

Russian Generals' Biggest Fear? Ordinary Russians

It's not the U.S., even if Moscow's chief military strategist thinks the Pentagon's goal is regime change.

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Russian and U.S. generals have made no secret lately of the fact that they each view the other as their No. 1 adversary.

Modern weaponry plays a big role in these mutual threats. But Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov is now fretting that the U.S. will deploy a “Trojan horse” strategy of fostering a fifth column within Russia and its allies. That the general should be looking so publicly over his shoulder at his own people should trouble citizens.

On Saturday, he talked about the threat in a speech at a conference at the Academy of Military

Sciences. He said:

The U.S. and its allies have set an aggressive vector for their foreign policy. They are developing offensive military actions such as a “global strike” and “multi-domain battle,” using “colored revolution” and “soft power” technology. Their goal is to liquidate the statehood of undesirable countries, to undermine their sovereignty and replace their legally elected governments. That’s what happened in Iraq, in Libya and in Ukraine.

Currently such action is observable in Venezuela. The Pentagon has started developing a completely new strategy of military action, which has already been called “Trojan Horse.” It’s based on the active use of the “fifth column protest potential” to destabilize the situation along with precision strikes on the most important targets.

There’s much to unpick in this admittedly lengthy quote. General Gerasimov and other Russian strategists, of course, follow U.S. thinking on conventional prompt global strikes (building weapons that would allow America to strike high-value targets anywhere in the world within an hour) and multi-domain operations (where adversaries are attacked simultaneously in multiple areas, such as cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum).

But the Russians’ biggest fears, though, relate to what they see as established U.S. policy — regime change — no matter how ambivalent President Donald Trump may be about the practice.

Gerasimov suspects Pentagon strategists are developing new military plans aimed at achieving that goal. Unlike the other terms the Russian general used in describing U.S. strategic concepts, though, “Trojan Horse” isn’t one used by his counterparts in Washington.

This part of his remarks likely refers to a recent appearance by General David Goldfein, the U.S. Air Force chief of staff, at the Brookings Institution, according to Russian state-owned news agency RIA Novosti. The left-wing German online magazine Telepolis wrote that Goldfein’s ideas were “reminiscent of the Trojan Horse.” This is what could have prompted Gerasimov’s reference to a new Pentagon plan.

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Bizarrely, however, neither Goldfein nor Telepolis said anything about the U.S. using a “fifth column.” Goldfein did discuss multi-domain operations, saying the concept wasn’t quite ready to be doctrine yet, but it should be ready within a year. He also described multi-domain operations as creating “so many simultaneous dilemmas” for the adversary that the latter would choose not to take on the U.S. The example he gave related to his domain, the air force, not to fomenting unrest:

If a China or a Russia or another adversary on the globe ever were to see an F-35, for instance, inside their air space I would love to change, you know, all of their — send them all a message with two words, we’re here. Not I’m here, we’re here. Because if they ever do see an F-35, which is highly unlikely, it will never be alone. It will be part of a penetrating joint team. The message is we’re here in space, we’ve been here for a while, we’ve been watching you, we

know what's going on, and we have already penetrated whatever defenses you think you have.

The mention of hard-to-detect F-35s in Russian airspace resonated in Moscow. The embassy in Washington responded to Goldfein's remarks with a cheeky tweet: "Remember Vietnam." It was accompanied by a video of a Russian missile downing a plane.

The "Trojan Horse" reference in Telepolis likely referred to the hidden threat of stealth aircraft and whatever "dilemmas" Goldfein mentioned vaguely. Gerasimov, however, seems to be less worried about F-35s than about U.S. exploitation of "protest potential."

It's probably fair to say Gerasimov and his colleagues at the Russian defense ministry feel they have the U.S. military threat more or less under control. He said in his speech that he believes Russia is ahead of the rest of the world in weapons development, referring to the hypersonic missiles Russia has recently unveiled.

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According to Gerasimov, 82 percent of Russia's nuclear force consists of modern weapons. He's also proud of the country's conventional forces, saying 96 percent of mid-level commanders have combat experience and that, by 2025, the Russian military will have 475,000 professional contract soldiers, reducing its reliance on conscripts.

What the generals and the Kremlin are really scared of, though, is ordinary Russians. They are afraid their own people will knife them in the back if the U.S. tries regime change.

That fear is the Russian regime's Achilles' heel, to use another term from the Trojan War. The "Gerasimov doctrine," if one even exists, isn't so much about waging hybrid war on the U.S. — it's about constantly covering one's own back. That should scare Russians more than Americans: It won't take much to set off reprisals when a random quote from a U.S. general can put their Moscow counterparts on high alert.

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