
AFGHAN AND CHECHEN WARS IN MODERN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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ANNOTATION

This study examines and compares the performance of the Soviet military in Afghanistan and the Russian military in Chechnya. It aims to discern continuity or change in methods and doctrine. Because of Russian military cultural preferences for a big-war paradigm that have been embedded over time, moreover, this work posits that continuity rather than change was much more probable, even though Russia's great power position had diminished in an enormous way by 1994. However, continuity—manifested in the continued embrace of a conventional and predictably symmetric approach—was more probable, since cultural change usually requires up to 10 years. Several paradoxes also inhere in asymmetric conflict—these are also very much related to the cultural baggage that accompanies great power status. In fact, the Russian military's failures in both wars are attributable to the paradoxes of asymmetric conflict. These paradoxes come into play whenever a great power faces a pre-industrial and semi-feudal enemy who is intrinsically compelled to mitigate the great power's numerous advantages with cunning and asymmetry. In other words, great powers often do poorly in small wars simply because they are great powers that must embrace a big-war paradigm by necessity. This study identifies and explains six paradoxes of asymmetric conflict. It also examines each paradox in the context of Afghanistan and Chechnya.

Key words: war, paradigm, each, often, use

On Christmas Eve in 1979, Soviet forces conducted a conventional assault on Kabul and other key points in Afghanistan with the aim of implanting a stable Soviet-friendly government and of quelling an insurrection. Almost 10 years later, Soviet forces withdrew after suffering close to 14,000 killed, leaving behind a very precarious pro-Soviet government and an ongoing civil war. In December 1994, Russian forces invaded Chechnya, employing almost the same conventional template used in Afghanistan. On New Year's Eve 1994, Russian forces launched their main assault on Grozny, initially suffering huge losses and meeting with failure. The goals in Chechnya were almost the same as the goals sought in Afghanistan 15 years earlier—to implant a pro-Russian government and to stabilize the Chechen republic. Russian forces pulled out of Chechnya almost 2 years later after suffering close to 6000 killed, having failed to meet their objectives. As a great power, the Soviet Union failed to win a small war in Afghanistan. As a former great power, Russia failed to win in Chechnya. In both cases, Soviet/Russian forces possessed a technological advantage and a latent numerical advantage in forces. In both cases, Soviet/Russian forces fought conventionally against an adversary who fought unconventionally. In both conflicts, the Russians faced ideologically-driven indigenous movements fighting for independence. The significant differences between Afghanistan and Chechnya were: 1) the structure of the international system underwent an enormous change— from bipolar to unipolar; and 2) Russia ceased to be a great power. Notwithstanding these two enormous changes, this study postulates that one would observe continuity in Russian military-strategic cultural preferences in Chechnya because not enough time elapsed between the end of the Cold War and the conflict in Chechnya for a cultural change to occur—military cultural change normally takes 5-10 years. Thus, one would expect to observe continuity in Russian preferences for the use of force—these preferences should reflect a focus on the big war, or conventional, paradigm for war.

PURPOSE AND CONTEXT The purpose of this monograph is twofold: 1) to identify Russian military-strategic preferences for the use of force; and 2) to explain how the paradoxes of asymmetric conflict, coupled with, and

sometimes stemming from, these preferences, made it probable that Russia would not win in Afghanistan or Chechnya. Concerning the war in Chechnya, this monograph is limited to an analysis of the conflict between 1994 and 1996. This subject is particularly germane to the U.S. military and its allies because asymmetric conflict is the most probable form of conflict that NATO faces. Four factors point to this probability: The Trans-Atlantic Alliance is represented by countries that have the most advanced militaries (technology and firepower) in the world; The economic and political homogenization among these states essentially precludes a war among them. Most rational adversaries in the second tier would have learned from the Gulf War not to confront the West on its terms; and, As a result, the United States and its European allies will employ their firepower and technology in the less-developed world, against inferior adversaries, using asymmetric approaches. Asymmetric conflict will therefore be the norm, not the exception. Though this monograph was completed in the spring of 2001, U.S. operations in Afghanistan after September 2001 also attest to the salience of this subject.² In addition, the military organizations of great powers are normally large and hierarchical institutions that innovate incrementally, if at all. This means that one can expect the Russian military to adapt very slowly to a new type of war, even in the face of a changed security environment. This is particularly true when the required innovations and adaptations lie outside the scope of the conventional war focus. In other words, great powers do not win small wars because they are great powers: their militaries must maintain a central competence in symmetric warfare to preserve their great power status vis-à-vis other great powers; and their militaries must be large organizations. These two characteristics combine to create a formidable competence on the plains of Europe or in the deserts of Iraq. However, these two traits do not produce institutions and cultures that are amenable to omni-competence.

THE PARADOXES OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT

In addition to this big war culture, some contradictions simply derive from the logic that exists when a superior industrial power faces an inferior, semi-feudal, semi-colonial, and underdeveloped adversary. For example, the great power intrinsically brings overwhelmingly superior resources and technology to this type of conflict.

In war, military strategy encompasses the identification of strategic objectives, the allocation of resources, decisions on the use of force, and the development of war plans. Moreover, organizational culture is the pattern of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that prescribe how a group should adapt to its external environment and manage its internal structure. Finally, military-strategic culture is a set of beliefs, attitudes, and values within the military establishment that shape collective (shared) preferences of how and when military means should be used to accomplish strategic aims. It is derived or developed as a result of historical experience, geography, and political culture. Core leaders perpetuate and inculcate it, but it is most pronounced at the operational level because, when armies have met with success in war, it is the operational techniques and the operational histories by which enemies were defeated and which are consecrated in memory. Finally, while military-strategic culture is not quantifiable, one can empirically discern preferences for how and when to use military forces. These qualitative preferences are observable in military doctrine, military operations, and in statements by the core military elites. Together, these three historically observable components of military-strategic culture tend to demonstrate a preferred paradigm for war.

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