The Russian View of Deep Battle: Implications for the War in Ukraine

by
Stephen J. Cimbala

Russia's conduct of military operations in Ukraine cannot be understood without revisiting one of the most influential concepts in Soviet and Russian operational art: **Deep Battle**. Developed in the 1920s and 1930s by theorists such as Vladimir Triandafillov, Deep Battle emphasized striking not only the enemy's frontline forces but also the entire depth of their defensive system—logistics, command nodes, reserves, and infrastructure—simultaneously. The goal was to collapse the enemy's ability to respond, restoring maneuver to the battlefield after the static carnage of World War I.

Nearly a century later, Russian planners still view Deep Battle as a foundational concept. Yet the war in Ukraine has exposed the performance gap between theory and practice.

Deep Battle in Russian Military Thought

Deep Battle was designed as a holistic operational approach: massed firepower, rapid penetration, and exploitation by mobile formations. It required tight coordination, robust logistics, and the ability to sustain momentum across multiple echelons. Soviet forces demonstrated aspects of this during World War II, and the concept remained embedded in Russian doctrine long after.

Modern Russian operations—at least on paper—still aspire to this model. Analysts note that Russian commanders have attempted to regain maneuver by applying Deep Battle principles, seeking rapid breakthroughs and deep strikes to disorganize Ukrainian defenses. However, the conditions required for successful Deep Battle are far more demanding than the theory suggests.

Why Deep Battle Has Struggled in Ukraine

Several factors have undermined Russia's ability to execute Deep Battle effectively. Logistical fragility has plagued Russian operations, as sustaining supply to fast-moving units proved difficult; forces entering Ukraine in 2022 quickly outran their logistics, leading to stalled advances and exposed columns. Scholars argue that this logistical weakness fundamentally compromised Russia's ability to maintain operational tempo. Additionally, Ukrainian resilience and adaptability have presented unexpected challenges. Ukrainian forces have been far more agile and technologically integrated than Russian planners anticipated, employing precision fires, dispersed command structures, and Western intelligence support to blunt Russian attempts at operational shock and interrupting supply lines and replacement equipment. Their use of drone and counter-drone technology exemplifies adaptive learning that has already been noted and copied by other state militaries.

Russia's attempts at Deep Battle are further hindered by insufficient force quality and added maneuver complexity, as the doctrine relies on well-trained, coordinated echelons. Russia's reliance on mobilized troops, fragmented command structures, and heavy attrition has made synchronized deep operations difficult to sustain. The loss of air superiority has limited Russia's

ability to shape the battlefield making the battlefield more complex. As intended by doctrine, Soviet Deep Battle assumes overwhelming air support to suppress enemy depth, but contested airspace in Ukraine has prevented this crucial element.

Where Russia Has Adapted

Despite these challenges, Russia has applied Deep Battle concepts in modified ways. In adapting the principles of Deep Battle to modern conflict, Russia has focused on targeting Ukrainian infrastructure with long-range strikes. This campaign has prioritized attacks on energy systems and logistics nodes, aiming to disrupt Ukrainian depth and sustain pressure even without accompanying maneuver. By striking critical assets far from the front lines, Russia attempts to weaken Ukraine's ability to resist and maintain its war effort.

Rather than achieving rapid breakthroughs as originally envisioned by Deep Battle doctrine, Russia has shifted to a strategy of incremental, attritional "deepening." This approach relies on massed artillery and slow, grinding advances to steadily erode Ukrainian defenses. The result is a war of attrition where progress is measured in small territorial gains instead of dramatic operational shifts, demonstrating an adaptation of Deep Battle's objectives without its characteristic momentum.

In addition to these methods, Russian military planners and observers continue to pursue efforts to reconstitute maneuver forces. Despite ongoing challenges, such as limited operational success, attempts are being made to rebuild the capacity for operational-level breakthroughs. These efforts underscore a persistent desire within Russian strategy to reclaim the maneuver warfare and deep operational reach that are central to Deep Battle theory, even as practical limitations remain.

The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Deep Battle

Vladimir Putin has repeatedly issued veiled or explicit warnings regarding the potential for Russian nuclear first use concerning the possibility of Russian nuclear first use in response to perceived unacceptable threats. This stance is further reflected in Russian military exercises, which have frequently included simulated launches with tactical nuclear weapons systems. However, it is important to note that some Soviet assessments during the Cold War adopted a realistically pessimistic outlook on the conduct of military operations in a nuclear environment, recognizing the immense challenges such conditions would impose.

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the duality in Russian strategic thinking: while nuclear signaling and preparation remain integral to Russia's military posture, there is also an awareness—rooted in historical experience—of the profound difficulties associated with waging war in a nuclear-affected battlespace.

Implications for the Future of the War

Understanding Russia's attachment to Deep Battle helps explain both its ambitions and its limitations. Russia will continue seeking opportunities for operational breakthroughs, even if conditions rarely allow them. The concept remains deeply embedded in Russian military culture. At the same time, Ukraine's strategy of disrupting Russian logistics and command nodes directly targets the prerequisites of Deep Battle, making it harder for Russia to generate momentum. If Russia can rebuild its logistics, improve training, and integrate drones and electronic warfare more effectively, it may regain the ability to conduct deeper operations—but this remains uncertain. The war is likely to remain attritional because neither side currently possesses the combination of mass, mobility, and air dominance required for true Deep Battle.

Conclusion

Deep Battle remains a conceptual framework and historical marker for understanding Russian military behavior. But the war in Ukraine has shown that doctrine alone cannot compensate for structural weaknesses, resilient opposition, and the realities of modern precision warfare. Russia's struggle to translate Deep Battle theory into battlefield success underscores the widening gap between its strategic aspirations and its operational capabilities.

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Stephen J. Cimbala is Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Penn State Brandywine and the author of numerous works on nuclear deterrence, arms control, and military strategy. He is a senior fellow at NIDS and a recent contributor to the Routledge Handbook of Soviet and Russian Military Studies edited by Dr. Alexander Hill (Routledge: 2025).