



## **Are the Russian Armed Forces a Threat to NATO?**

**Maxim Worcester**

**May 2014**

### **Executive Summary**

---

Russia's occupation of Crimea has created a new interest in an issue many had thought was history – the military balance in Europe. The withdrawal of US troops from Europe and the drastic cutting of military budgets in the West has led to some concerns that NATO's ability to contain Russia is weaker than it was during the Cold War.

At the same time, Russia has embarked on a hugely ambitious plan to upgrade its conventional and strategic assets and has taken steps to reform an army which had changed little from the days of the Red Army.

Given the rapid deterioration of Russia's financial situation and looming sanctions, it is very questionable, that Russia can afford to complete its plan to bring its forces into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, let alone achieve the levels of interoperability which NATO has achieved in the last years. It has not managed to transform a mass mobilisation army into one that is more compact and professional. The fact remains – Russia can only maintain the strategic balance through the preservation of all three components of the Strategic Nuclear Forces.

With the potential for conflict rising on NATO's eastern flank, we can take some comfort in the fact that NATO has a conventional military advantage over Russia in Europe.

### **About ISPSW**

---

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented and is above party politics.

In an ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, bringing major opportunities but also risks, decision-makers in enterprises and politics depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have worked – in some cases for decades – in executive positions and possess a wide range of experience in their respective specialist areas.



## ANALYSIS

---

The invasion of Georgia in 2008 exposed significant military weakness and triggered a huge rebuilding plan. Efforts to raise standards have, however, been dogged by mismanagement, corruption, changes in plans. Under Russia's 10-year reform plan of 2009, its military forces should have been at one million last year. Currently the headcount stands at a number between 700,000 and 800,000.

In practice, the reforms have run into significant difficulties. One of the core problems today faced by the Russian armed forces is a lack of standardization. For example, the motorized rifle brigades comprise four different types: two types of heavy brigades as well as medium and light structures. These, along with the tank brigades are equipped with ten different modifications of four different Main Battle Tanks (T-64, T-72, T-80 and T-90) and seven different types of Armored Personnel Carriers. Most of these carry different machine guns or cannons with differing fire control systems, ballistics and caliber of ammunition. Some of the vehicles require diesel fuel, others gasoline. In short, the Russian army is faced with a logistical nightmare. This calls into question the very idea that brigades might be fully combat-ready upon taking possession of pre-deployed vehicles. From this it becomes clear, that a Russian brigade might even have problems in carrying out effective offensive operations against the prepared defenses of any NATO Unit larger than a company.

These problems became acutely apparent during the Vostok-2010 exercises in the Russian Far East. A brigade, trained to operate BMP-2 Infantry Fighting Vehicles, was deployed to the Eastern Military District only to find that the assigned vehicles were of a different type (BMP-1) meaning that the troops were unable to make effective use of the equipment. Three years later the exercise was repeated – this time the brigade was deployed by train to the Far East together with their equipment. What also became clear was that the long-awaited Sozvezdie M2 command and control system designed to connect brigade units during combat was in fact further complicating matters. The exchange protocols could not communicate with the system used by the Russian General Staff, nor could it interact with the air defense unit command and control system.

The Five Day War with Georgia exposed significant shortfalls of the Russian air force. The ability of the air force in combating enemy air defense has to be judged as limited for a country aspiring to be a great military power. Russia lost ten combat aircraft during the short conflict over the course of a total of 200 missions – five were lost on the first day of the conflict. Georgia lacked fighter aircraft as well as a comprehensive and integrated air defense system which puts the Russian losses into perspective. The Russian air force was also unable to provide effective ground support due to a lack of trained forward air controllers and non-compatible radio systems. Ground troops were not able to communicate with the pilots, nor could either effectively operate at night due to the lack of night vision equipment.

The Russian government has since taken steps aimed at improving the effectiveness of the Russian armed forces. It plans to increase the number of "contract personnel", higher paid volunteers, who fill most of the NCO and specialist slots, from 200,000 to 425,000 over the next few years and ensure that a training and selection programme will ensure that the right people are recruited. However, army service is so despised that even competitive pay and better living conditions are not attracting as many qualified volunteers as needed. The balance of recruits are conscripts who now only serve for one year rather than two. The declining birthrate since the end of the Soviet Union has resulted in the number of draftees declining from 1.5 million in the early 1990s to 800,000 today. Less than half of the conscripts are turning up for duty and many have criminal backgrounds or are unfit for duty. Given the growing number of ill-trained and unreliable conscripts, high levels of corruption amongst the officer corps the Russian military is more of a mirage than an effective combat organi-



sation. Even Russian sources state that the Federal Targeted Program of Transition to the Contract Basis, which was implemented in 2004 - 2007, was a failure.

One of the most expensive and long-term reform is the modernization according to the State Armament Programme for 2011 - 2020. If successfully executed, the Russian Armed Forces will be 70% equipped with new weapons and military equipment. "New" in this context does not necessarily mean "modern". In December 2008, for the first time since the end of the Soviet Union, a contract was signed for the purchase of 32 Su-34 fighters. This was rapidly followed for further orders, including the re-purchase of 34 MIG-29 fighters from Algeria. In this way, contracts were signed for 130 tactical fighter aircraft. The Navy signed contracts for the purchase of frigates and submarines, and has signed orders with France for the delivery of two Mistral class LPDs. The army has ordered Iveco armored vehicles from Italy and UAVs from Israel. The priorities of the conventional arms programme are firmly focused on improving C4ISR capabilities and military transport aircraft to improve troop mobility. All in all, Russia plans to spend \$616 billion on weapons by 2020.

The main threat to the success of the programme is macroeconomic uncertainty. Currently, Russia's economic situation is grim. In the first quarter of 2014 GDP sank by 0.5% against the same period last year (2013). The World Bank has forecast negative growth rates (1.8%) for 2014, should the Ukraine crisis continue. In the first quarter of 2014 capital flight reached \$70 billion and is set to reach \$150 billion by the end of the year.

Given the grave economic outlook for Russia it remains very questionable if the highly ambitious programme of military spending can be realized. All points to the fact that currently Russia's armed forces are at 80% of planned strength (at best) and that number is set to decline as Russia's economic situation continues to deteriorate. The ambitious programme was based on the assumption that growth rates would average at 6%, economic growth was only at around 4% in 2011 when the programme was launched. To fund the programme, Russia has been forced to resort to state-guaranteed credits and defense spending as a proportion of GDP has continued to rise as the economy declines.

Russia's military might be the largest in the region, but it isn't the same force as the Red Army. At the same time, the military balance in Europe has also changed drastically. This has led to some concerns that the West's ability to deter Russia is weaker than it was during the cold war. The truth, however, is quite the opposite. The military balance in Europe is more favorable to NATO today than it was when nearly ten times as many US troops were based in Europe.

According to IISS, the Soviet Union deployed a total of 64 divisions in the Western Theatre of Military Operations. They would have been reinforced by around 700,000 troops from East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland. In all, the Warsaw Pact would have had more than 100 divisions at its disposal. NATO would have been able to muster around 25 equivalent divisions.

Since the end of the Soviet Union the situation has changed dramatically. Today, Russia has a total of seven divisions in its Western Military District and can muster a total of about 25 divisions. Its former allies are members of NATO and are backstopped by the rest of NATO – including the United States. These numbers do not take into account the general deterioration of Russian forces since 1991 and the increase in effectiveness of NATO. Even Vladimir Putin can see that the Russian conventional armed forces are outgunned. The Strategic Nuclear Forces and a renewed interest in Chemical and other weapon systems remain Russia's trump card and sole option to contain NATO.

\*\*\*



**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

### About the Author of this Issue

---

Maxim Worcester is Managing Director of German Business Protection GmbH (GBP), a Berlin based Security Consultancy. GBP is a subsidiary company of KÖTTER Security. In the past he worked, amongst others, for the Economist Intelligence Unit, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Control Risks and KPMG.



*Maxim Worcester*