



Russia's Military Revival: Why Now and Towards What End?

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The revival of Russian military power poses certain challenges to NATO and the West. Russia's military developments are best understood as a continuation of longer-term factors in the country's history.

Throughout the 1990s and up until the announcement of a systematic programme of military modernisation in 2008, the Russian armed forces fell into a state of serious decline. Their shortcomings were painfully demonstrated during the two Chechen wars, where they struggled to defeat an opponent that was vastly inferior numerically and technologically. In the eyes of the world, Russia had lost its status as a global military actor, because it seemed clear that its ability to project military power beyond its borders had become distinctly limited. This international image was overhauled almost overnight in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation in spring 2014 and in the wake of the ongoing air campaign over Syria.

Today Russia is again seen as a serious military player. The interventions in Ukraine and Syria have led to fears in the West that the process of Russian military modernisation is motivated by an about-turn in foreign policy that includes an ever increasing **military adventurism and expansionism**. However, it is likely that Russia's reasons for rebuilding conventional military capabilities are more complex than this. Rather than signifying a clear break with the past instigated by President Putin, recent developments in the Russian military are a continuation of longer-term factors in the country's history, and foreign and defence policy. Within this context, Russia's 'military revival' was inevitable and hardly surprising.

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Russia's self-perception as a great power and its desire to be granted this status by the international community dates back centuries and this did not cease with the end of the Cold War. Having a large and powerful military has always been key to Russia's great power ambitions. It was central to the making of the Tsarist empire and a strong military, above all else, elevated the Soviet Union to the status of a superpower. Against this background, the period of neglect of the Russian armed forces throughout the 1990s was uncharacteristic and should have come as more of a surprise than the more recent modernisation efforts. The lack of military reforms during the 1990s was not the result of a conscious decision on the part of the political leadership to give up on the aspirations of being a global military power, or the belief that a strong military was no longer necessary. On the contrary, Russian great power ambitions, including the maintenance of a military able to project power on a global level date back to the early 1990s. It was a combination of political and financial factors that prevented these ambitions from becoming reality.

The first Russian military doctrine published in 1993 envisaged significant cuts to armed force levels and emphasised the need to develop conventional forces able to deal with local conflicts, which appeared to be the most immediate concern at the time. However, the idea that a global conventional deterrent was no longer desirable or required was never a consensus view. In fact, the 1993 doctrine already reflected serious ambitions to maintain a globally competitive conventional deterrent. The ambition for parity in conventional military power was reiterated in the 2000 military doctrine, which explicitly reoriented priorities away from the focus on small-wars type scenarios and towards the need for the creation of Russian conventional forces with global reach.

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Between 2000 and 2008 the Russian economy grew by an average of almost 7 percent per year, a rate of growth that was matched by similar annual increases in the defence budget. This meant that, following years of economic turmoil during the 1990s when even a relatively high percentage of GDP – an average of four percent – spent on defence was insufficient to sustain the military on a reasonable level, Russia's long-standing ambition to rebuild a military fit for a great power had finally become affordable. Relinquishing armed strength and accepting the resulting loss of great power status was never an option that was seriously entertained in Russia. From this point of view, the revival of the Russian military was only a matter of time.

The idea that the revival of Russian conventional military capabilities in recent years can only be motivated by the political leadership's intention to engage in ever more aggressive, expansionist and offensive military action also requires further contextualisation. Such a view represents a one-sided understanding of why countries, as a rule, maintain powerful armed forces. As Robert Art wrote in 1996, 'to focus only on the physical use of military power is to miss most of what most states do most of the time with the military power at their disposal'. In other words, countries do not only have militaries to fight offensive wars, but also to deter, coerce, compel, reassure or dissuade other actors. International prestige is another important motivation for states to maintain powerful militaries. Given the centrality of the military in Russia's self-perception as a great power this factor is particularly salient for understanding the motivations behind its recent military revival.

After years of decay, during which the West had written off Russia as a serious global military competitor, conspicuous displays of military power and brinkmanship, coupled with the interventions in Crimea and Syria, have been

an effective way of rapidly enhancing the international image of Russia's newly modernised military. Such a use of military power for 'swaggering', which according to Art can have historically helped countries to gain 'prestige on the cheap' has already yielded impressive results. Although Russia's relative military power is still severely lacking in comparison to the US and NATO, international reactions to recent displays of its revived armed forces have arguably enhanced its global image to an extent that far exceeds its material capabilities. The international community is again viewing Russian military power as a serious competitor, as Russia has already achieved one of its long-standing objectives. International recognition as a great power has been a central aim of Russian foreign policy throughout history. Now that the country is yet again seen as a global military power it has gained such recognition, at least in part, but based on fear, rather than on respect.

The future of Russia's power projection

Better military capabilities mean that the Russian leadership today has more opportunity to resort to the use of force. The air campaign in Syria, for example, would simply not have been possible ten years ago, even if the willingness to launch an intervention of this kind had been there. It is unlikely, however, that better capabilities will cause the country's leaders to lose sight of the fact that the utility of military force is limited and not suited for the achievement of all foreign policy objectives.

Nonetheless, developments in Russian defence and foreign policy are a concern and a difficult challenge to international security. With the Crimea annexation, Russia demonstrated its willingness to use military force for territorial expansion for the first time in post-Cold war history. This has understandably led to growing fears, especially amongst its neighbours, about

Russian intentions and the potential for further expansionist moves. Russia's interventions in Ukraine and in Syria have also led to tensions with the West that are incomparable in scale and scope to problems in the recent past.

There are limited options available to the West and to the international community to stop the Russian military modernisation process, bar the imposition of sanctions banning the export of defence technology and dual-use equipment into Russia, which the US and EU have already put into place. It will also be difficult, as it has been in the past, to prevent Russia from using military force as an instrument of foreign policy in certain situations in the future.

There are choices to be made, then, on deciding how to respond to these developments. When it comes to dealing with Russian military interventions, the West can only lead by example in using military force as a last resort and within the parameters of international law, and condemn Russia in the strongest terms when it does not do the same.

It is clear that Russian military actions in Ukraine and Syria have already had serious consequences for the country's international image. As complete isolation is not in Russia's interest and it continues craving respect as a Great Power from the global community, there is some hope that international repercussions and condemnation will be a factor in its future decisions to use military force. There are also choices to be made about how to respond to aggressive Russian military posturing vis-à-vis NATO and other neighbouring states.

For the time being, NATO has chosen the path of an uncompromisingly tough stance, strengthening its presence alongside its eastern borders in an attempt to demonstrate unity and resolve and to deter any potential military aggression.

While these measures are likely to reassure NATO member states in eastern and central Europe, their potential long-term consequences, like a renewed arms race and increasing dangers of escalation, should not be ignored.

It is already obvious that Russia is not interpreting NATO's actions in the spirit intended, as defensive measures aimed at reassuring NATO members close to its borders. Instead, Russia has taken these moves as an opportunity for further 'swaggering' and showing off its military power, stepping up its own activities and presence in the region.

It is not yet clear how Russia's relations with NATO and with the West will evolve under the next US administration headed by Donald Trump. Although some analysts have argued that the new US president is good news for Russia, such a conclusion remains at least questionable or is at least premature.

If the US will indeed steer towards a more isolationist stance, it is possible that criticism of Russian military brinkmanship in the Baltic region and beyond, and violations of international law during military conflicts where this does not directly impinge onto US interests, will diminish. Such a turn of events would certainly be welcomed in Moscow, where the country's full sovereignty to use military force as a foreign policy instrument is seen as centrally important.

At the same time, it is by no means certain that the US will abandon its position as an important actor in European and international security and it is unlikely that the new US administration will be happy to concede this role to Russia, in effect abandoning its preeminent position in the international system. It is beyond doubt that Donald Trump's presidency will confront Russia with a serious degree of uncertainty and unpredictability, much more so than the election of Hilary Clinton would have done. The extent to which this

unpredictability – including the potential for harsher US reactions towards Russian military adventurism and an increased risk of escalation – will influence Russian foreign policy decision-making is a question for the future.

Image via Kremlin/Wikimedia.

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