

New-Generation Warfare in Syria: Russia's Tactical Innovation and Grey-Zone Strategy in a Modern Conflict

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Abstract:

Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war since 2015 marked a significant shift in its military doctrine through the application of New-Generation Warfare (NGW). This approach integrates conventional force with cyber operations, disinformation, electronic warfare, economic leverage, and proxy actors—commonly described as grey-zone tactics operating below the threshold of open war. In Syria, Russia combined precision airpower, advanced military technology, and the use of private military contractors such as the Wagner Group with coordinated information campaigns to strengthen the Assad regime while minimizing troop deployment and international backlash. This article examines how Syria functioned as a testing ground for Russia's non-linear warfare model and explores the implications of this strategy for global security and regional stability. It argues that Moscow's success in Syria has entrenched NGW as a core component of its 21st-century military and foreign policy.

Keywords: Economic coercion, Backlash, Confrontation, Hybrid tactics

Introduction

New-Generation Warfare (NGW) is a strategic military doctrine developed primarily by Russian military theorists in the early 21st century, reflecting a fundamental shift away from traditional large-scale conventional warfare toward more integrated, asymmetric, and multi-

domain approaches. Rather than relying solely on battlefield superiority, NGW emphasizes the coordinated use of both military and non-military instruments—including cyber operations, information warfare, economic coercion, psychological influence, diplomatic maneuvering, and

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proxy forces—to achieve political and strategic objectives while avoiding formal declarations of war or direct state-to-state confrontation. Central to this doctrine is information dominance, the use of private military contractors for plausible deniability, advanced technologies such as electronic warfare and drones, and the strategic exploitation of legal, economic, and cultural vulnerabilities within adversary states. Russia's intervention in Syria illustrates the practical application of NGW, blending conventional military strikes with covert influence operations and calculated geopolitical maneuvering to secure its interests without engaging in traditional warfare.

Grey-Zone Conflict and the Syrian Civil War

Grey-zone conflict refers to a state of competition or confrontation that exists between peace and open warfare. It involves the use of ambiguous, gradual, and often deniable actions aimed at gaining strategic advantage without crossing the threshold that would provoke a conventional military response or activate formal defense treaties. Such activities typically include cyberattacks, espionage, infrastructure sabotage, political interference, disinformation campaigns, support for proxy militias or insurgent groups, and limited territorial encroachments that fall short of full-scale invasion. The grey zone thrives on ambiguity by blurring the boundaries between war and peace, state and non-state actors, and legal and illegal actions,

making it difficult for affected nations to respond decisively within existing international norms.

The Syrian Civil War, which began in March 2011, emerged as part of the broader wave of Arab Spring uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa. It started with largely peaceful protests in the southern city of Daraa, where citizens demanded democratic reforms, the release of political prisoners, and an end to systemic corruption under President Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian rule. The government's violent crackdown on demonstrators triggered nationwide protests and a spiral of escalating violence. By late 2011, the unrest had transformed into a full-scale civil war involving multiple actors, including the Syrian government and its security forces supported by Iran, Hezbollah, and later Russia; a fragmented opposition that included the Free Syrian Army and various rebel factions; and extremist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, which exploited the chaos to seize territory.

As the conflict deepened, Syria became a multi-front proxy battlefield involving regional and global powers. The United States, Turkey, and several Gulf states supported different opposition groups, while Russia and Iran provided crucial military, financial, and strategic backing to the Assad regime. In 2014, a U.S.-led coalition launched air operations against ISIS, further internationalizing the war. The conflict produced a catastrophic

humanitarian crisis, resulting in over 500,000 deaths, more than 13 million internally displaced persons and refugees, and widespread destruction of cities, infrastructure, and cultural heritage. Despite ISIS losing much of its territory and the Assad government regaining control over key regions, the war remains unresolved due to continuing violence, economic collapse, foreign military presence, and persistent diplomatic deadlock.

Russia's direct military intervention began on September 30, 2015, marking its most significant overseas operation since the Cold War. Invited by the Assad government, Moscow stepped in at a time when the regime was facing severe military setbacks from rebel and extremist forces. Although Russia justified its involvement as part of the global fight against terrorism, its objectives were largely strategic. These included preserving a long-standing ally, securing its naval facility at Tartus in the Mediterranean, reasserting itself as a global power, countering U.S. and NATO influence, protecting economic and arms trade interests, and testing new military doctrines such as New-Generation Warfare. Russia conducted extensive airstrikes from the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia and later expanded its role through the deployment of special forces, military advisors, electronic warfare units, and private military contractors like the Wagner Group.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a combination of international relations theories and contemporary military-strategic concepts to analyze the changing character of warfare in the 21st century, with particular reference to Russia's intervention in Syria. The framework integrates Hybrid Warfare Theory, Grey-Zone Conflict, Realist Power Projection, and Asymmetric Warfare to explain how modern states pursue strategic objectives through multi-dimensional, non-linear, and often ambiguous methods. Together, these perspectives help illuminate the logic behind Russia's military and political actions in Syria and situate them within broader patterns of contemporary conflict.

Hybrid Warfare Theory

Hybrid Warfare Theory forms a central pillar of this study. The concept refers to the blending of conventional military force with irregular tactics, cyber operations, information warfare, economic coercion, and political manipulation. Scholars such as Frank Hoffman have argued that modern conflicts are no longer purely military but involve integrated campaigns across multiple domains—military, political, informational, and technological.

In the Syrian context, Russia demonstrated a hybrid approach by combining precision airstrikes, special forces operations, electronic warfare, cyber activities, and strategic propaganda with the use of private military contractors

such as the Wagner Group. Rather than relying solely on large-scale troop deployments, Moscow employed a mixed strategy that minimized costs while maximizing influence. This approach enabled Russia to reshape battlefield dynamics, strengthen the Assad regime, and emerge as a decisive power broker in Middle Eastern geopolitics without engaging in direct conventional warfare with the United States or NATO.

Grey-Zone Conflict and Strategic Ambiguity

Grey-zone conflict theory explains state behavior that deliberately operates below the threshold of open war while still pursuing strategic gains. Such actions are characterized by ambiguity, plausible deniability, covert operations, and calibrated escalation designed to avoid triggering formal military retaliation or international legal consequences.

Russia's strategy in Syria aligns closely with this framework. By relying on private military companies, proxy forces, information manipulation, and back-channel diplomacy, Moscow maintained strategic ambiguity while advancing its interests. Instead of openly confronting Western powers, Russia used indirect tools to expand its influence, complicate Western decision-making, and shape political outcomes on the ground.

Scholars like Michael Mazarr and Hal Brands argue that grey-zone strategies are intended to "confuse, delay, and divide" adversaries while gradually shifting the

balance of power. Syria served as an ideal environment for Russia to experiment with and refine these tactics in a real conflict setting.

Realist Theory and Power Projection

From a realist perspective, Russia's intervention in Syria reflects the logic of power politics in an anarchic international system. Realism emphasizes state survival, national interest, and balance of power as primary drivers of foreign policy. Russia's actions can be interpreted as a rational effort to secure its strategic position and counter Western influence.

Moscow intervened primarily to preserve the Assad regime, a long-standing ally that guaranteed Russia access to critical military facilities such as the Tartus naval base and Khmeimim airbase. Additionally, the intervention allowed Russia to reassert itself as a global power, demonstrate military capability beyond its immediate neighborhood, and challenge U.S. and NATO dominance in the Middle East. Within this framework, Russia's use of New-Generation Warfare can be seen as a modern instrument of realist statecraft—combining military force, political leverage, and information control to achieve geopolitical objectives without engaging in costly large-scale war.

Asymmetric Warfare and Non-Linear Strategy

Asymmetric warfare theory explains how states or actors with limited conventional strength can employ

unconventional methods to offset more powerful adversaries. Russia's approach in Syria exemplifies a non-linear strategy that integrates kinetic military action with psychological operations, media control, cyber tactics, and proxy warfare.

Rather than confronting superior Western militaries directly, Russia adopted a cost-effective and deniable strategy that maximized impact while minimizing risk. Precision air campaigns, targeted support to regime forces, and information manipulation allowed Moscow to shape outcomes on the ground without deep military entanglement. This approach highlights the increasing importance of perception, narrative, and strategic communication in modern conflict.

Taken together, the theoretical lenses of hybrid warfare, grey-zone conflict, realism, and asymmetric strategy provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing Russia's intervention in Syria. They reveal how Moscow adapted its military doctrine to the complexities of contemporary warfare, employing flexible, multi-domain operations that blurred traditional distinctions between war and peace, state and non-state actors, and military and non-military instruments. This integrated framework enables a deeper understanding of Russia's strategic behavior and its implications for future international security dynamics.

Syria as a Testing Ground for New-Generation Warfare (NGW)

Russia's military intervention in Syria from 2015 onward provided Moscow with a critical laboratory to operationalize and refine its evolving doctrine of New-Generation Warfare (NGW). Unlike traditional warfare, NGW emphasizes integrated, multi-domain operations that blend military force with cyber capabilities, information warfare, proxy actors, and diplomatic maneuvering. The Syrian battlefield offered a relatively permissive environment in which Russia could experiment with advanced technologies, hybrid tactics, and unconventional force structures without risking a direct large-scale confrontation with NATO or other major global powers. This made Syria a strategically valuable testing ground for modern Russian military innovation.

Limited Military Footprint, Maximum Strategic Impact

Rather than deploying massive ground forces, Russia adopted a lean and agile military presence designed to achieve maximum strategic effect with minimal direct involvement. Its operations were centered around airpower from the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia, supported by naval capabilities at the Tartus port. Moscow supplemented this with special operations forces, military advisors, and private military contractors such as the Wagner Group. This minimalist deployment model reflected the core logic

of NGW: achieving decisive political and military outcomes through limited overt force while relying on local allies and proxies to conduct ground operations.

Precision Airstrikes and Long-Range Strike Capability

Syria allowed Russia to demonstrate and validate its precision-guided munitions and long-range strike systems in real combat conditions. Russian naval forces launched Kalibr cruise missiles from submarines and warships in both the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas, showcasing their extended reach and accuracy. Meanwhile, advanced fighter jets such as the Su-34 and Su-35 conducted sustained precision bombing campaigns against rebel-held territories. These operations were widely broadcast through Russian state media, serving both as military validation and strategic messaging aimed at domestic audiences, adversaries, and potential arms buyers.

Electronic Warfare and UAV Integration

The Syrian conflict enabled Russia to field-test sophisticated electronic warfare systems designed to disrupt enemy communications, jam NATO signals, and interfere with GPS navigation. At the same time, Russia integrated unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for reconnaissance, surveillance, and real-time targeting, improving coordination between air and ground forces. This combination of electronic warfare and drone technology became a defining feature of Russia's tech-driven approach

to NGW, emphasizing speed, situational awareness, and networked operations.

Use of Proxy Forces and Deniable Actors

The deployment of the Wagner Group played a central role in Russia's strategy of plausible deniability. By relying on a Kremlin-linked private military company rather than regular troops, Moscow could expand its combat footprint without official accountability for battlefield losses or civilian casualties. These contractors worked alongside Syrian regime forces and local militias, multiplying combat power while keeping Russian military casualties low. This approach allowed Russia to maintain strategic ambiguity while still exercising significant control over military operations on the ground.

Information Operations and Psychological Warfare

Syria also became a testing arena for Russia's information warfare capabilities. State-controlled outlets such as RT and Sputnik actively shaped global narratives by portraying Russian intervention as a legitimate fight against terrorism while criticizing Western involvement as destabilizing. Moscow conducted disinformation campaigns aimed at blaming opposition groups for chemical attacks and civilian casualties, thereby undermining their credibility. Additionally, bot networks and coordinated social media campaigns were used to influence public opinion both inside Russia and internationally,

demonstrating the centrality of digital propaganda in NGW.

Diplomatic Maneuvering and Multidimensional Strategy

Military actions in Syria were closely synchronized with diplomatic initiatives. Through the Astana Process, Russia engaged Turkey and Iran as key regional partners while maintaining communication with Israel to avoid direct military clashes. By positioning itself as both a military actor and diplomatic mediator, Moscow reinforced the NGW principle that modern warfare extends beyond the battlefield to include negotiation, alliance-building, and geopolitical leverage. This multidimensional strategy allowed Russia to protect its military assets while consolidating its influence in the Middle East.

Doctrinal Lessons and Global Application

The Syrian campaign provided Russia with crucial operational lessons that were later applied in other conflicts, most notably in Ukraine in 2022. Techniques such as coordinated disinformation, cyber operations, reliance on proxy forces, and non-contact warfare through precision strikes became central elements of Russia's broader military strategy. Thus, Syria not only shaped Russia's intervention there but also influenced its approach to future conflicts.

Grey-Zone Tactics Applied in Syria

Russia's intervention in Syria represents a textbook application of grey-zone warfare—an operational space that exists between peace and open conflict. Grey-zone strategies rely on ambiguity, plausible deniability, legal maneuvering, and indirect coercion rather than overt military domination. In Syria, Moscow systematically employed these tactics to secure its strategic interests, protect the Assad regime, counter Western influence, and expand its geopolitical footprint—while avoiding direct military confrontation with the United States or NATO. Rather than fighting a traditional war, Russia pursued influence through proxies, information control, covert diplomacy, cyber tools, and economic leverage.

Beyond Syria, Moscow has replicated similar approaches elsewhere, particularly in Africa through the strategic deployment of Wagner mercenaries in Mali, Libya, and the Central African Republic, where it combined security assistance with political influence. In Europe, Russia has used Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) systems such as the S-400 missile platform to deter NATO forces and complicate Western military planning—another hallmark of grey-zone competition.

Overall, Syria functioned not merely as a battlefield but as a live laboratory for New-Generation Warfare (NGW). It allowed Russia to validate its evolving

doctrine that blends conventional military strength with asymmetric tactics, precision technologies, psychological operations, and geopolitical maneuvering. The Syrian campaign cemented NGW as a core pillar of Russian military and foreign policy, demonstrating a cost-effective, high-impact model of modern conflict engagement.

Use of Private Military Companies (PMCs) – The Wagner Group

One of Russia's most significant grey-zone instruments in Syria was the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-linked private military company operating outside formal military structures. This arrangement provided Moscow with plausible deniability while still exercising substantial control over battlefield operations. Wagner fighters participated in front-line combat, secured oil and gas infrastructure, and carried out strategic assaults often disguised as independent or locally affiliated forces.

Because Wagner casualties were not officially acknowledged, Russia minimized domestic political backlash and avoided public scrutiny over military losses. This model enabled sustained military engagement without the political risks associated with deploying regular Russian troops.

Information Warfare and Propaganda

Russia conducted an aggressive information campaign to shape global perceptions of the conflict. State-run media outlets such as RT and Sputnik

consistently promoted pro-Assad narratives while portraying Western involvement as destabilizing and illegitimate. Moscow frequently blamed opposition forces for chemical attacks and civilian casualties, deflecting responsibility from the Syrian regime and Russian forces. At the same time, coordinated social media bot networks and fake accounts amplified disinformation, polarized public debate, and undermined trust in Western governments and mainstream media—particularly in democratic societies.

Cyber Operations and Electronic Disruption

Although less visible than airstrikes, cyber and electronic warfare played an important role in Russia's grey-zone strategy. Reports indicate that Russian forces jammed U.S. drones and disrupted GPS signals in parts of Syria, limiting Western surveillance and strike capabilities. Additionally, Russia employed electronic surveillance and signals intelligence to monitor rebel communications, gather battlefield intelligence, and coordinate operations. Cyber tools were also used to influence narratives and gather sensitive information without engaging in direct military confrontation.

Covert Diplomacy and Deconfliction Agreements

Russia skillfully balanced military assertiveness with covert diplomacy to avoid escalation. It maintained deconfliction channels with the United

States to prevent accidental clashes between Russian and American forces in Syrian airspace. Simultaneously, Moscow engaged in backchannel negotiations with Iran, Turkey, and Israel, shaping battlefield dynamics while protecting its strategic interests. Through the Astana Process, Russia promoted an alternative peace framework that marginalized UN-led efforts and reduced Western diplomatic leverage.

Legal and Political Ambiguity

Russia justified its intervention through legal grey areas, claiming it was acting at the invitation of Syria's sovereign government. This framing contrasted sharply with Western-led coalitions, which Moscow portrayed as unauthorized or illegal. By avoiding a formal declaration of war and presenting itself as a partner rather than an occupier, Russia blurred the line between military intervention and legitimate assistance. It also supported controlled constitutional reforms and orchestrated elections in regime-held areas to create a veneer of democratic legitimacy.

Economic and Energy Manipulation

Beyond military objectives, Russia pursued long-term economic dominance in post-war Syria. It secured exclusive rights to operate key oil and gas fields, particularly in eastern Syria, embedding itself in the country's energy sector. Moscow also offered arms deals and reconstruction contracts that deepened Syria's dependency on Russia while

sidelining Western-backed rebuilding initiatives. These economic tools reinforced Russia's political leverage over Damascus. Russia's conduct in Syria demonstrates the effectiveness of grey-zone warfare in contemporary geopolitics. By operating below the threshold of open war, exploiting legal ambiguity, and leveraging proxies, cyber tools, and information operations, Moscow achieved major strategic gains without the financial and political costs of traditional warfare. Syria thus stands as a model of how state power can be projected discreetly, deniably, and decisively in the 21st century's blurred battlespace—where military victory is as much about perception, influence, and control as it is about firepower.

Lessons Learned & Global Implications

Russia's intervention in Syria represented far more than a regional military campaign; it functioned as a real-world proving ground for New-Generation Warfare (NGW). The conflict demonstrated how a modern state could integrate military power, information control, cyber tools, and diplomacy into a single coordinated strategy to achieve strategic objectives without resorting to full-scale conventional war. These lessons have since shaped Russian military behavior and carry profound implications for global security, warfare, and international norms.

Proof of Concept: NGW Is Effective

The Syrian case validated NGW as a viable and effective alternative to traditional warfare. Russia achieved substantial geopolitical influence through a relatively limited military footprint, avoiding the costs and risks associated with large-scale troop deployments. By integrating precision airpower, proxy forces, electronic warfare, and information operations, Moscow demonstrated the power of multi-domain strategy. Ultimately, Russia succeeded in preserving the Assad regime, securing its naval and air bases, and re-establishing itself as a dominant power in the Middle East. The key lesson is that small, carefully calibrated interventions—when combined with hybrid and grey-zone tactics—can yield high strategic returns, particularly in fragmented, unstable, or war-torn states.

Plausible Deniability and Ambiguity as Strategic Assets

Russia's reliance on private military contractors such as the Wagner Group and its extensive use of disinformation allowed it to operate with plausible deniability. This approach reduced direct accountability for civilian casualties and controversial military actions while complicating Western or NATO responses. Strategic ambiguity enabled Moscow to shape global narratives through media influence, avoid direct confrontation, and gradually consolidate power without provoking large-scale retaliation. This underscores that

deniability and ambiguity have become central tools of modern state power projection in grey-zone conflict.

Testing Ground for Advanced Military Technology

Syria served as a laboratory for Russia to test, refine, and operationalize advanced military capabilities in real combat conditions. These included precision-guided munitions, sophisticated electronic warfare systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) integrated with real-time surveillance and targeting networks. The broader lesson is that contemporary conflict zones allow major powers to innovate, train forces, and evaluate technology without the risks associated with fighting a near-peer adversary such as NATO.

Informational Control Equals Strategic Control

Russia's success in Syria was not purely military; it was equally informational. Through state media and coordinated digital campaigns, Moscow framed its intervention as a legitimate counterterrorism effort while portraying Western coalitions as destabilizing and illegal.

At the same time, disinformation campaigns blurred responsibility for atrocities, delegitimized opposition groups, and delayed or weakened international responses. This highlights a central principle of NGW: in modern conflict, controlling narratives and

perceptions can be as decisive as controlling territory.

Global Implications

Erosion of International Norms

The widespread use of NGW and grey-zone tactics is gradually undermining traditional concepts of war, sovereignty, and international law. The growing reliance on non-state actors, private militaries, cyber operations, and disinformation challenges existing legal frameworks such as the Geneva Conventions, which were designed primarily for conventional state-to-state warfare.

Need for NATO and Western Adaptation

Traditional military deterrence is increasingly inadequate against hybrid threats. To counter grey-zone strategies, NATO and Western allies must invest in new capabilities, including:

- Stronger cyber defenses,
- Dedicated strategic communication units to combat disinformation,
- Rapid-response hybrid task forces, and
- Integrated civil-military security frameworks.

Future security will depend as much on resilience, information integrity, and technological superiority as on tanks, jets, and troops.

A Model for Other Powers

Russia's relative success in Syria may inspire other states—such as China, Iran,

or Turkey—to adopt similar hybrid and grey-zone approaches. This raises the likelihood of increased proxy wars, covert interventions, cyberattacks, and political manipulation across multiple regions. The Syrian conflict revealed that power in the 21st century can be exercised in subtle, indirect, and ambiguous ways with far-reaching geopolitical consequences. As NGW and grey-zone strategies become more common, traditional military doctrines, legal norms, and diplomatic mechanisms must evolve accordingly. The future of international security is likely to be defined not by declared wars, but by continuous competition below the threshold of war—where influence is exerted through technology, information, alliances, and covert action rather than formal battlefield victories.

Conclusion

Russia's intervention in Syria represents a critical turning point in contemporary warfare and international security, illustrating a decisive shift from conventional military dominance to hybrid, non-linear, and grey-zone strategies. The campaign operationalized Moscow's doctrine of New-Generation Warfare (NGW), demonstrating how integrated applications of precision airpower, electronic warfare, cyber capabilities, information operations, and proxy forces can yield significant geopolitical outcomes without the costs of large-scale conventional war. By employing a calibrated mix of kinetic and non-kinetic tools—particularly through

the Wagner Group, strategic disinformation, and electronic disruption—Russia was able to reshape battlefield dynamics, consolidate the Assad regime, and secure its long-term strategic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Syria functioned both as a laboratory for military innovation and a demonstration of Russia's evolving approach to power projection. The intervention reaffirmed Moscow's status as a central power broker in the Middle East while simultaneously revealing structural limitations in Western deterrence, crisis response, and counter-hybrid capabilities. Traditional military superiority proved insufficient against strategies designed to exploit legal ambiguity, political fragmentation, and informational manipulation. More broadly, the Syrian case underscores the growing salience of hybrid and grey-zone conflict in global politics. It challenges existing frameworks of warfare, sovereignty, and international law, which remain largely structured around state-centric, conventional military paradigms. As other states observe and potentially emulate Russia's model—particularly in regions of geopolitical contestation—the character of international conflict is likely to shift further toward persistent, low-intensity, and deniable competition below the threshold of declared war. Future security architectures must therefore move beyond conventional deterrence and incorporate integrated responses that combine cyber resilience, strategic

communications, legal innovation, and rapid hybrid response mechanisms. The lessons of Syria suggest that in the 21st century, power will increasingly be exercised not through decisive battles, but through sustained contests over narratives, influence, technology, and political legitimacy

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