UNDERSTANDING MODERN RUSSIAN WAR

Ubiquitous rocket, artillery to enable battlefield swarming, siege warfare

By Maj. Amos Fox
A vast amount of information on the Russo-Ukrainian War has generated discussion within the U.S. Army as to the evolving character of contemporary and future war. That war includes the Crimean Campaign, which resulted in the Russian annexation of the peninsula, and the Donbas Campaign, which resulted in the Russian annexation of the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. These campaigns demonstrated many technological innovations. Current literature is replete with discussions of Russian cyber and electronic operations to neutralize mission command systems or influence information. However, a discussion of the conflict’s conventional character is largely missing from this discourse. The battlefields in Eastern Ukraine are far more reminiscent of World War I than that of a digital battlefield fought with binary digits of ones and zeros. Russian forces continually exploit Ukrainian operational initiative in order to swarm those forces and then wage siege warfare on their opponent.¹ This paper expands the discussion of the Russo-Ukrainian War beyond the ruminations on technological innovation and instead focuses on the character of the conventional battles in the conflict, of which there are many.

RUSSIAN INNOVATIONS FOR MODERN WARFARE

Russia’s primary formation in the Russo-Ukrainian War is the battalion tactical group. The formation is dispersed and operates with near impunity beneath the anti-air/area denial umbrella Russia established in Eastern Europe. "Russia's primary formation in the Russo-Ukrainian War is the battalion tactical group." "The formation is dispersed and operates with near impunity beneath the anti-air/area denial umbrella Russia established in Eastern Europe."


² Phillip Karber, “The Russian Military Forum, Russia’s Hybrid Warfare Campaign: Implications for Ukraine and Beyond” (lecture, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, March 10, 2015).
Ukrainian Army. The ability to achieve rapid local dominance in the air and on the ground – or to swarm, is an obvious Russian advantage. Russia, seeking to maintain a weak Ukraine, both physically and morally, uses the battalion tactical group to accomplish these objectives through an attritional strategy of siege warfare – eroding physical strength and will through the abrad ing of tangible Ukrainian means.

Tactical drones have been invaluable to the combined Russian-partisan effort in Donbas. The absence of organic cavalry formations in the region creates a reconnaissance vacuum that the Russians and partisans fill with drones. The drones, often in conjunction with unconventional reconnaissance forces, answer information requirements and observe areas of interest for respective commanders. The drones are linked directly to the battalion tactical group and can therefore quickly conjure torrents of rocket and artillery fire to support local offensives, or hastily disrupt opposition action.3

Furthermore, Russian action during the Donbas Campaign validated two ideas regarding its use of rockets and artillery. First, much like its history implies, Russia focuses on the offensive use of artillery and rockets to set the conditions for maneuver. Historically, Russia has used rocket and artillery fire to soften the resistance before committing ground forces, whereas the U.S. Army seeks to employ field artillery and mortars in coordination with maneuver forces.4 The difference is discrete, but a difference nonetheless. Second, the Russians are not concerned with minimizing civilian casualties. This is likely for information purposes; the message being that the Ukrainian government and armed forces are incapable of protecting the local populace, thus resistance is futile.

SWARMING AND SIEGES IN EASTERN UKRAINE

The July 11, 2014, strike at Zelenopillya is perhaps the most noticeable example of the combined effects of tactical drones with the battalion tactical group and its organic Fires capabilities. The attack was a preemp tive undertaking oriented on Ukrainian brigades. Those brigades were postured in assembly areas and prepared to conduct offensive action against Russian and partisan forces. Buzzing tactical drones and cyber-attacks targeted Ukrainian commun ications before the strike. An onslaught of rockets and artillery fell on the Ukrainian position shortly after the drones arrived, leaving 30 Ukrainian soldiers dead, hundreds more wounded, and over two battalions’ worth of combat vehicles destroyed.5

This strike created a ruckus within the U.S. Army, specifically in relation to the sophistication of Russian cyber capabilities and in the loss of field craft operating in a combat environment. This strike also highlighted the disparity in artillery and rocket munitions between Russia and the U.S. Army, in that Russia still possesses and employs a variety of munitions to include dual-purpose improved conventional munitions and thermobaric munitions.

The Battle of Ilovaisk followed on the heels of the strike at Zelenopillya. Ilovaisk, a critical line of communication linking the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) with Russia via highway, was held by DPR partisans and Russian forces. In early August 2014, Ukrainian forces fed approximately eight battalions into the city, attempting to extricate Russian and partisan forces from Ilovaisk. Their effort achieved moderate success so by the end of August, Russia had to dispatch multiple battalion tactical groups from its Southern Military District in Rostov-on-Don to regain control of the situation. In doing so, Russian forces encircled the town, isolating the Ukrainian forces and began to besiege their forces. Many Ukrainian soldiers reported hearing the distinctive buzz of Russian drones prior to the deluge of rocket and artillery fire.6 They attempted to breakout of their beleaguered position several times, but were never successful. By the end of the month, Ukrainian forces were in a critical position, forcing their government to seek a political solution. This led to the Minsk Protocol Sept. 5, 2014. The agreement allowed for a peaceful withdrawal of Ukrainian forces along a corridor back to Ukrainian-held territory. However, Russian forces opened fire on the Ukrainian forces as they withdrew. The resulting carnage from the battle and the shooting gallery along the corridor yielded over 1,000 Ukrainian soldiers killed in action, hundreds more wounded, and scores of combat vehicles destroyed. The Battle of Ilovaisk was the bloodiest battle of the war for the Ukrainian Army.7 The Minsk Protocol did little to inhibit combat operations and Russian operations continued.

The next major Russian siege was at the Second Battle of Donetsk Airport or “Little Stalingrad” to its Ukrainian de-

3 Ibid.
Looking beyond Eastern Europe, one can find Russia employing a similar approach to war in Syria, specifically in Aleppo. Russian armed forces, in conjunction with Syrian allies, have encircled the city, cut all ingress and egress routes, and ruthlessly assaulted the city.

The Battle of Debaltseve was the last major siege of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The battle, similar in many ways to the Battle of Ilovaisk, was fought for lines of communication which were critical to both sides in the conflict. The city of Debaltseve’s 25,000 inhabitants, was held by Ukrainian forces and was the furthest piece of Ukrainian-held territory. The city presented a salient into Russian and partisan controlled territory, which offered Russia an enticing opportunity to shore up its front lines. On Jan. 14, 2015, Russian and partisan forces attacked to collapse the shoulders of the salient and encircled the Ukrainians controlling the city. Once isolated, Russian forces launched massive salvos of rocket and artillery fire at Ukrainian forces and on the city’s infrastructure. To make matters worse, they cut power and utilities in the city, which created a humanitarian crisis within Debaltseve. By the end of January, Russian offensive action coupled with the harsh Ukrainian winter led to the death of 6,000 citizens, while another 8,000 citizens fled. The battle triggered the Minsk II agreement Feb. 11, 2015, but fighting continued until Feb. 20, when the city fell to Russian and partisan forces. All told, the battle saw approximately 8,000 Ukrainian soldiers defeated by over 10,000 Russian and partisan forces. The Ukrainians suffered close to 200 killed in action, well over 500 wounded, and hundreds missing or captured.

STRATEGY FOR POLITICAL DOMINANCE

The benefit of a siege is its ability to transfer military power into political progress, while obfuscating the associated costs. A rapid, violent decisive victory in which hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers are killed in a matter of days is counterproductive to Russia’s offensive political goals, whereas the incremental use of violence over time accomplishes the same objectives with less disturbance to the international community. Imagine a formation of tanks driving through the desert. They can quickly get to an objective by driving full-throttle, but in doing so they kick up a large amount of dust and debris, making it difficult to see and maneuver. Instead, a more deliberate approach allows for a more controlled and precise attack, reducing collateral damage and minimizing the impact on the environment.

8 TRADOC G-2, Threat Tactics Report: Russia (Fort Leavenworth, KS: 2015), 40-42.
of dust, making the tanks and direction of travel observable. However, a formation of tanks moving slowly through the desert kicks up less dust, making its presence less noticeable and its intentions less discernable. “Dust clouds” on the battlefield are inevitable. How one marginalizes the influence of the dust cloud in pursuit of its political goals is the essence of good strategy. This is a key consideration in understanding Russia’s proclivity for the siege.

As Russo-Ukrainian War illustrates, the battalion tactical group is the Russian tool for accomplishing tactical and operational objectives in a siege. In late September 2016, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armored Forces, announced the Russian Army would increase the number of battalion tactical groups from 66 to 125 by 2018. Additionally, professional soldiers will staff them whereas conscripts will be assigned to rear-echelon formations. As a result, the U.S. Army can expect to find Russian battalion tactical groups in areas where Russian ground forces are employed to achieve political objectives.

Furthermore, the battalion tactical group enables battlefield swarming. Military analysts John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt said swarming has two requirements: an adversary must be able to strike from multiple directions with small, mobile units that are tightly interconnected. In addition, elements within the “swarm force” must actively contribute to the intelligence picture, forming a “sensory organization.” Taking this idea a step further, the ability to swarm mandates a doctrine that supports it. Adequate information on the enemy’s location and communication infrastructure enables dispersed forces to swarm (physically or through strike capability), long-range Fires (i.e. mobile rockets and self-propelled artillery), rapid mobility and successful command and control architecture. The battalion tactical group meets each of these preconditions and enables Russian forces to quickly achieve overmatch through swarming.

This understanding is vital to U.S. operational artists and planners. Without a clear understanding of how the enemy fights and how they organize to fight, plans are made on little more than speculation. The tactical character of the Russo-Ukrainian War is more reminiscent of the warfare in the early 1900s. Specifically, the Russian Army’s Donbas Campaign is characterized by use of mobile rockets and self-propelled artillery to swarm and subsequently besiege Ukrainian forces to gain operational and tactical initiative. This is not to marginalize the influence of nascent technology, but to illuminate Russia’s true tactics in war, which are obscured by the threat of their cyber, electronic and information capabilities.

The major battles of the conflict demonstrate the Russian siege is intrinsically linked to the overmatch and area-denial capability of the battalion tactical group. Moreover, the siege is a product of positional warfare, in which Russia uses movement to elicit a desired response from the Ukrainians, the purpose being to lure them into encirclement and then to slowly abrade their formations through siege warfare. A highly effective reconnaissance model that removes the intermediary to allow rapid and overwhelming indirect fire support enables Russian swarming action.

Looking beyond Eastern Europe, one can find Russia employing a similar approach to war in Syria, specifically in Aleppo. Russian armed forces, in conjunction with Syrian allies, have encircled the city, cut all ingress and egress routes, and ruthlessly assaulted the city. This demonstrates that Russia’s fondness for the siege is not unique to Ukraine, but permeates across its military. While the means and methods employed in Syria are different than those in Ukraine, the approach – use of the siege to achieve political ends – is the same.

Finally, it is critical to remember that the contemporary Russian Army is not the Red Army of long ago, nor is it the Iraqi Army of 1991 or 2003. The contemporary Russian Army is combat-experienced in combined arms maneuver at all echelons of command, a skill in which the U.S. Army is still working to recover after well over a decade of countersurgency operations in the Middle East.

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