

Research Paper

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Russian Ground Forces Posture Towards the West



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Summary

- The loss of former satellites and significant Soviet territories as a consequence of the break-up of the USSR left Russia feeling unjustly dispossessed, humiliated and vulnerable to a West that in subsequent years came to be regarded once again as an enemy.
- Long neglected, the Russian military could neither contribute to a reassertion of ‘great power’ status, nor even guarantee the diminished country’s security. Under President Putin, however, a far-reaching and costly programme of military reform, rationalization and modernization has made the army formidable again, especially in Russia’s west and southwest. The military is again prepared for defence, and to help implement a revisionist programme.
- Even more important than qualitative upgrading is the army’s doctrinal modernization. It is readying itself conceptually for a spectrum of conflict from nuclear through limited conventional to ‘new generation’ war, in which the military component is only a part, and not necessarily the most important. Deception and dissimulation are essential elements of Russian management of conflict, especially in its (often decisive) initial period.
- Russia’s preference is not to telegraph, through its peacetime dispositions, possible wartime intentions that could provoke NATO counter-preparations. Thus, with the inevitable exception of in Kaliningrad *oblast*, major forces are not held threateningly close to the Baltic states. For Russia, the ongoing Ukrainian conflict necessitates an intimidatory forward deployment that allows for a rapid response in time of crisis. Similarly, the unrest characterizing the Caucasus region, and Russia’s hostility towards Georgia, require a forward military presence.
- Should a major conflict come with NATO, Russia expects to achieve military surprise – a force multiplier – and that operations will assume a fast-moving, manoeuvre character from the outset. Typically, engagements are likely to be clashes where both sides are on the move. This is the sort of warfare in which the Russian military believes it excels. The objective would be to fracture a hostile coalition in which some members have only limited stakes at risk.
- The new force structure emphasizes high readiness for short warning, possibly complex conflicts in former Soviet and satellite countries, hence the original stress on responsive and agile brigades. However, experience in Ukraine suggests that Russia must prepare for possibly prolonged operations, even ones potentially involving NATO. Larger-scale, longer, potentially nuclear conflict demands some return to more sustainable, hard-hitting divisional organization. Moreover, the number of operational-level headquarters in the west of Russia has grown from four to six armies. Their nuclear capability has been enhanced, and official statements suggest that the threshold for their use has lowered.
- Russia has evolved a coherent concept and force structure to prosecute ‘new generation’ war. It underscores its preparedness to fight despite its relative weakness in other than purely military terms. A consequently assertive foreign policy emanating from Moscow will carry with it the risk of war through miscalculation, even hubris. Is the Russian army able to fight and win against a peer competitor, let alone an enemy alliance? Its several evident weaknesses, some systemic, cast doubt on this proposition.

Introduction

There is currently much discussion, some of it informed, about whether or not Russia is now preparing for aggressive war in pursuit of expansionist objectives. Statistics are being deployed – not infrequently selectively, and generally relating to military expenditure – in support of various contentions. What is often lacking is much sense of historical perspective or understanding of how historical experience now shapes the Russian mindset. This paper attempts to shed some light on these areas, and to explain how Russia’s perception of the nature of future war helps to drive contemporary military policy and the structuring and deployment of ground forces. Under President Vladimir Putin, the Russian army is once again a major-league player, and it wants its possible adversaries to know it. This is not to suggest that Russia regards physical combat between the armed forces of states as the only, or even principal, method of waging war in the 21st century, as a glance at ‘new generation’ warfare will suggest. But this paper will concentrate on the nature of military reform as it impacts Russia’s ground forces. It will address the rationale underlying their peacetime dispositions, their evolving operational doctrine, and their consequent organizational structure.

Political context and military reform

To regard the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century¹ is not the exclusive preserve of its communist ideologues. Any Russian nationalist concerned with their country’s defence (not to mention its prestige and power) would think the same. In the First World War and its aftermath, Russia lost Finland, the Baltic states, Poland and Bessarabia, leaving vital economic and political centres perilously close to its western frontiers. Much of this territory was recovered prior to the German invasion of 1941, but, despite increased strategic depth, in that year the enemy reached the gates of Leningrad and Moscow, overran most of Ukraine and almost won the war. Having already lost its Warsaw Pact buffer, with the break-up of the USSR Russia lost the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and its three Caucasian and five Central Asian republics. NATO moved into the European part of the vacuum thus created, right up to the Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian borders, and is viewed by Russia as working to draw Georgia and Ukraine into its web.

President Putin – as a historically aware Russian nationalist – has never regarded the independence of Russia’s former provinces and republics as a serious and lasting proposition. While not looking to restore the USSR, he sees the Russia’s ‘near abroad’ as falling within its rightful sphere of influence and consequently enjoying only limited sovereignty. To the Russian eye, NATO and EU enlargements are simply land grabs in the guise of liberal principles. Furthermore, Putin feels acutely his country’s strategic vulnerability now that, under his leadership, Russia has ceased to be meekly subservient to what he regards as Western dominance. An attack from without would doubtless be preceded by, or coupled with, externally promoted subversion from within. His adversaries are believed to be keen on sponsoring further ‘colour revolution’ to produce regime change in Russia itself. Putin also regards the alienation of Russian lands in 1991 as a historic wrong that must, when possible, be put right. The Russian armed forces must be ready, always, to react to

¹ As characterized by President Putin in his televised ‘state of the nation’ address to the Federal Assembly on 25 April 2005.

sudden opportunities or threats to its controlling position in its ‘near abroad’ (as it did in 2008 in Georgia, and 2014 in Crimea and Donbas).

Russia perceives itself to be in a position of military weakness somewhat analogous to that of the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s. It is surrounded by enemies, especially in the West, and in that direction it once again lacks the strategic depth that can be traded for time. The principal compensatory means that another country might have chosen would possibly be political and diplomatic. These instruments of policy are, however, circumscribed by post-Soviet Russia’s renewed hostility to the West. This was first clearly evidenced in Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference,² and has latterly been aggravated by its involvement in Ukraine and the unwelcome light that this shines on other activities in the ‘near abroad’, not to mention the Russian intervention in Syria. Putin’s Russia is content to take a confrontational stance – not least, it would seem, for domestic political reasons.

From the early 1990s, the Russian military had suffered variously through government neglect, considerable popular hostility, corruption, and some refusal within the officer corps to face the need for change. Unsurprisingly, it put up a poor performance in the Georgian war of 2008. The Putin administration, encouraged by increasingly buoyant economic growth, embarked on a fast-paced, intensive programme of reform and modernization. Defence expenditure grew both in absolute terms and as a proportion of GDP, only levelling off in 2016 despite a worsening economic downturn which had become a full recession in 2015.³ The allocation to defence had been reduced to the equivalent of 4 per cent of GDP by 2017, and was forecast to stand at 3.5 per cent of GDP in both 2018 and 2019.⁴ There is little reason to believe that this level would be unsustainable throughout the realization of the State Armament Programme for 2018–27 – or GPV 2027 – provided the economy grows about at 1.5 per cent per year and the oil price does not drop below approximately \$40 per barrel.⁵ That this level of commitment precludes significant allocations for improvements in other critical areas such as education and public health is seemingly viewed within the Kremlin as a price worth paying.

Structural reform was the first, basic necessity in reinvigorating the military. In 2008 the Russian legacy force from the Soviet era amounted to 1,890 large units,⁶ most of which were of cadre form (i.e. held at skeleton manning in peacetime and requiring several weeks to flesh out with reservists in order to reach war establishment and receive the training necessary to operate with even minimal effectiveness on the battlefield). Post-reform, the army was reduced to 172 large units, partly by removing a layer of command and partly by eliminating cadre units from the order of

² President of Russia (2007), ‘Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy’, 10 February 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034> (accessed 14 Mar. 2018).

³ Tian, N., Fleurent, A., Wezeman, P. D. and Wezean, S., (2017), ‘Trends in world military expenditure, 2016’, SIPRI, April 2017, p. 6, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-world-military-expenditure-2016.pdf> (accessed 14 Mar. 2018).

⁴ Cooper, J. (2018, unpublished research note cited with the permission of the author), ‘Russian Defence Spending: clearing the media fog’, 4 May 2018, University of Birmingham.

⁵ Kofman, M. (2018), ‘The Durability of Russian Military Power: Moscow’s Prospects for Sustaining Direct Competition’ *CCW Russia Brief*, Issue 2, May 2018, <http://www.cew.ox.ac.uk/s/Russia-Brief-2-hmly.pdf> (accessed 14 September 2018).

See also Connolly, R. and Boulègue, M. (2018), *Russia’s New State Armament Programme: Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2027*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russia-s-new-state-armament-programme-implications-russian-armed-forces-and-military> (accessed 10 October 2018).

⁶ De Haas, M. (2011), *Russia’s military reforms: Victory after twenty years of failure?*, Clingendael paper no. 5, p. 25, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20111129_clingendaelpaper_mdehaas.pdf (accessed 14 Mar. 2018).

battle:⁷ all units are now supposed to be fully manned in peacetime and maintained in a permanent state of combat readiness. As a consequence of this restructuring, there was a large-scale reduction in the number of officers required: in 2008 there was a shortfall of 40,000; and in 2010 there was a surplus in the much smaller, rationalized army despite the elimination of graduate conscription of officers. This reduced army resulted in further savings, for instance with the number of officer training establishments being cut from 65 to 10.⁸ There were complementary reductions and rationalization in the hitherto cumbersome logistics system. Military command structures were also slimmed down and rationalized. The 16 Soviet-era military districts were reduced initially to six and subsequently – from 2010 – to four. These are now joint operational–strategic as well as administrative headquarters; there is also a fifth such command for the Arctic.⁹

In his recent paper assessing the likely durability of Russian military power, Michael Kofman asserts that an increase in armed forces personnel between 2011 and 2017, from some 700,000 to more than 900,000, was achieved despite a decline – arising from falling birth rates through the 1990s – in the overall number of 18-year-olds available for service at this time.¹⁰ Doubtless the process was aided by a crackdown on corruption in the Military Commissariat responsible for conscription, which saw exemptions on medical grounds fall substantially.¹¹ Recruitment of contract service personnel was also boosted by improved pay and conditions of service, together with a restoration of the prestige of the military. By 2017 there were said to be some 380,000 regular soldiers, more than half of the total, although Russian figures remain open to interpretation.¹²

The cost savings resulting from restructuring, combined with increased military spending, have enabled a growth in capability, especially in the western and southwestern strategic directions – the primary areas of strategic concern. In 2013 the Western and Southern Military Districts contained four army and two corps headquarters, two divisions and 15 motor-rifle/tank brigades. By mid-2017 there were six army and two corps headquarters, five divisions, and 17 or 18 manoeuvre brigades. The secondary importance of the vast Central and Eastern Military Districts is illustrated by the fact that in 2017 they contained only one division and 10 motor-rifle brigades.¹³ The airborne forces, which are high-command assets rather than subordinate to military districts, are in the process of increasing their establishment from under 40,000 personnel to around 60,000 by 2020.¹⁴ The increase in operational-level command entities will enhance Russian flexibility and sustainability at

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Grau, L. W. and Bartles, C. K. (2017), *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces*, Fort Leavenworth, KS, Foreign Military Studies Office, p. 31.

⁹ Ibid, Chapter 2.

¹⁰ Kofman (2018), 'The Durability of Russian Military Power'.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. Russia's Ministry of Defence gives the number as 384,000. See Office of the President of the Russian Federation (2017), 'Расширенное заседание коллегии Министерства обороны' [Extended session of the Defence Ministry Board], <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56472> (accessed 10 Oct. 2018).

¹³ Figures extrapolated from Sutyagin, I. and Bronk, J. (2017), *Russia's New Ground Forces: Capabilities, Limitations and Implications for International Security*, RUSI Whitehall Paper No. 89, Chapter III. The authors also point out that the Central and Eastern Districts are home to six army and one corps headquarters, creating the command infrastructure for considerable force expansion should this prove necessary. The Arctic operational-strategic command, a primarily air–sea theatre, has one corps headquarters and two, soon to be three, motor-rifle brigades.

¹⁴ Argumenty i Fakty (2015), 'ВДВ в ближайшие годы войдут в состав войск быстрого реагирования' [Airborne troops will become part of the rapid reaction forces in the coming years], 4 June 2015, http://www.aif.ru/society/army/vdv_v_blizhayshie_gody_voydut_v_sostav_voysk_bystrogo_reagirovaniya (accessed 10 Oct. 2018).

the critical operational level. The aim of modernizing 30 per cent of the armed forces' equipment by the end of 2015 was considerably exceeded, if Russian Ministry of Defence statistics are to be believed, despite the loss of important Ukrainian components and the impact of Western sanctions. The proportion actually achieved, according to Russia's Ministry of Defence, was 47 per cent by the end of 2015, and 59.5 per cent by the end of 2017.¹⁵ The stated intention now is to reach 70 per cent by 2020, and the defence ministry appears confident of achieving this goal ahead of time.¹⁶ This precedence given to defence in a period of continuing economic decline – and despite the effects of Western sanctions – suggests that Moscow is unlikely to ease its confrontational stance towards the West for the foreseeable future.¹⁷

Russia's adversarial posture *vis-à-vis* the West is the corollary of the country's sense of grievance over what it regards as its dismissive, even humiliating treatment since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its consequent revisionist predisposition. This necessarily carries with it a preparedness for armed conflict, or even a willingness to use its armed forces aggressively. The rearmament and reorganization currently under way is plainly not designed for a purely reactive, defensive posture. Nor would such a stance make military sense for a state that sees itself as being surrounded by enemies, shorn of its strategic depth and suffering a legacy of painful historical experience, and with ambitions to revise at least elements of the post-Cold War status quo. The Russian military is thus oriented towards offensive action, with an admixture of the defensive.

Russian thinking about future war

Russia's qualitative upgrading of its forces is an important aspect of its preparation for future war, but not the most important. As was the case for the Soviet Union in the 1930s, its doctrinal response to the latest revolution in military affairs will be the most significant development. Clearly, the Russian conceptualization of future war has moved from one of a clash of mass armies in which numbers will be a determining factor. There is now a blurring – never absent even in Soviet times – of the boundaries between war and peace. The new norm may well be what Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov describes as 'new generation' war¹⁸ (or ambiguous war, usually – albeit mistakenly – termed 'hybrid' in the West and, in Putin's narrative, practised by the USA and NATO in some former Soviet states). According to Gerasimov's article: 'In the 21st century, a tendency towards the elimination of the differences between the states of war and peace is becoming

¹⁵ For 2015 figures, see Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (2015), 'Тезисы доклада министра обороны Российской Федерации на расширенном заседании Коллегии Минобороны России' [Abstract of the report by the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation at the extended session of the Defence Ministry Board], https://function.mil.ru/files/morf/2015-12-11_MoD_board_extended_session_RUS.pdf (accessed 21 March 2019). For 2017 figures, see Office of the President of the Russian Federation (2017), 'Rasshirennoye zasedaniye kollegii Ministerstva oborony', <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56472> (accessed 21 March 2019).

¹⁶ The economics of Russian defence are dealt with in Cooper, J. (2016), 'The military dimension of a more Militant Russia', *Russian Journal of Economics*, 2(2), and Cooper, J. (2018), *The Russian State Armament Programme, 2018–2027*, Russian Studies 01/18, Rome: NATO Defence College.

¹⁷ Nor is defence against the internal threat neglected. Fear of internal order being actively subverted by other states spurred the creation of a new, 340,000-strong National Guard, equipped with armoured fighting vehicles and heavy weapons. Indeed, the allocation of the defence budget to 'power' ministries other than the Ministry of Defence in the State Armament Programme for 2018–27 has increased from 9 per cent previously to 14 per cent.

¹⁸ Gerasimov, V. (2013), 'Ценность науки в предвидении. Новые вызовы требуют переосмыслить формы и способы ведения боевых действий' [The Value of Science in Prediction. New challenges require rethinking the forms and methods of warfare], *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kur'yer*, 5 March 2013, <https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632> (accessed 14 Mar. 2018).

discernable. Wars are now not even declared but, having begun, are not going according to a pattern we are accustomed to.’ This new generation war should fall more surely into the Russian comfort zone than that of Western democracies; and, in any confrontation, it suits a weaker but politically more agile power. The historian Timothy Snyder argues in *The Road to Unfreedom* that Russia has long been practising information and influence operations and other non-kinetic forms of warfare against target states and groups in the West, often successfully.¹⁹ The Internet Research Agency in St Petersburg is not a military organization, but it is arguably more destructive of enemy determination and cohesion than most armed attacks could hope to be. Its actions are insidious and deniable, and thus run less danger of uniting enemies and leading to escalation.

In conditions of local war or armed conflict, ‘colour revolution’ or terrorism, mixed in with informational, cyber, economic, political, criminal and other indirect modes of attack, the cadre mobilization model of the Soviet army has become inappropriate. Moreover, the old system strained popular enthusiasm and support for both military and government. Today, the emphasis is on high combat readiness of an increasingly professionalized military, potent combat capabilities in the context of combined arms and joint operations, the ability to deploy rapidly anywhere as may be required, and the attainment of fast-acting, reliable command and control. There is an increased preparedness for limited, ideally plausibly deniable operations in support of limited political objectives. This is evidenced by the growth of the *spetsnaz* (special forces, often operating covertly), as well as of conventional airborne troops.²⁰ It also explains the attraction of the new phenomenon in Russia of private military contractors such as Wagner, which have been deployed in Donbas and, more recently, in Syria and (in a smaller way) in the Central African Republic. These characteristics, combined with flexibility and strategic mobility, must necessarily substitute for Soviet mass. Russia now boasts a credible military posture to back an assertive foreign policy. Its forces possess a range of capabilities that enable the state to deploy an appropriate scale and type of force in possibly complex operations to fulfil any requirements of policy.

Deployability, even if only to adjacent countries, poses a problem given Russia’s great size, relatively limited infrastructure and outdated administrative capacity, and as yet inadequate military command-and-control capabilities. Together, these factors slow things down. Some potential adversaries may well have the potential to act faster than Russia. This combines with relative weakness to put a premium on pre-emption in order to disrupt the enemy’s command and control and decision-making, throw it into confusion and in consequence seize the initiative. The employment of Russian forces will be predicated on the achievement of surprise through a comprehensive *maskirovka* effort,²¹ quite probably extending over a considerable period of time. This, of course, is not a recent idea. Restating it in 2013, Gerasimov quoted approvingly the 1930s’ theorist Georgy Isserson’s assertion: ‘Mobilization and concentration is not part of the period after

¹⁹ Snyder, T. (2018), *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, London: The Bodley Head. In this book, the author expands on and reinforces the case made in his previous work *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017, London: The Bodley Head).

²⁰ In 2013 these totalled seven brigades, one regiment and five battalions; and it was planned to expand by 2018 to eight brigades, one regiment, 16 battalions and 59 companies. These statistics, and those for the strength of the Western and Southern Military Districts, are taken from Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, chapters II and III.

²¹ *Maskirovka* is a single, all-embracing concept that includes concealment and camouflage, deception and disinformation, counter-reconnaissance and security to conceal the disposition and activities of friendly troops and mislead the enemy with regard to their grouping and intentions.

the onset of war ... but rather unnoticed, proceeds long before that.’²² Ideally, therefore, as in Donbas in 2014, Russia’s opponents would not be able to tell just when posturing and threats had morphed into aggression – or even prove that this had actually happened.

Peacetime orders of battle, force structures, deployments and exercise activity can reveal a lot about wartime intentions. During the Cold War, for instance, the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG, later the Western Group of Forces – WGF) was plainly intended to conduct an offensive into at least West Germany and the Low Countries, and NATO deployed what it hoped would be an adequate defence in response. Today, by and large, Russia would prefer not to telegraph its intentions so clearly. It has revisionist ambitions, and is actually engaged both in a ‘re-imperialization’ project and in efforts to undermine its enemies, but the military is only one of several instruments to be utilized in these enterprises – and one to which the Kremlin does not wish to draw undue attention.²³ If significant forces were to be permanently garrisoned in close proximity to Estonia, Latvia or even Belarus, this would strengthen the case of NATO ‘hawks’ demanding a forward deployment for deterrence purposes against Russia. Thus, most of the forces based in the Western Military District are garrisoned in its depth, especially around Moscow, rather than towards the frontiers. Kaliningrad oblast provides an inevitable exception. Its isolation, and its strategically significant position as an advanced *place d’armes*, require that it be substantially garrisoned, including with surface-to-surface and air-defence missiles.

There is, of course, another interpretation of the paucity of forward-deployed forces in the Western Military District. If the Belarusian armed forces are regarded as effectively an extension of that district, then there is no need for Russian forces to be stationed further to the west to enable them to intervene in the Baltic states and/or Poland with minimal delay in mobilization, concentration and deployment. This, however, is to assume that Belarus will always be a pliant tool of the Kremlin – an assumption that was made about Ukraine until the unexpected removal of Viktor Yanukovich in early 2014. While Moscow sees its relationship with Minsk as quasi-imperial, President Alyaksandr Lukashenko appears to regard it as merely transactional. Lukashenko quite frequently flirts with the West, and makes a point of showing himself not to be Putin’s poodle.

The situation is different further south. Until 2014, only in the North Caucasus were substantial forces maintained in what might be considered threatening proximity to the frontier, the likely purpose being to intimidate the former Soviet states of the Transcaucasus – above all Georgia – and indeed troublesome and potentially separatist areas of the Russian North Caucasus. Such forward-deployed elements also provided for a scenario in which intimidation ceased to be effective and action became necessary and urgent. As the Ukrainian crisis escalated, Russian forces were moved close to that border too, with some being actually committed – supposedly unattributably – to the struggle for Donbas. When, with Minsk II, that conflict essentially became a stalemate, in addition

²² Gerasimov (2013), ‘Ценность науки в предвидении’ [The Value of Science in Prediction].

²³ ‘Re-imperialization’ is the term used by Agnia Grigas in *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (2016, Newhaven, CT, and London: Yale University Press). At the same time, Russia is actively engaged in non-military aspects of ‘new generation’ war with its adversaries in a sustained effort to undermine the stability of several Western states and the cohesion of NATO and the EU. Anton Shekhovtsov investigates both the strategy and the tactics pursued in a political aspect of this endeavour in *Russia and the Western Far Right* (2018, Abingdon: Routledge). In *The Vory – Russia’s Super Mafia* (2018, Newhaven, CT, and London, Yale University Press), chapters 12–16, Mark Galeotti looks at state co-option of organized crime to achieve economic and political ends. Timothy Snyder also considers the evolution of Russia’s information war in *The Road to Unfreedom* (2018).

to the forces remaining in Ukraine several formations took up permanent station in an arc from Klinty (Bryansk oblast) in the north to Crimea in the south.²⁴ Clearly, the purpose is intimidatory, and to provide for a swift transition to military action if it is again required. The conflict with Ukraine, arguably an existential issue for Russia, could quickly escalate into war – quite possibly involving Western powers. It thus exercises a major influence on Russian political and military thinking.

During the Cold War, had any confrontation between the Warsaw Pact and NATO escalated into active conflict, even a week or so into the process of mobilization, concentration and deployment NATO could have achieved a density of defence that would have required a Soviet breakthrough operation. As in the Great Patriotic War, such an undertaking would have been time-consuming, expensive, and perhaps uncertain of success. It might have proved impossible for Soviet forces to gain operational momentum, and the likelihood of NATO resorting to use of nuclear weapons – and their ability to do so – would have grown with each day that passed. The Soviets therefore concluded that they had substantially to have won in the initial period of war – i.e. while the West had not yet completed its mobilization, concentration and deployment. With surprise and pre-emption achieved, and with the defensive front uncompleted, Moscow believed that its forces would be able to conduct high-tempo operational manoeuvre from the outset. Led by tactical forward detachments and operational manoeuvre groups at the higher level, they would be able to exploit gaps and weak spots and achieve high rates of advance into the enemy's depth, breaking up the organization, command and control, and logistic support of defending formations and perhaps precluding NATO resort to operational–tactical nuclear weapons. These concepts are as relevant today as they were 30 years ago. The difference is that they are now easier to realize than in a less technologically advanced era when force densities were likely to be higher.

Contemporary conditions obviate the need for such a breakthrough, and generating operational manoeuvre is not a problem. Force levels have shrunk in the post-Cold War era, and the likely area of operations has grown so much that the ratio of forces to space – even taking into account massive increases in firepower – makes it impossible to create a continuous front. Nor do even elaborate field fortifications provide the force multiplier for the NATO defender that they once did: precision and thermobaric weapons – large and small – have combined with modern obstacle-clearing methods to greatly lower their effectiveness. Forces can transition from their peacetime garrisons to assume their allotted place in an offensive without the need for large-scale, obvious and vulnerable concentrations. The key to success will, in Russia's view, lie in surprise, and in the high-combat readiness and high mobility that will both enable and capitalize on surprise.²⁵

The conventional aspect of future war between Russia and NATO will be characterized by manoeuvre from the outset. There will be no ponderous massing of formations using vast quantities of artillery to gnaw methodically through a dense, well-organized and balanced defence. Instead, fewer formations will converge from dispersed locations on an inevitably thinner, less robust

²⁴ TSN (2016), 'Росія стягує війська до північних кордонів України' [Russia draws troops to the northern borders of Ukraine], 10 June 2016, <https://tsn.ua/ukrayina/rosiya-styaguje-viyska-do-pivnichnih-kordoniv-ukrayini-670077.html> (accessed 14 Mar. 2018).

²⁵ Contrary to the opinions of many defence and intelligence experts, modern methods of intelligence gathering and surveillance have not made surprise unattainable in contemporary conditions. See Dick, C. J. (2016), *From Defeat to Victory: The Eastern Front, Summer 1944*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, pp. 270–72.

defence, probably on more numerous axes. Now, their attacks will be prepared by concentrations on critical targets executed by reconnaissance-fire and reconnaissance-strike complexes at, respectively, the tactical and operational levels.²⁶ These combine precision as well as conventional massed fire from widely spread long-range missile, multiple rocket and artillery units. The manoeuvre units will then be able to attack from the line of march, that is to say without being involved in traditional, time-consuming Western-style battle preparation. The typical form of combat will be the meeting battle and engagement (respectively at tactical and operational levels) where the two sides clash on the move, both intent on advancing to achieve their assigned goals and thus neither having the advantage of choosing the ground on which to fight.

Soviet military theory taught that superior numbers were not required for success in such circumstances. What would bring victory was beating the enemy to the punch, and thereafter acting within its appreciation–decision–action cycle. The Russian military sees this as its forte. Even more than in the past, the aim of operations is likely to be the destruction of the enemy’s main groupings, as often there will be no vital terrain objectives that, if secured, would put the opponent at a fatal disadvantage. The aim will be to convince selected enemy states that, for them, war with Russia is no longer a worthwhile policy, thus breaking up a hostile coalition. Russia’s frequently stated preparedness to use operational–tactical nuclear weapons, underlined by force structuring, will reinforce this message. Resulting from successful experience in 1943–45 and sound subsequent doctrinal development, the Russians have confidence in their superior ability to conduct manoeuvre warfare. They are investing heavily in creating the necessary capabilities to realize the demands of theory in practice.

Reorganizing Russian formations to meet the demands of the future

Changing perceptions of strategic interests combine with changing perceptions of the nature of future war to produce adjustments in force posture. They also require reorganization of force structures according to the different demands of likely future conflicts. The army’s cadre-mobilization model suited a Soviet Union that anticipated an existential struggle with NATO that would require harnessing all the resources of the state and society to achieve victory. The much-diminished Russia that emerged from the collapse of the USSR had more modest ambitions: preventing further disintegration (the purpose of the two Chechen wars); and maintaining dominant influence in former Soviet republics (the rationale behind the war with Georgia). The impetus for military reform came from the army’s poor showing in those conflicts. The post-2008 remodelling of the ground forces reflected the new priority: the creation of high-readiness forces

²⁶ RFCs and RSCs were first discussed by Marshal N. V. Ogarkov in the 1980s. He envisaged the intimate combination of long-range, real-time ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) systems such as satellites, drones and *spetsnaz* with highly accurate and/or area fires, precision-guided (e.g. through GLONASS, the Russian version of GPS) and coordinated by automated command-and-control systems. The aim was to ensure that important targets, even where small and mobile, would be engaged within minutes of their detection. This requires powerful computer assistance at every stage of the process from the detection of the enemy, through the decision-making process, prioritizing targets and allocating appropriate means of engagement, to the execution of strikes. However, the technological gap between the USSR in its final two decades and the US in particular – a gap that the chaos of the first post-Soviet decade did nothing to close – meant that Russia lagged behind.

capable of reacting within hours to the short-notice demands that may result from an unpredictable geopolitical environment.

The reforms introduced by Anatoliy Serdyukov (Russia's defence minister in 2007–12) envisaged the elimination, or at least downgrading, of the divisional level of command. As a relatively large and cumbersome formation, a Soviet-style ground forces division required considerable time and resources to move long distances – more than a fast-developing crisis might allow. Henceforward, the rapid-reaction forces would rely on two elements. The first comprised the airborne (actually, mostly air-assault) troops whose utility was emphasized by their successful employment in Ukraine. The four airborne and air-assault divisions, currently comprising two manoeuvre regiments apiece, are each in the process of forming an additional regiment (eventually making 12 regiments in total); in addition, there are two air-assault brigades. The manpower establishment now aimed for is 60,000 by around 2020, an increase of 60 per cent, or of nearly 100 per cent in the case of the *spetsnaz* element. They are also to be re-equipped with better-armed airborne combat vehicles and reinforced by permanently assigned tank units and increased combat support to bolster their capabilities in conventional conflicts.²⁷ The second consists of modular ground forces brigades containing usually four of the basic building blocks of these high-readiness forces – the battalion tactical group (BTG). Many BTGs are held at (theoretically) two hours' notice to move. In early 2016 there were 65 of these, approximately one per brigade (though this figure includes all those fully manned by professional soldiers),²⁸ and by 2018 there were to be 125.²⁹ Together, the airborne, acting in conjunction with an appropriate number of manoeuvre brigades, should be able to deal with potentially short-warning and short-duration, possibly complex and certainly decisive operations in the 'near abroad' before a defence could be properly prepared, much less before outside powers become involved. They were – and are – geared to conventional, possibly high-end war fighting rather than the peacekeeping and counter-insurgency operations that have preoccupied Western powers for the last two decades.

The new brigade, typically with four organic manoeuvre BTGs, superficially resembles the Soviet regiment with its three motor-rifle and one tank battalions (vice versa in tank units). In fact, the brigade is considerably stronger as it possesses combat and service support resources that are almost of divisional scale. The new motor-rifle brigade has two self-propelled and one multiple-rocket-launcher battalions, two air-defence battalions, and battalions each of reconnaissance, anti-tank and engineer troops, and electronic warfare, UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle, popularly known as drone) and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear) companies.³⁰ This reflects the diminishing role of tanks and infantry in determining combat outcomes through direct-fire engagements. Increasingly, actions are being decided by the manoeuvre of indirect fire concentrations and precision strikes delivered by reconnaissance-fire and reconnaissance-strike

²⁷ Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), *Russia's New Ground Forces*, pp. 50–52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Soyustov, A. (2018), 'Учения «Восток-2018»: крупнейшие маневры на постсоветском пространстве с 1981 года' [Vostok-2018 exercises: The largest manoeuvres in the former Soviet space since 1981], Russian Federal News Agency, 7 September 2018, <https://riafan.ru/1096935-ucheniya-vostok-2018-krupneishie-manevry-na-postsovetskom-prostranstve-s-1981-goda> (accessed 10 Oct. 2018).

³⁰ Grau and Bartles (2017), *The Russian Way of War*, p 31.

complexes.³¹ The tank and motor-rifle troops are employed to complete the destruction of the enemy and exploit into its depth to decisive effect.

Capable of autonomous operations, such a brigade would deploy four BTGs supported as deemed necessary to accomplish the mission by the other brigade assets, supplemented on critical axes by others from higher level. Such minor formations, by virtue of their small size, have the great merit of being agile and speedily deployable. They enable the army to react quickly in unexpected crises and are adequate for operations in the 'near abroad' or in other neighbouring countries where the opposition is likely to be neither as numerous nor as combat-effective as the Russian forces. On the other hand, as experience in Ukraine has indicated, the span of command and control can overstretch the brigade headquarters.

There was much opposition to the reforms within the Russian military and defence industries, which ultimately contributed to the dismissal, in late 2012, of both Serdyukov and his Chief of the General Staff, Nikolay Makarov. Subsequently, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its efforts to change the geopolitical orientation of the rest of Ukraine began to exercise a profound influence on the army. As already touched on, the conflict fixed a substantial proportion of Russian ground forces in geographical locations that would enable their rapid advance into Ukraine to deal with any outside intervention in the event of escalation. It also accelerated changes in force structure. It demonstrated that, while brigades, and their subordinate BTGs, are well suited to rapid response where policy requires the conduct of limited operations in low-level armed confrontations or regional conflicts, they were not going to meet the demands of prolonged, sometimes intense combat, let alone those of major war.

Heightened confrontation with NATO means the possibility of large-scale, conventional manoeuvre warfare, constantly under conditions of possible escalation to nuclear use. This requires at least a number of minor formations that are harder hitting and more sustainable in the face of serious casualties. This has led to the revival of the division as an important element of operational manoeuvre. In 2013 there were just two divisions left in the force structure. By the end of 2017 there were three full-sized divisions, with two more being formed – each by putting together two brigades, one building up from one brigade and one started essentially from scratch. Of these, four are in the Western Military District, two in the Southern and one in the Central. In future, the order of battle will comprise a mix of divisions and self-sufficient brigades to preserve balanced groupings capable of fulfilling different missions.³² It is, however, too early to be sure what the typical 'new-look' tank or motor-rifle division will look like, though it is unlikely to be as relatively cumbersome as its Soviet predecessor. Will it comprise three manoeuvre units (i.e. regiments) or four, and what will be the composition of units? What level of organic combat and service support will it enjoy, and to what extent will it be reliant on augmentation from major formation resources? Whatever the

³¹ Marshall Ogarkov's vision has now been realized. Russian progress in the interlinked fields of C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) has resulted in RFCs and RSCs being used successfully in Donbas and Syria. The lessons learned are resulting in improved systems and procedures, and have informed the State Armament Programme for 2018–27. See Adamsky, D (2018), *Moscow's Syria Campaign: Russian lessons for the Art of Strategy*, Russie.NeiVisions, 109, Paris: Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri).

³² Interview with Colonel-General Oleg Salyukov, Commander-in-Chief Ground Forces, in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 7 March 2018. In the interview, the general was not asked about rumours that a further two brigades in the Southern Military District would also be expanded to divisions.

answer to these questions may be, it is plain that the possibilities of an escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, and/or a major contingency in the Caucasus, are being taken seriously.

It is likely that the revival of the divisional level was intended to send a signal to possible enemies – for instance as part of a reaction to NATO forward-deploying ‘tripwire’ units into the Baltic states in response to actions in Ukraine – that Russia is back in the ‘big league’ of serious military players, and is prepared to use military force if necessary to achieve its goals and retain what it regards as by rights its territory and influence. There is, however, much more to this reorganization than political messaging. Substantial investment is being made – despite the economy’s current weak rate of growth – to build up the breadth and depth of combat capability that a major, high-end war would require. To be effective, groups of divisions and brigades must be organized and controlled by an operational-level headquarters. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, the Western and Southern military districts fielded four armies and two smaller corps. They had each added another army headquarters by late 2014 and early 2017 respectively. This increase will allow for a possible expansion of force levels in the west, and at the same time build in a prudent degree of redundancy. Of course, an army headquarters alone is insufficient to add significantly to theatre capabilities. It must also be able to reinforce the efforts of its minor formations on important axes with substantial levels of combat and service support. A full army set comprises most or all of the following assets: a command and control brigade; reconnaissance, surface-to-surface missile, artillery, rocket artillery, air defence and logistics brigades; and *spetsnaz*, engineer, bridging, electronic warfare, CBRN and helicopter regiments. Much of the equipment in such units is more powerful and longer range than that held in minor formations. The army commander will mass elements – or their effects in the case of strikes – on his chosen axis or axes of main effort to enable the advance of his minor formations in accordance with his concept of operations.³³

Of course, the forces deployed initially in an intervention or local conflict may prove inadequate, or a situation may develop unfavourably as did that in Donbas in 2014. This may require the deployment of further ready forces. Even so, there is the possibility that the forces committed cannot achieve the required end state and still more are required. Russia’s military reform has anticipated this eventuality. Five dedicated storage and maintenance bases have been established in the Western Military District, and another one in the Southern Military District (and a further 15 in the Central and Eastern districts). These, similar to the US Army’s POMCUS (Prepositioning Of Materiel Configured in Unit Sets), contain pre-positioned, properly maintained brigade-level assets, and 2.5 units of fire for all equipments. Troops from elsewhere in Russia can be flown in to activate the kit, leaving their organic equipment behind. Doctrine requires that such brigades be ready to take the field within 24 hours. The airlifting of significant numbers is regularly practised by Military Transport Aviation, which is capable of transporting the personnel of up to five motor-rifle brigades in a single lift. Further expansion of air transport is also planned once current procurement problems have been overcome.³⁴

³³ Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, p. 43, and details fleshed out throughout Part II. Currently, only 58 Army in the Southern Military District is assessed as holding a full army set.

³⁴ The logistics and air transport capabilities in support of rapid-reaction forces are described in Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), *Russia’s New Ground Forces*, pp. 16–22.

Any conventional conflict that involves – or potentially involves – NATO carries with it a danger of escalation, growing with time, to the nuclear dimension. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union hoped to minimize the threat by advancing so rapidly and so deeply that enemy tactical nuclear systems would be progressively destroyed or kept on the move, and their logistic support and command and control disrupted. They expected, moreover, that opposing forces would become so intermingled as to make targeting problematic. The USSR's confidence in success was not, however, high enough to outweigh its fear of the catastrophic consequences of being mistaken. The Soviet army trained seriously for theatre nuclear conflict (arguably more so than did NATO), but awareness that its likely outcomes would be to precipitate the demise of the USSR militated against risk-taking. It is far from clear that a similar constraint applies today. Hints are dropped about Russia's preparedness to resort to nuclear use in the event of major armed conflict. Some Western commentators and officials interpret these, and other statements taken out of context, in alarmist ways – including touting the now prevalent idea that Russia inclines to a new 'escalate to de-escalate' concept.³⁵ This may be more a case of perception management on Russia's part than actual intent. What is clear is that the army's force posture now suggests that an improved capability could be used to convert words into deeds. At the strategic level, ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) and SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile) forces have been modernized to reinforce the credibility of Russia's deterrent posture.

At the operational level, the old nuclear delivery systems, principally the Scud and SS-21 surface-to-surface missiles, have been phased out as too inaccurate or too short-range. The ground forces now field 11 brigades each of 12 Iskander-M, a very accurate missile with a range of 400–500 km and capable of delivering a conventional, nuclear or fuel-air warhead.³⁶ Each army has a subordinate missile brigade. Operational-level commanders can mass nuclear or precision and/or thermobaric (fuel-air) strikes on chosen critical targets in support of their plans of manoeuvre; and these can of course be supplemented where required by air- and sea-delivered missiles. Each army also possesses a CBRN defence regiment, and each military district a CBRN defence brigade. These units have an offensive function, being responsible for flame and thermobaric weapons and the handling of chemical munitions, and an offensive/defensive role in generating bispectral smoke and aerosol screens to shield important units and areas from enemy observation. Their principal role, however, is the detection and evaluation of chemical, biological and radiological contamination, and subsequent decontamination of affected troops and equipment. Why would Russia invest considerable resources in creating offensive and defensive capabilities for the conduct of nuclear war if it was not prepared, or even did not intend, to do so? Is this part of a far-sighted, comprehensive preparation for war, or is it part of an influence operation to deter and intimidate potential enemies?

³⁵ A collection of such quotations can be found in Schneider, M. B. (2017), 'Russian Nuclear Weapons Policy', RealClear Defense, http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/04/28/russian_nuclear_weapons_policy_111261.html (accessed 5 May 2018).

³⁶ Cooper (2018), *The Russian State Armament Programme, 2018 – 2027*, p 11.

Conclusions

Russia has evolved a coherent concept and organization for the conduct of new-generation war. Many aspects of these have been and are being tested in Ukraine and in Syria, with useful lessons learned.³⁷ Russia probably perceives itself as being superior to most, or all, NATO members at least in the many-faceted non-military aspects of its conduct. This may give Moscow the confidence to risk war with the potentially – or even actually – militarily stronger coalition. Axiomatically, an alliance such as NATO is militarily less than the sum of its parts. Inevitably, allies have more or less divergent aims and different levels of devotion to the cause. They endeavour to shift the heaviest burdens on to the shoulders of others. They have differing perceptions of justifiable risk, and differing levels of preparedness for pain. Strategy becomes a series of compromises between competing and/or conflicting interests that threatens indecision. Thus, too much can be made of the fact that that Russia's conventional potential strength is limited, given a GDP in 2016 estimated by the World Bank at about half that of the UK and slightly less than that of the state of New York.³⁸ In any contest, the weaker party is not the one with most to lose, but the one most afraid of losses. Self-assurance may well contribute to the assertion of a foreign policy that may seem not merely threatening, but foolhardy to some external observers. The risk of war resulting from miscalculation and/or hubris in assessing the opposition is now much greater than it was in the Cold War era.

What Russia's political leadership and military high command intend, and believe, is one matter. What its capabilities actually are is another. The command-and-control system is probably inadequate to meet the demands of future war. Most of the army's equipment is still, essentially, legacy kit from the Soviet era which is being modernized but not yet replaced by a new generation: to address this will take some time and investment that may be unaffordable without damage to the economy and, possibly, to popular support for the government.³⁹ A number of questions remain, moreover. Is, for example, the latest materiel qualitatively comparable with that of the US – or even, in some critical areas, of other Western powers? Russia currently lags behind in many high-tech areas where qualitative superiority can potentially be decisive, such as digital command-and-control systems to enable network-centric operations.⁴⁰ There are immediate manpower difficulties, too, with the expansion of the force structure not having been fully matched by increases in personnel numbers. Many non-elite units and formations are currently undermanned, casting doubt on their high readiness. Indeed, one estimate, using Russian figures, suggests that the ground forces as a whole are 19 per cent short of their theoretical composition.⁴¹ This should not be a longer-term problem, however, as the rising birth rate year-on-year from 1999–2015 can be expected to ensure the supply of manpower from a larger recruitment pool into the 2030s.⁴² But there must be doubts as to whether Russian military personnel, now and into the future, will be up to meeting the demands of doctrine. The almost half who are one-year conscripts will certainly not

³⁷ For many examples, see Adamsky (2018), *Moscow's Syria Campaign*.

³⁸ World Bank Development Indicators, retrieved 1 July 2017; and for the comparison with the UK, using the US Bureau of Economic Analysis estimate, retrieved 8 December 2017.

³⁹ See Connolly, R. and Boulègue, M. (2018), *Russia's New State Armament Programme*.

⁴⁰ In *Russia's New Ground Forces* (2017), pp. 85–88, Sutyagin and Bronk cite numerous Russian articles from the military-industrial sector that illustrate the degree of dependence of defence industries on imports of modern Western technologies.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–137.

⁴² Kofman (2018), 'The Durability of Russian Military Power'.

be, and there are grounds for questioning whether much of the professional contingent is of the calibre, training standards and flexibility required against a first-class enemy.

In its time of trial in 1941, the Red Army's practice fell disastrously short of theory – and the theory itself proved to contain significant errors and weaknesses. Will its successor fare better?

On the other hand, how capable will NATO militaries, which to varying degrees have neglected high-end warfare for decades, and which in most cases have been hollowed out to save money, prove to be when put to an unexpected test? Even more critically, will its members now stand together in crisis, let alone find the will – and the money – to rebuild an effective deterrent in peacetime? At present, there are plenty of reasons for doubt. Let us hope we do not need to find out the answers.

About the author

Charles Dick has more than 40 years' expertise in the workings of the Soviet and Russian military, and the development of the theory and practice of military operational art, first as an intelligence officer, and subsequently as a senior lecturer – and then head – of the Soviet (later Conflict) Studies Research Centre. He is the author of a comparative two-volume study of the Anglo-American and Soviet conduct of operations in the summer of 1944: *From Victory to Stalemate* and *From Defeat to Victory*, published in 2016 by the University Press of Kansas.

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Cover image: A BAT-2 armoured tracklayer during a military exercise by Russian Army engineer units at the Borodinovka training ground, Rostov-on-Don, on 1 February 2019.

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