



## **Military Force: A Driver Aggravating Russia's Decline**

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### **Introduction**

Looking into the remaining years of the 2010s, it is only too obvious that decline is set to be the dominant trend in Russia, and it is easy to predict that the trajectory will be neither smooth nor agreeable for this diminishing power and its neighbors. This decline was certainly not initiated by the sharp drop in oil prices in the middle of the decade—nor can it be arrested by the potential recovery of this volatile commodity to a more sensible plateau of \$40–50 per barrel. It can be argued that Russia's "resurgence," which appeared so robust in the 2000s, contained and nurtured many causes of the forthcoming decline, which is a complex phenomenon combining a range of factors from demography to infrastructure to corruption. A key element in the erosion of Russia's trajectory toward gaining strength was the authoritarian mutation of its political system, which had already begun in the course of Vladimir Putin's first presidency and reached the stage of complete degradation with his return to the Kremlin in 2012. One institution that stands out from the general picture of corrupt decay is the Armed Forces. This analysis will look into the very particular combination of modernization and dislocation of the Russian military machine: specifically, how political abuse of the military is aimed at compensating for the lack of other components of state power—which then leads to an acceleration of the general decline of the country.

### **The Contorted Combination of Military Reform and Rearmament**

The week-long war against Georgia in August 2008 convinced the Russian leadership that a direct application of military force was a highly effective instrument of policy—and that its force at that time was too feeble. This proven need to upgrade led to the launch of military reform in autumn 2008, which turned out to be the only meaningful undertaking in the much-trumpeted project of "modernization" advanced by President Dmitry Medvedev to establish his leadership. The reasons for his failure are too many to be evaluated here, but what is relevant is the determined execution of reorganizations and cuts in the Armed Forces. In hindsight, it is clear that the lack of any coherent design for reforms associated with Defense Minister Anatoly

Serdyukov was seriously detrimental: some changes were pushed too fast and too far, while some crucial parts were left completely unreformed.

Reconfiguring the basic structure of the Ground Forces (from the battalion-regiment-division to the battalion-brigade order), then deemed a remarkable success, was achieved in parallel with the disbandment of hundreds of quarter- and half-strength units that were the heritage of the Soviet “mass army” construct. The price for this success was the forced retirement of thousands of officers, which bitterly alienated the officer corps. The dismantlement of such a huge and dysfunctional mobilization system also signified a departure from previous strategies for engaging in large-scale conventional war, but this reality was never reflected in doctrinal thinking. The main shortcoming of the reconfiguration, however, was indecision over how to proceed from the conscription system to an all-volunteer army, caused primarily by the shortage of money to recruit some half a million young men to serve as soldiers under contract (*kontraktniki*).

The Serdyukov reform was indeed implemented on the cheap because its launch coincided with the arrival of a sharp economic crisis, which marked a major watershed in Russia’s decline. It was only in 2011 that the increase in petro-revenues reassured the Russian leadership of the availability of resources to build up the country’s military might, resulting in approval of the hugely expensive 2020 Armament Program. This mega-investment coincided with the curtailing of many of Medvedev’s “modernization” program initiatives and was criticized as too heavy by many economists, including Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, who was fired for expressing his disagreements too insolently. While massive rearmament was intended to boost Russia’s reindustrialization, it also envisaged an expansion of international cooperation, both with the West (including the *Mistral* deal with France) and with Ukraine.

### **Abuse and Overstretch of Military Power**

Economic stagnation became the key factor in Russia’s decline in the early 2010s. And against this background, a half-reformed military machine appeared to be the best available means of asserting Russia’s international status and enabling domestic consolidation. The reshuffle of the top brass provided for a better performance of the machine. Notably, Sergei Shoigu, who replaced the unpopular Serdyukov as defense minister in November 2012, was not very keen to push forward painful reforms but, rather, restored the integrity of the chain of command by bringing younger and war-seasoned generals into key positions, including into the General Staff. He also placed a strong emphasis on combat training in exercises of various scale, focusing particularly on the performance of the special forces and airborne troops.

These measures guaranteed the spectacular success of the rapid deployment of the so-called “little green men” into Crimea in March 2014: A smooth and well-camouflaged military operation ensured a swift annexation of the province by Russia. What followed, however, was a messy and, at best, partly successful intervention into eastern Ukraine, in which Russia was recognized as an aggressor but was not able to fully utilize its military superiority due to the peculiar character of “hybrid war.” The political need to preserve its barely plausible deniability translated into the order forbidding the use of air force, so the battalion groups deployed at the Ilovaisk (August 2014) and Debaltseve (February 2015) battlefields were able to achieve only

tactical successes and suffered casualties. Russia concentrated some 50,000 troops on the border with Ukraine and moved perhaps 10,000 inside the Donbas war zone; but that was not enough to “liberate” the key regions of eastern Ukraine with a population of more than 15 million people. The pause in combat operations since March 2015 has left Russia with the need to secure and supply an awkward piece of territory with two big cities and unnatural borders, forcing it to rotate composite battalions with increasingly dubious combat tasks.

This barely camouflaged aggression has driven Russia into a tough political confrontation with the West, in which a vast differential in economic potential puts it in a position of weakness. Moscow has opted to play further on its military strength, perceiving its readiness to accept higher risks as a major advantage. The main theater for demonstrating readiness to use military force proactively has been in the Baltics, while provocative demonstrations have often been staged in the Black Sea theater as well as in the Arctic and in the Far East. The Air Force has become the instrument of choice for this virtual power projection, with the level of stress for the supply-and-maintenance services at its main airbases reaching a breaking point. This has led to a chain of accidents and crashes starting in summer 2015 and involving two Tu-95MS strategic bombers—the first such losses on record.

The intervention in Syria, while not large scale in terms of the numbers of troops and assets involved (up to 70 aircraft and helicopters), has added significantly to the pressure on the most combat-capable elements of the military organization. The Air Force had to reduce drastically its activities in the other theaters, including in the Baltics, yet the chain of accidents has continued. The intervention did produce strong political resonance and has caused a sharp crisis in Russia’s relations with Turkey, but it has not changed the course of the complex Syrian civil war and has become a high-risk and heavy-maintenance enterprise that serves no useful political purpose.

Overall, the shift toward using military force as a physical instrument of policy, starting with the annexation of Crimea, has resulted in an increasing over-stretch of Russia’s half-reformed military structures. Ground forces are engaged in combat deployment inside and in the vicinity of the Donbas war zone, the Air Force is hard pressed to sustain the intervention in Syria, and the Navy is busy supporting this intervention, so there is very little “free capacity” left, while the political demand for more proactive moves continues to increase.

### **Getting the Rearmament Wrong**

It has become plainly obvious in the course of sinking into the slow-moving (rather than sudden) economic crisis that the scope of the 2020 Armament Program was seriously unrealistic. But a simple trimming down is not an option. While the main point of departure—the end of the life cycle of most of Soviet-era weapon systems—was correct, the goal of massive domestic production of every kind of modern arms necessary for all the tasks set for the Armed Forces was completely unfeasible. Russia inherited a vast and disorganized military-industrial complex, but it could not be modernized and reorganized into a Soviet military machine writ 4–5 times smaller and capable of producing a full menu of weapons. Hard decisions on setting priorities were avoided, and the priorities that were set have proven to be off target.

One such priority was the channeling of an extraordinary amount of resources toward the modernization of Russia's strategic forces: first and foremost, the fleet of strategic submarines. In hindsight, the rationale for rushing this program looks far from solid. Three *Borei*-class submarines have been delivered to the Navy, and three more hulls are in the advanced stages of construction, but the *Bulava* missile, which is the main weapon system for these subs, has not completed the full schedule of tests (only one test launch was conducted in 2015) and is accepted as combat ready on dubious premises. It was entirely possible to proceed more slowly with this hugely expensive program, and to achieve greater output from the defense industry by allocating resources differently.

One of the under-resourced elements of the 2020 Armament Program was the modernization of the Air Force, which envisaged construction of hundreds of new planes in parallel with upgrades of the old models. As a result, the diversity of assets at the newly enlarged air bases has increased to such a degree that maintenance becomes a puzzle—and technical failures have duly multiplied. Sanctions have significantly affected those plans to upgrade; but even worse, disruption has been caused by the breakdown of cooperation with Ukraine, which had previously supplied engines for Russian helicopters and many key components for the latter country's military transport planes. Shipbuilding, even if planned less ambitiously, has also been badly affected. One of the main setbacks here was the cancelation of the *Mistral* contract with France because the stern part of the hulls and much of the equipment (including the helicopters) for the first two amphibious assault ships were produced in Russia, and Russian shipyards were reconstructed for building the next two ships.

Overall, the combination of disruption caused by sanctions and progressive underfunding caused by the contraction of petro-revenues has delivered the defense industry into a deeper crisis than the authorities are prepared to admit. Unrealistic initial goals of rearmament were set with the expectation that the defense-industrial complex would become the main driver of Russia's reindustrialization, but it has instead turned into a value-destructing generator of stagnation, much like in the late Soviet years. Indeed, present-day prescriptions for proceeding with import substitution are as unfeasible as was the order to execute conversion in the latter half of the 1980s. The government is reluctant to present to a defiant and disoriented President Putin the whole scale of the accumulating problems, so the political roadmap for sustaining the allocation of resources to half-accomplished programs remains firm, despite its obvious impossibility. Mistakes in setting priorities for the parameters of the 2020 Armament Program have been further aggravated by the denial of the need to concentrate scarce resources on a limited number of workable programs. The development of the 2025 Armament Program has thus become an exercise in surrealistic escape to an alternative reality.

### **Conclusion: From Decline to Breakdown?**

Analysis of the deterioration of the Russian military machine reveals a particular interplay between the abuse of military force and the mismanagement of the defense industry. On one hand, the massive rearmament program did bring some enhancements in combat capabilities, and the top brass was eager to report a big leap forward in rebuilding Russia's military might—which the Kremlin was equally eager to use to its advantage. Nevertheless, decisive moves in projecting this revived power against Ukraine have revealed many shortcomings in the actual progress of

military reform, while intervention in Syria has added more stress to the half-reformed military structures. These protracted engagements have increased the demand by the Armed Forces for more modern weaponry, but to no avail, as the combined impact of Western (and Ukrainian) sanctions and the crisis of state finances (caused primarily by the collapse of petro-revenues) have severely affected defense industry production chains.

Military force is seen by the Russian leadership as the only reliable instrument in the unfolding confrontation with the West, but Moscow is unable to channel sufficient resources into proper maintenance of this complex instrument, which consequently becomes prone to accidents and malfunctioning. The Kremlin is convinced that its readiness to accept greater risks is a major political advantage in various tests of wills and asymmetric responses that shape the mode of this confrontation, but in fact it is not prepared for an increasingly probable catastrophic disaster (on the scale of the *Kursk*, near the onset of the Putin “era”) and could act irrationally when it does strike. The regime’s capacity to absorb a defeat is quite low and further diminished by the heavily propagandistic emphasis on new “victories,” such that the corrupt court lives in fear of a sudden shift in public opinion caused by a revelation of its weakness.

Even without a major new military setback in the near future, the defense industry, which used to be a major support base for Putin’s policies, could experience such disruptions and non-payments, leading workers at huge Soviet-era enterprises to resort to strikes; and this unrest could have greater political resonance than labor action in other sectors. Seeking to preempt such threats, the government must keep money flowing into rearmament projects, which not only deprives other sectors of investment resources and squeezes social programs, but also precludes any serious economic reforms. In this regard, the defense industry may be characterized as an unreformable “black hole,” consuming resources and aggravating the recession.

The dynamics of the trend—in which the misuse of military power leads to its deterioration, thus leading to further abuse—have accelerated to dangerous levels, diminishing the probability of a more comfortable, gradual decline with controlled risks of breakdowns. Russia’s military degradation will develop against a backdrop of steady economic decline, which will erode any remaining cohesion within a disgruntled society. Even more important is the very deep and fast-moving decay of key political institutions. The increasing unsteadiness of political superstructures will lead to new attempts at using military might to generate legitimacy, which could indeed spur some very short-term boosts of “patriotic” mobilization but will inevitably drive the regime into an extremely high-risk zone. Facing a sequence of domestic disturbances, the Kremlin will then not be able to rely on military instruments for ensuring the prolongation of its grasp on power.

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