

Russia's Military Reform: Progress and Hurdles

Russia's military reform is a keystone of the country's great-power ambitions. Vladimir Putin's ambition to build up modern armed forces is driven by political determination. Therefore, the notion of Russia's military weakness should be reconsidered – not least in view of its high disposition towards military action, as demonstrated on Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

By Jonas Grätz

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 has reinforced Western concerns about Russian foreign and security policy. Under President Vladimir Putin's rule, Russia is once more pursuing ambitions to regain great-power status and extending a strategic challenge to the West (cf. [CSS Analysis No.136](#)). Moscow is trying to push back against US influence in Europe and to enforce a sphere of influence in its own neighborhood. After the war in Georgia, the Crimean crisis has once more demonstrated that military challenges have returned to the European theater. The following provisional review of Russia's exceptionally ambitious reform to modernize its armed forces, launched in 2008, is timely and highly apt against this backdrop.

Efforts at reforming the armed forces have a long tradition in Russia, but they have often faltered due to lack of political prioritization and insufficient determination. In the 1990s, the armed forces were successfully returned to Russia from their European bases with considerable Western assistance. Force levels were reduced from over 4.5 million to less than one million troops. The organizational structure was simplified. However, genuine reforms – such as a full restructuring and reorganization to meet new threats – failed due to resistance from traditionalists in the military, lack of political determination, and insufficient funding.



Russia's Armed Forces are being modernized. The reform focuses on three areas: organizational structure, personnel, and weapons upgrades. *S. Karpukhin / Reuters*

Meanwhile, the political debate in Russia was marked by the experience of Western military operations such as "Desert Storm" in Iraq in 1991, the Kosovo war in 1999, or the attack on Iraq in 2003, as well as by Russia's own experiences in Chechnya. Russian military theorists noted a technological trend towards highly technical, remote-controlled "sixth-generation warfare". There could be no doubt that without modernizing and restructuring its armed

forces, which were largely a legacy of the Soviet era, Russia could no longer compete on equal terms in military conflicts with the US and NATO; nor would it be able to operate successfully in asymmetric conflicts.

The 2008 war in Georgia was the decisive political impetus for renewed reform efforts. It revealed significant problems in command structures as well as in the sol-



diers' equipment and training. Initial problems with implementation were resolved through a massive increase of the defense budget, which in 2012 was expanded by 16 per cent compared to the previous year. Special programs worth USD 730 billion were introduced for improving equipment from 2011 to 2020.

At the same time, the military threat perception broadened. Two aspects in particular were crucial in this context: First of all, the US, and thus NATO, have moved progressively closer to Russia's borders, and have been identified as the main threat in the Russian foreign policy whitebook of 2008 and in the current military doctrine of 2010. Previously, the Western military alliance had no longer been listed as a primary threat in post-Soviet Russia. Secondly, the threshold between military and non-military threats has been eliminated. Thus, challenges that could have been dealt with as non-military issues attained military relevance for Russia. In response to the "color revolutions" of 2003 and 2004 in Georgia and Ukraine, the "destabilization" of neighboring countries was ranked as the second-highest danger. Domestic challenges, on the other hand, were accordingly downgraded. Conversely, the doctrine now indicates a willingness to use military force for the protection of Russian citizens abroad. The operations in Georgia and Crimea confirm that Russia is indeed willing to do so, irrespective of international law. Furthermore, in the case of Ukraine, it is apparent that the notions of "citizenship" and "threat" are extremely malleable.

Structural Changes

The military reform announced by then defense minister Anatoliy Serdyukov in October 2007 mainly concerns three areas: Organizational structure, personnel, and weapons upgrades. The basis of the new organizational structure was a restructuring of the armed forces into a mainly professional volunteer army in a permanent state of readiness. Also, due to these changes, the share of conscripts will be reduced from its current level of 50 per cent to 20 per cent. At the end of the decade, according to these plans, conscripts will no longer take part in combat operations. At the same time – unlike in European professional armed forces – the personnel strength of the military will be raised from the current de-facto level of 700'000 to one million soldiers.

The core of this reform is the abolition of the division (up to 13'000 troops) as the primary organizing formation, to be replaced completely by brigades (4'000 troops). The aim is to increase mobility and to facilitate smaller-scale operations of autonomous units. Due to the variety of challenges in various parts of the country, there has been considerable resistance to this uniform approach, which is why trials of the various structures are still ongoing.

One innovation in the organization of warfare has been the introduction of four military districts, with each of which having a joint operational staff. These staffs, patterned on the US model of regional commands, will be tasked with directing opera-

tions, since the Georgian war revealed great difficulties in coordination. The Western, Southern, Central, and Eastern Military Districts largely correspond to the four strategic directions. However, the Central District is mainly conceived as providing support for the Western and Eastern Districts, while the Western District will also carry out missions in the Arctic.

With 250'000 troops, the army is the largest service and is largely concentrated in the Eastern District, which hosts four armies, compared to two each in the other districts. Altogether, the army has 38 combat brigades and 41 combat support brigades. Another 26 to 40 brigades are to be formed by 2020, including 14 new army aviation brigades, which will contribute about 90 combat and transport helicopters each to reinforce the infantry's hitherto weak tactical air support and air mobility. About 16 per cent of the combat helicopters are of recent production. Additionally, new reconnaissance and air defense brigades are to be formed. While most of the armored vehicles are functional, they are mainly of Soviet vintage and are only gradually being modernized.

With its 150'000 troops, the air force is administratively subdivided into two functionally distinct staffs – the strategic Long-Range Aviation Command and the Military Transport Aviation Command – and, at the tactical level, into four territorial air force and air defense staffs. Stationed in six main bases, the Long-Range Aviation Command constitutes the airborne component of the nuclear triad. It has around 140 Soviet-era long- and medium range bombers at its disposal. Development of a new stealth bomber with variable-sweep wings is underway. Although the Military Transport Aviation Command leads a niche existence, it is to be equipped

The US, and thus NATO, have been identified as the main threat in the current military doctrine.

with 260 heavy transport aircraft by 2020, thus increasing the strategic flexibility of the army. The tactical air force has 580 fighter jets, 12 per cent of which are of recent design. Every year, four to five per cent of the fleet are replaced. A fifth-generation, stealth-capable fighter jet is currently undergoing trials and is supposed to be commissioned by the end of the decade. How-

ever, Russia has no significant unmanned aerial vehicle assets.

Of the various military services, Russia's navy faces the greatest problems. Its 130'000 seamen are distributed among four fleets (the Northern Fleet, the Pacific Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet, and the Baltic Fleet) and a flotilla (Caspian Sea). Apart from the nuclear-powered ballistic-missile and attack submarines, there has been little investment in naval assets. After decades of development, two new strategic submarines have been commissioned, with a third still undergoing trials. However, due to problems with the Bulava intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), they have not yet been equipped with nuclear arms. Russia has only one aircraft carrier, which has been beset with failures. It also has one heavy nuclear-powered missile cruiser; its sister ships are to be modernized and re-commissioned over the course of this decade, which would considerably enhance the navy's capabilities. Otherwise, modernization efforts are focused on frigates and

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Mistral-class helicopter carriers ordered from France. These efforts will increase the ability to project power.

Besides the army, the air force, and the navy, there are four other independent branches of the armed forces. The first of these are the Strategic Rocket Forces, which control the land-based nuclear ICBMs. The second are the elite Airborne Troops, which serve as a rapid deployment force. The approximately 45'000-strong force is structured into four air assault divisions and four air assault brigades as well as an airborne reconnaissance regiment. Third, up to ten brigades of special forces units were raised in 2013. These three service branches are directly subordinated to the president rather than the operational staffs. This increases their aptitude for flexible deployments, as can currently be seen on the Crimean Peninsula, where, according to reports, regiments of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division and the 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade have been deployed. Fourth, the Aerospace Defense Forces operate early-warning radar systems and satellite systems for identification of hostile missile launches. They are expected to be significantly expanded in the future. Fur-

thermore, a Cyber-Warfare Command is expected to be created in 2014.

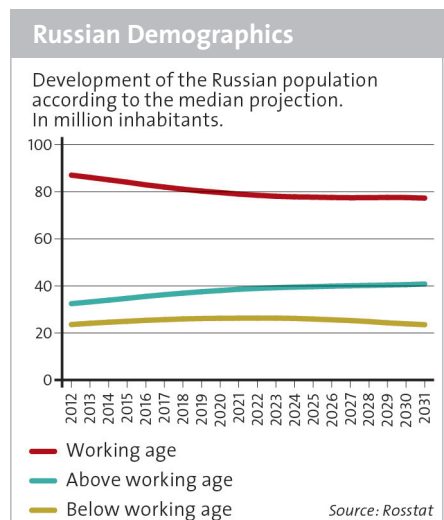
Problems with Professionalization

Among the core elements of the reform as it relates to personnel are professionalization, more autonomous leadership, and a tighter organizational culture. The Russian military has traditionally had a surfeit of officers. Under Serdyukov, the 335'000-strong officer corps was initially downsized, but then expanded once more after resistance and difficulties. He also eliminated the rank of *praporshchik* (warrant officer), but it was brought back in 2012 by the new Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu due to organizational problems.

These developments reflect difficulties in the transition from a mainly conscript army to the new armed forces, which rely mainly on volunteer soldiers. By 2020, it is envisaged that professional soldiers and NCOs will constitute the backbone (50 per cent) of the armed forces. Although the integration of contract soldiers is making rapid progress – the plan was, at least nominally, nearly fulfilled in 2013 with 60'000 new entrants and a total of 205'000 to 220'000 professionals – many problems remain: In 2013, 35'000 contract soldiers left the armed forces again. This indicates that many signed up for a three-year career mainly because of the better pay. Many commanders also deplore the bad health, lack of motivation, and rampant alcoholism among contract soldiers. Currently, many brigades are only at 60 to 80 per cent of their nominal strength.

Culturally, too, the military is not prepared for its role as employer. Contract soldiers have more rights than conscripts – officers cannot subject them to the usual harsh treatment. While contract soldiers are expected to take on increasingly demanding leadership tasks, their pay and living conditions are considerably worse than those of career officers. The concept of engaging soldiers on short-service contracts has thus not been a success so far, placing a question mark on the professionalization of the military.

The demographics also indicate a negative trend. By 2024, the working population will decline by at least 10 million. The numbers of 18- to 27-year-olds in particular will decline by 2023. While the birth rate in Russia is currently increasing, that is mainly due to the Muslim non-Slavic re-



gions. It is important to note another problem in this context – the dominance of ethnic Slavs in the military. Many Muslim applicants have already been turned back.

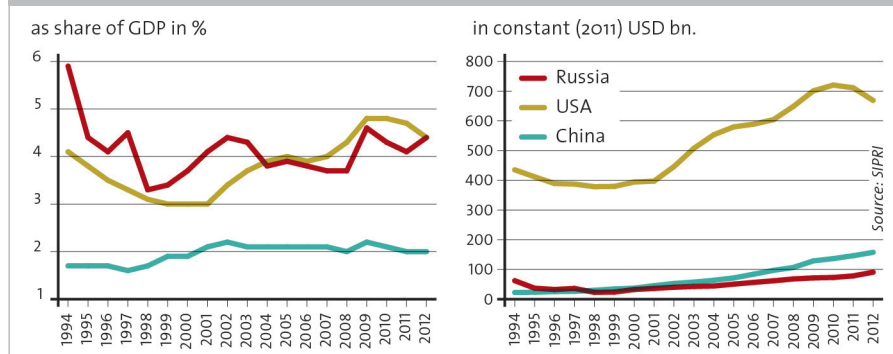
Moreover, the military continues to compete with many other state security organs, such as the Interior Ministry, which also has paramilitary units, or the intelligence services. Two per cent of the population work directly for a state security organ. Russia thus has a security apparatus proportionally more than twice the size of that of the US.

Stepping Up Procurement

Thanks to state procurement programs, the lion's share of military expenditures – about 60 per cent in 2013 – are spent not on personnel, but on procurement. By 2020, it is envisaged, 70 per cent of the troops will be equipped with “modern” weapons systems; currently, only 19 per cent are. “Modern” in this context refers to weapons that are no more than ten years old. To this end, the armaments program for 2010–2011 was increased to a volume of USD 630 billion. Another USD 100 billion are earmarked for developing the military-industrial complex.

The Kremlin's massive armaments program and its reform of the military-industrial complex also has significance in terms of industrial and social policy. The military industry employs two million workers; five per cent of the Russian population depend on it for their livelihood. In this way, the Kremlin is “solving” an issue in Soviet style: Funding for the military is once more taking on a central role in society. It is hoped that this will boost innovation and global

Military Expenditure, 1994–2012



competitiveness. Russia is already the second-largest arms exporter after the US, which it aims to overtake.

While Russia does have strong development programs for tactical missiles, submarines, and tactical aircraft (helicopters and fighter jets) and is a leader in air defense systems, it has significant shortcomings in other areas, including crucial deficits regarding information technology, radar technology, and high-precision weapons systems. In these areas, Russia depends on purchasing components, espionage, and technology transfers from Western companies. Under Defense Minister Shoigu, procurement was re-nationalized: Simple purchases of weapons systems from the West were stopped. At the same time, it was decided that no more Western machine tools would be used for the arms industry due to concerns over cyberattacks on the electronics. Instead, the technology transfer will be stepped up through cooperation with Western arms companies, and collaboration with emerging countries like India will be increased. This policy will push up costs and will not lead to the military being equipped with the best armaments products. For instances, there are significant delays in the delivery of a modern communications and reconnaissance system. Thus, Russia will continue to have deficits in waging “sixth-generation warfare”.

Another problem is the monopolistic structure of the industry, which is further aggravated by lack of transparency in procurement. Critics assume that at least 20 per cent of expenditures in procurement are used for other than the intended purposes. Bringing prototypes to serial production is frequently fraught with difficulties. High-tech components cannot be produced at consistent quality levels. Recurrent failures in complex weapons systems can be attributed to fluctuations in production quality rather than to design flaws. Furthermore, there are bottlenecks in production capacity, for example in aircraft production and shipbuilding. The plans to enhance military transport aviation can only be realized if capacity is expanded rapidly. Russia also depends on cooperation with Ukraine: So far, many motors for helicopters and aircraft as well as rockets have been produced in Ukraine. Russia lacks the know-how for producing many of the parts required. The current conflict is putting a strain on this cooperation and necessitates import substitutes, which entail great cost and delays.

The Effects of Remilitarization

Under Vladimir Putin, the modernization of Russia's armed forces has become a priority for the first time since 1991. For several years, considerable sums have been expended on this reform. However, challenges remain when it comes to technology and

organizational culture; and demographic problems are also still an issue. Moreover, the lagging economic output will exacerbate conflicts of objective between social and defense policy. Russia is very unlikely to achieve its aim of building a million-strong military that is capable of flexible deployment by 2020.

Within the framework of modernization, Russia is advancing the establishment of small, flexible elite units for deployment on its borders – as in the current crisis in Ukraine. These capabilities will allow it to exploit crisis in the region and to pursue further-reaching strategic goals. As the reform progresses and equipment is improved, the ability to win regional wars will also be enhanced. Only when it comes to the global projection of conventional military power will Russia still be lacking sufficient means.

Modernization will bring about considerable improvements of Russian military capabilities. The country can use its new-found military clout both for enforcing interests in its European neighborhood and to position itself as an attractive partner for new alliances in Asia, as indicated by closer cooperation and the augmentation of exercises between Russia and China as well as India. Modernization is accompanied by an expansion of the categories of challenges that may be legitimately be resolved by military force. For politicians in the West, the question is how to deal with this new assertive stance and Russia's improved military capabilities.

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