

CURRENT HISTORY

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“Moscow may not be very good at learning lessons from setbacks, and certainly tends to exaggerate its successes, but it has few doubts about the feasibility of ‘military solutions’ and even fewer reservations about reaching for them.”

What Drives Moscow’s Military Adventurism?

PAVEL K. BAEV

Russia’s propensity to use military force as an instrument of policy—and even as an instrument of choice—has become increasingly pronounced over the past two and a half years. Since the March 2014 arrival of the so-called “green men” (Russian special-operations forces wearing no insignia) in Crimea, every week brings news of artillery duels in the Donbas war zone in eastern Ukraine, or airstrikes in Syria, or mock attacks on US Navy ships in the Baltic or Black seas. Yet the costs of these interventions are mounting, while the political returns on such efforts at projecting military power are clearly diminishing—raising more questions about their rationale and sustainability.

Indeed, since the spring of 2016, Russia has been demonstrating rather uncharacteristic self-restraint. For instance, it refrained from responding to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Anakonda 2016 exercises in the Baltic theater by staging snap drills twice as large, as it did in 2015. Questions about the outcomes of ongoing combat deployments and possible new experiments in wielding military instruments are, therefore, more complicated than a simplistic portrayal of Russia as an intrinsically aggressive power driven by the desire to restore its superpower status would suggest.

It is often lost on newly minted experts on the Russian turn to “hybrid war” (unconventional projection of power, combining special operations and propaganda) that Russia, in the course of its post-Soviet quarter-century, has accumulated remarkably rich and diverse experiences in the ap-

plication of military force for managing and manipulating violent conflicts. Moscow may not be very good at learning lessons from setbacks, and certainly tends to exaggerate its successes, but it has few doubts about the feasibility of “military solutions” and even fewer reservations about reaching for them.

BATTLE TESTS

The first half of the 1990s saw an unprecedented increase in the number of violent conflicts in Europe, which were caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the Cold War-era security system. The newborn Russian state found itself enmeshed in many of them and opted to take a proactive stance, starting with contributing a battalion to the United Nations Protection Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but quickly learned that nobody else was ready to deal with nasty little wars in its neighborhood. Taking the lead in terminating these wars, Moscow had to depart from the rules of UN peacekeeping operations and improvise cease-fire deals by enforcing consent on all parties. This approach entailed the legitimization of separatism, producing the phenomenon of so-called frozen conflicts, which Moscow has continued to manage to its benefit. The quasi-states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria remain on the political map to this day. Only one civil war—in Tajikistan—was effectively brought to an end, by empowering a despotic regime that is still standing.

The next chapter in Russian power projection unfolded on domestic territory. It opened with the start of the first war in rebellious Chechnya in late 1994. That attempt to quash separatism turned out to be so costly and unpopular that Moscow had to accept confirmation of its defeat in the peace treaty

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of May 1997, which effectively granted Chechnya independence. The humiliation of that fiasco was erased by the Second Chechen War (1999–2004), pursued by newly elected President Vladimir Putin and won with the massive application of brutal force. That war, however, produced lasting instability in the North Caucasus, manifesting itself in a long series of terrorist attacks, and now in a sustained flow of volunteers to the ranks of Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq.

The conclusion of the war in Chechnya made it possible for Moscow to contemplate further applications of military might. Georgia became the next target, primarily because of its strong desire to join NATO—and to win back the separatist provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Many observers are inclined to see the weeklong war in August 2008 as a preamble to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, but in fact, that old-fashioned march of Russian tank columns toward Tbilisi merely reaffirmed the realities on the ground that had existed before the war. The Russian leadership was not satisfied with the performance of its armed forces and opted not to send troops requested by Kyrgyzstan when violent unrest broke out in the latter's Osh region in May and June of 2010.

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LEARNING CURVE

The period of the "reset" (2009–12), an initiative by the Obama administration to improve US-Russian relations, granted Moscow an opportunity to rethink the pros and cons of military interventions, and to make greater efforts at modernizing its military machine (including through cooperation with the West). In fact, military reform was the only real achievement in the ambitious but vague program of "modernization" initiated by the caretaker President Dmitri Medvedev. Severe cuts in the officer corps and radical reconfiguration of combat units were followed by the massive Armament 2020 program, approved in 2011 and still being implemented despite prohibitively heavy costs.

One lesson the Kremlin had learned was that really successful power projection is swift and overwhelming, as with the deployment of four battalions into western Georgia in November 1993, when a rebellion was put down without a single shot fired. Such operations require well-trained units, so the modernization effort focused particular attention on improving the combat

readiness of airborne troops and marines, and on building professional special-operations forces. Meanwhile, dozens of skeleton regiments that were supposed to constitute the infrastructure for mobilization in a protracted conventional war were disbanded.

Another lesson taken to heart by the Kremlin concerned the crucial importance of air power in small wars—and the unacceptable deterioration of the Russian Air Force. NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999 was a stunning demonstration of the devastating punishment that can be inflicted with high-precision strikes. Russia's own air operations in the 2008 war with Georgia, by contrast, were far from successful, with heavy losses of aircraft and nasty collateral damage. Subsequently, pilot training was significantly increased, while many resources were devoted to upgrading the fleet of tactical airplanes and helicopters, and acquiring new models.

A less obvious but much emphasized lesson established the crucial importance of nuclear weapons in assuring Russia's security generally, and its freedom to launch interventions at will in particular. Accordingly, the top priority in the Armament 2020 program was modernization of Russia's nuclear arsenal, and the single most expensive item was the construction of eight Borei-class strategic submarines. Rather paradoxically, long-range aviation, which has the most value in the strategic triad for the purpose of demonstrating capacity for power projection, received the least priority, and the development of a new generation PAK-DA bomber was postponed into the indefinite future. Back in 2005, Putin enjoyed a ride on a Tu-160 strategic bomber, but the "Tupolev lobby" failed to convince him that big investments would yield fruit in the matter of a few years. The fact of the matter is that the technological base is not sufficiently developed to get production going within the short time horizon of politicians.

Finally, concerns about the quality of the military leadership dawned on the Kremlin, where none of the courtiers in Putin's inner circle had even basic knowledge about planning and executing operations in real theaters of war. Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov deserved credit for pushing through reforms against bitter resistance in the archconservative military hierarchy, but he was

clearly not a field commander. In November 2012, he was replaced by Sergei Shoigu, who earned the trust of the officer corps by showing respect for Russian military traditions and culture, and promoting “warriors” with first-hand experience leading troops in combat operations to key positions in the general staff. By the end of 2013, as the political crisis in Ukraine gained momentum, Russia was ready to throw its military might around.

UKRAINE IMPROVISATIONS

The swift military occupation and effective annexation of Crimea in March 2014 were so far outside the pattern of previous Russian interventions, and so blatantly in violation of international law, that the rationale remains a mystery. In hindsight, it is possible to argue that the decision to capture Crimea was overdetermined by multiple motivations. Putin's fear of brewing discontent in Russia was mixed with angst over the money wasted on supporting deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, and an urge to punish the victorious revolution in Kiev and its alleged Western sponsors. Concerns about access to the Sevastopol naval base were hardly a major motivation, but the propaganda machine nonetheless encouraged

speculation that NATO might establish a foothold in Crimea. In this climate, Putin was compelled to take a high-risk gamble. Success proved astonishingly easy.

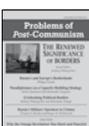
It is obvious that the campaign, involving the deployment of well-trained troops and the effective isolation of Ukrainian garrisons, followed a detailed but flexible plan that had been prepared long before by the general staff. At the same time, the political part of the Crimean operation—from the appointment of a new local government by the flabbergasted parliament to the crudely falsified referendum on “reunification” with Russia—proceeded as a sequence of awkward improvisations.

Similar improvisations unfolded in various parts of eastern Ukraine, from Odessa to Kharkov, but it soon became clear to the conflict entrepreneurs in Moscow that the local support base for manufacturing separatist rebellion was too thin and that effective “protests” could only be staged by imported “muscle.” Instead of using professional “green men” as in Crimea, motley gangs of volunteers, including even Chechen paramilitaries, were transported to dozens of localities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. It took the profoundly disorganized Ukrainian army a couple of

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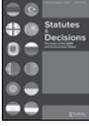


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months to get its act together, but by midsummer of 2014 it had recaptured Slovyansk, a symbolic center of the “rebellion.”

It was entirely possible for the Russian leadership at that moment to wash its hands of this setback, but the propaganda campaign centered on the so-called Novorossiia project, which aimed at tearing from Ukraine its eastern and southern Russian-speaking regions, was ratcheted up to such a level of intensity that a sensible withdrawal became unthinkable. In order to rescue the disorganized separatists, Russia had to move several regular battalions and lots of heavy weapons into the combat zone, as well as resorting to cross-border artillery strikes on Ukrainian forces, all the while officially denying that its forces were engaged in Ukraine.

This direct intervention checked the offensive of the Ukrainian army at Ilovaïsk in August 2014 and forced it to retreat from Debaltsevo in February 2015. The Minsk agreement—negotiated by Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and signed also by the separatist leaders—stabilized the front line but did not secure a cease-fire. The hostilities have since acquired the character of trench warfare, with daily artillery duels in the suburbs of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Mariupol.

The strategic option of undertaking a new offensive aimed at establishing a land corridor to Crimea was available to the Russian leadership in the summer of 2015. An army grouping of 50,000 to 70,000 troops had massed on the border with Ukraine on the pretext of conducting exercises, and would have sufficed to achieve this aim. However, such an operation would have signaled a full-blown war with Ukraine, and the Russian leadership did not dare launch it. Similar snap exercises in the southwestern “theater” were held in August 2016; however, much like a year prior, the Russian leadership didn’t dare proceed from war games to a full-blown war, opting instead to preserve the fig leaf of “nonintervention.”

The plausibility of the denial that Russia was waging a hybrid war was underpinned not only by vicious pro-separatist propaganda, but also by the fact that the Russian Air Force was not deployed. At the same time, Russia’s top brass saw a need to

prevent Ukraine from using its advantage in the air over the separatist forces, so a large number of surface-to-air missiles were moved into the combat zone. The tragedy of the midair destruction of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, which was hit by a Buk missile while crossing through eastern Ukrainian airspace on July 17, 2014, costing 298 lives, was a consequence of that aggressive countermeasure.

STUCK IN SYRIA

Moscow found another use for its air force in provocative demonstrations, from violations of airspace to mock attacks on US Navy ships, particularly in the Baltic theater. The NATO members Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as nonmembers Finland and Sweden, responded by building up their air-defense capabilities. In the fall of 2015, the Russian leadership decided that an intervention in the Syrian civil war would be a better use of its air power.

In hindsight, it is again possible to conclude that the decision was overdetermined. The need to shift public attention away from the deadlock in Donbas merged with Moscow’s desires to reaffirm Russia’s pivotal role on the world stage and to rescue a friendly dictator in distress, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, from looming defeat. The risk of that gamble was comparatively lower than in Ukraine or in the Baltic region because the intervention involved just 50 combat planes. Still, in reputational terms it was higher than any Western politician would deem acceptable.

The initial outcome of the intervention was highly positive in terms of its political resonance, though it did not immediately change the course of the hugely complex war. Nonetheless, Moscow sought to collect a maximum dividend as soon as possible. Providing close air support for Assad’s forces, Russian bombers and helicopters operating from the Khmeïmim air base near Latakia targeted various opposition forces but did not give high priority to Islamic State (ISIS) targets, and also paid little heed to civilian casualties. Russia additionally used the intervention to demonstrate its strategic reach by deploying naval platforms, including in the Caspian Sea, to launch both long-range cruise missiles and strategic bombers for carpet bombing with unguided explosives.

Within the Kremlin’s walls, the nuclear arsenal is seen merely as a major asset that so far has not been effectively used to Russia’s political advantage.

The first setback came on November 24, 2015, when a Russian Su-24 bomber was shot down by a Turkish F-16 fighter after a brief incursion into Turkish airspace. Moscow responded by building an air-defense “bubble” over the Khmeimim base with S-400 surface-to-air missile launchers, as well as imposing trade sanctions on Turkey. The bitter row with Turkey continued until July 2016, when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan found it opportune to make an elliptical apology.

The Russian deployment was reduced by about half in March 2016, when US Secretary of State John Kerry negotiated a partial cease-fire in Syria, but the chain of setbacks for Russia has continued, with technical accidents and enemy fire downing helicopters and claiming lives. Russia is now, for all intents and purposes, trapped in the Syrian quagmire. It is unlikely to score any major victories after the “liberation” of Palmyra from ISIS control in late March 2016, and several attempts to achieve a decisive breakthrough in the battle for Aleppo have only aggravated the humanitarian disaster. The deadlock renders the Russian intervention unsuccessful, but a withdrawal is certain to result in the collapse of the Assad regime. Syria's tribal dictatorship is hardly a valuable ally for Russia, but for Putin it constitutes a symbolic bulwark against revolutionary chaos and perceived Western conspiracies.

REASONS FOR RESTRAINT

The inevitable question about a possible next target for Russian experiments with power projection must be juxtaposed with a question about the limits of this power. Neither can be answered with total confidence, and it is safe to suggest that the Kremlin's assessment of its options is influenced by considerations that are incomprehensible to economists or scholars of war and peace. It is possible to interpret the cautious self-restraint shown by the Russian leadership since the spring of 2016 as the beginning of a reckoning with the real costs of overreaching. But it is equally possible to regard the daily artillery barrages in the Donbas war zone and the occasional strikes on Syrian rebels by long-range Tu-22M3 Russian bombers as evidence of a continuing preference in Moscow for using the military instruments of policy.

Among the factors that might persuade Russia to exercise greater caution, the country's still-deepening economic crisis certainly comes first. Since many government officials are insulated from the recession, there is no political will in the

Kremlin to undertake the structural reforms necessary to overcome it. It is hard to say whether the courtiers and *siloviki* (chiefs of the security establishment) who make up Putin's inner circle have a good understanding of the trajectory of the economic crisis or whether they prefer to keep to the safer ground of denying the decline. In any case, a revenue shortfall cannot be wished away: while the official line asserts that all necessary resources must be allocated for a military buildup, in reality the defense budget and expenditures on rearmament are facing accumulating cuts.

Another political calculation favoring demonstrative self-restraint posits that Russia can sustain a confrontation with the West only if Western unity erodes. Moscow has invested great effort in exploiting divisions among its adversaries, but has learned from experience that every aggressive advance compels NATO members to undertake joint efforts to contain Russia. Thus, mock air attacks have been directed only at US Navy ships in the Baltic and Black seas, while not a single violation of German airspace in the Baltic area has been recorded. The Russian leadership tends to overestimate the depth of transatlantic disagreements and assumes that centrifugal political trends—manifesting themselves, for instance, in the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom—could be enhanced by the export of corruption, including covert funding for right-wing parties and radical groupings. Military pressure, however, is counterproductive for such intrigues.

Moreover, each of the previous proactive moves has left Russia with a new territorial “asset” needing a sizable force to protect it. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for example, cannot be left undefended, and Crimea has become a Russian fortress. Even the Khmeimim base in Syria needs a garrison of expeditionary forces. The heaviest of these current entanglements is certainly in eastern Ukraine.

Taking into consideration the need to rotate troops in and out of the war zone, far fewer battalions are available for yet another enterprise than one might expect from a military with an estimated one million active-duty personnel. This is a symptom of Russia's failure to make progress toward greater professionalization of its armed forces, as envisioned by military reform plans. In the absence of such reforms, the combat readiness of regular battalions is effectively a function of the conscription cycle, which means that in spring and autumn the army is not capable of carrying out demanding missions.

It might also be a consideration in the Kremlin that every military victory tends to boost the popularity of the defense minister, Shoigu, the only member of the top leadership with an independent political profile and a significant pool of loyal followers not only in the military hierarchy but also in the Ministry of Emergencies, which he formerly headed. The continuing cuts in funding have resulted in an escalation of turf wars among various overgrown law-enforcement agencies, including the newly created National Guard, the Interior Ministry, and even the omnipotent state security agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB). The Defense Ministry has been mostly exempt from these squabbles, so Shoigu's political capital is on the rise—which cannot be very comfortable for Putin, who guards his monopoly on decision making and seeks to banish even the shadow of any potential challenger.

TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY

Yet all the good reasons for greater caution cannot overcome the Putin regime's single most significant motivation—the need to retain power. While Putin's personal popularity remains high, actual public support for his deeply corrupt and increasingly anti-democratic system of government is inevitably eroded by the hardships caused by a protracted economic crisis. Large-scale repression of “internal enemies” would have been a natural response, but the magnitude of corruption in law-enforcement agencies—revealed by recent feuds between them—is so great that they could not effectively carry out such an order.

Mobilization against “external enemies” has become the Kremlin's most reliable political tool. Having embarked on a course of confrontation with the annexation of Crimea, it would be risky for policy makers to deviate or attempt a reversal, because demobilization would undercut their grip on power. Vicious jingoist and anti-Western propaganda proved to be a highly effective instrument for domestic mobilization, but it has become a self-propelling political force that drives decisions toward the most aggressive options.

Exploiting the advantage of surprise in choosing the place and time for its next move, Moscow aims for quick and clear victories that will boost domestic support. The experience of the row with Turkey shows that a minor setback (like the loss

of a combat plane) can provide the pretext for a successful mobilization, though it also inevitably generates demands for heavy retaliation, risking new setbacks. The predisposition to stay on the offensive is reinforced by the assumption that the ability to maintain the initiative is one of Russia's advantages in the evolving confrontation with the West, which is always late in responding. The corollary, however, is that every pause works to Russia's disadvantage, giving its opponents time to gather resources and build consensus on countermeasures, including economic and personal sanctions, to the previous Russian advance.

Russia's focus on scoring spectacular victories at the lowest possible cost suggests that a military invasion of Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania—the scenario that NATO's strategic planners are most concerned about—is too risky for the policy makers in the Kremlin. It is certainly useful for them to keep NATO's attention and resources focused on this theater, particularly because it accentuates security disagreements within the alli-

ance. However, an attempted occupation of even the vulnerable Narva border region in Estonia would mean exposing Russia's Kaliningrad exclave to a heavy threat. A conquest of all three Baltic states would require the de-

ployment of a 500,000-strong force (as was needed for the Soviet Union's “peaceful” takeover of these countries in June 1940), which is far beyond Russia's capacity.

What makes any hypothetical plan for an offensive in the Baltic theater even less feasible is the plain fact that Russia has to keep thousands of troops inside the Donbas war zone, with tens of thousands more standing by to reinforce this deployment in case there is an escalation of hostilities. Incessant exchanges of heavy fire along the front line, which cuts across urban agglomerations, prove that this conflict cannot be safely “frozen” and is set to remain the heaviest military commitment for Russia. Logically, this makes eastern Ukraine the most likely target for the next Russian attempt at projecting power, if only because here the general staff can make a reasonably accurate estimate of the means necessary for achieving specific goals. It is also clear that such estimates have to be constantly revised upward because Ukraine is investing serious efforts in building up its defense capabilities. The snap exercises of Russian

The political returns on efforts at projecting military power are clearly diminishing.

forces in August–September 2016 concentrated on the border with Ukraine showed that Moscow is practical enough to settle for a show of force rather than a new offensive.

The experience in Syria has probably turned the Russian leadership against any new interventions in the Middle East, and Turkey, which has launched its own cross-border intervention, certainly remains too formidable a power to be challenged directly. On the other hand, the chronically unstable Caucasus region might yet again become a useful target for Russian power projection. Malignant hot spots such as Nagorno-Karabakh could compel Russia to intervene, but Moscow could also create opportunities for itself to score high-resonance victories with small-scale applications of force, first of all against Georgia. At the same time, the smoldering instability in the North Caucasus could spawn a new wave of terrorist attacks in Russia, while the task of countering and suppressing this threat could be used by the Kremlin as an instrument of domestic mobilization, as in 1999–2000.

One region where Russia has a position of power and has invested considerable resources in upgrading its military infrastructure is the Arctic. However, Moscow cannot find a way to harvest any political dividends from its military dominance in that region. Any attempt to capitalize on it—for instance, by occupying demilitarized Spitsbergen Island, off the north coast of Norway, on the pretext of protecting its Russian settlement—would certainly result in a complete shutdown of the international cooperation in the Arctic that Moscow seeks to preserve.

RETHINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

The balance of limitations on and temptations for attempting a new enterprise of projecting power is fluid, but the fundamental trend in this dynamic is determined by the general decline of Russian power. Moscow's acknowledgment of this trajectory cycles through spasms of sober acceptance and bitter denial, but there are signs that it may produce a conclusion that greater reliance on nuclear arms is needed. This could seem mind-boggling because the risk of issuing threats backed by apparent preparations to use nuclear weapons

is regarded as unacceptable, at least according to commonly accepted strategic thinking.

In the distorted view from within the Kremlin's walls, however, the nuclear arsenal is merely a major asset that so far has not been effectively used to Russia's political advantage. Russia has indeed invested huge resources in modernizing this arsenal over the past five years, having made it the top priority in the 2020 Armament program. Far from recognizing this as a strategic blunder, policy makers are looking for ways to collect dividends from the investment.

This certainly does not mean that threats to target US missile-defense systems in Europe, reiterated earlier this year specifically against the newly opened Deveselu interceptor site in Romania, would be followed up with actual missile strikes. But a resumption of nuclear testing at the old Soviet Novaya Zemlya site in the Arctic cannot be excluded. It would make little sense for Russia to withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty or the 2011 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). However, a conspicuous deployment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons in the Kaliningrad region or in Crimea, as Moscow has vaguely promised, would definitely have a strong impact. Military exercises also could focus on training troops to operate on a nuclear battlefield, and doctrinal guidelines governing the first use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons could be clarified.

The maturing authoritarian regime in Russia is not intrinsically interested in military adventures, and is certainly not ideological about reasserting Russia's global status as a military superpower. Instead, its aggression is driven primarily by the demands of the struggle for its own survival; it will not relinquish its monopoly on political power without a fight. External power projection, in other words, may well be seen in the Kremlin as the only way to sustain domestic mobilization. Risk assessments for such interventions are shaped by the fear of internal unrest, while the violations of international law that have already been committed are so grave that it probably seems pointless to worry about the consequences of new transgressions. ■