



# Russia's military: the weak links

by Cameron Johnston and Nicu Popescu

Although President Putin has repeated time and again that he will not be drawn into an arms race for fear of bankrupting Russia, that is precisely what his policies imply. On 28 January 2015, two Russian TU-95 bombers, presumably armed with nuclear weapons, approached British airspace and disrupted civil aviation. The last in a series of fifty close encounters worldwide, this incident confirmed fears of a resurgence in Russian military might. If the Ukraine crisis showed that Russia could project force in the 'near abroad', military manoeuvres further afield are intended to prove that Russia is a global power, in terms of its capabilities as well as its ambition.

Yet appearances can be deceptive. The Russian special forces which seized Crimea and fomented unrest in eastern Ukraine were indeed better equipped and organised than the soldiers who fought in Georgia in 2008. Structural reforms and rearmament drives had seen to that. But sanctions, the decline in military cooperation with Ukraine, inflation and plummeting oil prices have already conspired to undermine the foundations of Russia's renewed military strength.

## Against the (Western) tide

The State Armaments Programme 2011-2020, or GPV 2020, was designed to give Russia advanced weapons befitting of a resurgent power. The government planned to spend around \$630 billion

over nine years, thereby ensuring that 30% of arms would be 'modern' by 2015 and 70% by 2020. Spending was weighted towards the end of the decade so that defence companies would have time to find their feet and prepare for serial production.

Unlike the rest of Europe, Russia invested heavily in its military after the financial crisis of 2008. Moscow increased defence spending by close to 60% between 2008 and 2013, whereas EU member states cut 12% on average over the same period. The US also reduced spending both in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP after 2011.

Long before the annexation of Crimea, however, it became clear that GPV 2020 was not being fulfilled on time and in full. In 2012, for instance, targets were revised downwards three times in a vain attempt to show that rearmament was on track. The defence industry had shed experts and engineers during the 1990s and now struggled to lure them back, while a shortage of machine tools and the lack of radical structural change meant that defence enterprises could not up the tempo as fast as hoped.

## The Ukraine factor

The crisis over Ukraine has exacerbated these underlying problems. The end of formal military

cooperation with Ukraine has cut Russia off from an important supplier of parts and services: engines for its planes and helicopters, gas-turbine engines for its frigates, guidance systems for its missiles and experts who service its ageing stock of SS-18 ‘Satan’ missiles – which account for a full third of Russia’s nuclear arsenal.

The Ukrainian company Motor Sich illustrates just how interconnected the Russian and Ukrainian defence industries were. Every year, it sent between 250 and 270 engines to be fitted into Russian military and civilian helicopters. Hundreds more found their way into helicopters destined for foreign customers.

It is unlikely that Russian manufacturers will be able to compensate for this loss, at least in the short term. Motor Sich still appears to be sending engines across the border but, with a complete cessation of trade likely, Russian businesses are struggling to pick up the slack. St Petersburg’s Klimov works is bidding to increase production from 50 to 350 engines a year and its director, claims somewhat fancifully that the company can complete the transition within a year.

Even if the requisite finances were available, therefore, Russian defence enterprises would have struggled to meet their targets. But funding is now under threat. GPV-2020 was drawn up on the assumption that the Russian economy would grow at 7% per annum over the course of the programme. In fact, it barely grew at all in 2014 and is forecast to contract by 3% to 5% in 2015.

With GDP shrinking, the government had to decide whether to distribute a smaller slice of the pie to the armed forces or to stick to current spending plans and risk starving more innovative areas of the economy. It appears to have opted for the former. Though his rhetoric is as bellicose as ever, Putin decided to ‘delay’ spending under GPV-2020 and to rein in expenditure under its successor programme, GPV 2016-2025, which has been scaled back from 55 to 30 trillion roubles. If the current exchange rate between the dollar and the rouble persists, that would mean a large cut to military spending in dollar terms.

## Weapons of choice

If public pronouncements are any indication, Russia intends to concentrate its dwindling resources on its nuclear forces. At a recent meeting convened to discuss GPV 2025, Putin argued that the principal threat to Russian security is

America’s missile defence system in Europe. In response to the deployment of US destroyers to the Spanish port of Rota, meanwhile, the Russian chief of the general staff signalled his intention to place four nuclear missile regiments on alert. Lastly, point 27 of Russia’s new military doctrine states that ‘Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons[...]in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation with conventional weapons, if the survival of the state is put at risk’.

Structural changes within the Russian defence industry also underline the importance attached to nuclear forces. A giant aerospace holding, dominated by the Almaz Antey concern, may soon be established to cover all aspects of air and space defence. New ‘Tundra’ satellites will allow Russia to monitor space for intercontinental ballistic missiles with greater precision, while a new generation of Voronezh radar systems will pick up incoming projectiles.

But if the nuclear forces are going to consume a growing portion of a finite defence budget, what is going to be cut? With Russian soldiers, tanks and military equipment embedded in eastern Ukraine, troops concentrated around Ukraine’s border and no end to the conflict in sight, the government cannot very well slash funding for its conventional forces. Indeed, by provoking NATO into stepping up its presence in eastern Europe, Russia has lumbered itself with the additional cost of shoring up its Western defences.

## Checkmate or stalemate?

In chess terms, then, Russia’s armaments policy is in zugzwang: whatever move Putin makes next, he loses. The Kremlin’s ‘political technologists’ have whipped up the population into such a frenzy that to back down now and cut spending to Russia’s conventional forces would damage the regime. But if it maintains spending across the board, it deepens the economic crisis and imperils public services, thus courting public wrath. The *deus ex machina* of rising oil prices might save the day but, then again, it might not. Russia seems determined to open multiple fronts against the ‘decadent West’, diplomatically, economically and militarily. But if it overreaches, the Kremlin will have no choice but to spread its resources perilously thin.

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