed by what Makotczenko defines as the adoption of military and non-military measures. On the one hand, military measures are the same as those applied in a conventional war, based on the relative combative power of a nation. On the other hand, non-military measures are shown operatively through actions in the form of a coalition and the formation of political and diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, economic blockade, cessation of diplomatic relations and seeking the support of the news media, among others.[2] As can be seen, a series of factors and dimensions are combined, among these are found the foreign policy through diplomatic actions in the International Community.

Another Russian expert, Nikolaevich, conceptualized the Gerasimov Doctrine as a combination of different pressure methods, among which the military, the political-diplomatic, the economic-social, the psychological–information, the technical-information, as well as acts of terrorism and extremism (including the employment of special services, Special Forces, cyber forces, public forces and diplomacy) are distinguished.[3] As can be seen, this definition again includes actions in the diplomatic field as part of the operational actions of a total strategy.

In this sense, the execution of non-military measures goes hand in hand with military measures, which -as far as possible- should never become violent or tax attacks. The latter, because one of the main objectives of the Kremlin is to safeguard the good image and prestige of the Russian State, showing it as a fair government and vigilant of its interests before the international community. Therefore, the main tool used is coercive deterrence that manifests itself through the deployment of conventional forces and specific Special Forces operations. This is the way in which Russia has proceeded in its conflicts during the 21st century. It is in this type of strategy that Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, through his statements in the media and international organizations, becomes a kind of "orchestra director" of the actions (both at the strategic level and at the operational level) of Russian task forces during crises and conflicts.

Lavrov in the Russo-Estonian cyberwar, the first of its kind in military history

The first cyberwar in history occurred in 2007, after the removal of the Statue called the "Bronze Soldier" from the center of the city of Tallinn, capital of the Republic of Estonia. Placed in 1947 by the Soviet government, this statue symbolized for the Russian-speaking and pro-Russian sector of the population, the Soviet victory over the Nazi army during World War II. However, for the majority sector of Estonians, the statue was a reminder of the communist occupation that lasted almost five decades. In this highly polarized society, excessive violence would soon manifest itself through protests and clashes in the streets, causing one death, 43 injuries and almost 1000 citizens arrested, in addition to the beginning of a diplomatic crisis between the Baltic Republic and Russia.[4]

Once the facts were known, the Kremlin - led by former KGB agent Vladimir Putin - began to develop a strategy using non-military means, in accordance with the Hybrid War doctrine. Previously, Minister Lavrov had come out to testify in international media, describing the removal of the statue as a show of blasphemy and insult to the memory of those who liberated Europe from Nazism.[5] Likewise, Lavrov stated that Estonia was violating the fundamental rights of its citizens of Russian descent and therefore, the prime minister of that country should resign.[6] This was Lavrov's first action that sought to delimit the next political-military movements of Russia in this scenario.

Consequently, the Russian minister would openly announce what - as it would later become known - was the very well planned and programmed action of non-military media, declaring to its local media that Russia should react without hysteria, but also take serious steps that would demonstrate its position on this action, adding that this would be the way in which Russia would act.[7] Shortly after, the Russian cyber offensive on the Estonian computer and technological system would begin.

In this regard, the Estonian Ministry of Defense divided the Russian cyberattacks into two phases.[8] The first phase, implemented from April 27 to 29, 2007, sought to obtain the favor and support of pro-Russian Estonian citizens. To this end, various Russian websites indicated how they should proceed and spread propaganda criticizing the actions of the Estonian police against pro-Russian citizens and Estonians of Russian descent, mostly false news.[9] The second phase, implemented since April 30, 2007, consisted of an offensive directed at duly selected sabotage targets. During this phase, all state entities and banking services were attacked, causing severe political, economic, commercial and telecommunication damage in the country.[10] To achieve this, the Russians had to have both specialized human resources, known as cyber warriors, and state-of-the-art technological means.

Although Estonian Defense Minister Jaak Aaviksso declared that Estonia was under a cyber attack[11] and other authorities stated that there was evidence that the Russians were behind the cyber offensive,[12] the Kremlin never officially admitted it. At the same time, Lavrov continued the game of official statements and messages, while Estonia reacted with a belated cyber defense that included the arrival of specialists from NATO and the United States (US). The actions of the Estonian Government had to be fixed in the long term, because the damages caused required it. Similarly, Estonia had to develop international alliances, specifically with the most important technology and network corporations in the world to reduce the damage suffered to its systems.

In the following months, Lavrov was commissioned to seek conciliation, meeting with his Estonian colleague, Umas Paet, in a scenario still of tension and outrage. However, in parallel to this apparent search for a solution, the Estonian ambassador to Russia, Marina

Kaljurand, had to leave Moscow after being harassed and persecuted for several days by activists from youth organizations.[13] This, as will be understood, was part of the synchronized action of the Russian Government within the framework of its Hybrid War strategy, the key of which lies in the identification of strategic objectives and the covert use of means that - in peacetime - violate sovereignty from another state.[14]

In this way, it is evident that in his statements Lavrov had ranged from conciliatory, as usually corresponds to a diplomat in office, to threatening and coercive, in the purest style of a general in full battle, showing that the directives emanating from the Kremlin are obeyed and are linked to all the actions carried out by the Russian forces employed for this purpose.

Lavrov in the 2014 war with Ukraine

At the beginning of 2014, a series of protests took place in Ukraine against the political leader Viktor Yanukovych, who had decided to slow down the integration talks with the European Union (EU). Yanukovych was accused by the population of maintaining close ties with the Russian Federation, having received a public promise of substantial financial support that would allow it to overcome the serious economic crisis that Ukraine was going through as a result of the collapse of industrial production.

The Protestants, supported by the national army, sought Ukraine's early accession to the EU. However, a relevant sector of Ukrainians, identified with the Russian regime, did not approve these claims. The latter were mainly located in the southeastern part of the country, in regions such as Crimea, where the vast majority of the population is made up of Russian-speaking and pro-Russian Ukrainians, who were radically opposed to Ukraine's accession to the EU. On this occasion, the scenario was more uncertain than that of Estonia, because the population in favor of Russia was greater in number than the opposition, and it was also clearly territorialized.

To avoid what was already seen as a civil war, the Ukrainian parliament demanded drastic reforms to government policy, causing Yanukovych's resignation on February 22, 2014. From that moment on, the government of Putin would initiate a series of actions framed in the notion of Hybrid War.

After this resignation, the Ukrainian parliament decided to appoint an interim president, a position that would fall to the economist Oleksandr Turchinov, who immediately accused Russia of wanting to provoke a conflict to invade and annex Crimea. The Crimean area historically represents a relevant strategic sector for Russia, both for its population, the vast majority of which are Russian or pro-Russian, and for the location of the port of Sevastopol, where the largest and most powerful Russian naval fleet is located. The accusation of the new Ukrainian leader served the Kremlin to take action and mobilize troops to the border sector between the two countries.

Immediately, Lavrov would come out to declare that Russia had no intention or interest in crossing the borders of Ukraine, but that it was willing to protect the rights of the Russian-speakers who lived there, and for this Russia would use all political means, diplomatic and legal available.[15] In this way, the Russian Minister projected and defended both the interference and the power of the Russian Federation in what they call its area of influence.[16]

After various clashes, on March 11 2012, the local authorities of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol unilaterally declared their independence from Ukraine, proclaiming the Republic of Crimea, which was recognized only by Putin. However, prior to the declaration, these local authorities had the support of Russian Special Forces (camouflaged with uniforms of the Ukrainian army), field and naval artillery of the Russian armed forces, intelligence agents, as well as of different hybrid war actions by the Kremlin.

Days later, on March 18 2014, after a referendum was held in the region, Sergey Aksionov (self-proclaimed Prime Minister of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea), Vladimir Konstantinov (President of the Supreme Council of Crimea), Vladimir Putin (President of Russia) and Anatoli Chali (Mayor of Sevastopol) signed a treaty of accession of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation. This document sought to be legitimized through a Crimean-wide referendum, which resulted in massive support for the Russian return. Faced with these facts, Lavrov would declare that Russia would respect the will of the Crimean population,[17] whereby - indirectly - the Kremlin announced that its initial objectives of territorial conquest and guarantee of the intangibility of its bases in this area had been achieved.

Obviously, this would lead to international protest, especially by the EU and the US, who initiated various actions in the field of international relations and foreign policy, such as economic sanctions and the rejection or disavowal of Russia of meetings agreed by the international community. In April of that year, Lavrov would come out again to declare, in a coercive way, that Russia would not do stupid things in response to the sanctions that had been imposed, although if the economic pressure persisted, the situation would be analyzed again.[18] From here, Russia would seek to lower the level of tension since its intention to annex Crimea remained firm.

After the Western sanctions on Russia, Lavrov had a series of meetings with John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, in different cities in Europe, seeking agreements to defuse the situation. Meanwhile, military actions continued, with more Russian troops arriving on the Ukrainian border and into Crimea. In September, in order to generalize the problem, Lavrov declared that the situation in Ukraine was the result of the crisis in the European security system.[19] Consequently, the application of the Gerasimov Doctrine was more evident than ever, seeking - this time - a return to normality in relations with Europe.

After a few months, Lavrov would declare, in a sententious way, that Moscow did not renounce cooperation with the EU, but that relations would not be as before.[20] All this, in order to accelerate economic agreements with the leaders of the West to leave behind the stigma of Ukraine. However, in 2016, the Russian strategy would change radically. On that occasion, Lavrov would declare that Russia was not hiding anything, showing as evidence the detainees and their statements, as well as the caches with weapons and ammunition that were found in Crimea. They also stated that they could not show everything on television, but that they had irrefutable proof that there had been a subversion, long planned by the intelligence services of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, in order to destabilize the situation in Crimea.[21] With this, the Kremlin sought to turn the situation around, accusing Ukraine of being a terrorist government, for which the EU and the US unfairly sanctioned Russia. Once again, the Russian Foreign Minister played a leading role in the new objective of his country, always under the actions dictated by the Gerasimov Doctrine.

After the description and analysis of Estonia and Ukraine, it can be affirmed that the statements of the Russian Foreign Minister, regarding the actions of his government, have

had three purposes. First, seek to keep the Russian image unpolluted as a country that respects International Law, and as a just and peaceful nation. Second, to show Russia as a nation of global gravitation and a leading actor within the International Community. Third, defend Russia immediately from any aggression transmitted through the media or networks by other countries, assuming - in that case - an offensive attitude.

Likewise, regarding the work carried out by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, it can be asserted that this has had three fundamental objectives. First, to show before the International Community that Russia is a nation that protects its citizens abroad. Second, to show Russia as a sovereign and hegemonic nation in the region, whose decisions go through guarding its areas of influence and interest. Third, show Estonia and Ukraine as aggressor nations, which do not comply with International Humanitarian Law.

Conclusions

Lavrov has been the fundamental pillar of the execution of Russian foreign policy. His voice, throughout the international community, is the voice of Russia. For many, Lavrov has been the most truly staunch soldier in their country.[22] In addition, from his position, he has directed the execution of the Russian strategy in its conflicts of this century. His statements have signified the previous step to the actions and operations of all the forces engaged in executing the Russian Hybrid War, according to the Gerasimov Doctrine. In this way, through his performance in the service of his nation, Lavrov demonstrates that the Minister of Foreign Affairs or Chancellor is the true Chief of General Staff of the Operations and Actions of the Hybrid War of the XXI Century.

Final Notes

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