



Can Russia Sustain Its Military Capability?

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Summary

Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and subsequently accelerating militarization has forced us to re-examine Russian defense policy as a central focus of foreign attention. The war in Ukraine, Russia's intervention in Syria, increasing signs of a manufactured war psychosis inside Russia and the visible improvements in the capabilities of the Russian military obliges us to reckon with these events, ongoing trends in Russian defense policy, and their implications. Given the structural economic crisis that has been aggravated by declining energy prices and Western sanctions we must also probe the question as to just how sustainable Russian defense policy is. The argument advanced here is that Putin has reconfigured the system throughout his 16-year tenure in office to produce a system resembling in critical respects the Soviet one. Therefore despite the pressures now operating on the system, it can for some time to come provide the Russian military with modern conventional and nuclear weapons even though it will probably not realize the full demands of the government. Nevertheless, and despite the strong constellation of interests favoring this militarization, it will increasingly run into difficulties given the structural problems plaguing Russia. Moreover, as in Soviet if not Tsarist times, this unchecked militarization will encounter barriers it cannot overcome; without fundamental changes in policy, these will lead the country into crisis. But whether Putin or whoever succeeds him will grasp that insight and meet those challenges remains, as of today, and as seen by Russian analysts, quite unlikely. If that assessment is right, then sometime in the future—though we cannot say when or how it will occur—a deep structural crisis is in the offing. And nobody can foretell its outcome.

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Introduction

Many Western and Russian writers have recently charged that Russia is mobilizing for war or at least preparing for an arms race with the West. [1] To be sure, this is not a universal view, and the Russian army suffers from many visible defects that might preclude such a

decision, e.g. the recent firing of the entire command staff (50 officers) of the Baltic Fleet for dereliction of duty. [2] Moreover, senior NATO commanders have stated that as of June 2016, Russia is not planning an imminent invasion of the Baltic States or anywhere else. [3] Nevertheless the security temperature has risen considerably due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Reports of the heightened readiness of Russian forces around Belarus and the Baltic States add to the anxiety. [4] Neither can we ignore the ongoing militarization of the economy and state administration or the regression to Soviet times with the creation of divisions, corps and even armies, a regression away from the brigades created in 2008–2012. [5] Since 2009, the Russian government has steadily sought to mobilize the entire state administration for conflict. Moscow outlined this course of action in the national security strategies of 2009 and 2015 and the defense doctrines of 2010 and 2014, and Western writers like this author and the British scholar Andrew Monaghan have also commented on this trend. [6]

Therefore, whether or not major war is imminent, ongoing developments oblige us to raise several key questions, particularly the following: Given the centrality of Putin's quest for great military power as a defining attribute of his policy, can Russia, under present and foreseeable conditions, sustain that power? We try to answer that question largely by examining it through the eyes of Russian writers. And while there are no definitive answers, this is a crucial issue. If Russia cannot sustain its huge investment in military power or only do so at the cost of impoverishing its overall economy, then neither the military buildup nor Putin's system are sustainable over time. In that case, the system then inevitably faces visible, possibly terminal decline. Tsarism and Soviet power ultimately failed largely because they could not sustain the armed forces and their ensuing claims to a great power status. Whereas Joseph Stalin successfully created the basis for that status, Stalinism contained the seeds of its own decline. And today there are those who also argue that Putin is following a similar trajectory, which entails the same results of decline leading to state collapse. [7] Therefore we cannot exclude *a priori* the possibility of decline leading to state failure.

Russian Defense Thinking

Putin frequently charges NATO and the United States with trying to force Russia into an unsustainable arms race, but, to the contrary, under his leadership Russia is most likely to pursue an asymmetric strategy that will produce more than enough capability to defend its vital interests. Furthermore he has repeatedly insisted that Russia focus on new and new types of weapons. [8] Therefore he denies that his policies are militarizing the economy and claims that he intends to avoid his predecessors' mistakes. [9]

Nevertheless Russia's official strategy documents not only demand the mobilization of the state administration; for a long time they have been suffused by and originate in the presupposition of ever rising threats and conflicts all along Russia's periphery, and by major actors' growing disposition to use force to secure strategic goals. [10] Russian military policy in response to this threat perception possesses a clearly massive scale comprising both an anti-Western foreign policy in response and a huge conventional and nuclear buildup. According to Russian scholar and former Duma member Alexei Arbatov,

This course of action was adopted on the basis of very optimistic projections of economic growth; Russia's defense budget for 2020 was projected to reach \$200 billion, implying a GDP of \$5 trillion—2.5 times the 2012 GDP of \$2 trillion. This projection assumed growth rates on par with China's, which Russia is nowhere near achieving. In fact the [Russian] defense budget was below \$60 billion. [11]

Putin and his subordinates have long repeated the Stalinist mantra that the defense industrial sector is a locomotive of overall economic growth and is therefore essential to the overall growth of the economy. [12] Indeed, he and Dmitry Medvedev, currently prime minister and president from 2008 to 2012, demanded enormous leaps forward in military production at that time. The goals set out for Russia by Putin and Medvedev then for defense procurement confirm this threat perception. Putin reiterated, and not for the first time, that Russian defense technology must be superior to that of all its potential rivals. [13] Even more tellingly, Medvedev stated in 2008 that,

A guaranteed nuclear deterrent system for various military and political circumstances must be provided by 2020... We must ensure air superiority, precision strikes on land and sea targets, and the timely deployment of troops. We are planning to launch large-scale production of warships, primarily nuclear submarines with cruise missiles and multi-purpose attack submarines... We will also build an air and space defense network. [14]

Putin said that by 2020 the armed forces will receive over 1,500 new aircraft and helicopters and about 200 new air defense systems by 2020. [15] He has demanded 70 percent modernization (although it is nowhere specified what are the criteria of such modernization) by 2020, called for producing over 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), 8 strategic missile submarines armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), 20 multipurpose submarines, and 50 combat surface ships. His list includes over 600 modern aircraft, including fifth-generation fighters, over 600 modern helicopters, 28 S-400 surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles, 38 Vityaz air defense systems, 10 Iskander-M brigades, over 2,300 modern tanks, some 2,000 self-propelled artillery systems and guns, over 17,000 motor vehicles, and 100 military satellites by 2020. [16] Upon reassuming the presidency in May 2012, Putin decreed not only that the armed forces be equipped with modern weapons and special purpose hardware to the proportion of 70 percent by 2020, but also that the defense procurement program identify key areas, telling the government to ensure “priority development of nuclear deterrent forces; aerospace defense resource; systems for communications, intelligence and control; radio electronic measures, unmanned aerial vehicles; automated strike weapons, modern transport aviation; precision weapons and defenses against the same; and special protection systems for servicemen.” [17]

The Air Force also has ordered 92 Su-34 fighters, but talks of acquiring up to 140 of them by 2020; it has also ordered 30 Su-30SM fighters by 2015. [18] Similarly, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov (2007–2012) told the Defense Board that in 2008–2011 the armed forces received 39 ICBMs, 12 Iskander systems, two submarines, 374 aircraft, 713 other

rocket and artillery weapons, over 2,300 armored vehicles and equipment, 79 surface-to-air systems, 106 air defense systems, and some 40,000 vehicles. [19] Presumably modernization in this context meant modernized weapons. Putin also decreed in 2012 that the government should start preparing the ground for the next State Armaments Program, i.e. the 2016–2025 plan, and base it on “competitive domestically-produced weaponry and military and special purpose hardware.” [20]

The State Armament Plan from 2011–2020 has, as of 2016, been only one-third fulfilled. As of this writing, two-thirds of the envisaged \$700 billion earmarked for procurement in this period has yet to be spent. But current figures indicate that under present conditions Russia is already at the limit of what it can afford to spend on defense. [21]

Yet, the drive toward further mobilization occurs both with regard to industry and to military manpower. Aleksandr’ Golts reports that,

Recently, Putin told a meeting on enhancing the mobilization readiness of industry that leaders of Russian military industry discussed the possibility of shifting Russian industry to weapons production on the eve of war. At the end of the 1980s, attempts to strengthen mobilization readiness in the face of falling oil prices finally destroyed the Soviet economy. Now, it seems, the situation is repeated. In other words, confrontation with West inevitably leads to the rebirth of the mass mobilization concept that killed the USSR. [22]

Space precludes a detailed assessment of the success to date of these plans. However, NATO commanders and leaders concede Russia’s overwhelming superiority in the Baltic, Ukrainian and Black Sea theaters that could defeat any current NATO force. Moreover, the visible rearmament of the Russian nuclear fleet suggests that Russia has achieved enough of its goals to make it confident in its conventional forces, a confidence reflected in the 2014 defense doctrine that, for the first time, mentioned non-nuclear deterrence specifically. [23] While undoubtedly many projects fell by the wayside or are mired in difficulty—for example, shipbuilding, a notorious problem area—this plan, as of today has succeeded well enough. Western scholars admit that, even under today’s sanctions, there is no reason to believe the military modernization plan cannot continue giving Putin most, if not all of what he wants to sustain the defense sector. [24]

Beyond this conclusion, the pattern of Russian military exercises clearly points to ever-increased emphasis on the ability to mobilize rapidly large numbers of forces for conventional theater war. [25] NATO commanders and Western analysts have both remarked on the vastly improved Russian capability to perform such mobilization and deploy forces rapidly to a theater. But in the spring of 2016, Putin and Defense Minister Shoigu went still farther and conducted another “snap” mobilization exercise that essentially involved mobilizing the entire state and military administration. [26] This exercise clearly went far beyond the large-scale mobilization that was premised in the exercises beginning with Zapad 2013. [27] And despite the Kremlin’s statements to the contrary, the 2016 spring exercise strongly suggests an ongoing and focused policy that

entails precisely the kind of militarization and efforts to enhance capabilities that Putin continues to decry.

But this relative success in procuring new weapons, and in mobilizing the armed forces and the state raises several other issues. First of all, given the absence of real growth since 2012, if not earlier, and the sanctions regime whose impact is considerably more than the government will admit (as shown by its diplomatic efforts to eliminate them), rising defense spending may prove to be unsustainable while the economy is shrinking. Indeed, we have good reason to believe that structural militarization is occurring. The late Vitaly Shlykov (former co-chair of Russia's Defense Council) coined the term structural militarization to suggest that excessive defense spending is an institutionalized aspect of the Soviet and Russian economic system. [28] If this trend is not reversed or at least checked and absent substantial growth in other sectors besides energy—which in any case would largely stem from rising energy prices that could fund major defense projects—then over time the economy could well be strained to the utmost if not beyond. Therefore spending on the rest of the economy could become progressively less tolerable over time. [29]

In this context there is also good evidence suggesting the onset of this structural militarization even before 2014. [30] In 2008, total defense spending increased by 26 percent over 2007, and the 2007 figures for procurement were 28 percent higher than those for 2006. [31] And then in 2009, at the bottom of the financial crisis that began in 2008, Deputy Defense Minister Lyubov Kudelina stated that, while the total planned defense budget was cut by 8 percent in 2009–2011, Russia would spend 1.5 trillion rubles to acquire arms, scientific-research and experimental-design work in the interests of the Armed Forces. In this period, total defense spending would rise from 1.439 trillion rubles to 1.615 trillion rubles in 2011, a rise of 12 percent. And of that spending 36 percent would go to development, procurement, and repairs of arms and equipment. [32] The figures for 2011–2020 have grown from this basis by an order of magnitude. Indeed, by 2013, Russian defense spending in official terms, amounted to 3.9 percent of GDP, although the actual defense burden is probably higher. [33] Moreover, according to Vasily Zatselin, “new armaments” are weapons with less than ten years of service and “modernized arms” are old models with new components, not just repairs. This assumes that the new program will modernize weapons at 7–10 percent annually, almost certainly an unattainable goal. [34] These modernization results speak for themselves and showed even before the invasion of Ukraine that 20 years after the fall of communism the Russian defense sector remains on the treadmill of defense reform. [35] Indeed, nothing has changed since then except that this sector has demonstrated that it can give the government much of what it is calling for, at least in a general sense.

We say it can generally produce what the government is ordering because many Russian analysts now argue that the defense sector, much like the Soviet sector is virtually autonomous. [36] That means this sector is essentially producing, at least with regard to nuclear weapons, systems for which no real mission is indicated. They are only producing what they can already make. Producers subsequently rationalize the mission, often couched in offensive and very threatening terms, to suit what is already produced instead of

matching production to strategy. [37] If this analysis is correct, then in many respects the Russian defense industry, much like its Soviet predecessor, is able to supply many reasonably high-tech weapons to its chief customer, the Ministry of Defense and the military. But also like its predecessor, Russia's current defense industry is regressing by imposing unfocused capabilities upon the state rather than what it actually needs. Certainly the industries comprising this sector, grouped as they are into major state corporations, are honeycombed with corruption and have been for years. Both Western and Russian analysts see them as being inherently economically dysfunctional organizations whose chief purpose is money laundering and the acquisition and/or distribution of corrupt rents, much like the rest of the economy. [38] More recently, according to their own financial statements, their performance has been abysmal, testifying to the corrosive effects of congenital rent seeking and corruption throughout the defense sector and the overall economy. [39]

Thus, these industries are inherently suboptimal economic performers and a growing burden on an economy plagued by sanctions and shrinking growth. Shrinking growth is bad enough, but sanctions choke off access to credit, superior technologies and knowhow, and investment. And low energy prices depress spending because the necessary state revenues are not there. Consequently the burdens on the economy are already showing themselves. Incomes have fallen by about 10 percent, major infrastructure programs and pensions have been cut, and the absence of growth also means further cuts to state spending on all areas of human capital, as well. [40]

Not surprisingly, there has been major pressure to cut defense spending or at least reduce the rate of its growth. Several programs or deployments have been extended or stretched out and some have been canceled (e.g. deployments to Tajikistan); but by and large that campaign has not been successful. Although there have been reports of cuts in defense spending in the 2016 budget, in fact these cannot be definitively verified at present. [41] Moreover, Putin's own inclination is to press forward in an insane attempt to engender a Stalin-style "leap forward" comparable to the 1930s; therefore, the Ministry of Defense and the *siloviki* certainly see no reason to reform or reduce defense spending. [42]

However, we can verify that there is a robust political struggle over the pre-eminence of the defense sector in the state budget, state allocations and the overall economy. Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, whom Putin brought back to give him new proposals on reviving the economy, has forthrightly stated that it is essential to curtail much if not all of the aggressive foreign and defense policy and transfer those resources to productive investment. Indeed, Kudrin had resigned in protest against the timing of militarization in 2010, so in his eyes this trend was already coming into being then, if not earlier. [43] And in 2014, his successor as Finance Minister, Anton Siluyanov, acknowledged that Russia cannot afford the defense buildup. [44] Predictably, Putin refused, claiming that he would not sacrifice Russia's sovereignty, a response worthy of a Romanov Tsar or Soviet General Secretary. [45]

Today there appears to be little hope soon of reversing the structural militarization of the economy, not least due to the strategic supremacy of an ideology and constellation of

interests that promotes militarization and rent seeking in the defense sector. This ideological predisposition to seeing Russia as a besieged fortress goes back to Putin's policies in 2004 after the Chechen attack on Beslan and the failed attempt to install Viktor Yanukovich as Putin's satrap in Ukraine, a failure that precipitated the Orange Revolution there in 2004. [46] But that ideological trope has taken over all discourse in Putin's Russia, where it is actively and massively promoted in every way by official media. Thus the first target of Russian information warfare is Russian public opinion, to promote this predisposition to conflict and a sense of being constantly embattled. And its purpose is to preserve Putin's power and system. [47] And of course, it is bound up with the panoply of ideas and emotions contained in the great power or *Velikaya Derzhava* syndrome that enjoys so much long-standing and deep-rooted popularity.

Defense correspondent Pavel Felgengauer observed years ago that the institutional setup of the *Silovye Struktury* (power structures), in particular the intelligence community, provides a powerful reinforcement for anyone disposed to accept or promulgate the besieged fortress trope. He writes:

Russia has a Prussian-style all-powerful General Staff that controls all the different armed services and is more or less independent of outside political constraints. Russian military intelligence—the GRU, as big in size as the former KGB and spread over all continents—is an integral part of the General Staff. Through the GRU, the General Staff controls the supply of vital information to all other decision-makers in all matters concerning defense procurement, threat assessment and so on. High-ranking former GRU officers have told me that in Soviet times the General Staff used the GRU to grossly, deliberately and constantly mislead the Kremlin about the magnitude and gravity of the military threat posed by the West in order to help inflate military expenditure. There are serious indications that at present the same foul practice is continuing. [48]

This continuing situation is a direct outgrowth of the catastrophic failure under Yeltsin to impose democratic civilian control on the security sector as well as the intensification of its wide-ranging power under Putin.

The paladins of these structures have clearly embraced not only the besieged fortress mentality but also a militarized rhetoric and style of thinking that has spilled over into the economics of the defense sector, probably because it was so easily corruptible or already corrupted. Thus, Andrei Illarionov observes that,

Since its outset, the *Siloviki* regime has been aggressive. At first it focused on actively destroying centers of independent political, civil and economic life within

Russia. Upon achieving those goals, the regime's aggressive behavior turned outward beyond Russia's borders. At least since the assassination of the former Chechen President Zelimkhan Yandarbiev in Doha, Qatar, on 14 February 2004, aggressive behavior by SI [*Siloviki*—author] in the international arena has become the rule rather than the exception. Over the last five years the regime has waged ten different “wars” (most of them involving propaganda, intelligence operations, and economic coercion rather than open military force) against neighbors and other foreign nations. The most recent targets have included Ukraine (subjected to a “second gas war” in early 2009), The United States (subjected to a years-long campaign to rouse anti-American sentiment) and, most notoriously, Georgia (actually bombed and invaded in 2008). In addition to their internal psychological need to wage aggressive wars, a rational motive is also driving the *Siloviki* to resort to conflict. War furnishes the best opportunities to distract domestic public opinion and destroy the remnants of the political and intellectual opposition within Russia itself. An undemocratic regime worried about the prospect of domestic economic social and political crises—such as those that now haunt Russia amid recession and falling oil prices—is likely to be pondering further acts of aggression. The note I end on, therefore, is a gloomy one: To me the probability that *Siloviki* Incorporated will be launching new wars seems alarmingly high. [*italics in Original*] [49]

Another mounting institutional obstacle is the entrenched desire of the armed forces and apparently the Ministry of Defense and/or General Staff as well to retain as much of the old Soviet mobilization system as possible even though it is hopelessly obsolete and dysfunctional. We see this in the return to formations like divisions and even armies as has recently happened in the Western Military district opposite the Baltic States. [50] This entails a regression from the reforms of 2008–2012 that created mobile, powerful, and truly ready and well-trained brigades. As Aleksandr Golts has recently written,

When the number of reservists makes up about two-thirds of the size of the army in peacetime (which is characteristic of voluntary, but not conscription-based, Armed forces), the draft simply does not make sense. If, in the event of military action, only 700,000 reservists are to be called to duty, then why does the state need spend a huge amount of resources to train more than 300,000 conscripts each year if no one is planning to call on them, even in a time of war? The new defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has set the task to recruit, by 2020, 495,000 [51] contract soldiers. The draft, however, will remain, but will not exceed 10 percent of the declared million-man Armed Forces. It will be voluntary in fact: only those who are planning to become a professional soldier will have to pass conscription.

However the authorities do not want to give up the opportunity to have 300,000 conscripts in the Armed Forces each year. But the attempt to conserve the draft confronts directly the concept of permanent readiness. It is clear that if the one-year term of service by draft is retained, the combat capability of the Russian army will be highly doubtful. [52]

But while combat capability suffers, the authorities can still mobilize the entire country in anticipation of another total war like World War II; and during peacetime, the government can exploit these troops as “baptized property,” as it has done for centuries. The fact that Putin has now sacked the entire leadership of the Baltic Fleet, 50 officers in all, for dereliction of duty, which included maltreatment of soldiers, barely a year after praising them to the skies, suggests how deeply rooted the old ways are and how easily Moscow can be deceived concerning the quality of its forces. [53]

Finally it is also now clear that the authorities are engaged in deliberate threat inflation. Putin, on his recent trip to Helsinki, once again blatantly misrepresented the capability of the US/NATO missile defense systems being emplaced in Poland and Romania while threatening to move troops to the border should Finland join NATO. [54] This misrepresentation has long been official policy, even though nuclear designer Mikhail Solomonov, General (ret) Victor Yesin and scholar Alexey Arbatov, along with other writers and commentators in and out of government, have admitted that this system cannot threaten Russia’s nuclear arsenal. Solomonov apparently told this to Putin in person. [55]

Conclusions

A powerful nexus of political, institutional, and economic interests throughout the security sector have embarked upon a policy of threat inflation, militarization, and attempted intimidation of Russia’s neighbors and interlocutors, not least for their own selfish material and other interests. While corruption is rampant, structural militarization and, in some cases, an open return to Soviet practices and ideas are driving policy formulation and implementation. While the defense sector can for the foreseeable future provide the weapons needed, the correlation of forces, to employ a Soviet neologism, is turning against Russia. It is falling behind China and depends on it more than ever, much more than China depends on it. NATO, with all its problems is mobilizing its capabilities even if arguably too slowly, and the economy has long since reached a dead end, even without the burden of sanctions and low energy prices, because of Putin’s classic patrimonial Muscovite system. There are also signs that Russian economic and military capability may have passed apogee, due to economic and demographic obstacles—and due to the fact that Russia seems to be returning in crucial ways to the Soviet system. While the situation at present may not be irretrievable, the longer it goes on, the more today’s Russia will resemble past Russian systems that ended in convulsions and explosions due to the inherent potential of the system to decline. In that case, both Russia and the West will again have to heed Karl Marx’s admonition that the “dead weight of all the generations of the past weighs like a nightmare upon the brain of the living.”

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