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The Revival of the Russian Military

How Moscow Reloaded

Dmitri Trenin

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian military rotted away. In one of the most dramatic campaigns of peacetime demilitarization in world history, from 1988 to 1994, Moscow's armed forces shrank from five million to one million personnel. As the Kremlin's defense expenditures plunged from around \$246 billion in 1988 to \$14 billion in 1994, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the government withdrew some 700,000 servicemen from Afghanistan, Germany, Mongolia, and eastern Europe. So much had the prestige of the military profession evaporated during the 1990s that when the nuclear submarine *Kursk* sank in the Barents Sea in 2000, its captain was earning the equivalent of \$200 per month.

From 1991 to 2008, during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin and the first presidential term of Vladimir Putin, Russia used its scaled-down military within the borders of the former Soviet Union, largely to contain, end, or freeze conflicts there. Over the course of the 1990s, Russian units intervened in ethnic conflicts in Georgia and Moldova and in the civil war in Tajikistan—all minor

engagements. Even for the operation in Chechnya, where Yeltsin sent the Russian military in 1994 in an attempt to crush a separatist rebellion, the Russian General Staff was able to muster only 65,000 troops out of a force that had, in theory, a million men under arms.

Beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, Russia acted meekly. It sought a partnership with the United States and at times cooperated with NATO, joining the peacekeeping operation led by that alliance in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1996. To be sure, after realizing in the mid-1990s that NATO membership was off the table, Moscow protested vehemently against the alliance's eastern expansion, its 1999 bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, but Russia was too weak to block any of these moves. The Kremlin's top priority for military development remained its nuclear deterrent, which it considered the ultimate guarantor of Russia's security and sovereignty.

Those days of decay and docility are now gone. Beginning in 2008, Putin ushered in military reforms and a massive increase in defense spending to upgrade Russia's creaky military. Thanks to that project, Russia has recently evinced a newfound willingness to use force to get what it wants. First, in February 2014, Moscow sent soldiers in unmarked uniforms to wrest control of Crimea from Ukraine, implicitly threatening Kiev with a wider invasion. It then provided weaponry, intelligence, and command-and-control support to the pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region, checking Kiev's attempts to defeat them. And then, in the fall of 2015, Russia ordered its air and naval

DMITRI TRENIN is Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center. Follow him on Twitter @DmitriTrenin.

forces to bomb militants in Syria fighting President Bashar al-Assad, intervening directly in the Middle East for the first time in history.

These recent interventions are a far cry from the massive campaigns the Soviet Union used to undertake. But the fact is, Russia is once again capable of deterring any other great power, defending itself if necessary, and effectively projecting force along its periphery and beyond. After a quarter century of military weakness, Russia is back as a serious military force in Eurasia.

GEORGIA ON ITS MIND

The story of Russia's military modernization begins with its 2008 war in Georgia. In August of that year, Russian forces routed troops loyal to the pro-Western president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and secured the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Russian protectorates. The five-day campaign was a clear success: Moscow prevented NATO from expanding into a former Soviet state that was flirting with membership, confirmed its strategic supremacy in its immediate southern and western neighborhood, and marked the limits of Western military involvement in the region. By increasing its military footprint in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia also bolstered its control of two strategically important areas in Transcaucasia—securing the approach to Sochi, the location of the Russian president's southern residence and Russia's informal third capital, in the former, and placing Russian forces within striking distance of Tbilisi in the latter.

Yet for all these gains, Russia fought its brief war against Georgia with unreformed, bulky remnants of the

Soviet military. Russian soldiers were forced to use outdated weaponry, and Russian officers, overseeing troops who were insufficiently prepared for combat, even had to give orders using civilian cell phones after their military radios failed. By the end of the conflict, Russia had lost five military aircraft, including a strategic bomber. Moscow won the war against a much weaker enemy, but the flaws in its own military were too glaring to ignore.

And so two months after its war with Georgia, the Kremlin embarked on an ambitious program of defense modernization and military restructuring. These efforts, which Russian officials have projected will cost some \$700 billion by 2020, are intended to transform the Russian military from a massive standing force designed for global great-power war into a lighter, more mobile force suited for local and regional conflicts. Moscow has pledged to streamline its command-and-control system, improve the combat readiness of its troops, and reform procurement. And in a radical break from a model that had been in place since the 1870s, Russia adopted a flexible force structure that will allow it to quickly deploy troops along the country's periphery without undertaking mass mobilization.

Russia's defense industry, meanwhile, began to provide this changing force with modern weapons systems and equipment. In 2009, after a hiatus of about two decades, during which the Kremlin cut off funding for all but company- or battalion-level exercises, Russian forces began to undertake large-scale military exercises, often without prior warning, to improve their combat readiness. Perhaps most important,



Big green men: a military parade in Moscow's Red Square, November 2015

Russian soldiers, sailors, and airmen came to be paid more or less decently. By the time the Ukraine crisis broke out, Russia's military was far stronger than the disorganized and poorly equipped force that had lumbered into Georgia just five and a half years before.

EUROPE GOES BIPOLAR

The Russian military executed the Crimea operation brilliantly, rapidly seizing the peninsula with minimal casualties. Blueprints for the takeover must have existed for years, at least since Ukraine expressed interest in joining NATO in 2008. But it took a reformed military, plus a remarkable degree of coordination among Russia's various services and agencies, to pull it off.

The operation in Crimea was not a shooting war, but actual fighting followed a few weeks later in the Donbas. Instead of ordering a massive cross-border

invasion of eastern Ukraine, which Moscow had implicitly threatened and Kiev feared, the Putin government resorted to a tactic known in the West as "hybrid warfare": providing logistical and intelligence support for the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas while undertaking military exercises near the Ukrainian border to keep Kiev off balance. Moscow did send active-duty Russian officers to eastern Ukraine, some of whom were ostensibly on leave. But the bulk of the Russian-provided manpower in the country was made up of volunteers, and regular Russian units operated there only intermittently.

At the same time, Russia put NATO countries on notice: stay out of the conflict, or it may affect you, too. Russian warplanes—which in 2007 had resumed Cold War-era patrols around the world—skirted the borders of the United Kingdom, the United States, and several

Scandinavian countries and got close to Western planes over the Baltic and Black Seas. Putin later admitted on Russian television that he had even considered putting Russia's nuclear forces on high alert to defend its interests in Ukraine.

Russia benefited from its Ukraine campaign in several ways. The gambit allowed Moscow to incorporate Crimea, and it kept Kiev fearful of a full-scale invasion, which made the new Ukrainian leadership abandon the idea of using all of the country's available forces to suppress the separatist rebellion in the Donbas. It also directly challenged U.S. dominance in the region, terrifying some of Russia's neighbors, especially the Baltic states, which feared that Moscow might pull off similar operations in support of their own minority Russian populations. By provoking even deeper hostility toward Russia not only among Ukraine's elites but also among its broader population, however, Russia's military actions in Ukraine have also had a major downside.

Moscow's use of force to change borders and annex territory did not so much mark the reappearance of realpolitik in Europe—the Balkans and the Caucasus saw that strategic logic in spades in the 1990s and the early years of this century—as indicate Russia's willingness and capacity to compete militarily with NATO. The year 2014 was when European security again became bipolar.

PUTIN BREAKS THE MOLD

For all its novelties, the Russian offensive in Ukraine did not end Moscow's tendency to project force only within the borders of the former Soviet Union. Russia broke that trend last year, when

it dove into Syria's civil war. It dispatched several dozen aircraft to Syria to strike the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS) and other anti-Assad forces, established advanced air defense systems within Syria, sent strategic bombers on sorties over the country from bases in central Russia, and ordered the Russian navy to fire missiles at Syrian targets from positions in the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas. By doing so, Russia undermined the de facto monopoly on the global use of force that the United States has held since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Moscow's immediate military objective in Syria has been to prevent the defeat of Assad's army and a subsequent takeover of Damascus by ISIS, a goal it has sought to achieve primarily through the empowerment of Syrian government forces and their Hezbollah and Iranian allies. Its political objective, meanwhile, has been to engineer a peace settlement that protects Russian interests in the country and the wider region—above all, by ensuring that Syria's postwar, post-Assad government remains friendly to Russia; that Moscow is able to retain a military presence in Syria; and that Russia's wartime partnerships with Iran, Iraq, and Kurdish forces produce lasting political and economic ties.

Even more important, Putin seeks to confirm Russia's status as a great power, in part by working alongside the United States as a main cosponsor of a diplomatic process to end the war and as a guarantor of the ensuing settlement. Putin's historic mission, as he sees it, is to keep Russia in one piece and return it to its rightful place among the world's powers; Russia's intervention in Syria has demonstrated the importance of military force

in reaching that goal. By acting boldly despite its limited resources, Russia has helped shift the strategic balance in Syria and staged a spectacular comeback in a region where its relevance was written off 25 years ago.

The operation in Syria has had its disadvantages for Moscow. In November 2015, a Turkish fighter jet downed a Russian bomber near the Syrian-Turkish border, the first such incident between Russia and a NATO country in more than half a century. Russia refrained from military retaliation, but its relations with Turkey, a major economic partner, suffered a crushing blow when Moscow imposed sanctions that could cost the Turkish economy billions of dollars. By siding with the Shiite regimes in Iran, Iraq, and Syria, Russia could also alienate its own population of some 16 million Muslims, most of whom are Sunni. Faced with this risk, Moscow has attempted to improve ties with some of the Middle East's Sunni players, such as Egypt; it has also wagered that keeping Assad's military afloat will ensure that the thousands of Russian and Central Asian jihadists fighting for ISIS in Iraq and Syria will never return to stir up trouble at home. Thus, Moscow's war in support of Assad and against ISIS has also been an effort to kill individuals who might threaten Russia's own stability.

NOT IN MY BACKYARD

Where will the Russian military go next? Moscow is looking to the Arctic, where the hastening retreat of sea ice is exposing rich energy deposits and making commercial navigation more viable. The Arctic littoral countries, all of which are NATO members except for Russia, are competing for access to

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resources there; Russia, for its part, hopes to extend its exclusive economic zone in the Arctic Ocean so that it can lay claim to valuable mineral deposits and protect the Northern Sea Route, a passage for maritime traffic between Europe and Asia that winds along the Siberian coast. To bolster its position in the High North, Russia is reactivating some of the military bases there that were abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is also building six new military installations in the region. Tensions in the Arctic remain mild, but that could change if there is a major standoff between NATO and Russia elsewhere or if Finland and Sweden, the two historically neutral Nordic countries, apply for NATO membership.

More likely, Russia will take military action near its southern border, particularly if ISIS, which has established a foothold in Afghanistan, manages to expand into the Central Asian states, all of which are relatively fragile. The countries with the region's largest economies, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, will soon face leadership transitions as their septuagenarian presidents step down or die. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where Russia keeps small army and air force garrisons, will not prove stable in the long term; like Turkmenistan, they are home to high unemployment, official corruption, ethnic tension, and religious radicalism—the same sort of problems that triggered the Arab Spring.

The memory of the Soviet quagmire in Afghanistan is still too fresh for the Kremlin to seriously contemplate invading the country again to put down ISIS there; instead, it will continue to support the Afghan government and the Taliban's efforts to take on the group. But that is not the case in Central Asia, which

Russia considers a vital security buffer. If the government of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan faces a major challenge from Islamist extremists, Russia will likely intervene politically and militarily, perhaps under the mandate of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, an alliance to which all four states belong.

In the coming years, then, Russia's military will continue to focus on the country's vast neighborhood in greater Eurasia, where Moscow believes using force constitutes strategic defense. If Russia's venture in Syria fails to achieve Moscow's political objectives there, or if Russia's economy significantly deteriorates, that instance of intervention beyond the country's near abroad may prove to be an exception. If not, Russia might learn to efficiently use its military force around the world, backing up its claim to be one of the world's great powers, alongside China and the United States.

A NEW STANDOFF?

Even as Moscow has reformed its military to deal with new threats, Russian defense planning has remained consistently focused on the United States and NATO, which the Kremlin still considers its primary challenges. Russia's National Security Strategy for 2016 describes U.S. policy toward Russia as containment; it also makes clear that Russia considers the buildup of NATO's military capabilities a threat, as it does the development of U.S. ballistic missile defenses and the Pentagon's ongoing project to gain the ability to strike anywhere on earth with conventional weapons within an hour. To counter these moves, Russia is modernizing its nuclear arsenal and its own air and

missile defenses. Moscow is also revising the deployment pattern of its forces, particularly along Russia's western border, and it will likely deepen its military footprint in the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are safe, however, even if they do not feel that way: the Kremlin has no interest in risking nuclear war by attacking a NATO member state, and the sphere of Russian control to which Putin aspires certainly excludes these countries.

At the same time that Russia is rebuilding its military, NATO is ramping up its own military presence in eastern Europe. The result will likely be a new and open-ended military standoff. Unlike during the Cold War, however, there is little prospect for arms control agreements between Russia and the West anytime soon because of the many disparities in their conventional military capabilities. Indeed, the Russian armed forces are unlikely to become as powerful as the U.S. military or threaten a NATO member state with a massive invasion even in the long term. Although Moscow seeks to remain a major player on the international stage, Russian leaders have abandoned Soviet-era ambitions of global domination and retain bad memories of the Cold War-era arms race, which fatally weakened the Soviet Union.

What is more, Russia's resources are far more limited than those of the United States: its struggling economy is nowhere near the size of the U.S. economy, and its aging population is less than half as large as the U.S. population. The Russian defense industry, having barely survived two decades of neglect and decay, faces a shrinking work force, weaknesses in key areas

such as electronics, and the loss of traditional suppliers such as Ukraine. Although Russia's military expenditures equaled 4.2 percent of GDP in 2015, the country cannot bear such high costs much longer without cutting back on essential domestic needs, particularly in the absence of robust economic growth. For now, even under the constraints of low energy prices and Western sanctions, Russian officials have pledged to continue the military modernization, albeit at a slightly slower pace than was originally planned.

Putin and other Russian officials understand that Russia's future, and their own, depends mostly on how ordinary citizens feel. Just as the annexation of Crimea was an exercise in historic justice for most of the Russian public, high defense spending will be popular so long as Russian citizens believe that it is warranted by their country's international position. So far, that seems to be the case. The modernization program could become a problem, however, if it demands major cuts to social spending and produces a sharp drop in living standards. The Russian people are famously resilient, but unless the Kremlin finds a way to rebuild the economy and provide better governance in the next four or five years, the social contract at the foundation of the country's political system could unravel. Public sentiment is not a trivial matter in this respect: Russia is an autocracy, but it is an autocracy with the consent of the governed. 🌐