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New Century, Old Rivalries: Russian Military Modernisation and NATO

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Nobody should have any illusion about the possibility of gaining military superiority over Russia. (Vladimir Putin)

The West has repeatedly failed to understand Russia and, as a result, failed to anticipate it. Western political leaders, military professionals, economists and analysts alike, for the most part, failed to see the signs heralding the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union, and again failed to see — or chose to ignore — the signs heralding the course President Vladimir Putin intended for the Russian Federation. Consequently, although there were indicators of Russia's military Renaissance and its implications for Euro-Atlantic security, until relatively recently they were not afforded any great measure of attention or concern.

The false assumptions underpinning Western estimations of Russia were rooted in, and coloured by, the erroneous belief that the East-West confrontation was consigned to history and that how the Cold War ended was accepted by both sides. This belief was a natural conclusion based on the course of events since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Berlin Wall was a tourist attraction; Russia and the West had signed myriad disarmament treaties and engaged in ever-increasing trade; Russia was integrating into the international community, becoming a member of the then G8 group of advanced economies, and was even cooperating with NATO through the NATO-Russia Council. However, in an alarmingly short period of time, decades of progress to overcome divisions and transform rivalry into constructive partnership have unraveled, as we witness a narrative reminiscent of the Cold War featuring a return to tit-for-tat remilitarisation.

Under the direction of Vladimir Putin, Russia has embarked on a far-reaching military modernisation programme; at a time when NATO defence spending was falling, Putin has poured money into the armed forces and the defence-industrial complex that supplies them. This has resulted in a dramatic increase in Russia's conventional military capabilities, which, combined with Russia's recent foreign policy, has led NATO to introduce measures to shore-up the alliance. If the lessons of history are not heeded and de-escalatory policies not pursued by both, there exists the very real danger of NATO-Russia relations reverting back to Cold War dynamics and a costly and destabilising arms race.

Russian Military Modernisation

A basic principle of international relations, particularly according to the Realist school, is that power derives from military strength. Hence the capabilities of a nation's armed forces are of elemental importance. Within the context of relatively recent history, the rationale governing the Russian armed forces has been characterised by a philosophy of numeric superiority to counter the technological superiority of rival Western militaries. This philosophy very much adhered to the laconic dictum that 'quantity has a quality of its own' (Glantz, 1991: 259). This approach saved the Soviet Union in its struggle against the German *Wehrmacht* which, though having better trained officers and men as well as technologically superior machines, possessed them in much smaller numbers, and was ground down and eventually overwhelmed by superior Soviet manpower and the sheer number of comparatively crude, yet effective, weapons being churned out by Russian factories. Although The Soviet Union caught up significantly during the arms races of the Cold War — and in fact was ahead of the West in some respects — the emphasis on numbers continued throughout the Soviet period, with the armed forces comprising 4.3 million troops in 1986 (Nichol, 2014: 29), compared to roughly 2.2 million in the United States armed forces (World Bank). Massed armies also led to what Vitaly V. Shlykov termed the 'Structural Militarization' of the Soviet economy in preparation for a Blochian war (Shlykov, 1997) – a machine age war where entire societies are mobilised.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the armed forces were drastically reduced – today they stand at roughly 750,000 active personnel – as was defence funding as the economy of the Russian Federation struggled during the 1990s. As a result, during the ‘... 1990s and much of the 2000s, troop readiness, training, morale, and discipline suffered, and most arms industries became antiquated’ (Nichol, 2014: Summary). Starved of funds for decades, Russian military equipment aged, and Russia relied on its nuclear forces for strength to make up for the weakness of its conventional forces suffering from chronic shortages. This was the case until the late 1990’s when the Russian economy improved due to the rise of global energy prices, which ‘... enabled Russia to reverse the budgetary starvation of the military during the 1990s’ (Nichol, 2014: 29).

This resulted in a steadily climbing defence budget — reaching \$91 billion in 2015 according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2015) — fueled by petrodollars and President Putin’s vision of a new, or rather modernised old, Russia. In order to propel the Cold War-era military — whose deficiencies were revealed during the brief 2008 Georgia war — into the twenty-first century, Russia initiated a ten-year \$700 billion weapons modernisation programme in 2011, prioritising strategic nuclear weapons, combat aircraft, naval vessels, air defences, communications and intelligence capabilities (Masters, 2015). The programme included \$89 billion to rebuild ‘... the largely obsolete defence industrial complex’ (Nichol, 2014: 30).

Replacing old equipment and modernising the defence sector is occurring in parallel to reforms which are attempting to shift the military away from a ‘citizen-army’, i.e. a conscription force, and towards a force made up of contract soldiers. These changes suggest a shift away from the old philosophy of quantity, and that Russia has adopted a more modern approach to military organisation and equipment with emphasis on smaller, more professional and flexible forces equipped with cutting edge weapon systems (Lovelace cited by Thornton, 2011: iii). An example which gives credence to the notion of a paradigm shift is the new T-14 Armata main battle tank (MBT), which moves away from traditional Russian MBT designs such as the T-72 and T-90, and towards a more Western armoured fighting vehicle design philosophy which leans towards larger vehicles with a higher profile (de Larrinaga, 2015).

Besides the new Armata platform, a range of new systems has recently been introduced, is currently coming on line or in development, covering the entire spectrum of military hardware. These include small arms like the AK-12, upgraded Mil Mi-28 attack helicopters, the Sukhoi PAK FA T-50 stealth fighter, Borei-class submarines, the Coalition-SV self-propelled artillery system, the Kurganets-25 infantry fighting vehicle, the new generation S-500 air defence missile system and the RS-24 Yars Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) among others. This ambitious full spectrum programme raises the question: can the Russian economy and the defence-industrial complex maintain and further deliver it?

Steven Rosefielde argued that Russia intends to re-emerge as a fully fledged superpower and that this is easily within the Kremlin’s grasp as Russia’s military-industrial complex is intact (Rosefielde, 2005: abstract). He posited that the Putin administration broadly endorses the General Staff’s (*genshtab*) ambitious aspirations for modern full spectrum fifth-generation armed forces including nuclear modernisation, advanced conventional weapons, information warfare tools, precision guided munitions, high-tech combat aircraft and anti-stealth radar, to name just a few (Rosefielde, 2005:88/89).

Many observers doubt however that such an ambitious and high-tech rearmament programme can succeed. According to Alexander Golts, an expert on Russian military affairs, ‘President Putin is attempting a “do-it-all” approach that has overextended his country’s manufacturing capabilities’ (Golts cited by Gibbons-Neff, 2015). Wanting to develop all spectrums of military systems, from small arms to intercontinental ballistic missiles ‘...means no one programme will have enough funding’ (Golts cited by Gibbons-Neff, 2015). Falling revenues from energy exports, combined with Western sanctions, the devaluation of the rouble and programme cost-overruns, are forcing the Kremlin to cut back defence spending as well as shelve certain plans for the time being. Putin himself acknowledged these difficulties, and that the Russian defence-industrial complex is not yet able to deliver what is being asked of it. According to Putin, ‘This is connected not only with economics, but also with the fact that the defence [industry] is not entirely ready to produce certain types of weapons on time’ (Putin cited by Grove, 2015).

Western sanctions on selling military equipment to Russia are also hampering the programme, for example France’s decision to cancel delivery of two Mistral-class amphibious assault ships (France 24, 2015) and Germany cancelling the construction of an infantry training centre intended to train 30,000 troops a year (Sloat, 2014). Reliance on imported weapon system components is another hurdle facing the Russian defence industry. Replacing Western technology and an ability to manufacture advanced components is a big challenge for Russia. To address this, Putin has signalled his intent to replace imports in the defence industry by building up a domestic manufacturing capability in order for it to be self-sufficient, and to counter the risk of foreign partners ‘not performing their contractual obligations’ (Putin cited by Johnston, 2014).

Whether Russia manages to realise its ambitious modernisation and rearmament programme and whether the defence-industrial complex can deliver it remains to be seen. What is certain however is that although Russia’s military modernisation programme is still a work in progress, it has increased the capabilities of its conventional armed forces in key areas, for example electronic warfare, logistical support and unmanned drones (Marcus, 2015). Thus, while not yet achieving parity with the technological sophistication of Western militaries, particularly the US military, the Russian armed forces are once again a force to be reckoned with.

NATO reinvigorated

Western responses to Russia’s growing military muscle and Putin’s foreign policy have been modest in measure and slow in execution, and it has really only been Russia’s military activities in relation to Ukraine which have prompted the West to acknowledge let alone undertake steps to address them. The often painfully slow process of implementing responsive measures is indicative of an attempt to settle on a uniform approach for a group of actors with varying perspectives. European states have vastly differing relations with Russia, relations which are influenced by a multitude of diverse factors such as geographic proximity, trade dependence and historical interactions, to name just a few. Consequently, agreement on a common position is no easy task. For the East European states of ‘New Europe’ — where memories of Soviet oppression are still fresh — the reactions to Russia’s resurgence are proactive and swift, whereas the West European states of ‘Old Europe’ are more cautious and reluctant to risk their energy supply and trading relations with Russia (Ratti, 2009: 417-418).

As an institutional framework to unite these differing perspectives and to present a common position, NATO has taken on new relevance. The product of European post-war collective defence, NATO was devised according to its first Secretary General Lord Ismay ‘to keep the

Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down’ (Ismay cited by di Paola, 2010), objectives which it was thought to have accomplished. Instead of being disbanded, however, the formal alliance was maintained, and then expanded by taking in the former Warsaw Pact states as they joined the European Union (EU) in order to also integrate them into the European defence architecture. It is NATO’s expansion eastwards that is one of Putin’s most publicly cited grievances with the West, perceived as encroaching on Russia’s area of interest and threatening Russian security. This perception was formalised by an update of the 2010 Russian Military Doctrine, signed by Putin in 2014, which identified NATO as the main external military danger (Russian Military Doctrine, 2010: II/8).

NATO’s capabilities however have been progressively reduced — the inevitable consequence of years of defence cuts. Although a significant increase in NATO’s defence spending figures following the events of 11 September 2001 can be observed, they have been on a downward trajectory since roughly 2009, falling from \$1,077 billion in that year to \$871 billion in 2015 (NATO, 2016: 2). Reductions in military expenditure have caused problems for the capabilities and cohesion of the Alliance. Only four European Alliance members spend at least two per cent of their GDP on defence as stipulated by NATO guidelines (NATO, 2015: 6). A striking example of the challenges that funding reductions pose for possessing and maintaining credible military forces are equipment shortages in the German army, which are so chronic that there are questions about its ability to effectively deploy if ever called upon. A core NATO member, Germany needs to almost double its defence spending to reach the two per cent target, and a report by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces speaks of having to ‘... replace massively overused or obsolete equipment and weapons ...’ (Bundestag, 2014: 6).

Other European NATO Member States also lack critical capabilities. And if parts of a system are deficient, it naturally affects the whole. A report by the UK House of Commons Defence Committee concluded that ‘... NATO is currently not well-prepared for a Russian threat against a NATO Member State’ (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2014: 3). Furthermore it concluded that this lack of preparedness applies to both a conventional and asymmetric attack and that urgent steps ‘... need to be taken to meet these challenges’ (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2014: 3). It must be said, however, that despite defence spending cuts NATO still spends roughly ten times more than Russia does, and that its problem is not just the overall level of spending, but also how this spending is distributed among its members.

Nevertheless, adapting to Russia’s growing military capabilities NATO has, albeit slowly, responded with a series of measures. In 2014 in the Wales Summit Declaration the North Atlantic Council agreed to reverse the trend of declining defence budgets, and that Alliance members who spend less than the 2 per cent guideline will:

- Halt any decline in defence expenditure
- Aim to increase defence expenditure in real terms as GDP grows
- Aim to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade with a view to meeting their NATO Capability Targets and filling NATO’s capability shortfalls (NATO, 2014: Para 14).

The North Atlantic Council also approved the NATO Readiness Action Plan which ‘...responds to the challenges posed by Russia and their strategic implications’ (NATO, 2014: Para. 5). It includes a range of measures such as significantly enhancing the responsiveness of the NATO

Response Force and establishing a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (NATO, 2014: Para. 8). The declaration includes many other measures to adapt the Alliance's military strategic posture, including ensuring NATO has a robust and flexible command structure, has enhanced exercise programmes, is addressing challenges posed by 'hybrid warfare' threats, has a strong defence industry (especially in Europe) and is maintaining a '... continuous air, land, and maritime presence and meaningful military activity in the eastern part of the Alliance...' (NATO, 2014: Para. 7).

Shifting NATO forces to Eastern Europe to counterbalance Russia's growing military capabilities to reassure east-European alliance members was no hollow threat, as the US is poised to move main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and other heavy weapons for up to 5,000 American troops to several Baltic and Eastern European states (Schmitt and Meyers, 2015). This represents moving the military infrastructure of NATO member states closer to the borders of the Russian Federation – identified in the updated Russian Military Doctrine as the main reason for considering NATO as the main external military danger. It seems fair to argue therefore, that Putin's actions have brought about the very thing which he feared, and that, all things considered, NATO-Russia are now at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

Conclusions

With both NATO and Russia endeavouring to increase and improve their military capabilities against the other, a new arms race is on the cards. This confrontation could easily spiral out of control and years of disarmament endeavours – for example the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty – nullified if a tit-for-tat remilitarisation takes place. This would have severely negative consequences for global stability at a time when the international system is already becoming increasingly violent and chaotic, and cooperation between the West and Russia is important in solving pressing global problems such as terrorism.

To avoid this outcome, both sides will need to step back to arrest the current downward trajectory of NATO-Russia relations. For Russia's part, this would mean ceasing its activities in relation to Ukraine and abiding by multilateral agreements that it has signed, namely the Budapest Memorandum which guarantees Ukraine's territorial integrity, ceasing its incursions into NATO airspace, and not using its armed forces as a tool of *Machtpolitik*.

On NATO's part, this would mean taking into account what Robert Kaplan terms Russia's 'geographic insecurity' (Kaplan, 2012). This refers to its deep-seated fear of an attack from Europe, fears which are rooted in the historical traumas of invasions throughout its history, notably by Napoleon and, in particular, by the Wehrmacht. These fears, it could be argued, have been rekindled by NATO's expansion eastwards, and reinforced by NATO moving forces closer the Russia's border, particularly in the form of the missile shield in Eastern Europe.

An encouraging sign is that NATO has reopened the NATO-Russia council which was suspended two years ago due to Russia's annexation of Crimea. This signals at least a desire for dialogue, but whether or not it will be the first step in repairing relations remains to be seen.

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