

# STRATEGIC HORIZONS: IN UKRAINE, RUSSIA REVEALS ITS MASTERY OF UNRESTRICTED WARFARE

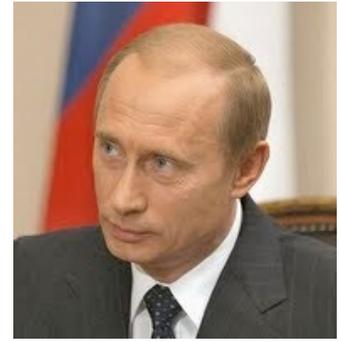
STEVEN METZ

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# Strategic Horizons: In Ukraine, Russia Reveals Its Mastery of Unrestricted Warfare

By Steven Metz  
April 16, 2014



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Russia is on the hunt again, determined to engulf another part of Ukraine and possibly more. Moscow's complex, multidimensional offensive uses intimidation, misinformation and any organization or group that can serve its interests. As Ukraine teeters on the edge of bankruptcy, Russian President Vladimir Putin is tightening the economic screws by threatening to require advance payment for essential natural gas shipments. Pro-Russian separatists have launched demonstrations across eastern Ukraine, attempting to goad the government into an overreaction that could give Moscow an alibi for open invasion. Meanwhile, Russian and pro-Russian troops have seized government buildings and police stations, engaging in firefights with Ukrainian security forces. Just across the border [sit 40,000 Russian troops](#), sending an ominous signal to the Ukrainians. For the beleaguered Ukrainian government and people, pressure is coming in many ways and from many directions. And that is exactly what Putin intends.

Washington seems befuddled by all this, responding with vague warnings that bad things might happen if Russia takes further unspecified actions. While Putin operates in multiple complex, parallel dimensions, the American response is linear, limited and rigid. Tragically, the United States doesn't seem to grasp the logic of Russian actions even though they embody an emerging form of strategy that security experts have debated and discussed for more than a decade: unrestricted warfare.

The phrase "unrestricted warfare" first drew attention with the publication of a 1999 academic paper [written by two Chinese colonels](#), Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. It is based on the belief that there are no longer limitations or rules in warfare—anything that contributes to victory is at least worth consideration. Unrestricted warfare involves diverse, simultaneous asymmetric attacks on an adversary's social, economic and political systems. It ignores and transcends the "boundaries between the battlefield and what is not the battlefield, between what is a weapon and what is not, between soldier and noncombatant, between state and nonstate or suprapstate." Essentially, it is a way for the weaker party in a conflict to even the odds.

Whether Russian strategists were directly inspired by the Chinese report or not, Moscow has adopted, even mastered, a form of unrestricted warfare optimized for the age of pervasive information, economic connectivity and social media. Its pace of operations, both physical and informational, is faster than even the Chinese colonels anticipated. Those operations also come from multiple directions. Putin's version of unrestricted warfare inspires anyone or anything pro-Russian to swarm on Ukraine and its friends. There may or may not be actual Russian special forces in eastern Ukraine, but local Russian elites [have created the de facto equivalent](#) by mobilizing security force defectors, mercenaries, thugs and "rent-a-mobs."

Disinformation about what is happening and who is doing it runs rampant, much of it coming from Russia's state-controlled media. This campaign targets the citizens of the former Soviet Union who were misled by the state for so long that they are unable to recognize when they are being duped. In parallel, Moscow exploits the dependence of Ukraine and other parts of Europe on Russian energy exports, threatening implicitly without having to do so explicitly. It simultaneously taps

Russian and international resentment of the United States and the West in general, traditional Russian chauvinism and the anti-authoritarianism of youth. Emotion-laden themes rather than facts inspire Moscow's swarms.

The Russian offensive [makes use of nonstate forces](#) like the Cossacks, the Night Wolves motorcycle gang and “patriotic hackers” as well as Western companies doing business in Russia. Some of these groups may not even know that Putin is using them. This strategy, security expert Robert Haddick wrote, demonstrates “an expanded ‘civilianization’ of combat operations” with real or ersatz civilians “in the vanguard of offensive military operations designed to seize and hold territory.” This trend, [according to Haddick](#), “is a logical consequence of both the current media-saturated age and the incredible lethality of modern military technology.”

In the past, Russia wouldn't have bothered with something as complex and bothersome as unrestricted warfare but simply would have taken what it wanted and crushed any resistance. Now it uses this new form of aggression in large part because the United States has no effective counter. America is organizationally and psychologically unprepared for unrestricted warfare. Washington's instinct is to compartmentalize the elements of power and apply them in sequence, first trying diplomacy and phone calls, treating crises as if they are simply a big misunderstanding. If that doesn't work, the United States threatens severe consequences for at least some finite period of time until the American public runs out of patience or Washington is distracted by another crisis. Then it invokes modest, low-cost sanctions while promising there will be more if necessary. All along, Washington attempts to sign up partners—something that has become increasingly difficult as Europe loses its stomach for risky confrontation or conflict if it can find any reason to avoid a fight. As the United States and Europe dicker on how to punish Putin, he digs deeper into Ukraine, cloaking his aggression in ambiguity and deniability and remaining several moves ahead of the ponderous, stove-piped and hesitant United States and the even more ponderous and hesitant European Union.

That Russia is outmaneuvering the United States with a 21st century version of unrestricted warfare is bad enough, but this may be just the tip of the iceberg. Iran does the same thing with equal skill, operating in multiple dimensions using a dizzying array of organizations and entities that weave together crime, terrorism, insurgency and subterfuge, all the while camouflaging official involvement to lower the chances that whoever is in the White House can muster enough political support to do anything about it. And, lest we forget, China was the inventor of the concept of unrestricted warfare. For the time being, Beijing seems to be trying more conventional methods to get what it wants, but it could easily revert back to unrestricted warfare if open military pressure and economic inducements don't work.

The entire American strategic culture, ethos and security organization is diametric to unrestricted warfare. The United States wants its conflicts and security problems to remain tidily restricted. Its strength is greatest when there is no political ambiguity or ethical confusion, and when partners jump on board. This is precisely why America's adversaries will not fight this way. Even though the United States cannot itself be a master of modern-day unrestricted warfare, it at least needs to understand how America's adversaries are using it. □

*Steven Metz is a defense analyst and the author of “Iraq and the Evolution of American Strategy.” His weekly WPR column, [Strategic Horizons](#), appears every Wednesday. You can follow him on Twitter [@steven\\_metz](#).*

*Photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin (photo by the website of the president of the Russian Federation).*

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