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Bettina Renz

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## Why Russia is Reviving Its Conventional Military Power

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Bettina Renz

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**ABSTRACT:** The revival of Russian military power poses certain challenges to NATO and to the West. However, the exact nature of these challenges is not straightforward. This article discusses why Russia is reviving its conventional military power and argues these developments are not limited to the intention of preparing for offensive action. NATO's and the West's policy responses to recent changes in Russian defense policy need to be based on a realistic and nuanced understanding of Russian motivations because ill-considered responses could have serious unintended consequences.

After almost 20 years of allowing Russia's conventional armed forces to fall into disrepair, an extensive program of modernization announced in 2008 has yielded impressive results and started a process of Russian military revival.<sup>1</sup> Following the military intervention in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and Russia's first expeditionary operation outside of the former Soviet region in Syria, recent developments in Russian defense policy have led to increasing concerns about a militarily resurgent Russia and the potential implications of this for its neighbors, NATO, and the West. In the words of the new NATO SACEUR, US General Curtis Scaparotti, who was sworn in in May 2016, "a resurgent Russia [is] striving to project itself as a world power... To address these challenges, we must continue to maintain and enhance our levels of readiness and our agility in the spirit of being able to fight tonight if deterrence fails."<sup>2</sup>

According to Gustav Gressel, writing for the European Council of Foreign Relations, "Europe's military advantage over Russia" is now "undermined." To counter "Russia's new military boldness and adventurism" and its military vision that is "centered on the Eurasian landmass," Europe is now in need of finding an urgent response to

Bettina Renz is an Associate Professor at the University of Nottingham's School of Politics and International Relations. She received a PhD from the University of Birmingham's Center for Russian and East European Studies in 2005. Her research expertise is in strategic studies with a particular interest in contemporary Russia. She has published widely on Russian security and defense policy, including military reforms and transformation.

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1 Dmitri Trenin, "The Revival of the Russian Military: How Moscow Reloaded," *Foreign Affairs* (95) no. 3 (May/June 2016), 23-29.

2 Matthew Bodner, "Changing of the Guard: NATO Brings in Army General to Deter Russia," *The Moscow Times*, May 12, 2016, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/569142.html> (accessed May 26, 2016).

“Russian expansionism.” Although “a major military escalation on the European continent is not imminent,” according to Gressel, “Russia is clearly preparing itself for offensive operations.”<sup>3</sup>

Russia’s conventional military capabilities are more impressive today than during the first two decades of the post-Soviet period, and these capabilities are likely to continue growing. It is also beyond doubt Russian foreign policy rhetoric and conduct today, particularly towards NATO and the West, is more forceful and aggressive than it was at any time during the post-Cold war era. However, the convergence of these factors does not necessarily mean Russia is rebuilding its conventional military exclusively to prepare for more offensive action or to pursue expansionist policies in direct confrontation with NATO.

This article argues this conjecture overlooks the fact that most states continue to see the maintenance of a powerful conventional military as essential. Conventional military power has remained highly relevant throughout the post-Cold war era not only as an instrument of policy, but also as an essential attribute of a strong state and global actor. From this point of view, Russia’s restoration of conventional military power was only a matter of time and money and is in many ways less surprising than the long neglect of these capabilities. Moreover, the assumption that preparation for offensive action and the pursuit of expansionist policies is the only motivation behind the revival of Russia’s conventional military power disregards the fact that the utility of military force is not limited to the fighting of wars and defeating of opponents.

Instead, conventional military power is routinely wielded to deter, compel, swagger, dissuade, or reassure. The idea that improvements in Russia’s conventional military capabilities have significantly increased the likelihood of offensive action, including against the West, also underestimates the limitations of Russia’s conventional military capabilities and overstates its likely willingness to take such a step in the first place. Theoretically, the scenario of a Russian offensive against a NATO member state is not impossible now or in the future, but it would be highly irrational given Russia’s persistent disparity in conventional military power and the risk of escalation into nuclear conflict. The revival of Russian conventional military power will increasingly affect the defensive balance in Europe and pose certain challenges. However, the implications of this development and how NATO and the West should respond are not straightforward. A more nuanced consideration of Russia’s possible motivations for rebuilding its conventional military power is essential. Basing policy responses on a skewed understanding of Russian intentions could have serious unintended consequences.

### **The Enduring Relevance of Conventional Military Power**

A strong military is central to a state’s ability to project power on an international level. As Hans Morgenthau noted, as long as anarchy obtains in the international system, “armed strength as a threat or a potentiality is the most important material factor making for the political

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3 Gustav Gressel, “Russia’s Quiet Military Revolution and What It Means for Europe,” *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief* 143 (October 12, 2015): 1 and 13, <http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/russias-quiet-military-revolution-and-what-it-means-for-europe4045> (accessed February 8, 2016).

power of nations.”<sup>4</sup> Arguably, this is as true today as it was at the time this line was written. During the Cold War, strong conventional military power, in addition to nuclear deterrence, singled out the United States and the Soviet Union as the world’s two superpowers. Although some advocates of nuclear weapons believed nuclear deterrence would make conventional military power obsolete in the long run, such a view never took hold in the superpowers’ defense decision-making establishments. In fact, both countries continued spending the bulk of their military budgets on conventional forces because it was understood the political-military utility of nuclear deterrence was limited for dealing with threats to their interests below the threshold of a direct nuclear attack on their own territories.<sup>5</sup>

When the Cold War ended, many believed the centrality of military power in international relations would diminish. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the threat of a global conflict had waned and, with the spread of democracy and economic interdependence, state competition in the future would revolve around economic, not military matters.<sup>6</sup> However, such beliefs were short-lived. Military power continued to be seen as an essential instrument of statecraft, especially for great powers, even though economic competition had become more important and there was no longer an immediate threat of a global war.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of an immediate adversary against whom to assess its conventional military capabilities, the United States defined the “two-war” standard as a measure to size its conventional forces in 1991. As there was no clear and present danger emanating from a specific state actor, conventional forces strong enough to deal with the eventuality of two simultaneous major regional contingencies were considered essential to ensure the country’s “ongoing demands for forward presence, crisis response, regional deterrence, humanitarian assistance, building partnership capacity, homeland defense, and support to civil authorities.”<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary China is another important example demonstrating the enduring relevance of conventional military power in the eyes of states aspiring to great power status. Although China has established itself as one of the world’s economic great powers, growing economic strength has been accompanied by a massive drive to establish a competitive conventional military arsenal. As the world’s second largest military spender behind the United States, and with its budget continuing to grow, China’s development has evoked discussions similar to the Russian case about the country’s intentions and its potential transformation into a “revisionist state.”<sup>9</sup> As Hew Strachan has noted,

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4 Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace, 5th Edition* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 29.

5 Robert J. Art, “To What Ends Military Power?” *International Security* 4, no. 4 (Spring 1980): 21; and Gary L. Guertner, *Deterrence and Conventional Military Forces* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1992), 1-2.

6 Robert J. Art, “American Foreign Policy and the Fungibility of Force,” *Security Studies* 5, no. 4 (1996): 7.

7 *Ibid.*, 8-9.

8 Daniel Goure, PhD, “The Measure of a Superpower: A Two Major Regional Contingency Military for the 21st Century,” *The Heritage Foundation Special Report #128*, January 25, 2013, 1, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/01/the-measure-of-superpower-a-two-major-regional-contingency-military-for-21-century> (accessed May 19, 2016).

9 Wei-chin Lee, “Long Shot and Short Hit: China as a Military Power and Its Implications for the USA and Taiwan,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 43, no. 5 (October 2008): 524.

rather than causing a decline of the role of conventional military power in international politics, the end of the Cold War made permissible a situation where states, especially in the West, have displayed a growing readiness to use military force as an instrument of policy.<sup>10</sup> The utility of conventional military power endures.

### Russia and Conventional Military Power

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia always maintained a strong nuclear deterrent, and in this area remained equal to the United States. However, its conventional forces were left to decay for almost two decades. This drawn-out neglect of its armed forces should not be confused with a statement of pacifism in the sense that the projection of military power was no longer seen as important.

Russia's quest for great power status dates back centuries, and its self-perception as such did not cease with the end of the Cold War in 1991.<sup>11</sup> Military power was central to the making of the tsarist empire. It was also a strong military, above all else, which elevated the Soviet Union to superpower status during the Cold War years. Relinquishing armed strength and accepting the resulting loss of great power status was never a serious option for Russia. The first military doctrine of the Russian Federation issued in 1993 envisaged significant cuts to Soviet legacy force levels and prioritized the development of conventional forces able to deal with local conflicts, which were seen as the most immediate concern at the time. The idea that a global conventional deterrent was no longer needed was never a consensus view in Russia. Traditional military thinkers from the outset argued in favor of more open-ended defense requirements that would keep the country prepared for a larger variety of eventualities.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the 1993 doctrine already reflected ambitions to maintain a competitive conventional deterrent. It envisioned investments in research and development for the creation of high-tech equipment, including electronic warfare capabilities, stealth technology, and advanced naval weaponry. This was a direct response to the lessons Russian strategists had learned from the accomplishments of the "revolution in military affairs" demonstrated by superior US conventional forces in the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>13</sup> Such ambitions were confirmed 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 conventional forces with global reach. This doctrine was published in the wake of NATO's high-tech operation "Allied Force" over Serbia which, in the words of Alexei Arbatov, "marked a watershed in Russia's assessment of its own military requirements and defense priorities."<sup>14</sup>

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10 Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22.

11 Iver B. Neumann, "Russia as a Great Power, 1815-2007," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11, no. 2 (June 2008).

12 Alexei G. Arbatov, "The Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine: Lessons Learned from Kosovo and Chechnya," *The Marshall Center Papers*, no. 2, (June 2000): 7, [http://www.marshall-center.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F\\_Publications/mcPapers/mc-paper\\_2-en.pdf](http://www.marshall-center.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F_Publications/mcPapers/mc-paper_2-en.pdf) (accessed October 12 2015).

13 Richard Pipes, "Is Russia Still an Enemy?" *Foreign Affairs* 76 no. 5 (September/October 1997): 75-76.

14 Arbatov, "The Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine," 8-9.

Although the central components of the successful 2008 modernization program, such as the need to professionalize, create rapid reaction forces, and procure advanced technology, were considered in all reform attempts from the early 1990s, no program up until 2008 led to fundamental transformation. Unlike the 2008 reforms, which were backed up by realistic financial means and unprecedented political will, Yeltsin-era plans for military transformation faltered owing to the country's dire economic situation and the lack of political clout required for pushing through changes unpopular with some elements in the military leadership.<sup>15</sup> The inability to turn ambitions for its conventional military into reality did not mean the Russian leadership no longer saw strong conventional military power as desirable or important. Clearly, there was an understanding that a strong nuclear deterrent alone was insufficient to uphold Russia's great power status in the long term, especially when other countries' conventional armed forces continued to modernize at a rapid pace. Conventional military power persists as an important attribute of state power. It is deemed to have utility as an instrument of policy, even more so now than it was during the Cold War. As long as this is the case, it would be unrealistic to expect Russia not to want to remain a player in the game.

### The Utility of Conventional Military Power

The idea that the modernization of Russia's conventional military capabilities can only be motivated by its intention to engage in ever more aggressive, expansionist, and offensive military action is based on a simplistic understanding of the utility of conventional military power. As Robert Art argued, "military power should not be equated simply with its physical use...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."<sup>16</sup> In other words, states maintain conventional military forces not only to fight offensive wars, but also to wield these forces in a variety of physical and non-physical ways to deter, coerce, compel, swagger, reassure, or dissuade other actors, depending on the situation and on the objectives to be achieved.<sup>17</sup>

The prerequisite for a state's ability to use its military power in any physical or non-physical way is the availability of a robust military organization in the first place. Following the serious neglect of the Russian armed forces throughout the 1990s, this availability was increasingly in doubt. The degree of decay of the Russian military and the possible domestic and international repercussions if this situation had been allowed to continue need to be taken into account when Russia's reasons for rebuilding its conventional military power are considered. As Eugene Rumer and Celeste Wallander wrote in 2003, "Russia entered the millennium with its capacity to project military power beyond its borders vastly reduced and its ability to defend its territorial integrity

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15 Alexei G. Arbatov, "Military Reform in Russia: Dilemmas, Obstacles, and Prospects," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 112-113.

16 Art, "American Foreign Policy," 10.

17 Art, "To What Ends Military Power?" and John F. Troxell, "Military Power and the Use of Force" in *US Army War College Guide to National Security Issues: Volume 1: Theory of War and Strategy, 5th Edition*, ed. J. Boones Bartholomees Jr. (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012): 217-241.



and sovereignty severely tested by the war in Chechnya.”<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the fact that the once powerful Russian military struggled to defeat “a band of irregulars fighting with little more than the weapons on their backs,” as Jeffrey Tayer had put it, created a feeling of insecurity in Russia that cast serious doubts on its ability to defend against and deter potential external threats.<sup>19</sup>

Although a stronger Russian conventional military poses certain challenges to NATO and the West, it is clear further decay would have been a poor alternative. When the Russian National Security Concept issued in 2000 permitted nuclear first use to “repulse armed aggression, if all other means of resolving the crisis have been exhausted,” it was widely assumed the nuclear threshold was lowered because there was no longer any faith in Russia that conventional options would be successful in the case of an armed attack.<sup>20</sup> As Charles Glaser cautioned, there is the danger that insecurity can pressure an adversary to adopt competitive and threatening policies.<sup>21</sup> This is particularly dangerous if the only tools available for pursuing such policies are nuclear weapons. It is also clear the modernization of Russia’s conventional military was a necessity not only to ensure defense requirements. Although a military coup was never on the cards, concerns over growing military opposition and mutiny became increasingly common by the end of the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> The potentially catastrophic consequences of this for Russia, as well as for international security, are not hard to imagine.

Russian views on the utility of conventional military power are not limited to territorial defense and the peaceful deterrence of potential external threats. After all, Russia has used armed force to pursue a variety of policy objectives throughout the post-Cold War years, including various “peace enforcement” operations across the former Soviet region at the beginning of the 1990s, the Chechen wars, the war with Georgia in 2008, in Ukraine starting in 2014, and most recently in Syria. A reason why there is concern in the West about improvements in Russia’s conventional military capabilities is the conviction that better capabilities will inevitably lead to more offensive action in the future. As British expert on the Russian military Keir Giles has put it, “the more Russia develops its conventional capability, the more confident and aggressive it will become.”<sup>23</sup> The influence of capabilities on the decision to use force is not as straightforward, however. As Benjamin Fordham argued, the “claim that capabilities influence not just opportunity, but also willingness...is implicit or explicit in a substantial amount of work in international relations, but has rarely been tested.”<sup>24</sup>

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18 Eugene B. Rumer and Celeste A. Wallander, “Russia: Power in Weakness?” *The Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2003): 61.

19 Jeffrey Tayer, “Russia is Finished,” *The Atlantic*, May 2001, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/05/russia-is-finished/302220/> (accessed May 21, 2016).

20 Celeste A. Wallander, “Wary of the West: Russian Security Policy at the Millennium,” *Arms Control Today* 30, no. 2 (March 2000): 11.

21 Charles Glaser, “Will China’s Rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (March/April 2011): 82-83.

22 Arbatov, “Military Reform,” 103 and 129.

23 Keir Giles, *Russia’s New ‘Tools’ for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power* (London, UK: Chatham House, March 2016), 2, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-03-21-russias-new-tools-giles.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2016).

24 Benjamin O. Fordham, “A Very Sharp Sword: The Influence of Military Capabilities on American Decisions to Use Force,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 5 (October 2004): 633.

Better military capabilities are likely to influence Russian foreign policy by providing more opportunity for the use of force. After all, as Fordham also noted, “decision makers cannot use force unless they have the means to do so.”<sup>25</sup> Russia’s air campaign in Syria, for example, was certainly enabled by the opportunities created from improvements in its conventional capabilities. In Syria, Russia demonstrated it now had the capability to deploy and sustain a limited out-of-area operation for the first time in post-Soviet history. This came as a surprise to many observers, who did not believe Russia had the sea and airlift capabilities required for such an undertaking.<sup>26</sup> This operation would not have been possible ten years ago, even if there had been the willingness in theory to launch a similar offensive.

The most likely area for future Russian military action continues to be the former Soviet region in cases deemed by Russia to pose significant threats to its interests, for example, the intrusion of IS terrorism into Central Asian states. It is unlikely better capabilities will result in the indiscriminate future use of military force by Russia or a proliferation of expansionist policies as improvements in Russia’s conventional military capabilities have not substantially changed the relative military power balance in this region. Even at its lowest point, Russian conventional military power far outrivalled any of the other former Soviet states, at any point of the post-Cold War period, due to the sheer disparity in size and the fact that their militaries were besieged by similar levels of neglect.

Although the operational performance of Russian forces in conflicts fought up until the Georgia war in 2008 was far from stellar, especially when the Chechen wars stretched their capabilities in every possible way, the country never risked a situation that could lead to comprehensive defeat. In spite of its consistent military superiority over the other former Soviet states, Russia opted for the use of force in some cases, but not in others even when this was expected, such as the Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes in 2010. Although long-term occupation and territorial expansion following the five-day war with Georgia in 2008 was within the realm of possibility, Russia decided to withdraw.

Better conventional capabilities have created more options for the Russian leadership to resort to the use of force. However, better capabilities *per se* are unlikely to cause Russia to lose sight of the fact that the utility of military force is limited and not suited for the achievement of every policy objective. Rationality in Russian decision-making, when it comes to the use of force as an instrument of policy, is an important context for the fear that improved capabilities are pursued ultimately to prepare for offensive action against the West. This is not a new insight: in spite of the success of the 2008 modernization program, Russian conventional military power continues to lag far behind the United States and NATO in terms of size, spending, and technological sophistication. This fact has been conceded even by analysts who have warned about the dangers of a military resurgent Russia, as Gressel cited above. This issue tends to be brushed aside, however, as disparity is merely expected

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25 Ibid.

26 Dmitry Gorenburg, “What Russia’s Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in its Capabilities,” *PONARS Policy Memo 424*, March 2016, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/advances-russian-military-operations> (accessed May 20, 2016).



to delay the threat of Russian offensive action. It should not be. Given the relative weakness of Russia's conventional military vis-à-vis NATO and the likelihood of serious escalation and defeat, a military offensive on a NATO member state would be highly irrational. It is also far from clear what strategic objective such a move would serve.

There is no doubt that in absolute terms Russian conventional military capabilities in 2016 are considerably bigger and better than they were at any point during the post-Soviet period. The achievements of the 2008 modernization program, which emphasized the efficiency of command structures, the move from mobilization to rapid reaction, and the modernization of technology, have been well documented and were demonstrated during the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria.<sup>27</sup> Relative to the conventional military power of other great powers, the United States and NATO in particular, Russia's position remains far from impressive. Although defense spending alone is insufficient as a measure of relative military power, the sheer discrepancy in this respect is worth reiterating.

Although Russian defense spending has seen a steady increase since Vladimir Putin's election as president in 2000, the country's military budget today is still little more than 10 percent of United States military budget—and a fraction of the NATO alliance as a whole. Even when the Russian defense budget approached five percent of the gross domestic product in 2015 at the peak of military spending, its entire budget, inclusive of spending on nuclear capabilities, amounted to less than the combined budgets of Germany and Italy.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of the number and quality of high-tech weaponry, Russia continues to lag far behind Western competitors, especially the United States. Although strides have been made in reforming the Russian defense industry, persistent organizational problems need to be resolved before Russia can start rivaling the West with advanced military technology. Regarding troop numbers, it is generally assumed Russian military strength in 2015 comprised up to 800,000 personnel. This is sizeable (even compared to the United States' 1,400,000 active soldiers), but the bulk of the Russian armed forces are poorly trained conscripts.<sup>29</sup> When it comes to the combat readiness and operational experience of Russian conventional forces relative to those of the United States, there is little reason to fear Russia is catching up. Although Russian troops have trained in the fighting of large-scale joint inter-service operations in numerous military exercises in the past few years, Russia's reformed ground forces have never been tested in an actual conflict situation, as both Crimea and Syria were limited in scope and scale.<sup>30</sup>

Fears over the possibility of Russian offensive action against a NATO member state have not arisen out of the blue. Although long-range Russian bomber flights close to other countries' airspaces resumed in 2006 and have caused concern for a while, such instances of military provocation continue and have risen in number. Aggressive maneuvers

27 Giles, "Russia's New 'Tools,'" 13-25.

28 "Chapter Ten: Country Comparisons – Commitments, Force Levels and Economics," *The Military Balance* 116, no. 1 (2016): 484-485.

29 Ibid.

30 Johan Norberg, "Training to Fight: Russia's Major Military Exercises, 2011-2014," *Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI) Report*, December 2015, 5, <http://foi.se/rappport?rNo=FOI-R--4128--SE> (accessed January 2016).

by Russian fighter aircraft, like the buzzing of a US naval vessel in the Baltic Sea in April 2016, have exacerbated concerns Russia was willing to risk a military confrontation with the West. Moreover, the number and size of Russian military exercises and surprise inspections in its Western military district have mushroomed since the start of the 2008 modernization program. According to figures of the Russian Ministry of Defense, some exercises have involved up to 150,000 military personnel and have honed the country's ability to fight a large-scale interstate war.<sup>31</sup>

It remains highly questionable whether preparation for offensive action is the most likely motivation behind these developments. Given the variety of possible ways in which states can wield conventional military power to achieve different objectives, there are more plausible explanations for Russia's actions vis-à-vis NATO. One explanation, for example, is that Russia is using its military power for swaggering. This has been defined by Art as the conspicuous display by a state or statesman of one's military might "to look and feel more powerful or important, to be taken seriously by others in the councils of international decision-making, to enhance the nation's image in the eyes of others."<sup>32</sup> Clearly, after years of decay during which the West had written off Russia as a global military actor, such swaggering, coupled with the interventions in Ukraine and Syria, has been an effective way to enhance the international image of Russia's shiny, new military power in a comprehensive manner. Given the importance for Russia of being granted great power status on a global level, this explanation makes a great deal of sense, as swaggering can bring prestige "on the cheap," especially when the country is not in the position to project the image of being a great power by other means.<sup>33</sup>

The idea that the revival of Russian conventional military power is motivated entirely by the wish to pursue expansionist policies and to build the offensive potential required to defeat the West is reminiscent of the Western school of thought that during the Cold War sought to explain the Soviet defense effort as the result of historical Russian paranoia, aggressiveness, and "mindless lust for territory," thus depriving Soviet decision-making of any rationality.<sup>34</sup> Such an interpretation of Russian motivations and intentions is even more remarkable because the decision to risk offensive action against a NATO state would be even more irrational today than it was at any point during the Cold War given the disparity of the conventional military power balance. Some observers have expressed the fear Russia, even in the face of military inferiority, might test NATO's resolve with an attack on one of the Baltic states because a lack of commitment to Article V collective defense might mean the United States and other NATO members would not fulfill their treaty obligations.<sup>35</sup>

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31 Ibid., 62.

32 Art, "To What Ends Military Power?" 10.

33 Ibid.

34 William C. Fuller Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1992): xv.

35 Alexander Woolfson, "Why the World Still Needs the West," *Standpoint*, June 2015, <http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/features-june-2015-alexander-woolfson-the-world-still-needs-the-west> (accessed May 20, 2016).

In fact, similar concerns were prominent during the Cold War when analysts expressed doubts about the United States' willingness to escalate in the case of a Soviet attack on Europe. As Glaser noted, "the stronger argument in this debate held that US strategy did provide an adequate deterrent...because even a small probability of US nuclear escalation presented the Soviets with overwhelming risks."<sup>36</sup> The fact that a Soviet attack did not materialize in spite of a much more favorable military balance indicates this argument had a lot of truth in it.

The assumption of irrationality as the basis for Russian decision-making in the area of defense and foreign policy can only hamper the identification of appropriate policy responses. Certainly, measures such as sanctions imposed on the Russian regime would be useless as their success depends on the targets' rational response. A more complex assessment of Russia's reasons for rebuilding its conventional military force, not based implicitly or explicitly on questionable assumptions about Russian strategic culture, is required.

### Implications

As long as conventional military power retains utility as an instrument of policy, and it is seen as an important attribute of a global power, Russia is unlikely to stop improving its capabilities. The neglect of Russia's armed forces throughout the 1990s resulted from the leadership's inability—not its principled lack of desire—to maintain a competitive conventional military. Given the persistent importance of great power status for Russia and the historical significance of military strength in its self-perception as such a power, the revival of Russia's conventional military was just a matter of time.

This revival has implications for the global power balance and confronts the United States and NATO with an uncomfortable reality. Forcing Russia into reversing, or putting a stop to, this process *per se* is not an option. Western sanctions banning the export of defense technology and dual-use equipment into Russia are already in place and should be continued. The Russian defense industry is reliant on Western imports, especially for microelectronics and advanced production equipment, so the sanctions have the potential to slow down the modernization process. Although Russia has implemented measures to counter the impact of the sanctions with import substitution, according to the British expert on the Russian defense industry Julian Cooper, the completion of some weapons systems have already been halted or delayed.<sup>37</sup>

The pace of further Russian military modernization will largely depend on economic developments within the country. When the ambitious rearmament program to the year 2020 was created in 2010, the pace of the program was based on the expectation of significant economic growth which would allow Russia to keep defense spending below three percent of the gross domestic product for the lifetime of the program. Economic stagnation, however, meant military expenditures ballooned

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<sup>36</sup> Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War?" 85.

<sup>37</sup> Julian Cooper, "Russia's State Armament Program to 2020: A Quantitative Assessment of Implementation, 2011-2015," *Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI) Report*, March 2016, 41, <http://www.foi.se/report?rNo=FOI-R--4239--SE> (accessed June 5, 2016).

to 5.4 percent of the gross domestic product in the amended budget for 2015, and the new armaments program was delayed until 2025.<sup>38</sup> From this viewpoint, much will depend on the Russian leadership's willingness and ability to prioritize defense over other crucial areas of state spending.

Russia is likely to continue using military force as an instrument of policy. Better capabilities have given it a wider range of options, including outside of the former Soviet region. It is another uncomfortable reality for the United States and for NATO—as long as the right of states to use force persists in international politics, there is no easy way of stopping Russia from resorting to force in certain situations.

This is the case even if Russia does so in ways deemed to go against internationally accepted norms on when intervention is justified, as it did in Ukraine in 2014. In this sense, the United States and NATO can only lead by example in using military force strictly as a last resort and within the parameters of international law and to condemn Russia when it does not do the same. It is clear Russian military actions in Ukraine have already had serious consequences for the country's international image. Negative views of Russia in Europe have risen from 54 to 74 percent and no region of the world has improved its perspective of the country.<sup>39</sup> As complete isolation is not in Russia's interest, there is hope international repercussions and likely condemnation when international law is clearly violated will be a factor in its future decisions to use military force.

On a more encouraging note, there are limitations to Russia resorting to the use of military force in an offensive capacity and to the effectiveness of relying on this instrument as a means to regaining the status of a world power. It is unlikely improved conventional capabilities will blind the Russian leadership to the fact that military force is not a panacea for the achievement of all policy objectives and that in certain cases, especially if it could lead to direct confrontation with a militarily superior actor such as NATO, this could have devastating consequences that would not serve its interests. Although Crimea demonstrated Russia does not in principle shy away from using military force in support of territorial expansion, it is unlikely a "mindless lust for territory" has become the driver for Russian defense and foreign policy. If the experience of the post-Soviet era is anything to go by, Russia has not used military force for territorial expansion in the past, even in cases when the opportunity presented itself—and its military power would have allowed it to do so.

When it comes to Russia's use of conventional military power to re-establish itself as a serious actor in global politics, it is clear "swaggering" has already yielded considerable results. Although Russia's relative conventional military power is nowhere near the strength of the United States and NATO, international reactions to the display of its revived armed forces have arguably enhanced its global image to an extent that far exceeds its actual material capabilities. This should be kept in mind when decisions on US and NATO force deployments on Russia's

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Galeotti, "The West is Too Paranoid About Russia's 'Infowar,'" *The Moscow Times*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-west-is-too-paranoid-about-russias-infowar-op-ed/524756.html> (accessed May 3, 2016).

western borders are made. Reassurance measures, especially for NATO's most eastern member states, are inevitable. If the motivations for these measures are not clearly communicated, they could potentially lead to a situation whereby increasingly aggressive posturing by Russia could be encouraged rather than discouraged by indirectly inflating the image of its military power internationally and amongst the Russian population.

Reliance on conventional military power will only get Russia so far in its quest to regain international recognition as a great power. In an article published in 1996, Richard Pipes noted financially unattainable ambitions for conventional military power in the 1993 Russian military doctrine. In his view, Russia was at a crossroads between the lengthy path of turning the country into a genuine world power that projected strength in all areas of statecraft and the alluring shortcut towards recognition as a great power based entirely on military might.<sup>40</sup>

If Russia did indeed choose the second path, as seems probable given recent developments, this is unlikely to serve its interests well in the long term. The collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrated the hollowness of international status based entirely on military might. The loss of the latter inevitably signified the loss of great power status for Russia which, unlike the United States, had not maintained strength in other important areas of statecraft and foreign policy.<sup>41</sup> Although recent Russian defense reforms cannot be compared to the defense efforts of the Soviet Union in terms of scope and size, even comparatively modest military spending has significantly strengthened Russia's ability to project the image of power on an international level. This is a double-edged sword, however. If Russia continues to use military force in ways condemned by large portions of the international community and neglects the development of other instruments of statecraft for both domestic and international use, it will isolate itself further, rather than gain the respect it craves.

### **NATO's Options**

NATO's and the West's options for stopping the ongoing revival of Russia's conventional military power, or to prevent potential future Russian military interventions, are limited. There are choices to be made in deciding how to respond to these developments, especially when it comes to Russian military posturing vis-à-vis NATO, and potential consequences of any responses made need to be weighed up carefully.

As indicated in NATO SACEUR Scaparotti's May 2016 statement and also by NATO's actions since the start of the Ukraine conflict in spring 2014, the alliance has decided to take an uncompromisingly tough stance towards Russia, strengthening its presence and posture alongside its eastern borders in order to demonstrate strength, unity, and resolve to deter any potential Russian military aggression or expansionist move against NATO members and allies. While these measures are likely to reassure NATO member states in eastern and central Europe that have been historically fearful of Russian intentions, their potential long-term consequences for NATO and the West should not be ignored. It is already obvious Russia is not interpreting NATO's actions in the spirit intended

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40 Pipes, "Is Russia Still an Enemy?" 78.

41 Ibid.; and Art, "American Foreign Policy," 41.

by the alliance, that is, as defensive measures aimed predominantly at reassuring NATO member states close to its borders.

Continuing to perceive NATO troops stationed and exercising close to its borders as a threat to its security and national interests, Russia has reacted by stepping up its military posture and presence, as well as its aggressive rhetoric vis-à-vis NATO. The experience of the Cold War has taught us what an ever-more intense security dilemma can lead to. If the current trend of uncompromising rhetoric and military posturing on both sides continues, a renewed arms race is a likely outcome. Given Russia's economic situation and comparative conventional military weakness, the West would probably emerge victorious yet again in such a race. From this point of view, the scenario of a new arms race would be less disastrous for the West than it would be for Russia, but nonetheless it would be costly for all states and societies involved. Moreover, the danger of intended or unintended escalation in the face of spiralling tensions is worth bearing in mind.

Doing nothing is clearly not an alternative to NATO's current policies towards Russia. Even if a convincing case can be made that Russian intentions are probably not driven by expansionist policies and that an attack on a NATO member state is highly unlikely, chance and uncertainty make the fears felt by Russia's closest neighbors understandable and justified. The question is whether a middle ground between a policy (that will inevitably lead to another arms race with all the costs this involves), and "doing nothing" or a weak response (that could be interpreted as "appeasement") can be found.

The intensity of current East-West tensions cannot yet be likened to those of the Cold War and rhetoric about a "New Cold War" is not helpful as it "makes it harder for the West to craft realistic policies with respect to both the Ukraine crisis and Russia generally," as Andrew Monaghan has argued.<sup>42</sup> However, certain lessons from the Cold War might be instructive, especially when it comes to NATO's and the West's handling of aggressive Russian military posturing.

George F. Kennan's Cold War doctrine of containment, with its emphasis on strength, unity, and readiness to defend against and deter potential Russian expansion, has already experienced a revival and is being discussed amongst some Western leaders and within NATO as a relevant framework for creating responses to Russia.<sup>43</sup> As Matthew Rojansky cautioned, there is a tendency to interpret this doctrine falsely as an exclusively military approach. In fact, Kennan's understanding of containment was a complex and long-term political strategy. Focusing on recognition of the opponent's vulnerabilities at the same time as strengthening the West's capacities to find long-term solutions to pressing problems, Kennan explicitly warned against the use of "threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward toughness" as this could back the Kremlin into a corner and inadvertently exacerbate the situation.<sup>44</sup>

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42 Andrew Monaghan, *A 'New Cold War'? Abusing History, Misunderstanding Russia* (London, UK: Chatham House, May 2015), 1.

43 Matthew Rojansky, "George F. Kennan, Containment, and the West's Current Russia Problem," *NATO Defense College Research Division, Research Paper #127*, January 2016, 6.

44 *Ibid.*, 2 and 7.



The intensity of current East-West tensions will make a renewed attempt at resetting relations with Russia a much more difficult undertaking for the soon-to-be elected new US administration. The new administration will have the opportunity to consider whether a policy of increasingly tough military containment of Russia will serve the future interests of the United States and NATO better than a more balanced approach as advocated by Kennan. The latter will be the more difficult choice because it requires a complex understanding of developments in Russia, as well as the willingness of both sides to communicate. This effort appears worthwhile because as Rojansky argued, it will allow the United States and the West to strike a balance “between demonstrating the collective political will necessary to maintain a credible deterrent, and charting a way forward for negotiated settlement of differences, selective cooperation, and eventual reconciliation in Russia-West relations overall.”<sup>45</sup>