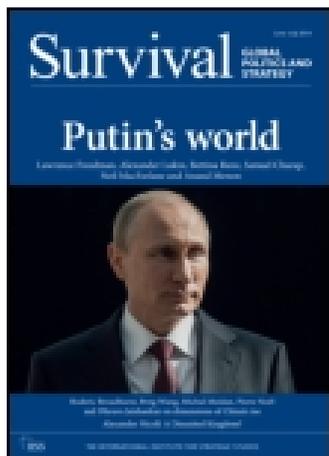


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Russian Military Capabilities after 20 Years of Reform

Bettina Renz

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the leaders of the Russian Federation faced the unenviable task of creating national armed forces using what was left of the Soviet military. Plans to provide 'traditional' defence and to meet future challenges were considered as early as 1992, leading to a string of reform programmes over the next two decades. Such efforts were closely observed by analysts in the West and Russia, who documented the drawn-out process in a large body of literature.¹ The assessments provided in the bulk of these works were almost unanimous: the reforms had failed, leaving the Russian armed forces 'impoverished, demoralized and largely ineffective', 'woefully inadequate to address the country's security threats' and standing 'perilously close to ruin'.²

During the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, the reforms were seen as botched jobs that merely reduced troop numbers, essentially leaving Russia with a smaller version of a Soviet-style, mass-conscription army. The latest push for change, announced in the wake of the country's 2008 war with Georgia, during which the performance of the Russian military was widely criticised, met with a warmer reception, at least initially.³ It envisaged a comprehensive shift away from low-tech to high-tech; from conscription to professionalism; and from mass to mobility. Some structural changes, such as the transition from divisions to brigades and the streamlining of

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central command, were executed with impressive speed, raising expectations that Russia was finally on its way to acquiring a 'modern' military. As time went on, however, observers noted a range of problems that, in their eyes, dampened the prospect of ultimate success. The Russian defence industry remained unable to produce advanced equipment. The possibility of ending conscription and moving towards an all-volunteer force seemed to be as remote as ever. Moreover, the 2010 military doctrine continued to emphasise mobilisation, instead of focusing on permanent readiness and rapid reaction. When Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov was replaced by Sergei Shoigu – a long-standing ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin – in November 2012, some experts argued that the 2008 reforms were in effect 'dead'.⁴

Events in Crimea have prompted much speculation about Russian military strength. Although the removal of beleaguered Ukrainian army units there only casts light on some of Russia's broader capabilities, the efficiency with which its forces have assumed control is hard to reconcile with the image of an inadequate military close to collapse. Even without this limited, if high-profile, operational success, there is evidence that the alleged failures of Russian military reforms have never been clear-cut. To some extent, this is because the change that has occurred since the end of the Cold War has been underestimated. More importantly, many negative assessments of Russian capabilities have resulted from flawed assumptions about the military requirements of contemporary Russia. Analysts have ignored the country's specific historical, political and strategic context, and failed to account for international debates on the utility of military force.

This essay reconsiders four purported failures in Russia's military reforms: the country's inability to transform its armed forces into an ideal modern military; its lack of advanced technology, resulting from the limitations of its defence industry; its reliance on conscription rather than a 'professional' military; and its maintenance of mass-mobilisation capabilities at the expense of rapid reaction and permanent readiness. Despite claims to the contrary, Russia is much closer to having the military it needs than has often been suggested.

The myth of the 'modern' military

Until recently, many analysts wrongly assumed that it was obvious what kind of army Russia needed. Their arguments were often based on the idea that military reforms in Russia were, or at least ought to be, aimed at the establishment of ideal modern, even Western, armed forces. In a 2004 article, Alexander Golts and Tonya Putnam questioned the Russian military's resistance to 'efforts to change their structure and character in accordance with institutional arrangements operative in Western liberal democracies'. In the authors' view, the failure of reforms was at least in part due to the fact that 'Russia's military elite has not acted forcefully to ensure military restructuring along Western lines'.⁵ Similarly, a volume on Russian military politics published by the US Strategic Studies Institute in 2011 observed that 'there were no indications that Russia was moving towards a model of Western-style modern forces'.⁶ Some analysts studying Serdyukov's 2008 reforms assumed that their aim was to establish 'a professional army of the Western model and "permanent readiness"' or even one 'designed to make the Russian Armed Forces look more like the United States/West'.⁷ Proponents of reform in Russia have often used buzzwords common in the West, as demonstrated by the proliferation of references to 'network-centric warfare' among Russian military leaders in recent years.⁸ But such similarities in the discourse should not come as a surprise, as the reforms have not occurred in a vacuum and East–West conceptual interaction in military thinking is nothing new.⁹

It was problematic for several reasons to assume that the Russian military sought to make improvements using a Western model of modern armed forces. Similarities in discussions and policies do not equate to Russia explicitly remodelling its military along Western lines (and, unsurprisingly, this has been reflected in Russian military doctrines and policies). More importantly, it is wrong to assume that there is an ideal type of modern military, or at least a widely accepted definition of what armed forces fit for the twenty-first century should look like.

The lack of a clear vision for the direction of the Russian military was often portrayed as a major reason for the failure of reforms. A study of doctrinal developments from 2010 noted that 'the political leadership could or

would not decide in which way military reforms were to go, either towards smaller, conventional, professional, high-tech, expeditionary forces ... or to continue with large but old-fashioned conventional forces together with modernized nuclear strategic-deterrent forces.¹⁰ This perceived lack of logic was often ascribed to a dichotomy of views. On one side were predominantly civilian proponents of reform, who wished to move the Russian armed forces along a clearly defined path of transformation. On the other were conservative generals stuck in the Cold War and set on preserving the status quo: 'the problem is rooted in a fundamental conflict of interest between the government (that needs to tailor defence according to the international security environment) ... and the General Staff (which does not want to part with its massive army)'.¹¹ Such explanations were too simplistic. They did not adequately reflect the complex challenge of matching Russia's military capabilities with its strategic context and vision. Even a cursory look at the international debate on contemporary war and armed forces suggests that it is hard to define success in military reform, and not only in Russia. Moscow's choices throughout the post-Soviet era have not only been determined by considerations of military effectiveness, but constrained by a range of domestic factors, including historical, political and financial concerns. It was a mistake to accept the idea of a one-size-fits-all approach to creating a modern military which Russia had failed to follow.

The hype surrounding modern military technology

The assumption that advanced technology is central to successful military reform is a case in point. Russia's failure to modernise its defence industry was often portrayed as a major obstacle to the development of military capabilities suited to twenty-first-century warfare.¹² Repeated attempts to restructure the sector since the 1990s have not produced results, and the technology gap between Russian and Western producers, especially in advanced systems, continues to grow. Writing in 2012, defence analyst Stephen Blank assessed the negative implications that this would have for Russian military capabilities: 'the current ambitious effort to reform Russia's entire military structure to endow it with a high-tech military is imperilled and, along with

it, Russia's overall strategic military capability ... Clearly, the defence sector cannot produce the weapons Russia's army needs.¹³

The 2008 war with Georgia highlighted the Russian military's shortfalls in information technology, unmanned aerial vehicles and precision-guided munitions.¹⁴ As Serdyukov acknowledged in the aftermath of the conflict, only 10% of the armed forces' equipment could be classified as modern, a share that the 2008 reforms would seek to increase to 70% by 2020.¹⁵ Much has been written about the Russian defence industry's problems, such as its lack of investment in research and development, outdated management practices, rapidly ageing workforce and even older manufacturing base.¹⁶ These challenges did not escape the attention of the Russian leadership, which addressed them in its reform plans of 2008. Since then, improvements have been made through a range of measures, including an increase in government defence orders and the allocation of additional resources to increase production capacity. However, trying to catch up with the most advanced technologies will be a long, drawn-out process.¹⁷ Despite the defence industry's major problems, the ease with which Russian forces acted in Crimea indicates that a lack of advanced equipment is not as significant an obstacle to Russia's strategic ambitions as was previously suggested. And, contrary to many assessments, this has long been recognised by Russia's conservative military thinkers, who have rejected the idea that technology intrinsically revolutionises warfare and can serve as a substitute for traditional military operations.¹⁸

The idea that the Russian defence industry was on the verge of collapse should have been taken with an even larger grain of salt. Although Russian producers cannot compete with foreign information-technology and electronics manufacturers, they have remained competitive in many other areas, including the production of jet fighters, tanks, helicopters and submarines. Russia maintains an important position as the world's second-largest arms exporter.¹⁹ Many outside the Russian defence industry therefore continue to value its legacy systems, which are designed for conventional inter-state warfare.

In equating Russia's lack of advanced technology with a shortfall in strategic military capabilities, analysts overlooked another important

factor: the degree to which such technology should be seen as key to resolving conflicts is debated in countries that possess it, including the United States. There was perhaps a moment of faith in advanced systems in the early 1990s. During the First Gulf War, the world was stunned by the US military's deployment of previously unseen technologies that allowed it to achieve victory in record time and at minimal risk to its soldiers on the ground. In America and elsewhere, subsequent debates on military development centred on the move from quantity to quality, in which technological superiority would allow for dramatic cuts in armed forces.²⁰ The Iraq experience seemed to offer a war-winning formula that could serve as a guide for successful military reform. Named the 'Revolution in Military Affairs', this approach centred on the idea that advanced technology could enable states to network their forces into a 'system of systems', overcome the fog of war and provide an answer to any strategic problem.²¹ But it did not take long for world events to interfere with this apparently perfect solution. Protracted ethnic conflicts in the Balkans throughout the 1990s, and the drawn-out wars in Afghanistan and Iraq the following decade, started to sow doubt as to the virtues of technology.²² Criticism of the Revolution in Military Affairs and related concepts, such as network-centric warfare, became increasingly common.²³ Calls were made to 'transform transformation' away from the focus on technology and superior firepower, and towards boots on the ground.²⁴

With this in mind, a closer look at Russian military operations before the Crimea crisis could have shown that a lack of advanced technology did not amount to a collapse of military capabilities or an outright failure of reforms. It is unlikely that high-tech equipment, or even full network-centric-warfare capabilities, would have led to fundamentally different strategic results in Russia's Chechen wars or the conflict with Georgia. The 1994–96 war with Chechnya was an unambiguous military failure that ended in de facto independence for the rebellious republic. Some tactical and operational lessons from the conflict led to improvements in the Russian military's performance during the second war, begun in 1999, but this too became a protracted conflict.²⁵ The Russian military's structural and doctrinal unpreparedness for engaging in counter-insurgency was largely to blame.²⁶ The use of precision-

guided weapons, rather than dumb bombs, in the destruction of Grozny might have reduced civilian deaths, and advanced command-and-control systems and better equipment would have probably lowered the number of Russian soldiers killed. But, as desirable as these capabilities would have been, it is unlikely that better equipment would have averted the strategic failure of these campaigns. This is suggested by the later wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which US and allied forces became bogged down in protracted conflict despite having the most advanced military technology at their disposal. Although these conflicts differ from the Chechen wars in many ways, they nonetheless demonstrate that technology is not a panacea, especially when an insurgency is involved.

Following the war with Georgia, criticism of Russian armed forces particularly focused on their shortcomings in command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR). Shortfalls in technology were held responsible for avoidable Russian combat deaths, such as occurred when aircraft were lost to 'blue on blue' fire because of pilots' inability to communicate with troops on the ground. The conflict underscored the failure of military reforms in the eyes of many, and provided the impetus for Serdyukov's radical plans.²⁷ It was during this period that network-centric warfare became a major talking point in Moscow.²⁸ But the strategic significance of Russia's technological shortcomings was again overstated. The Russian military quickly ejected Georgian forces from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and was able to withdraw from Georgia in only five days. This was no mean feat by the standards of any military, and it demonstrated that Russian forces were neither inadequate nor close to ruin as some believed.

Russian troops' performance in Crimea seems to indicate that, since 2008, further progress has been made in improving command and control, as well as inter-service coordination. Observers have noted the use of materiel that previously seemed unavailable to Russian troops, such as new load-carrying equipment and personal radios.²⁹ It is likely, however, that this equipment has not been rolled out across the Russian army, but is cur-

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rently available only to the special forces used in Crimea. Nonetheless, it is clear that Russia did not achieve its strategic objectives in Crimea because of improved technology. The mere deployment of a few units of uniformed men carrying rifles and some posturing involving outdated military vehicles and naval vessels was sufficient to prevent both the Ukrainian interim authorities and their allies from interfering with Moscow's plans. From a strategic perspective, Russia's objectives in the Georgian conflict and its takeover of Crimea were achievable by the use, or threat, of military force, whereas its aims in the Chechen conflicts were not. But this was a matter of the strategy on which the operations were based, and not a question of technological superiority.

It is likely that Russia's military reformers, and probably even the most conservative of its generals, see up-to-date equipment and even full-blown C4ISR capabilities as desirable or important. The inability to acquire such technology domestically led to a change in Russia's defence procurement: for the first time in recent history, the country has turned to foreign imports in an attempt to close technology gaps.³⁰ As none of Russia's allies within the former Soviet space are in a position to supply the latest in military equipment, purchases have been made from states with which Russia has not traditionally maintained a close relationship. These have included Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles and Italian armoured vehicles, as well as the high-profile agreement for *Mistral*-class landing vessels from France. Of course, the Crimea crisis will inevitably close Russia's access to Western advanced military technology, at least for the foreseeable future. A range of countries, including the US, the United Kingdom and Germany, are discussing the cancellation of military contracts, and France has threatened to back out of the *Mistral* deal as sanctions against Russia continue to take hold. But the implications of this for the future of the Russian military should not be exaggerated. As the crisis demonstrated, to the world and to Putin's government, the centrality of advanced technology to the maintenance of Russia's strategic military capabilities is at best a matter of debate. As such, it is highly doubtful that these sanctions will coerce the Russian leadership into changing tack.

What kind of army does Russia need?

Before the Crimea crisis, analyses of Russian military reforms often failed to address a crucial question: what kind of army does Russia need and want, given its strategic context and priorities? Many experts took for granted the idea that the reforms ought to be a major reorientation towards a future in which traditional inter-state warfare had been replaced by 'new' wars and asymmetric conflicts. From this point of view, it seemed obvious that Russia needed to abandon conscription and mobilisation capacities in favour of smaller, professional units that were 'mobile, flexible and professional and, therefore, combat-ready for scenarios like local conflicts and asymmetrical warfare'.³¹ As Zoltan Barany asserted in 2005, maintaining the outmoded practice of conscription and mobilisation was seen as incompatible with the 'small-scale soft security threats [Russia] should anticipate in the foreseeable future'.³² After the 2010 military doctrine was published, analysts noted what they saw as ambiguities in Russian military thinking: on the one hand, the doctrine 'stated characteristics of modern warfare, but on the other stressed mobilization capabilities'.³³ Such tension was seen as originating in the familiar disagreement between reformist civilians and conservative military leaders, the latter of whom held to 'the old concept of a mass-mobilization army, partly due to traditional threat perceptions and partly due to bureaucratic interests'.³⁴ But the reasons for this perceived failure were, again, more complex. Many analysts neglected important factors by accepting the idea that 'soft' threats and asymmetric conflicts characterise war in the twenty-first century. Such a notion is controversial and overly simplistic. Moreover, many experts placed too much emphasis on the maintenance of conscription as an obstacle to reform. The practice is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, but it does not preclude modernisation in other areas. As Russian operations in Crimea have demonstrated, the 2008-reform aims of strengthening mobility and rapid reaction was achieved more thoroughly than was previously assumed. Crucially, however, the focus on rapid reaction was never intended to 'reform [the Russian] military into Western-style expeditionary forces'.³⁵

Preparing for 'old' or 'new' wars?

It is clear that something about the character of war has been changing, but the exact nature of this development and its implications for the use of military force remain a matter of debate. Over the past two decades, much scholarship on war has been characterised by categorical assertions of unprecedented newness and 'historic rupture', advancing the argument that, as Mats Berdal has written, 'contemporary wars are "substantively distinct" from older patterns of armed conflict'.³⁶ Such stark reactions are understandable in the aftermath of dramatic and unexpected international events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and 9/11. With the benefit of hindsight, however, some analysts have in recent years begun to challenge such conclusions. The portrayal of a straightforward division between new wars and the conventional inter-state conflicts of the Soviet era has been criticised for lacking historical and international context.³⁷ In 2011 Hew Strachan described as short-sighted the argument that traditional inter-state war had become a relic. It is one thing to observe that the threat of inter-state war appears remote in certain places at particular moments, but it is quite another to conclude that this will remain true forever and on a global scale. As Strachan pointed out,

to extrapolate from either an American context or a European one to the rest of the world, to Asia and Africa in particular, seems fanciful ... Moreover, those whose thinking is shaped by the Western tradition have almost no historical evidence to support a belief in the obsolescence of certain sorts of war, despite its near orthodoxy.³⁸

In recent years, some experts have contended that such orthodoxy may have negative long-term consequences, due to the policy changes it could bring or has already produced. As argued by Gian Gentile of the US Military Academy in 2009, American forces' focus on counter-insurgency became a 'dogma' that is 'not simply dangerous [but] neglects key aspects of U.S. national security' and risks destroying the military's capacity 'to conduct operations at the higher end of the conflict spectrum'.³⁹ In the same year, the British Army's chief of the general staff called for a continuation of the UK

capacity to engage 'in high-intensity interstate-type warfare' while 'keeping alive the "conceptual flame" of manoeuvre warfare'.⁴⁰

Such debates have also been held in Russia, where the discourse on military reform remains complicated. Gentile has noted that arguments in favour of maintaining traditional war-fighting capabilities in the US have often been dismissed as the product of a conservative military mindset. He has rejected such criticism as one-sided:

The army *does* need to transform from its antiquated Cold War structure toward one that can deal with the security challenges of the new millennium ... [But] the future of war is not only counterinsurgencies such as Iraq and Afghanistan. One can imagine a range of possibilities that cover the full spectrum of war and conflict.⁴¹

Such considerations informed Moscow's decision to maintain conscription, mobilisation capacities and a strong nuclear deterrent while modernising the military in other areas.

Extrapolating from Western strategic priorities, many analysts assumed that Russian military reforms had failed because they did not prepare the armed forces for fighting in complex overseas contingencies or counter-insurgency campaigns on the scale of those in Afghanistan and Iraq. Russia's efficiency in Crimea would have come as less of a surprise if the country's strategic context had been taken into account. New wars were never central to Russia's strategic vision and, in contrast to many Western states, it regarded expeditionary warfare, fighting in overseas contingencies and humanitarian intervention as tasks that Russian foreign policy and military doctrine should work to avoid.⁴²

Nonetheless, Moscow's post-Cold War security policies and military doctrines have reflected an increasing appreciation of soft threats and human security, and have covered terrorism, organised crime, illegal migration and even environmental issues. The Russian leadership has recognised that "'new" transnational threats can be non-military in nature and may require non-military and international rather than state-led responses'.⁴³ But new wars and soft security threats have never been seen as the only or

most important consideration. Accordingly, military doctrine has continued to emphasise more traditional threats and capabilities alongside modern warfare.⁴⁴

Russia's focus on a multitude of threats and military capabilities makes a good deal of sense, given the country's geography and relative 'strategic solitude', as Ruslan Pukhov has put it.⁴⁵ Capabilities for dealing with new wars dominate along Russia's southern border, where it faces ethnic conflicts, insurgencies and terrorism in the Caucasus and Central Asia. To the east, however, is China, whose 'multi-million troop army [uses] traditional approaches to the conducting of combat operations ... with a great concentration of manpower and firing systems', as Lieutenant-General Sergei Skokov, Russian chief of the main staff of the ground troops, has stated. This fact alone makes the maintenance of mobilisation capacities and some conscription appear less irrational. To the West are what Skokov calls NATO's 'innovative armies with non-contact forms and methods for using the latest forces and equipment', which Russia could not easily match in a conventional war.⁴⁶ Moscow has long perceived NATO's post-Cold War activities to be a security threat and a challenge to its regional interests.⁴⁷ Russia's 2010 military doctrine placed NATO 'out of area' operations and eastward enlargement high on the list of military threats to the country.⁴⁸ Strategic context gives meaning to what many analysts before the Crimea crisis interpreted as Russia's seemingly illogical, concurrent pursuit of a modern military, 'old-fashioned' mobilisation capabilities and nuclear deterrence. Although traditional perceptions of potential enemies and conflicts have left their mark on Russian military doctrine and foreign policy throughout the post-Soviet era, this has not merely been an effect of Russian generals' inability to move on. A healthy degree of paranoia is required by the armed forces of any state in its attempt to prepare for a future in which 'much that is unpredicted and unpredictable can and will occur', as Azar Gat has put it.⁴⁹

Conscription or rapid reaction?

During the past 20 years, many Russia-watchers have shared the view that reforms could only succeed if the country's large, conscript-based military

was abandoned in favour of smaller, professional units with permanent readiness.⁵⁰ However, military effectiveness is not always the sole consideration in adopting a recruitment system. A confluence of other factors, such as economic arguments and domestic political constraints, has influenced the decision to maintain or abandon conscription after the end of the Cold War.⁵¹ As Rod Thornton concluded in his analysis of reforms during the Yeltsin era, 'the principal political goals in terms of ending conscription ... were not so much to develop a more efficient military – although that would have been a welcome side-effect – rather, Yeltsin wanted to both save money and to court electoral popularity'.⁵² That second factor is particularly significant, and has been an important driver of Russian politicians' efforts to professionalise the military over the past two decades.

The causes of conscription's weak reputation in Russia are well known. Its image problem resulted from the fate suffered by many young draftees during the First Chechen War and poor conditions of service, particularly the notorious *dedovshchina*, a brutal practice of hazing and violence against soldiers that sometimes has fatal results.⁵³ The persistent unpopularity of conscription has meant that promises of a move towards an all-volunteer force are as politically expedient today as they were under Yeltsin.⁵⁴ But the wish to do so, no matter how genuine, has not translated into an easily workable plan, particularly as the low prestige of military service is not limited to conscription. The architects of the 2008 reforms were painfully reminded of this fact when attempts to create a corps of professional sergeants faltered because of an inability to recruit skilled volunteers in sufficient numbers.⁵⁵ Coupled with Russia's demographic challenges, the image problem will ensure that the country continues to struggle in recruiting conscripts, let alone enough soldiers for a fully professional force.⁵⁶ For this reason alone, the abandonment of conscription is not on the horizon.

In 2010 a Russian journalist urged that 'changing the image of the army and reversing the negative attitudes towards military service is the most urgent task of military transformation'.⁵⁷ It is hard to disagree. The Russian leadership has begun to heed this advice, judging by the significant rise in military salaries and recent measures such as the programme of 'humanising service conditions' for conscripts and professional soldiers.⁵⁸ But it is

hard to tell whether their endeavours will succeed. The unreformed system of conscription and the general image problem of military service in Russia pose major challenges that will require serious strategic attention, resources and political will.

Nonetheless, conscription has never been a deal-breaker in attempts to reform the Russian military. As Anna Leander has argued, internationally conscription 'is not dead as a political idea' and 'regularly reappears on the agenda', even in states that have long since done away with the practice.⁵⁹ This can be seen in the US, where in 2012 General Stanley McChrystal suggested bringing back the draft to share the military burden more equi-

tably across American society.⁶⁰ The post-Cold War trend has been towards professional armed forces, but conscription and some capacity for mobilisation are maintained in several developed countries, including Finland, Norway, Denmark and Israel.⁶¹ These states rely on a combination of recruitment systems, allowing them to preserve mobility, rapid reaction, technological expertise and the other capabilities required by modern armed operations.

Conscription and mobilisation also help in preparing for situations in which large numbers of infantry soldiers are needed.⁶²

In many analyses of Russian military reform, the focus on a need to abandon conscription in favour of smaller, more mobile forces relied on a false dichotomy. A system of recruitment combining conscripts with more professional units is the most realistic option for contemporary Russia. Moreover, this structure has not precluded the modernisation of staffing in other areas. The 2008 reforms did not prioritise the abolition of conscription. According to Nikolai Makarov, former chief of the general staff, they instead envisioned the creation of more permanent-readiness units staffed entirely by professional soldiers. Such units would be capable of deployment to trouble spots along Russia's volatile borders, and would be part of a mixed system of recruitment also intended to produce forces for calmer areas.⁶³ To achieve this aim, Russian military planners would draw on the experience of airborne forces, which have included several fully professional elite regiments since 2002. In the war with Georgia, these troops stood

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out for their professionalism, fast responses, training and fighting skills, especially in comparison to the regular infantry.⁶⁴ During the Crimea operations too, the same airborne units acted effectively and in cooperation with other rapid-reaction forces from the special-forces reconnaissance brigades and the marine infantry that had not been traditionally envisaged in such a role. According to Keir Giles, these operations have shown that 'today the Russian military is vastly more capable than it was in 2008'.⁶⁵

However, analysts should not be tempted to conclude that Russia now has a 'more Western-looking army'.⁶⁶ One criticism of the reforms was that 'there were no indications the [Russian] armed forces were trained and equipped for wide-ranging complex military operations abroad, as had become the core business of Western armed forces'.⁶⁷ Such expectations have still not been met. This is particularly true of the adjustments in doctrine and thinking required by conflicts that involve more than traditional war-fighting skills. Of course, the effective performance of rapid-reaction units in all kinds of scenarios is not guaranteed by professionalisation alone. Although operational and tactical changes had allowed Russian forces to better control and hold territory by the time of the Second Chechen War, this did not help to achieve a long-term political solution. As Quentin Hodgson has written, dealing with the insurgency as a tactical issue without considering the strategic implications meant that Russian troops were not ready 'to handle the problems associated with guerrilla war'.⁶⁸

To some extent, modernising the education and training of soldiers for permanent readiness has been a part of recent reforms. As Makarov asserted in 2011, this process included 'the reworking of all guidance documents, instructions, regulations and teaching aids'. Although the relevant materials were reworked several times, Makarov was not satisfied with the results because they remained 'geared towards past wars'.⁶⁹ But it is unclear whether discussion of the need for conceptual changes will translate into substantively different approaches to doctrine and training for new wars. The significance of such shifts in military thinking should not be exaggerated. Russia is unlikely to be more successful than other states in trying to find a winning formula for counter-insurgency.⁷⁰ More importantly, the 2008 reforms' emphasis on mobility and rapid reaction was never aimed

at the creation of 'Western-type expeditionary forces ... which could be deployed in irregular operations rapidly and far away from the motherland'.⁷¹ Instead, it was the performance of Russian troops in Chechnya, and to an extent in Georgia, that demonstrated to the political and military leadership the need to strengthen rapid-reaction capabilities for dealing with low-intensity conflicts on Russia's periphery.

An army for all wars

Critics of Russia's military reforms have commented on the country's apparent lack of progress in creating forces able to deal with soft security threats. Such arguments have overlooked an important problem faced by many Western militaries: how to maintain armed forces that are able to deal with all missions across the spectrum of conflict, ranging from large-scale inter-state warfare to humanitarian-relief operations. Current US and UK military doctrine is based on the premise that armed forces trained and equipped for high-intensity conflict can be adapted 'down and across' to other kinds of missions. In light of unsuccessful intervention and stabilisation operations during the past two decades, however, doubts have been raised about the sustainability of this idea.⁷² Perceived challenges include the possibility that an all-purpose force will lose its prowess in 'fighting heavy'. Some have asked whether traditional military culture prevents soldiers from seeing low-intensity missions as more than a diversion, and whether the cultural divide between military and civilian actors allows for a truly cooperative approach to stabilisation operations.⁷³ As Gentile contends, building 'an army to win *all* wars' will not be easy. One way to overcome such difficulties could be through the creation of separate units dedicated to specific missions, as suggested by Kevin Stringer in his alternative vision for the US military. As he himself acknowledged, however, such a drastic transformation would be likely to be met with resistance, as it runs counter to 'the wider Army culture'.⁷⁴ Stringer's approach remains on the margins of Western debate, yet the core of his idea is far from radical in Russia. Although the issue is rarely raised in discussions of military reform and capabilities, the country already has a number of armed units dedicated to specific low-intensity missions.

Alongside the army, navy, air force and Strategic Rocket Forces under the Ministry of Defence, a number of institutionally distinct 'power ministries' specialise in smaller-scale and soft security threats. The fight against terrorism is one of the many tasks within the remit of the Federal Security Service. To this end, the agency maintains special-assignment units that receive military training and have the right to procure corresponding weapons and equipment. Such units fought alongside regular forces and Interior Ministry troops in both Chechen campaigns. They were heavily involved in the operations to end the Moscow theatre and Beslan school sieges, in 2002 and 2004 respectively. A lack of coordination in counter-terrorism was identified as a major reason for the poor performance of Russian forces in these incidents, particularly in Beslan. This led to the creation of a national counter-terrorism committee uniting all ministries involved and headed by the director of the Federal Security Service in 2006.

Three years earlier, Moscow had established the Federal Drug Control Service, charged with reducing the supply and demand of illegal drugs in Russia and beyond. The service has under its command special-assignment units that have fought alongside military personnel against drug-trafficking insurgent groups in the North Caucasus, including in Chechnya. Although the organisation has attracted its share of criticism, it has also contributed to international anti-drug operations, collaborating with US military personnel and Afghan forces in raids on narcotics laboratories in Afghanistan.

Russia's Ministry for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of the Consequences of Natural Disasters also commands smaller-scale contingency units, along with civil-defence troops. Its central task is to assist civilian populations in humanitarian crises, both in Russia and abroad. Armed and trained for self-defence, these hybrid troops can overcome the problems usually associated with the involvement of conventional forces in humanitarian relief and reconstruction efforts. They have contributed extensively to humanitarian operations under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, World Food Programme, Development Programme and Mine Action Service. They have also participated in numerous training exercises for disaster response and management with NATO troops.⁷⁵ Of course, this does not mean that Russia has found the key to success in dealing with soft

security threats. But it explains why military reforms never prioritised the need to develop the regular armed forces' capabilities for dealing with such tasks. The power ministries should have been factored into assessments of Russian military capabilities, even if they did not fit neatly within a Western framework.

* * *

The story of Russian military capabilities has never been as black and white as suggested. Flawed assumptions about how Russia's military should reform have led to exaggerated assessments of its inadequacy in addressing the country's security threats, and have downplayed the changes that have occurred. During the last 20 years, the Russian military has overcome many problems to address security threats, when tasked to do so by the political leadership. It has deployed troops to several local and regional conflicts, and deterred threats from further afield by maintaining a strong nuclear arsenal.

Of course, the combat performance of the Russian armed forces has been far from stellar, and their conduct has deserved every bit of criticism, especially in Chechnya. At the same time, the alleged failures in counter-insurgency are not unique to Russia, and Russian troops have been considerably more effective where military means matched strategic ends, as in Georgia and Crimea. Russia's occupation of the latter caught many by surprise, and the episode is likely to revolutionise Western views of the Russian military in the longer term. But observers and policymakers should be cautious not to flip from one extreme to the other in their assessments of its reforms and capabilities.

Russia's well-coordinated actions in Crimea have demonstrated that it was capable of achieving a favourable strategic outcome before other actors could intervene. But one cannot assume that Russia would be capable of replicating this performance elsewhere. Even combat operations elsewhere in Ukraine would run the risk of military-strategic overstretch and jeopardise Russia's military options vis-à-vis its other geostrategic priorities.⁷⁶ And events in Crimea do not suggest that the Russian military is capable of

competing in conventional warfare beyond its 'near abroad', nor in a confrontation with NATO. Such conclusions might be inconvenient to those with a vested interest in increasing European defence spending. But they are realistic in light of the Russian armed forces' many problems, many of which will require both long-term strategic attention and a focused allocation of resources. It is time to abandon hyperbole about Russian military ascendance or decay.

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