

RUSSIA'S QUIET MILITARY REVOLUTION, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR EUROPE

Gustav Gressel

SUMMARY

- Russia has implemented far-reaching military reforms to create a more professional and combat-ready armed forces that can swiftly deploy abroad, backed by expertise in non-conventional warfare tactics such as subversion and propaganda.
- The West has misunderstood these reforms – focusing on shortcomings in equipment – and, as a result, has dangerously underestimated Russia's military capacity, as shown by its response to the Ukraine crisis.
- Russia could now overwhelm any of the countries in the post-Soviet sphere if they were isolated from the West, but it lacks the capacity for effective long-term military action further afield, such as in Syria.
- Europe's military advantage over Russia is undermined by low combat-readiness, understaffing, and the need to coordinate between countries.
- Europe should develop a united political response to Russian expansionism, including a coordinated position on nuclear deterrence, while preparing for hybrid scenarios. It will need the support of the US, but EU crisis response agencies would be key in a hybrid war.

Russia has surprised the West with its military capacity twice in succession. First, in Ukraine, the Russian armed forces overturned Western assumptions about their inefficiency with a swift and coordinated “hybrid war”, combining subversion and infiltration with troop deployment to gain an early military advantage. The effectiveness of Russia's action unnerved Western planners, who scrambled to devise a response. Then, in Syria, Russia used military force outside the borders of the former Soviet Union for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Its forceful intervention in defence of President Bashar al-Assad made the United States look hesitant and indecisive, though the long-term impact of Russia's gambit remains uncertain.

Russia's new military boldness and adventurism has left Western observers puzzled, but it does not come out of nowhere: current Russian strategy is the culmination of a systematic military reform that has been insufficiently appreciated by the European Union and the US. An examination of this reform process will allow us to assess the current strengths and limitations of Russia's military, and to understand how Russia's leaders plan to use military force and how the West should respond.

The examination also reveals that, although Russia's action in Syria is now in the spotlight, it is a sideshow to Russia's military planning. The Syrian deployment does not draw on the core strengths of the armed forces, or on Moscow's military vision. That vision is centred on the Eurasian landmass, and above all those areas surrounding Russia's post-Cold War borders.

The current Russian leadership has never accepted the post-1989 European order, including the norms, rules, and conventions agreed by the last generation of Soviet leadership. The Kremlin does not seek incremental changes to the current order but aspires to create a totally new one, regarding post-Soviet borders as something to be revised – with military force, if necessary. As a group of leading Russian defence analysts remarked at the 2012 Valdai Discussion Club, an annual forum where Russian officials meet with experts: “The entire Belavezha Accords system of state and territorial structure, which took shape as a result of the 1991 national disaster (the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991), is illegitimate, random, unstable and therefore fraught with conflict”.¹

Until 2014, Russia could not underpin this desire for a revision of the European order with force. Even now, it is not in a position of sheer numerical superiority, as it had been from the seventeenth century onwards. Russian military thinkers and planners have had to be creative to try to overcome the multiple disadvantages of the Russian military apparatus vis-à-vis its Western counterparts.

First and foremost, Russia has improved the professionalism, readiness, and effectiveness of its military personnel and armed forces. While in the past the Russian armed forces needed years or months to gear up for military confrontation, they now have the ability to react quickly and strike without warning. The rearmament programme is incomplete and will likely be delayed by the economic downturn and by Russia’s diplomatic isolation. Still, Russia is now a military power that could overwhelm any of its neighbours, if they were isolated from Western support. The Kremlin considers the threat of tactical nuclear weapons as an important strategic tool that could be used to isolate the post-Soviet space from Western support, although Russia has, until recently, been reluctant to openly play this card.

While Russian military action beyond the non-NATO post-Soviet periphery is not imminent, it cannot be ruled out. The situation today differs fundamentally from that of the Cold War – Russia now has the advantage of geographic proximity to the potential frontline, and can move fast and without warning, unlike Europe. To counter this, Europe must be united in its response, ensure credible deterrence, and prepare to respond to hybrid warfare. It will also need the support of the US.

Russia’s underrated military reforms

Russia has announced various defence reforms since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But, for nearly two decades, these were little more than paper tigers.² The Russian military was not tested in any large-scale commitment of conventional forces, instead engaging in proxy wars in its immediate neighbourhood fought with irregular and special-operation forces. In the two wars in Chechnya, the performance of the Russian armed forces was far from satisfactory, but Russia shifted the war effort to local proxies and Interior Ministry troops, avoiding the need for the armed forces to change substantially. Lack of money and bureaucratic resistance meant that attempts to increase professionalism and combat-readiness in the Russian armed forces led nowhere. The bill of this negligence was to be paid in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008.

Russian tanks moved into Georgia in August 2008.³ The Kremlin denied that regime change in Tbilisi was on its agenda, but in fact Russian forces moved too slowly to achieve such a goal. While they succeeded in their strategic aim of humiliating Georgia and reinforcing Russian control of Georgia’s separatist regions, there were numerous tactical and operational problems.⁴ Russian forces were slow in mobilising and deploying to the theatre; troops from different divisions had to be synchronised before the invasion through manoeuvres in the Northern Caucasus, because Russian forces relied on mobilisation to fill the ranks and certain regiments were kept unmanned; and inexperienced and talkative conscripts proved to be a security problem. The Russian military had to rely on superior numbers instead of quality. Coordination between the arms of the Russian forces proved difficult. Tactical and operational planning was poor and inflexible, as was leadership. Situation awareness was poor, and led to many incidents of “friendly fire”. Russia failed to exploit the advantage of air superiority, and supply lines were overstretched.

Most strikingly, Georgia’s US-trained troops proved tougher than anticipated. Their leadership was more flexible; they acted as good combat teams; and they were much more motivated than the Russians, partly due to their superior individual equipment. Georgia had upgraded vintage Soviet equipment with Western night-vision and communication devices that made them more effective than their Russian counterparts, although Georgian troops lacked the heavy armour, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft equipment to defeat the Russian forces.

2 See Alexander M. Golts and Tonya L. Putnam, “State Militarism and Its Legacies: Why Military Reform Has Failed in Russia”, *International Security*, Volume 29, Issue 2, Fall 2004, p. 121–158; the article provides a useful description of social mobilisation and the cultivation of nationalism by the Russian Security Services, but defines “defence reform success” purely in Western terms. For the authors, it was unthinkable that the Russian military would succeed in the very same quest several years later.

3 For the causes and aftermath of the Russian-Georgian war, see Gustav C. Gressel, “Der Krieg am Kaukasus: Geschehenisse und Konsequenzen”, in Erich Reiter (ed.), *Die Sezessionskonflikte in Georgien* (Böhlau Verlag Wien: Köln, Weimar, 2009), p. 15–49.

4 The following assessment is in large part based on Eugene Kogan, “The Russian-Georgian Conflict: An Assessment”, in Erich Reiter (ed.), *Die Sezessionskonflikte in Georgien* (Böhlau Verlag Wien: Köln, Weimar, 2009), p. 63–70.

1 Mikhail Barabanov, Konstantin Makienko, and Ruslan Pukhov, “Military Reform: Toward the New Look of the Russian Army”, Valdai Discussion Club, Analytical Report, Moscow, July 2012, p. 9, available at http://vid-1.rian.ru/ig/valdai/Military_reform_eng.pdf (hereafter, Barabanov et al., “Military Reform”).

The poor performance of the Russian armed forces demonstrated the need for real defence reform. The Russian leadership realised that, if performance did not improve, they would find it difficult to use the military to intimidate or coerce larger neighbouring countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, or Kazakhstan, should they embark on policies diverging from the Kremlin's interests. The strength of the Georgian forces taught the Russian leadership that combat- and leadership-training, effective logistics, and higher levels of professionalism are much more important for the overall performance of military forces than high-tech equipment. In addition, it showed them that small incremental improvements on existing equipment would increase their performance considerably at a much lower cost than introducing all-new generations of weapons systems and combat vehicles.

The new round of Russian military reform started in late 2008, after the Georgian campaign was over. The armed forces had not undergone such a rapid transformation since the 1930s, and before that the 1870s. The authorities planned the “new look” reform in three phases, starting with the reforms that would take the longest to produce results.⁵ First, increasing professionalism by overhauling the education of personnel and cutting the number of conscripts; second, improving combat-readiness with a streamlined command structure and additional training exercises; and third, rearming and updating equipment.

Western analysts' focus on the rearmament stage of the reforms, which has not yet been completed, has caused them to overlook the success of the other two stages. These have already given Russia a more effective and combat-ready military, as demonstrated by its fast and coordinated intervention in Ukraine.

The first stage of the reform tackled the professionalism of the Russian armed forces – troops as well as leaders. The overall number of officers – both general staff and staff officers – was reduced dramatically (in line with the streamlining of the command-and-control structure), the warrant officers corps was dissolved, and professionally trained non-commissioned officers (NCO) were introduced. For the first time, the Russian army had a pyramid structure, with few decision-makers at the top and more officers servicing the troops. This freed resources for other reform projects, and reduced bureaucratic battles between rival offices. Officers' wages increased fivefold over the period of the reform, and greater management skills and commitment were demanded from them in return. New housing and social welfare programmes added to the financial security and prestige of armed forces personnel.

⁵ The description of Russia's military reforms is based – where not stated otherwise – on the following articles: Mikhail Barabanov, “Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia”, in Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (eds), *Brothers Armed, Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine* (East View Press: Minneapolis, 2014), p. 91–123; Roger N. McDermott, “Russia's Conventional Armed Forces: Reform and Nuclear Posture to 2020”, in Stephen J. Blank (ed.), *Russian Nuclear Weapons: Past, Present, and Future*, Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, 2011, p. 33–97; and Dmitry Boltenkov, Aleksey Gayday, Anton Karnaukhov, Anton Lavrov, and Vyacheslav Tseluiko, *Russia's New Army* (Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies: Moscow, 2011), available at www.cast.ru/files/book/NewArmy_sm.pdf.

Since the early 2000s, Russia had experimented with hiring more professional soldiers instead of conscripts, but now financial resources were available to increase their numbers on a large scale. This allowed the troops to use more high-tech equipment (conscripts serve too short a period to be effectively trained on complex weapons systems) and increased the combat-readiness of elite forces (paratroopers, naval infantry, and special forces).

The military education system was overhauled, reducing the number of military schools and higher education centres from 65 to 10, and introducing new curricula and career models. Many of the education and training reforms were modelled on the systems of Switzerland and Austria, whose ministries were happy to please their “strategic partners” in Moscow by granting them insights into their NCO and officer training programmes. The aim of Russian military planners was that the new generation of officers should be able to lead their troops in complex environments and quickly adapt to new situations by applying state-of-the-art (Western) leadership techniques. Last but not least, individual soldiers' equipment and uniforms were modernised, increasing morale and confidence.

The second phase concentrated on increasing troop readiness, and improving organisation and logistics. Russia revamped the entire structure of its armed forces – from strategic commands down to new combat brigades. The aim was to increase readiness, deployability, and the ability to send large numbers of troops abroad on short notice.

The reforms reduced the discrepancy between the armed forces' real strength and their strength on paper. During Soviet times, the army relied on mobilisation⁶ – calling up reservists – to achieve full combat strength. Each division was only staffed 50 to 75 percent (with two to three regiments not manned) and required reservists to fill all ranks. This procedure took time and was difficult to hide from the public, and hence would have been a clear indication to Russia's neighbours that military action was imminent. Russia had not resorted to mobilisation since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, due to the fear of domestic dissent. As a result, before each deployment, battalions and regiments had to be assembled in-situ from different divisions according to the level of staffing and equipment that was available at the time. These “patchwork” units were not successful in the Russian-Georgian war, as the different units and officers had hardly trained together and barely knew each other. Hence, the reforms significantly reduced the overall strength of the Russian army on paper, cutting structures that relied on mobilisation and introducing high-readiness combat-brigades (40 “new look” brigades were formed from 23 old divisions – a nominal reduction of about 43 percent).

⁶ In Russian or Ukrainian, the term mobilisation – мобілізація – also refers to drafting new recruits, so it is necessary to take care in interpreting it.

Then the command structure was streamlined. The military districts were transformed into joint forces commands, and their number was reduced. This cut the levels of hierarchy as the military districts now have access to all land, air, and naval forces in their zone. Unnecessary administrative commands were closed, especially in the army and air forces. Even more dramatic were the cuts and reorganisation in the logistics apparatus of the army, where extensive outsourcing and reduction of administrative personnel increased effectiveness.

To further boost troop readiness, manoeuvres and exercises were increased. Large-scale “snatch exercises” were conducted to ensure that Russia could react to a variety of contingencies in its immediate neighbourhood. Not surprisingly, the list of mobilised units and participants in the 2009 and 2013 high-readiness manoeuvres and the war in Ukraine do not differ much – the Russian armed forces generally rehearse what they intend to do. In theory, within 24 hours of alert all airborne units (VDV) should be deployed, and all Russian “new look” brigades ready to deploy. While such high readiness levels have not yet been achieved, one has to bear in mind that before the reforms some Russian divisions needed about a year of preparation before deploying to Chechnya. Smaller-scale battalion- and brigade-level exercises and live-fire exercises have also increased considerably since the mid-2000s.⁷ These are used for tactical leadership training, to familiarise new commanders and units with each other, and to make higher-level commands aware of any shortcomings in the new units.

The results of the reforms are clearly visible. During the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Russian army kept between 40,000 and 150,000 men in full combat-ready formations across the Russian-Ukrainian border.⁸ In parallel, Russia conducted manoeuvres in other parts of the country, comprising up to 80,000 service personnel of all arms. Moreover, the troops stayed in the field in combat-ready conditions for months before being rotated. Not even during the second Chechen war had the number of permanent troops maintained in the field been so high or lasted such a long time. Before the reforms, combat-readiness plummeted immediately after deployment due to inefficient logistics. This is not the case now.

Rearmament

The West has underestimated the significance of Russia’s military reforms. Western – especially US – analysts have exclusively focused on the third phase of reform: the phasing in of new equipment. Numerous Russian and Western articles have stated that the Russian armed forces were still using legacy equipment from the Soviet Union and that its replacement was occurring more slowly than planned by the Kremlin.⁹ However, this is a misunderstanding of the nature of the reforms. The initial stages were not designed to create a new army in terms of equipment, but to ensure that existing equipment was ready to use, and to make the organisation that uses it more effective and professional. Indeed, to successfully intervene in Russia’s neighbourhood, Moscow does not necessarily need the latest cutting-edge defence technology. Rather, such interventions would have to be precisely targeted and quickly executed to pre-empt a proper Western reaction.

It was logical for Russian policymakers to postpone the equipment phase of the military reform until the first two phases of restructuring had yielded tangible results. It takes more time to educate officers, phase out or retrain generations of military leaders, and overhaul bureaucratic structures and logistics than to acquire new equipment. Moreover, Russian policymakers expected the conditions for its realisation to improve over time, in terms of both budget and technology. During the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev there was hope that Russia’s military-industrial complex would benefit from modernisation partnerships with European countries, particularly Western Europe. Hence there was no reason to rush the rearmament phase of Russia’s military reforms. The military-industrial complex made use of the modernisation partnership, and closed some gaps in its arsenal – such as tactical drones – by import. It persuaded Israel to agree to a licence-build contract for a variety of tactical drones, in exchange for Russia cancelling the sale of the S-300 air-defence system to Iran.¹⁰ Other foreign purchases improved the effectiveness of existing equipment, such as new radio equipment for the armed forces, computerised training and simulation facilities, command-and-control networks, and night-vision devices for tanks.

Other deals with foreign nations were designed to close gaps in production techniques and project-management skills in the Russian defence industry. The most famous of these deals was the proposed sale of two Mistral-class helicopter carriers to Russia by French defence company

⁷ Richard Weitz, *Global Security Watch – Russia: A Reference Handbook* (Greenwood: Santa Barbara, 2010), p. 168.

⁸ See Igor Sutyagin, “Russian Forces in Ukraine”, Royal United Services Institute Briefing Paper, March 2015, available at <https://www.rusi.org/publications/other/ref:O54FDBCE478D8B/>.

⁹ Roger McDermott, “Black Holes, Vanishing Rubles and Corruption in the Russian Military”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 7, Issue 203, 9 November 2010, available at [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=37150&cHash=f63f3bbff1#_VY6tHrvaCIM](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37150&cHash=f63f3bbff1#_VY6tHrvaCIM).

¹⁰ “Russia confirms cancellation of Iran’s S-300 deal”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 20 October 2010, p. 28; “Russia and Israel’s IAI agree UAV partnership”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 20 October 2010, p. 31; to give a sense of the durability of such deals, Russia resumed the delivery of S-300 to Iran in 2015, and has used the drones extensively over Ukraine. See “Russia Confirms Sale of S-300 Missile Systems To Iran”, *Agence France-Presse*, 26 May 2015, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/05/26/russia-confirms-sale-missile-systems-iran/27970269/>; Christian Borys, “Ukrainian forces says two drones shot down over war zone are Russian”, *The Guardian*, 21 May 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/ukraine-drones-shot-down-russian>.

DCNS.¹¹ While the vessel itself is not the miracle weapon that Russian claimed, the deal allowed the Russians to learn how the West builds warships. By taking part in the construction of the two helicopter carriers, the Russian shipbuilding industry learned project-management techniques that will help the country to accelerate future shipbuilding programmes. Previously, Russian warships had been built using traditional methods – from keel up in the yard or dock. This is slow, and delivery problems with minor items can block the yard or dock, causing delays. Western nations instead build their boats in sections in different yards, and assemble the blocks later. This makes projects faster, cheaper, more flexible, and less prone to delays. Similar “partnerships” have been planned with Italian and German businesses to gain insights into Western production techniques and procedures for land vehicles, aircraft, defence electronics, and composite materials.

After Vladimir Putin announced the Russian rearmament plans in 2012, Russian defence spending increased from \$70.2 billion in 2011 to \$84.8 billion in 2013, and then \$91.7 billion in 2014.¹² However, the straining of European-Russian relations after Putin’s return to the presidency, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and collapsing energy prices have caused severe setbacks for Russian rearmament programmes.

European sanctions against Russia following the Ukraine crisis – especially the ban on the sale of arms and dual-use goods – did not cause many deals to collapse publicly, but it remains to be seen how far the defence industry’s projects have been delayed by the interruption of links to technical expertise and manufacturing facilities in the West. The incremental improvement of Russian legacy-systems will also be delayed.

But the biggest blow to the defence reforms was the failure of Russian economic modernisation policy in general. In 2015, the government further increased the proportion of GDP spent on defence in the face of rising inflation and falling GDP,¹³ but there are doubts about whether this is sustainable.¹⁴ China’s defence industry has benefited from the country’s overall economic and industrial modernisation. Russia, meanwhile, has failed to modernise at all. Its plan for economic modernisation was a bureaucratic, state-centric one that disregarded the fact that technological modernisation needs a private

industrial sector. Technological modernisation of the defence sector alone worked during Stalin’s time, but not in the information age. The difference between the Chinese and Russian defence industries illustrates this problem.

Russia’s defence modernisation is far from complete. The introduction of new generations of aeroplanes, warships, and land systems began only recently. This modernisation effort will continue over the next decade, and many of the programmes will run into the 2020s or even the 2030s. The decision on the next phase of rearmament has already been postponed several times.¹⁵

Although the low oil price, among other factors, may cause delays, most modernisation programmes should yield their first results by 2020. Whether by coincidence or design, Chinese military documents from the 2000s usually referred to 2020 as the year by which China would be ready to fight at least a regional war, and thereafter become a global military superpower. To militarily challenge Europe, Russia would need allies. Whatever the projected date for completing reforms, Russia knows that it is not yet time for a major military confrontation. However, its defence apparatus could still exploit situations that arise unexpectedly.

The notion that Russia is preparing to face off with the West and NATO is not just domestic politics and sabre-rattling. Russia cannot challenge the international order alone, but the Kremlin’s assertion that the West is in decline and the East on the rise implies its belief that the conditions for a military revision of the current world order will improve over time.¹⁶ Sooner or later, Russia’s leaders believe, they will be presented with an opportunity to join a revisionist coalition. In the meantime, the Russian armed forces are capable enough to successfully defeat any of its immediate western neighbours, including the EU and NATO members that border the Russian Federation, if they are isolated. And, for the time being, this neighbourhood will remain the focus of Russian military strategy.

11 For a deeper analysis of the deal, see Roy Isbister and Yannick Quéau, “An ill wind – How the sale of Mistral warships to Russia is undermining EU arms transfer controls”, GRIP Briefing, November 2014, available at [http://grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/RAPPORTS/2014/Rapport_2014-7%20\(EN\).pdf](http://grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/RAPPORTS/2014/Rapport_2014-7%20(EN).pdf).

12 All figures in 2011 prices and exchange rates. Data from SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, available at http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex-data-1988-2014.

13 “Russian Defense Budget to Hit Record \$81 Billion in 2015”, the *Moscow Times*, 16 October 2014, available at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russian-defense-budget-to-hit-record-81bln-in-2015/509536.html>.

14 The revised Russian budget, released in April 2015, would put defence spending at 9 percent of GDP. This sparked debate among defence analysts about whether such a high level of defence spending was sustainable. See Sergei Guriev, “Russia’s Indefensible Military Budget”, Project Syndicate, 14 May 2015, available at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-military-spending-by-sergei-guriev-2015-05>; or Hannes Adomeit, “Russlands Imperial Irrweg”, *Osteuropa*, Volume 3/2015, p. 67–93, available at <http://www.osteuropa.dgo-online.org/hefte/2015/3/russlands-imperial-irrweg/>.

15 “Russia to endorse new state armament program in late 2015”, Interfax, 27 September 2015, available at http://rbth.co.uk/news/2013/09/27/russia_to_endorse_new_state_armament_program_in_late_2015_30208.html.

16 This line of thought is best explained in Vladimir Putin’s 2012 article, “Russia and the changing world”, *Moskovskie novosti*, 26 February 2012, available at <http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20120227/171547818.html>.

Unconventional warfare

Western – especially US – critiques that the Russian armed forces are not fit for the twenty-first century argue that Russia still adheres to outdated concepts of mid-twentieth century industrial warfare and to an outdated threat perception.¹⁷ While these critics were mostly silenced by Russia's swift occupation and annexation of Crimea, and subsequent war against Ukraine, it is still accurate to observe that Russia prepares for war in an entirely different way than the West.

Russia's military efforts are embedded in a multi-pronged drive to overwhelm, subvert, and subdue the opposing society that is much more ruthless and effective than the West's "comprehensive approach" – the coordination of civilian and military efforts in conflicts and crises. Russia has analysed twenty-first century conflicts,¹⁸ and one of its conclusions is that contemporary warfare is embedded in deep societal struggle. As leading Russian analysts stated at the 2012 Valdai Discussion Club: "The distinction between 'civilian' and 'military' segments of society is disappearing. The aim of a military campaign is to impact not only the enemy army, but also its society, understood in terms of its cultural as well as its physical aspects. This trend makes it necessary to conduct joint 'civilian-military' operations, rather than purely military ones."¹⁹ Russia uses the regime's access to almost all societal spheres in the country to harness them for its war efforts.

These efforts are aided by Russia's paramilitary and non-military forces. In the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Interior has about 170,000 men in ready-formed and trained paramilitary units at its disposal to tackle domestic unrest, terrorism, and border violations.²⁰ There is no need for the armed forces to supplement them in case of an emergency. Similarly, natural disasters and humanitarian aid are taken care of by the Ministry for Emergency Situations, which also has its own troops. The railway and pipeline engineers of the Soviet army were incorporated into this ministry to deal with natural or man-made disasters, disruption of infrastructure, or humanitarian emergencies, and regularly deploy abroad to provide humanitarian assistance. Therefore the Russian armed forces do not prepare for "soft threats" or "post-modern threats" such as domestic terrorism or natural disasters because they don't have to.

These paramilitary and non-military forces would play an important role if Russia carried out a full invasion of one of its neighbours. Both services were mobilised in April 2014 when the Russian military was preparing its assault

on Ukraine.²¹ If there had been a full invasion of that country, it is likely that they would have provided internal security, established an occupation regime, repaired damaged infrastructure, and provided services, among other things. Though no such invasion took place, their mobilisation clearly indicates that the Russian military planners have a much broader picture in mind than just the military situation.

As Russia was too weak to act conventionally in its neighbourhood in the early 1990s, it built up enormous expertise in supporting and organising proxies and quasi-state structures. Now it is using these to supplement its conventional military might, both in terms of the non-military dimension of foreign intervention, and to bolster certain military capabilities. On strategic reconnaissance, the US has developed a powerful array of technical intelligence and surveillance instruments. Russia lagged behind in those assets, but tried to overcome this by embedding human intelligence assets and penetrating the adversary's command structures. In the "near abroad", Russia can also make use of civilian communications infrastructure and services as well as its land-based intelligence installations to intercept enemy communications.

In Ukraine, Russia is engaged not only in a conventional war but also in wars of subversion and propaganda, and in multiple disinformation campaigns at home and abroad. There is a trade and financial war going on, in which Russia tries to weaken the Ukrainian economy by cutting off imports, selectively harming entrepreneurs that support the new government, and corrupting others; as well as a multi-pronged campaign by political representatives, intelligence services, and Russian businesses to undermine European support for Ukraine. In Russian armed forces chief General Valeri Gerasimov's analysis of unconventional warfare,²² the armed intervention is only the climax of a campaign of intensive preparation through political, social, media, and economic means, fostering unrest and influencing sub-state actors.

Russia had prepared for the military campaign in Ukraine proper since at least 2008 by creating or connecting pro-Russian nationalist circles and fifth-column organisations, and by infiltrating local intelligence, military, economic, and administrative structures.²³ The creation of parallel structures and clandestine support bases was instrumental to this effort. The emergence of such organisations in other theatres is an indication of Russian military aspirations. Besides Ukraine, pro-Russian political, economic, and civil organisations are mushrooming in Georgia and Moldova.²⁴

21 Igor Sutyagin and Michael Clarke, "Ukraine Military Dispositions: The Military Ticks Up while the Clock Ticks Down", Royal United Service Institute Briefing Paper, April 2014, available at https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/UKRANIANMILITARYDISPOSITIONS_RUSIBRIEFING.pdf.

22 Валерий Герасимов, Ценность науки в предвидении, Новые вызовы требуют переосмыслить формы и способы ведения боевых действий, VPK News, 27 February 2013, available at <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

23 Winfried Schneider-Deters, *Die Ukraine: Machtvakuum zwischen Russland und der Europäischen Union* (Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, Berlin, 2012), p. 56–65.

24 "How Strong Is Russia's Soft Power in Georgia?", Eurasia-Net, 23 March 2015, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72671>; Alberto Nardelli and George Arnett, "Support for pro-Russia parties in Moldova, mapped", the Guardian, 1 December 2014, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/dec/01/support-for-pro-russia-parties-in-moldova-mapped>.

17 See, for example, Alexander Golts, "Military Reform in Russia: Conscription versus Professionalism", in Kristina Spohr Readman (ed.), *Building Sustainable and Effective Military Capabilities*, NATO Science Series, Science and Technology Policy Volume 45, IOS Press, 2004, p. 136–148.

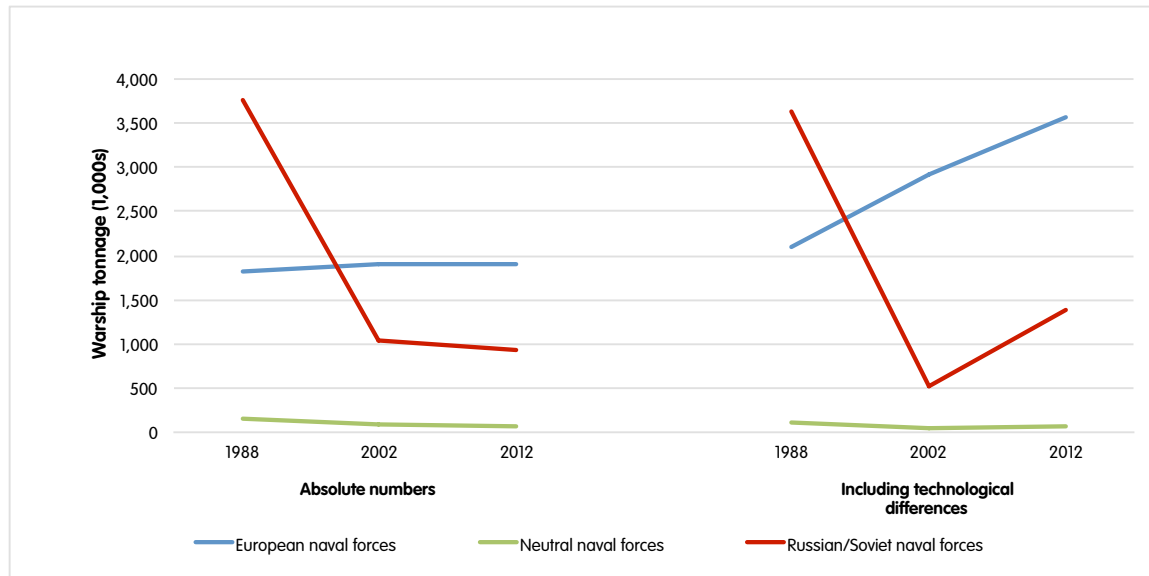
18 For the Russian analysis of the post-Arab Spring uprisings and conflicts, see Валерий Герасимов, Ценность науки в предвидении, Новые вызовы требуют переосмыслить формы и способы ведения боевых действий, VPK News, 27 February 2013, available at <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

19 Barabanov et al., "Military Reform", p. 8.

20 *The Military Balance 2015*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (Routledge: London, 2015), p. 197 (hereafter, *The Military Balance 2015*).

The military balance in Europe

Naval forces



Russia and Europe: The military balance

The Russian military reform made the current military apparatus more effective, more combat-ready, and better suited to Russia's assertive foreign policy in the near abroad. But what are the chances that it could successfully challenge the West? The European defence establishment has been confident that Russia's armed forces could be checked, at least in qualitative terms. However, this qualitative advantage applies to few European NATO members. France, the UK, and Germany have armed forces of superior quality to Russia, but issues of deployability, readiness, and quantity of ammunition could put this qualitative advantage into question.²⁵ The European-Russian military balance can be displayed as shown in the graphs accompanying this text.²⁶

Europe's naval forces are clearly superior to Russia's, both in numbers and in quality. Aside from its submarine wing, Russia has nothing to put to sea that could challenge Europe, and even this is only a shadow of its former Soviet strength. In a conflict, it would have to reserve considerable forces to protect its strategic ballistic missile submarines.

Russia would not be able to threaten transatlantic supply lines between Europe and the US, and hence Russia alone could not prevent the US from re-engaging in Europe. Russia may be working to change this – it

recently announced an ambitious submarine-building programme, and in 2015 alone laid down two nuclear ballistic missile submarines, three nuclear hunter/killer submarines, and two conventional ones.²⁷

The quantitative superiority of European air forces is trickier to interpret. Only French and British air forces have proven in combat that they are able to conduct the full range of missions: from gaining air superiority to carrying out interdiction and providing combat air support. German and Italian air forces have the equipment to do so, but for the rest of Europe there are national shortfalls in capabilities that limit their air forces to certain roles. Europe has phased out most of its land-based air-defence systems, and many elderly aircraft will be phased out without replacement over the next decade. The Russian air force, on the other hand, though smaller, is a homogeneous force that is used to acting as a single entity. It is capable of fulfilling all missions and roles of modern air warfare, though with some shortfalls regarding precision strike and deep strike. Russian aerial command-and-control (C2), intelligence, and situation-awareness systems are clearly inferior to US ones. But, without US support, European air forces (except for France and the UK) don't measure up well either.

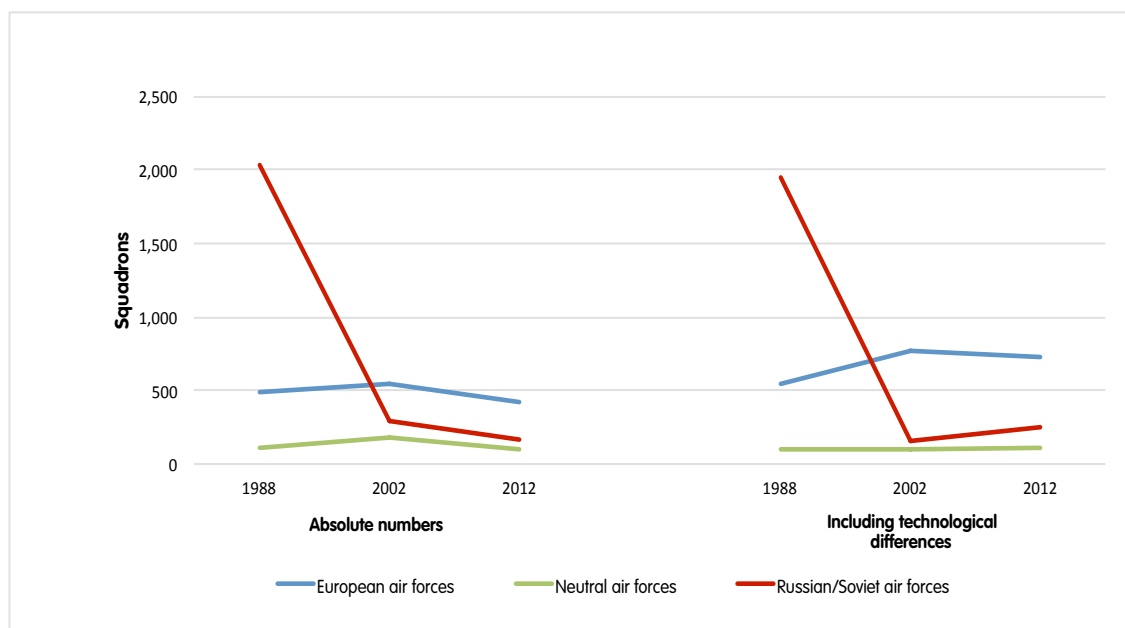
Regarding land forces, the balance is even more ambiguous. Europe has more combat forces than Russia. (The overall number of uniformed personnel is much higher in Europe than in Russia, but the figures include defence bureaucracy personnel, which Europe has a huge surplus of.) But what about readiness and training? European forces are scattered across 28 states. Some smaller NATO members,

²⁵ European NATO allies ran out of ammunition in the air campaign against Muammar Gaddafi after one month. In terms of both quantity and quality, Russia's armed forces are a different foe. See Steven Erlanger, "Libya's Dark Lesson for NATO", the *New York Times*, 3 September 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/sunday-review/what-libyas-lessons-mean-for-nato.html>.

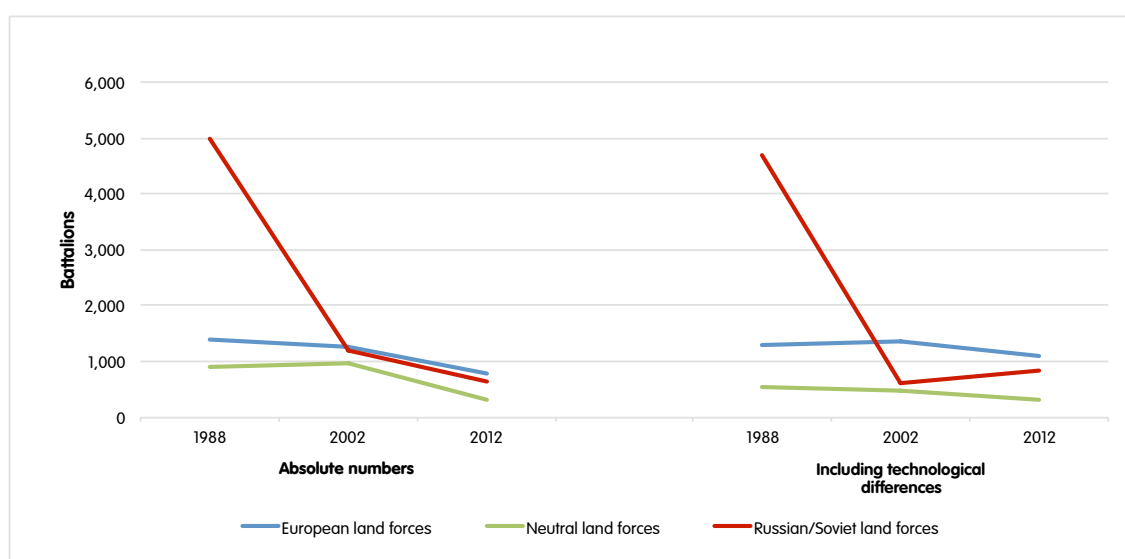
²⁶ The graphs depict land forces' combat formations in battalions, air-force combat formations in squadrons, and average warship tonnage. The graphs on the left illustrate the numbers of battalions, squadrons, and warship tonnage, respectively. In the graphs on the right, these values have been altered by multipliers (ranging from 0.25 to 3) to take the technological and professional differences of the armies into account. The methodology will be explained in detail in Gustav C. Gressel, "No new Cold War yet: the global distribution of military potentials", ECFR explainer, to be published in autumn 2015.

²⁷ "Russia to lay down 3 Yasen-class, 2 Borei-class submarine in 2015", TASS, 26 December 2015, available at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/769342>; Christopher P. Cavas, "Will Russia's Sub-Building Boom Matter?", *Defense News*, 24 January 2015, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/naval/submarines/2015/01/24/russia-navy-submarine-shipbuilding-nuclear/22190761/>.

Air forces



Land forces



especially in Central Europe, have such small forces that they can hardly train them on their own in combined arms manoeuvre warfare. Furthermore, the long period of peace in Europe has led to an erosion of combat-readiness levels. European analysts rightly point out that, despite tremendous efforts to reform the Russian armed forces, only 65 percent of their new combat brigades are actually combat-ready,²⁸ but they tend to forget that the European Defence Agency rated European land forces as 30.9 percent deployable (i.e. combat-ready) and 7.5 percent sustainable deployable.²⁹ While the figures were calculated differently and are difficult to compare, they point to a

sensitive issue in European defence: many units in today's European armies exist more on paper than in reality. Under-staffing, lack of exercises, low combat-readiness, and the constant drain of men and equipment to other tasks (such as attending to natural disasters, peacekeeping, and humanitarian missions) have led to an erosion of the real combat strength of European land forces. If called to action, it would take months to repatriate personnel, fill ranks, get equipment combat-ready, and then deploy it to the theatre. If Russia instigated a crisis, it could bring its own forces to an increased level of combat-readiness beforehand, achieving numerical superiority again.

²⁸ *The Military Balance 2015*, p. 159.

²⁹ Silvija Guzelyte, "National Defence Data 2012", European Defence Agency, Brussels, February 2014, p. 24, available at <http://www.eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/finance-documents/national-defence-data-2012.pdf>.

Procurement

The ability and will to produce new defence equipment will affect the military balance on the European continent over the coming decades. As its Cold War-era defence equipment aged, Russia started to draw up ambitious rearmament plans. In Europe, on the other hand, the financial crisis has delayed or deferred many armament programmes. Will Russia out-build Europe in the long run?

In terms of land systems, Russia's rearmament goals may not be realistic.³⁰ The only clear production aim is to build 2,300 T-14 Armata tanks by 2020,³¹ but it is more likely that this will be the total number of all Armata combat vehicles produced.³² Russia also plans to replace 70 percent of its armoured vehicles with new-generation models by 2020.³³ This represents an enormous effort and would dwarf any other land-system procurement programme, even in the US. Only one of the models, the BTR-82A light armoured personnel carrier, has been in production since 2010, while the production of many others has only just started.³⁴ To produce all these vehicles in five years seems impossible, even in a militarised police state.

However, Europe has no ongoing tank-procurement programme (they are produced for export only) and instead keeps upgrading its Cold War-era tanks. Only very limited numbers of infantry fighting vehicles are in production,³⁵ while armoured artillery systems are almost out of production. Europe's focus on expeditionary warfare has strengthened its appetite for light, wheeled armoured personnel carriers and light combat vehicle platforms, ill-suited for modern mechanised warfare.

Though at present Europe's planned acquisitions of combat aircraft significantly exceed Russia's,³⁶ Russian production numbers will grow. Its existing contracts will be fulfilled between 2015 and 2017, and it is likely that further aircraft will be ordered after that.³⁷ European procurement figures are unlikely to change much – the number of F-35s might increase, but no other combat aircraft will be procured until 2020. In addition, Europe has demonstrated no desire to modernise its air-defence systems. The few systems acquired in recent years have been predominantly sea-based. Only Germany and Poland are set to purchase land-based air-

defence systems in the coming years,³⁸ although there is no decision on the quantity yet.

In terms of naval forces, Europe not only out-matches but also out-builds Russia over the foreseeable future. If Europe takes its collective defence obligations seriously, it will have to reconsider its procurement priorities in the coming years.

Geography

Geography would be a disadvantage for Europe and an advantage for Russia in a future conflict on Europe's eastern borders. During the Cold War, NATO had to defend a relatively narrow land border with a limited depth. The Warsaw Pact was expected to launch a major assault on Germany, whose border stretched about 720km from Austria to the Baltic Sea. The perimeter was about 300km deep, from the inner German border to the French border (where NATO had its major bases and depots). Another Soviet thrust could have gone through Yugoslavia into Italy, where a land border of only 85km separated the Adriatic from the passage to the Austrian Alps. The other land borders – such as the Norwegian-Soviet or the Bulgarian-Greek borders – were also short and offered little favourable terrain for mechanised warfare, benefiting NATO's defence (see accompanying maps).

Today, however, from the North Cape across Finland, the Baltics, and Poland, the EU/NATO borders Russia or Belarus at a border stretching more than 2,000km from north to south. In the Black Sea, Russia's annexation of Crimea has provided it with a strong military foothold from which it could launch amphibious assaults across the region. In the case of a crisis on the EU/NATO's eastern border, the European reaction would take time and would give the Russian forces a chance to create facts on the ground. The distance from the major NATO bases in western Germany to the Baltic border is about 1,700km, and it is 1,200km to the Polish eastern border, and 1,800km to Romania's Black Sea coast across Crimea. Russia, by contrast, would enjoy the advantages of fighting on the "interior line". The distance from Moscow to the Russian-Baltic border is between 570 and 700km, to the Belarusian-Polish border 920km, and to Crimea about 1,200km.

During the Cold War, NATO practised the deployment of forces and reinforcements to the border on a regular basis, but the logistics of such an operation are now foreign to a new generation of staffers in the defence ministries. Compared to Western Germany, the lands on Europe's eastern borders are underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure. In the Baltic countries, the railroads are still the Russian wide-gauge system, which is not compatible with that used in the rest of Europe. There are few airports where troops could land. These infrastructure bottlenecks would make any NATO/EU deployment vulnerable to so-called anti-access tactics: ballistic missile attacks and sabotage.

30 See Appendix.

31 "Armata Universal Combat Platform", [Globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/armata.htm), available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/armata.htm>.

32 The tank, the T-15 heavy IFV/combat support vehicle, and the Koalitsiya-SV 152mm self-propelled armoured artillery system.

33 This would require the production of 2,300 MBT, 3,580 IFV, 4,200 APC, and 1,050 armoured artillery systems by 2020. See Marcel de Haas, "Russia's Military Reforms – Victory after Twenty Years of Failure?", Clingendael Paper No. 5, Netherlands Institute for International Relations, November 2011, p. 21f, available at http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20111129_clingendaelpaper_mdehaas.pdf.

34 For example, the Armata family, the Kurganets-25 IFV, and the Typhoon armoured vehicle series. There are no clear numbers about the vehicles produced, and Russia has converted several elderly BTR-80s to the new BTR-82A standard. The entire vehicle should be a stopgap measure until new generations of wheeled armoured vehicles become available.

35 The German Puma and Swedish CV-90.

36 See Appendix.

37 Additional Su-35, Su-34, Mig-35, Mig-29K, and – planned for 2018 – the PAK-50FA fighter aircraft are expected to be ordered and delivered before 2020.

38 "Niemcy wybrali MEADS?", *Defence24*, 15 May 2015, available at [Defence24, 21 April 2015, available at <http://www.defence24.pl/216691,polska-kupi-patrioty-caracale-beda-testowane-przez-wojsko>.](http://www.defence24.pl/225643,niemcy-wybrali-meads; Polska kupi Patrioty. Caracale będą testowane przez wojsko)

Cold War Europe



As Russia is a unitary actor, preparations for military actions could more easily be concealed or disguised as exercises. There is no multitude of railway administrations or airspace control authorities with whom such an endeavour would have to be coordinated. Hence, in a conflict with Europe, Russia would be much quicker to deploy its forces, shift forces between different theatres, and rotate forces deployed to the area. If Russia instigated a crisis, these factors would add to the advantage of the higher readiness levels of the aggressor.

The advantages of early military action do not contribute to crisis stability. During the Cold War, the Soviet army could not mobilise quickly enough to take the West by surprise, and the USSR was much less dependent on a quick military strike to secure its interests. As a result, the crisis dynamic was very different. Today, the advantages Russia could gain from a surprise attack on the West, and the West's fear of such an attack, may push crisis behaviour in entirely different directions.

Europe in 2015



War games

Military incursions into EU and NATO countries are not far from the minds of Russian military planners. In the first major exercise to test the “new look” reforms, “Zapad 2009”, the Russian army practised a swift offensive against Poland and the Baltic states, launching nuclear strikes against Poland to deter NATO from further engagement.³⁹

³⁹ At the time, there was little Western coverage of the manoeuvre. A short description of it can be found at Anna Dunin, “Intel Brief: Poland On Edge Over Russian Drills”, ISN, 18 November 2009, available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=109702&lng=en> (hereafter, Dunin, “Poland On Edge Over Russian Drills”); and Roger McDermott, “Zapad 2009 Rehearses Countering a NATO Attack on Belarus”, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 6, Issue 179, the Jamestown Foundation, 30 September 2009, available at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=35558#_VVWMRyaCJM](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=35558#_VVWMRyaCJM).

By the end of the operation, the Baltics have been captured and a land bridge to Kaliningrad secured. The “Caucasus 2009” manoeuvres repeated similar patterns against Georgia, and the “Ladoga 2009” drills practised amphibious and airborne operations in the Baltics and Finland.⁴⁰ All of the exercises involved the quick mobilisation of Russian transport to the theatre and the earliest possible “resuming” of offensive operations (as a diplomatic fig leaf, each scenario involved countering an initial NATO/Georgian attack). In the “Zapad 2013” manoeuvre, the script was even more loaded with significance. “Illegal armed groups” or “terrorists” from the Baltic states would take control of

⁴⁰ “Russia holds large-scale Ladoga-2009 military drills”, RIA Novosti, 18 August 2009, available at <http://sputniknews.com/military/20090818/155844811.html>.

parts of Belarus, and the Russian army again would have to react rapidly with an offensive operation, cutting off the Baltics from the rest of Europe and then “removing the terrorist threat from the area”.⁴¹

These exercises indicate that Russia’s military thinking is offensive in nature, and geared towards expansion, not defence. The “Lagoda 2012” manoeuvre rehearsed military actions against the Baltics and Finland, in a twenty-first century repetition of the 1939 Soviet invasion of the Baltics and Finland (the so-called Winter War).⁴² The Baltic-Russian and Finnish-Russian borders were taken as the hypothetical frontline, leaving little room for imagination about the ultimate aims of Russian military planning. Further exercises carried out in spring 2015 repeated similar scenarios, but with a stronger emphasis on nuclear deterrence.⁴³ Moreover, the Russian military build-up in the Arctic is focused on Russia’s Finnish/Norwegian borders and the region of Archangelsk,⁴⁴ paying little attention to the Russian-Alaskan frontier or the north Siberian shipping-lanes. If the Kremlin feared a pre-emptive attack by the US, the armed forces would pay greater attention to those areas.

While no Russian offensive against Scandinavia, the Baltic states, or Poland is imminent, Russia is evidently assessing its chances of success in such an offensive and improving the necessary infrastructure. However, any attempt to move into EU/NATO territories implies serious political and military risks for Russia. Russia does not possess “escalation dominance” against the West, particularly not without using nuclear weapons. It does not control all the factors necessary for the successful conclusion of such a fight: the West’s will and ability to react, US willingness to re-engage in Europe, and Europe’s will to mount a roll-back operation, and even to risk a nuclear confrontation.

But Russian nuclear doctrine is evolving too. While official statements concerning the use of nuclear weapons are unclear and conflicting,⁴⁵ Russia’s thinking on nuclear

warfare has become increasingly permissive since 1991.⁴⁶ The most worrying trend in the Russian debate is the discussion of the “de-escalatory” use of nuclear weapons. This concept revolves around the use of an early limited nuclear strike to deter NATO intervention. As Stephen J. Blank, senior analyst for nuclear strategy at the US Army War College, sums up the concept: “If Russia should decide to invade or seize one or more Baltic State, then that would mean it is prepared to wage nuclear war against NATO and the United States to hold onto that acquisition although it would prefer not to, or thinks it could get away with it without having to do so. The idea behind such a ‘limited nuclear war’ is that Russia would seize control of the intra-war escalation process by detonating a first-strike even in a preventive or pre-emptive mode, and this would supposedly force NATO to negotiate a political solution that allows Russia to hold onto at least some of its gains.”⁴⁷

The strategy may sound overly bold, but this is exactly the scenario that the Russian army rehearsed in 2009, 2013, and 2015 against Europe and in 2010 against Asia, requiring a rapid deployment of Russia’s limited (but now high-readiness) conventional forces in offensive operations. When the Western states react to the move, Russia would play the nuclear card to dissuade the West from engaging in a roll-back operation and force them to accept the Russian gains as a *fait accompli*. Putin’s statement that he was ready to put Russia’s nuclear weapons on standby during the occupation of Crimea suggested that the concept of the “de-escalatory” use of nuclear weapons has spread beyond military circles to the Russian leadership.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the Western reaction to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine shows that Russian war games are not far from reality.

Russia would face additional constraints in entering a land war against an EU or NATO country. The interruption of trade ties would be much more severe than in the case of a war in the post-Soviet periphery. Russia would not be able to move quickly from being a resource-exporting economy, and will depend on European markets for the time being. But Europe should not take this security for granted. A major deterioration of the security situation in Asia, another major crisis in Europe, or other unforeseen events in world politics might persuade Russia that its European export market might collapse anyway or that the chances for expansion are now better than they will be.

41 See Pauli Järvenpää, “Zapad-2013, A View From Helsinki”, the Jamestown Foundation, Washington, DC, August 2014, available at http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Zapad_2013_View_From_Helsinki_-_Full.pdf.

42 Dunin, “Poland On Edge Over Russian Drills”.

43 “Russia Expands Military Exercises To 80,000 Troops”, Agence France-Presse, 19 March 2015, available at www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/03/19/russia-expands-military-exercises-troops/25023979.

44 “Russia’s Military Buildup in the Murmansk Oblast”, New Eastern Europe, 30 January 2015, available at <http://neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1468-russia-s-military-buildup-in-the-murmansk-oblast/>; “Russia’s Plans for Arctic Supremacy”, Stratfor, 16 January 2015, available at <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/russias-plans-arctic-supremacy>.

45 For the official documents, see The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, Adopted by the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 706, April 21, 2000, available at http://www.dcaf.ch/layout/set/print/content/download/36018/527253/file/BM_Arbatov_04_Military-doctrine.pdf; The Law of the Russian Federation on Defense, adopted by the State Duma on April 24, 1996, and approved by the Federation Council on May 15, 1996, available at <http://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=1572> and http://www.dcaf.ch/content/download/36032/527281/file/BM_Arbatov_18_Defence.pdf; The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, adopted by the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 1300, December 17, 1997, in the Edited Version of the Presidential Decree No. 24 of January 10, 2000, available at <http://archive.mid.ru/ns-osndoc.nsf/f1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/36aba64ac09f737fc32575d900298676?OpenDocument>; Президент Российской Федерации, Военная доктрина Российской Федерации, 26 December 2014, available at <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>, p. 12–13.

46 For the evolving Russian nuclear doctrine, see Nikolai Sokov, “The New, 2010 Russian Military Doctrine: The Nuclear Angle”, CNS Feature Stories, 5 February 2010, available at http://cns.miis.edu/stories/100205_russian_nuclear_doctrine.htm, quoted in Andrei Shumikhin, “Nuclear Weapons in Russian Strategy and Doctrine”, in Stephen J. Blank (ed.), Russian Nuclear Weapons: Past, Present, and Future (US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), p. 99–159; Stephen J. Blank, “Russia and Nuclear Weapons”, in Stephen J. Blank (ed.), Russian Nuclear Weapons: Past, Present, and Future (US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), p. 293–364 (hereafter, Blank, “Russia and Nuclear Weapons”); Marcel H. Van Herpen, “Russia’s Embrace of Tactical Nuclear Weapons – Its Negative Impact on US Proposals For Nuclear Arms Reductions”, Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper, No. 11/04, September 2011, available at http://www.cicerofoundation.org/lectures/Marcel_H_Van_Herpen_RUSSIA_EMBRACE_OF_TACTICAL_NUCLEAR_WEAPONS.pdf.

47 Blank, “Russia and Nuclear Weapons”, p. 327–328.

48 “Ukraine conflict: Putin ‘was ready for nuclear alert’”, BBC News, 15 March 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31899680>.

The Russian political elite is betting on the collapse of the European project, and European leaders should take this into account. If the Russian military and intelligence establishment sees European turmoil as a chance to escalate and strengthen their position domestically, Russian military adventurism might seize its opportunity.

Beyond the post-Soviet space

Russia's military planners have been so successful in overcoming their disadvantages because the military's sphere of action has so far been limited to regional conflicts in the post-Soviet periphery. However, if the Russian military were deployed in large numbers to distant theatres of war – as threatened by its escalating presence in Syria – its weaknesses and shortfalls would soon become evident.

On the battlefield, Russia relies on heavy land systems for fire support: tank, gun, and rocket artillery, rather than close air support. In Russia's neighbourhood this is not much of a problem, because Russia has rail links to transport the vast amounts of munitions and spare parts that these systems require. But in a more distant arena, like Syria, the logistical footprint of Russia's heavy land systems would seriously limit military operations.

Air-to-air refuelling for striking faraway targets is still little practised by the Russian air force, except for the long-range bomber planes. But these bombers specialise in the nuclear strike role, and so are of little use in a conventional conflict. Other warplanes need air bases close to the theatre of war. These bases are abundant in Russia, but once the military tries to engage in fights beyond its periphery, access to secure bases would be a problem.

The Russian armed forces rely on their intelligence services for strategic reconnaissance, and land-based installations for signals intelligence, navigation, airspace control, and electronic warfare. Sea and airborne sensors are much more expensive to operate, and Russia has got rid of most of the Soviet Union's old arsenal. As a result, Russian military actions abroad would be dependent on the assistance of local partners and their intelligence services, which may not be as sophisticated as the Russian ones.

Moreover, although Russia has widened its pool of professional soldiers, it still relies on conscripts to man large segments of the armed forces. To recruit volunteers for the fight in Ukraine, the Russian propaganda machine had to peddle alarmist scenarios of "fascists" taking over Kyiv. It may be more difficult to fabricate scarecrows in far-flung regions, and still more difficult to make the Russian population believe in them enough to back military action. Recent polls show that few Russians support the country's military actions in Syria. If Russia lacks the popular support to send conscripts, the level of military presence will be limited.

Finally, the bulk of the Russian army is not trained to fight long-term counter-insurgency campaigns, which are the task of specialised paramilitary troops in the Interior Ministry. Those troops haven't been sent abroad, although in April 2014 Russia considered using them in a possible all-out invasion of Ukraine (which was never executed).

If Russia now sought to develop similar expeditionary capabilities to the West, this would necessitate a major readjustment of its military reforms and additional investment – both of which the country can ill afford. So far, the reforms have yielded results useful to Moscow's strategic interests. If those interests start to grow beyond the capabilities of the military apparatus, Russia will face serious trouble.

Strategic consequences for Europe

Russia's military modernisation and re-emergence as an expansionist, revisionist actor on Europe's eastern borders has profound strategic consequences for Europe. Little that was true for Europe's security in the 1990s and early 2000s is still valid. However, the situation Europe faces today is not a repetition of the Cold War. While there is again a systemic and ideological conflict between the democratic West and a revanchist Russia, Russia has neither the will nor the capacity to compete with the West on a global scale. But even if Russia is unable to shape world politics, it may be able to spoil it. And, as its expansionist aims threaten the very existence of some of the EU's eastern member states, the Russian threat will be a much more serious challenge for Europe than for anybody else on the planet.

European politicians need to wake up to the fact that their differences with Russia cannot be bridged or mitigated by economic cooperation, political dialogue, or common institutions. Military assertiveness and expansionism are built into the Russian political system and much of its aggressive foreign behaviour is caused by the structure of its political regime.⁴⁹ Its strong security apparatus that lacks checks and balances; the desire to foster social cohesion through external conflict; its ideological conservatism; and the militarisation of society that Putin has ushered in are long-term factors that will prevent any quick rapprochement between Russia and the West.

A major military escalation on the European continent is not imminent, but it cannot be ruled out. Russia is clearly preparing itself for offensive operations. It could exploit the weaknesses of its Western neighbours to achieve strategic surprise, but these options are attached to big risks and uncertainties for Russia. Much will depend on how Western leaders react to Russian provocations in the case of a crisis. Hence the challenge is more political than

49 Lilia Shevtsova, *Russia – Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, 2007); Lilia Shevtsova, *Lonely Power, Why Russia Failed to Become the West and the West is Weary of Russia* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, 2010); Martin Malek, *Grundzüge der Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik Russlands unter Präsident Putin, Ausgewählte Aspekte* (Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie: Vienna, March 2009); Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia, Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh, 2015).

military: only credible political coherence, solidarity, and deterrence can prevent military adventurism. Whether such adventurism will hit the European periphery or Europe itself will largely depend on the state of Europe's defence. While in theory the doctrine of the "de-escalating" use of nuclear weapons would provide a possible course of action for a successful Russian attack on an eastern EU/NATO country, the doctrine is extremely risky for Russia. Not only does it assume that NATO and Europe would immediately back down in the face of a direct nuclear threat, it also assumes that Russia can bear the diplomatic and economic costs of such an action – not to speak of the costs of governing the Baltics or Poland and suppressing the popular resistance that would arise. In Ukraine, Russia was not willing to take that much risk and refrained from any all-out invasion and occupation of Ukraine, waging a limited war in the Donbas instead.

A coordinated European response

In military terms, Europe first and foremost has to prepare to handle hybrid scenarios – combining conventional and non-conventional warfare – and further destabilisation of its eastern neighbourhood. Russia is likely to carry out a hidden initial aggression to confuse European leaders strategically, subvert Western support for the victim, and delay any reaction by the West until Russia has created facts on the ground, especially if it is unsure about the Western reaction.

The initial reaction to an unconventional, subversive Russian military operation should resemble stabilisation or crisis intervention rather than traditional defence. Rapid deployment would be more important than striking power for these spearhead forces, because they first have to deny unconventional forces access to critical infrastructure and administrative facilities. Close cooperation with non-military state authorities is essential. The quality of the Western forces has to be high. Moreover, this initial phase of the operation will be critical for Russia to build its narrative of events, both to sell to its domestic audience and to confront public opinion in the West.

In the second phase of the response to Russian aggression, Europe would have to deploy forces with sufficient striking power and sustainability to deny Russian forces the option of an armed incursion, or, if that has already happened, to stop and repel it. While some of the features of expeditionary warfare remain the same, such as the rapid deployment of forces over long distances, Europe needs to acknowledge that regular Russian land, air, and sometimes even naval forces are a far more formidable foe than all of the non-state irregular armed groups (or Middle Eastern dictators) that Western forces faced in the 1990s and 2000s.

Today, Russia poses a qualitative rather than a quantitative military challenge to Europe. During the post-Cold War "interbellum" (1989-2014) the readiness of some European member states' armies degraded considerably. Central

European armies in particular are not large enough to practise combined arms manoeuvre warfare on their own, still less to carry out larger joint operations. The air forces of smaller European militaries have become air-policing services at large, with little or no capabilities in other fields. And, as they have never been used for expeditionary warfare, they have not trained to take part in a major air campaign alongside allied comrades.

After 25 years of peace in Europe, many of the human skills needed for the conduct of a major conventional land war in the region have vanished with the personnel that retired after 1989. This is not only true for fighting personnel. The entire administrative and logistical apparatus necessary to support major military operations in Eastern Europe would have to be rebuilt from scratch.

Defence integration would be a plausible way to tackle the defence shortfalls of small- and medium-sized countries. For too long, the discussion has revolved around cooperation between the big European states, like the Anglo-French cooperation in armament and defence technology. However, the big European states – France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, and to a certain point Sweden and Poland – have functioning armies that are capable of conducting combined arms manoeuvre warfare. There is therefore little reason for them to bind their working military apparatuses to integrative projects with an uncertain future. Hence both "smart defence" and "pooling and sharing" are mere paper concepts, because the big states have little interest and the small states have little to share. But, as qualitative demands on armed forces increase with Russia's re-emergence as an expansionist power, and "soft niches" (such as nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) protection, engineers, logistics, etc.) are not what is needed for European solidarity, the smaller European members will have to consider serious defence integration. While integrated combat forces still seem to be out of question due to issues of sovereignty and tradition, combined education and training, logistics, infrastructure, acquisition, and administration would be much less sensitive but help to reduce the personnel costs and organisational ineffectiveness of smaller armies.

Beyond Europe

Even if Russia succeeds in modernising its armed forces as planned, it will not be able to challenge the West as a whole without allies. If the US is free to shift major military forces to the European theatre, Russia's armed forces can be overwhelmed in both quantity and quality. If Russia wants to attack any European state protected by NATO Article 5, it would need either to distract the US in the rest of the world, or to foster a "coalition of the revisionists" that is strong enough to challenge the West on a global scale. Therefore, Europe should not turn a blind eye to world politics beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

The question of how far the US should be involved in Europe's defence is a delicate one. Concerning nuclear weapons, there is no substitute for the US – in addition to the fact that neither France nor the UK can afford to purchase a further thousand nuclear warheads and the corresponding delivery means. And because the US has the ultimate responsibility in terms of nuclear weapons, it will probably never totally withdraw from Europe or leave European security entirely to the Europeans. This means that Washington could pay the ultimate price for a crisis it does not control. Europe's over-reliance on the US for security is dangerous for other reasons, as Russia may be tempted to exploit world crises to distract the US from Europe: the more turmoil and distractions, the better the military calculation for Russia in the European theatre.

The issue of European self-reliance necessarily raises the question of how to deal with the Russian nuclear threat and the doctrine of the "de-escalating" use of nuclear weapons. While US-Russian strategic deterrence must be considered as stable and predictable, the same thing cannot be said about the possible use of non-strategic nuclear weapons in a limited nuclear war. Because many European elites as well as opinion leaders are opposed to or at least not familiar with Cold War-style thinking on nuclear deterrence, it is particularly difficult for Europe to counter such moves. A mix of defensive measures, limited (nuclear) deterrence, and US reassurance could deter Russia from nuclear adventurism, if the application of these means were credible. These efforts need to be coordinated among states with very different strategic traditions, and a lot needs to be done to foster strategic cohesion. The most disastrous development of a crisis can be expected if, on the eve of a military crisis in Europe, European governments are not on the same page on nuclear deterrence. This could give the hawks in Moscow the signal they are waiting for to push for a more adventurous and risky policy. An attempt to draft a European Strategic Deterrence Doctrine could be a good exercise to bring together different strategic cultures, perceptions, and aims.

The role of the EU

Given the strong transatlantic dimension of European defence, especially the nuclear aspect, it seems obvious that NATO is the primary arbiter of a new European defence policy. But it would be unwise to forget the EU's role. Many of the EU's assets developed for crisis response (such as special police or *Gendarmerie* forces, and civil administration assets) will be useful in a hybrid scenario, either in the European neighbourhood or in the EU itself. The Union has developed instruments to deploy forces for internal security and civil administration abroad, and, via its policies on justice, freedom, and security, it would have the ability to coordinate the entire array of administrative forces in such a crisis. However, its policies and practices would have to be adapted to the new contingencies.

The European Neighbourhood Policy has set out a comprehensive agenda for reforming the justice and security sector in countries with an Association Agreement (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova). This assistance for domestic reform could be supplemented by common contingency planning or exercises to prepare a response to Russian-led destabilisation. Europe should remember that the war in the Donbas could probably have been avoided if European police and *Gendarmerie* had been deployed there in March or April 2014.

Last but not least, Article 42/7 of the Treaty of the EU, which guarantees the security of member states, is still a reserve framework in case NATO decisions are blocked by obstructive member states. It also covers Finland and Sweden – both non-NATO members facing an increasingly assertive Russia. So far, Europe has made little effort to implement Article 42/7 through a credible policy, let alone to make it a credible deterrent. It would be worth exploring how far the Nordic non-aligned members would be willing to engage in common defence preparation, and whether the neutral countries would sabotage this.

In the end, Europe's citizens need to realise that the prosperity and freedom they have attained within the European project is dependent on their vigilance and readiness to defend it. The 1990s and 2000s, in which Europe was allowed to reunite peacefully and flourish without external threats, was a window of opportunity that has now closed. If the opportunity arises, we should not be shy about reaching out to Russia. But until then, we must be prepared for the worst.

Procurement of major weapons systems in Europe pre-2020

Category	Europe	Russia	Comment
MBT	0	2,300	Russian production goals
IFV	452	3,580	Estimate based on Russian modernisation goals
APC	2,171	4,200	Estimate based on Russian modernisation goals
Drones	85	Some	The production of the IAI Searcher and other tactical drones continues, but no reliable numbers are available
Anti-tank systems	0	Many	There are no reliable numbers available, but Russia is taking delivery of ATGMs for new helicopters and armoured vehicles
Artillery systems	24	1,050	Estimate based on Russian modernisation goals
Combat aircraft	731	236	More planes will be ordered before 2020, RUS contracts fulfilled by 2015/2017
AWACS, ELINT planes and tankers	23	0	The next generation of Russian AWACS and electronic reconnaissance aircraft is under development, but will not be introduced in larger numbers before 2020
Strategic bombers	0	15	
Heavy transport aircraft	157	39	More planes will be ordered before 2020, RUS contracts fulfilled by 2015
Combat helicopters	161	237	
Transport and multi-purpose helicopters	523	312	
Ballistic missiles	0	100-400	Iskander, Bulawa, Yars in delivery, but no reliable numbers available. The planned 40 strategic missiles per year seems unsustainable
Air defence systems	0	30	Only includes known S-300 and S-400 orders; additional Tor, Buk, and S-400 are being delivered, but no reliable number is available
Aircraft carriers	2	0	The Russian "Storm" class CVA/CVN is still on the drawing board and will not be completed before 2020 (if construction has even started at that time)
Cruisers & destroyers	22	0	12 large missile destroyers planned, but construction is likely to start in 2023 at the earliest ⁽¹⁾
Frigates & corvettes	0	20	
Ballistic missile submarines	0	8	
Nuclear submarines	12	5	
Diesel-electric submarines	14	9	

These figures include only the acquisition of new equipment, not the modernisation of old equipment or the transfer of second-hand equipment within one of the blocs (there is a lot of acquisition by Eastern European states of second-hand equipment that has been phased out by Western European states). All data – if not stated otherwise – is from *The Military Balance 2015*.

(1) "New-generation missile destroyer under development in Russia", TASS, 21 October 2014, available at tass.ru/en/russia/755539.

About the author

Gustav Gressel joined ECFR's Berlin office as a visiting fellow in the Wider Europe programme. Before joining ECFR he worked as a desk officer for international security policy and strategy in the Bureau for Security Policy at the Austrian Ministry of Defence from 2006 to 2014, and as a research fellow of the Commissioner for Strategic Studies in the Austrian MoD from 2003 to 2006. He was also a research fellow at the International Institute for Liberal Politics in Vienna. Before his academic career he served five years in the Austrian Armed Forces.

Gustav earned a masters degree in political science at Salzburg University and a PhD in Strategic Studies at the Faculty of Military Sciences and Officer Training at the National University of Public Service, Budapest. He is the author of numerous publications on security policy and strategic affairs.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to ECFR's Wider Europe team for the rich and fruitful discussions and comments on my work. I am especially thankful to Vessela Tcherneva and Ivan Krastev, who have supported me throughout my time as a visiting fellow at ECFR and beyond. Without their support, guidance, and advice, this paper would never have been published. And I cannot forget the editorial team of ECFR, above all Hannah Stone, whose nerves I have continuously wrecked with military acronyms and special terms. I thank them for their patience.

I want to thank Dominik Jankowski, Pawel Luzin, and Martin Malek for the interesting discussions we had on Russia's military modernisation and strategic thought. I want to thank many of my former colleagues at the Austrian Ministry of Defence who have shared their thoughts and insights with me. In particular, the Department for Armament and Defence Technology (Amt für Rüstung und Wehrtechnik) and Dr Peter Sequard-Base have considerably enhanced my knowledge and understanding of the many technical issues that influence this debate.

But my sincerest thoughts are with the man who like no other supported, shaped, challenged, and advised me, as my superior, mentor, and friend: Professor Erich Reiter, who passed away, much too soon, on 10 July 2015. The author bears sole responsibility for any mistakes or omissions in this report, and the views expressed in this report are not necessarily shared by the individuals listed above.

ABOUT ECFR

The **European Council on Foreign Relations** (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy.

ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- **A pan-European Council.** ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU's member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR's activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Carl Bildt, Emma Bonino and Mabel van Oranje.
- **A physical presence in the main EU member states.** ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- **A distinctive research and policy development process.** ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to advance its objectives through innovative projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR's activities include primary research, publication of policy reports, private meetings and public debates, 'friends of ECFR' gatherings in EU capitals and outreach to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions.

www.ecfr.eu

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors.

Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations

© ECFR October 2015.

ISBN: 978-1-910118-43-6

Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR),
35 Old Queen Street, London,
SW1H 9JA, United Kingdom

london@ecfr.eu