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Assessing the Russian Military as an Instrument of Power

By The Saker

August 29, 2016

It has been a quarter of a century now since the fall of the Soviet Union and yet the memory of the Soviet Armed Forces is still vivid in the minds of many of those who lived through the Cold War or even remember WWII. The NATO-sponsored elites of Eastern Europe still continue to scare their citizens by warning of a danger of “Russian tanks” rolling down their streets as if the Soviet tanks were about to advance on Germany again.

For a while, the accepted image of a Russian soldier in the West was a semi-literate drinking and raping Ivan who would attack in immense hordes with little tactical skills and an officer corps selected for political loyalty and lack of imagination.

Then the propaganda narrative changed and now the new Russian bogeyman is a “little green man” who will suddenly show up to annex some part of the Baltics to Russia. Putatively pro-Russian “experts” add to the confusion by publicly hallucinating of a Russian deployment in Syria and the Mediterranean which could wrestle the entire region away from Uncle Sam and fight the entire NATO/CENCOM air forces and navies with confidence. This is all nonsense, of course, and what I propose to do here is to provide a few very basic pointers about what the modern Russian military can and cannot do in 2016. This will not be a highly technical

discussion but rather a list of a few simple, basic, reminders.

Russia is not the Soviet Union

The first and most important thing to keep in mind is that the Russian military is truly focused on the defense of Russian territory. Let me immediately say that contrary to much of the Cold War propaganda, the Soviet military was also defensive in essence, even if it did include a number of offensive elements:

- 1) The military control of all of Eastern Europe as a “buffer zone” to keep the US/NATO away from the Soviet Union’s borders.
- 2) An official ideology, Communism, which was messianic and global in its stated goals (more or less, depending on who was in power)
- 3) A practice of global opposition to the US Empire anywhere on the planet with technical, political, financial, scientific and, of course, military means

Russia has exactly zero interest in any of these. Not only did the nature of modern warfare dramatically reduce the benefits of being forward deployed, the messianic aspects of Communism have even been abandoned by the Communist Party of Russia which is now focused on the internal socio-economic problems of Russia and which has no interest whatsoever in liberating the Polish or Austrian proletariat from Capitalist exploitation. As for a global military presence, Russia has neither the means nor the desire to waste her very limited resources on faraway territories which do not contribute to her defense.

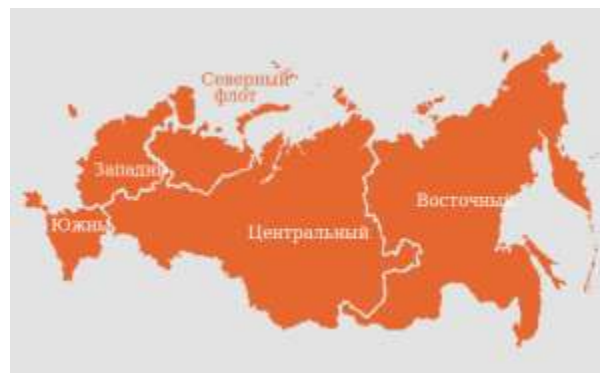


But the single most important factor here is this: the overwhelming majority of Russians are tired and fed up with being an empire. From Peter I to Gorbachev, the Russian people have paid a horrific price in sweat, tears, blood and Rubles to maintain an empire which did absolutely nothing for the Russian people except impoverish them and make them hated in much of the world. More than anything else, the Russians want their country to be a “normal” country. Yes, safe, powerful, wealthy and respected, but still a normal country and not a global superpower. Many Russians still remember that the Soviet Politburo justified the occupation and subsequent war in Afghanistan as the completion of an “internationalist duty” and if somebody today tried that kind of language the reply would be “to hell with that”. Finally, there is the sad reality that almost all the countries which were liberated by Russia, not only from Nazi Germany, but also from the Turkish yoke show exactly zero gratitude for the role Russia played in their liberation. To see how our so-called “Orthodox brothers” in Bulgaria, Romania or Georgia are eager to deploy NATO weapons against Russia is nothing short of sickening. The next time around, let these guys liberate themselves, everybody will be happier that way.

It is a basic rule of military analysis that you do not look at the intentions but primarily at capabilities, so let us now look at Russian capabilities.

The Russian armed forces are relatively small

First, the Russian armed forces are fairly small, especially for the defense of the biggest country on the planet (Russia is almost twice the size of the USA, she has about half the population and land border length of 20,241km). The total size of the Russian Armed Forces is estimated at about 800,000 soldiers. That puts the Russian Armed Forces in 5th position worldwide, somewhere between the DPRK (1,190,000) and Pakistan (643,800). Truly, this kind of “bean counting” makes absolutely no sense, but this comparison is useful to show something crucial: **the Russian Armed Forces are relatively small.**



This conclusion is further bolstered if we consider the fact that it is hard to imagine a scenario in which every Russian soldier from Kalinigrad to the Kamchatka will be engaged at the same time

against one enemy. This is why the Russian territory has been broken up into five separate (and, de facto, autonomous) military districts (or “strategic directions”): East, Central, Northern, Western and Southern.

While there are a number of units which are subordinated directly to the high command in Moscow, most Russian units have been distributed between the commands of these strategic directions.

[Sidebar: it is also interesting to know that when Putin came to power the Western military district was almost demilitarized as nobody in Russia believed that there was a threat coming from the West. The aggressive US/NATO policies have now changed that and there now is an major program underway to strengthen it, including the reactivation of the First Guards Tank Army.]

There is no US equivalent to the Russian military districts. Or, if there is, it is very different in nature and scope. I am talking about the US Unified Combatant Commands which have broken up our entire planet into “Areas of Responsibility”:

Notice that all of Russia is in the area of “responsibility” of only one of these commands, USEUCOM. In reality, however, in the case of full scale war between Russia and the United States USCENTCOM and USPACOM would, obviously, play a crucial role.

The Russians are *not* coming

The size and capabilities of the Russian Military Districts are completely dwarfed by the immense power and resources of the US Commands: in every one of these commands the USA already has deployed forces, pre-positioned equipment and built the infrastructure needed to receive major reinforcements. Furthermore, since the USA currently has about 700 military bases worldwide, the host countries have been turned into a modern version of a colony, a protectorate, which has no option than to fully collaborate with the USA and which has to offer all its resources in manpower, equipment, infrastructure, etc. to the USA in case of war. To put it simply: all of Europe is owned by the USA which can use it as they want (mainly as canon fodder against Russia, of course).



It is important to keep this immense difference in size and capabilities in mind when, for example, we look at the Russian operation in Syria.

When the first rumors of an impending Russian intervention began flooding the blogosphere many were tempted to say that the Russians were about to liberate Syria, challenge NATO and defeat Daesh. Some had visions of Russian Airborne Forces deployed into Damascus, MiG-31s criss-crossing the Syrian skies and even Russian SLBMs cruising off the Syrian coast (though they never explained this one). At the time I tried to explain that no, the “Russians are not coming” (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), but my cautionary remarks were not greeted with enthusiasm, to put it mildly. A Russian task force did eventually materialize in Syria, but it was a very far cry from what was expected. In fact, compared to the expected intervention force, it was tiny: 50 aircraft and support personnel. What this small force achieved, however, was much more than anybody expected, including myself. So what happened here, did the Russians really do everything they can, or did they get cold feet or were they somehow pressured into a much less ambitious mission than they had originally envisioned?

To explain this, we now need to look at the actual capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces.

The true “reach” of the Russian armed forces

First, Russia does have very long range weapon systems: her missiles can reach any point on the planet, her bombers can fly many thousands of miles and her transport aircraft have a range of several thousand miles. However, and this is crucial, none of that amounts to a real power projection capability.

There are two main ways to project power: to take control over a territory or, failing that to deny it to your enemy. The first one absolutely requires the famous “boots on the ground” while the second one requires air supremacy. So how far away from home can the Russian soldiers and pilots really fight? How far from home can the Russian Aerospace forces establish a no-fly zone?

Let’s begin by dispelling a myth: that Russian Airborne Forces are more or less similar to the US 82nd or 101st Airborne. They are not. The 82nd and 101st are light infantry divisions which are typically engaged in what I would call “colonial enforcement” missions. In comparison to the US airborne forces, the Russian Airborne Forces are much heavier, fully mechanized and their main mission is to fight in the operational level support of the front to a maximum depth of 100km to 300km (if I remember correctly, the Russian Aerospace Forces don’t even have sufficient aircraft to airlift an entire Airborne Division although they will acquire that capability in 2017). Once landed, the Russian Airborne Division is a much more formidable force than its US counterpart: not only are the Russians fully mechanized and they have their own artillery. Most importantly, they are far more tactically mobile than the Americans.

But *what the Russians gain in tactical mobility, they lose in strategic mobility*: the US can easily send the 82nd pretty much to any location on the planet, whereas the Russians most definitely cannot do that with their Airborne Forces.

Furthermore, even a Russian Airborne Division is relatively weak and fragile, especially when compared to regular armed forces, so they are critically dependent on the support of the Russian Aerospace forces. That, again, dramatically reduces the “reach” of these forces. All this is to say that no, the Russian VDV never had the means to send an airborne division/Brigade/Regiment to Damascus any more than they had the means to support the Russian VDV company in Pristina. This is not a weakness of the Russian Airborne Forces, it is simply the logical consequence of the fact that the entire Russian military posture is purely defensive in nature, at least strategically.

Like any other modern military force, the Russians are capable of offensive military operations, but those would be executed primarily as a part of a defensive plan or as a part of a counter-attack. And while the Russian Ground Forces (aka “Army”) have excellent terrain crossing capabilities, they are all designed for missions of less than a couple of hundred kilometers in depth.

This is why in the past I have written that the Russian Armed Forces are designed to fight on their national territory and up to a maximum of 1000km from the Russian border. Now, please do not take this “1000km” literally. In reality, 200km-400km would be much more realistic, and I would say that the capabilities of the Russian military diminish in a manner roughly inversely proportional to the square of the distance from the Russian borders. Here is what this maximal 1000km looks like on a map showing the western and southern borders of Russia:



Keep in mind that the real distance the Russian armed forces can “reach” is not primarily determined by distance, but much more by terrain and the possible defenses encountered in this

zone. Flying over Estonia to reach the Baltic Sea would be much easier than to fly over Turkey to reach Syria. It is much easier to cross the Ukrainian plains than it would be to cross the snow covered forests of Finland. Again, the conceptual 1000km distance would often be much shorter in the real world.

If we now take a closer look at the Middle-East, here is what we see:



Notice that Khmeimin is just at the edge of this 1000km distance, but only 50km from the Turkish border and that in order to resupply it the Russians would need to either cross Turkish airspace or fly around Turkey via Iran and Iraq. In other words, Khmeimim and Damascus are way too far for the Russian armed forces to insert anything but a relatively small force and give it a relatively limited mission. And while the Russians were extremely successful in Syria, I would argue that Putin took a huge risk, even if he, and the Russian General Staff, calculated the odds correctly and achieved a truly remarkable success.

Has the recent Iranian offer to use the Hamedan airbase made a difference in Russian capabilities?

Yes and no. Yes because it will now make it possible for the Russians to use their Tu-22M3 in a much more effective way and no because this improvement does not fundamentally change the regional balance of power or allow the Russian to project their forces into Syria. To put it simply: the Russians are years away from being capable of executing something similar to what the USA did during “Desert Shield”. In fact, such operations are not even part of the Russian military doctrine and the Russians have no desire to develop any such capability. There is a reason why the AngloZionist Empire is broke: maintaining a global empire is prohibitively expensive, the Russians painfully learned that lesson in the past and they have no desire to emulate the USA today. Doing so would not only require a dramatic change in the Russian military posture, but also to imitate the US political and economic model, something Russia

neither desires nor is capable of.

There are, however, also big advantages to the Russian force posture, the main one being that Russians will only fight on “their turf” not only in terms of location, but also in terms of capabilities. The very same inverse square “law” which so severely limits the Russian military power projection capabilities also acts in Russia’s favor when dealing with an enemy approaching the Russian border: the closer this enemy gets, the more dangerous his environment becomes. In practical terms, this means that the three Baltic states, the Baltic Sea, the Gulf of Finland, most of the Ukraine, the Black Sea and the Caspian are all, for all practical purposes, “Russkie-land”. The fact that NATO pretends otherwise makes no difference here: the kind of firepower, capabilities which Russia can bring to bear simply dwarfs what the US and NATO can commit. This is not an issue of number of tanks, or helicopters or combat aircraft, it is the fact that over and near the Russian territory the Russian armed forces would act as an integrated whole, exactly what they cannot do as far as, say, in Syria. So even if NATO can in theory bring more aircraft to the battle, Russian aircraft would be supported by the multi-layered and fully integrated Russian air defense network, a large number of sophisticated electronic warfare systems which, together with highly capable and long range interceptors: land based like the S-400 or airborne like the MiG-31BM would make it extremely dangerous for US/NATO aircraft to get anywhere near Russian airspace, especially for the AWACs the US air doctrine completely depends on.

The real meaning of A2AD

The US and NATO are, of course, very much aware of this. And as is typically the case, they concealed this reality behind an obscure acronym: A2AD, which stands for **anti-access area denial**. According to US strategists, Russia, China and even Iran are plotting to use A2AD strategies against the USA. What this means in plain English is simple, of course: some countries out there actually can fight back and defend themselves (hence the burning aircraft carrier on the cover of this book). The arrogance of it all is simply amazing: it is not like the USA is concerned about Iranian A2AD in Paraguay, Russia A2AD in Africa or even Chinese A2AD in the Gulf of Mexico. No, the USA is concerned about these countries defending their own borders. Indeed, how dare they?!

Fortunately for the world, Uncle Sam only gets to whine here, but cannot do much about it except conceal these realities from the general public in the West and obfuscate the dangers of messing with the wrong countries under bizarre acronyms like A2AD. And that brings me to the Ukraine.

A quick look at 1000km map will immediately show that the Ukraine is also well within the conceptual “Russkie-land” zone (again, don’t take 1000km literally, and remember that this is a maximum, a couple of hundred kilometers are much more realistic). This does not at all mean that Russia would want, or should, attack or invade the Ukraine (the the Baltic states and Poland, for that matter), but it does mean that such an operation is well within the Russian capabilities (at least if we forget about public opinion in Russia) and that to try to counter that would take a truly immense effort, something nobody in the West has the means to undertake.

In truth, those kinds of scenarios only exist in the demented minds of western propagandists and in the artificial world of US think tanks which make providing the politicians with frightening fairy tales their daily bread (for an example of the latter, see here). To be sure, the fact that both sides have long-range standoff weapons, including nuclear ones, makes such a scenario even less likely unless we assume that the Russians have gone insane and are trying to force the US to resort to nuclear weapons. The opposite scenario – the US taking the risk of forcing Russia to use her nukes – is, alas, not quite as unlikely, especially if the Neocons take full control of the White House. The difference? The Russians know that they are neither invulnerable nor invincible, the Americans don't. This is why the latter are far more likely to trigger conflict than the former.

A full-scale war between the USA and Russia would be far different from anything described here: it would last a week, maybe two, it would involve conventional and nuclear strikes on both the USA and Russia, and it would be fought primarily with standoff weapons, “boots on the ground” or armored warfare would matter very little in such a scenario.

The Ukraine is located well inside Russkie-land

So if in Syria the “Russians are not coming”, then in the Ukraine they are already there. I am not referring to the sending of equipment (the *voentorg*) or volunteers (the “*northern wind*”) but to the fact that the Ukraine and, especially, the Donbass are so close to the Russian border as being basically undeniable to the Russians should they decide to take it. Again, I am not suggesting that they will, or even that this should happen, but only that all the hot air from the regime in Kiev about “defending Europe against the Russian hordes” or “teaching NATO on how to fight the Russians” is absolute nonsense. Ditto for the talk about supplying “lethal weapons” to the Ukonazis. Why? Because the situation in the Donbass is extremely simple: it is highly unlikely that the Ukonazis would succeed in taking over the Donbass but if, by some miracle, they did, they would be destroyed by the Russian armed forces. Putin has made it abundantly clear that while he will not intervene militarily in the Ukraine, he will not allow a genocide to take place in Novorussia. Just the Russian artillery deployed along the border has the means to destroy any Ukrainian force invading Novorussia. In fact, that is exactly what happened in July of 2014 when in a single cross-border 2 minutes long fire strike by Russian multiple rocket launchers and long range artillery guns completely destroyed two Ukrainian mechanized battalions (a first in the history of warfare).

As I wrote many times, all parties to the conflict know that, and the only real goal of the Ukonazis is to trigger a Russian intervention in the Donbass, while the Russians are trying to avoid it by covertly supporting the Novorussians. That's it. It is that simple. But the notion of the Ukonazis ever getting their hands on the Donbass or, even less so, Crimea is absolutely ridiculous as even the combined power of the US and NATO could not make that happen.

Conclusion: Russia ain't the Soviet Union and it ain't the USA

It is absolutely amazing how hard it is for so many people to understand the seemingly simple fact that Russia is not a USSR v2 nor an anti-USA. It is therefore absolutely essential to repeat over and over again that the Russia of 2016 has no aspirations to become an empire and no

means to become a global challenger to the AngloZionist hegemony over our planet. So what does Russia want? It is simple: Russia simply wants to be a sovereign and free country. That's it. But in a world ruled by the AngloZionist Empire this is also a lot. In fact, I would say that for the international plutocracy ruling the Empire, this Russian aspiration is completely and categorically unacceptable as it sees this Russian desire as an existential threat to the USA and the entire New World Order the Empire is trying to impose upon all of us. They are absolutely correct, by the way.

If Russia is allowed to break free from the Empire, then this means the end for the Empire's global domination project as other countries will inevitably follow suit. Not only that, but this would deprive the Empire from the immense Russian resources in energy, potable water, strategic metals, etc. If Russia is allowed to break free and succeed, then Europe will inevitably gravitate towards Russia due to objective economic and political factors. Losing Europe would mean the end of the AngloZionist Empire. Everybody understands that and this is why the ruling 1%ers have unleashed to most hysterical full-spectrum russophobic propaganda campaign in western history. So yes, Russia and the Empire are already at war, a war for survival from which only one side will walk away while the other will be eliminated, at least in its current political form. This war is a new type of war, however, one which is roughly **80% informational, 15% economic and 5% military**. This is why the ban on the Russian paralympic team is every bit as important as the delivery of US and British counter-battery radars to the Nazi junta in Kiev.

If militarily and economically Russia is dramatically weaker than the US led block of all the countries forming the Empire, on the informational front Russia is doing much better. It is enough to see all the hysterics of western politicians about RT to see that they are most definitely feeling threatened in an area which they used to completely dominate: information operations (aka propaganda).

The goals of Russia are quite simple:

- a) military: to survive (defensive military doctrine)
- b) economic: to become truly sovereign (to remove the 5th columnists from power)
- c) informational: to discredit and de-legitimize the Empire political and economic basis

That's it. Unlike the grandiose hopes of those who wish to see the Russian military intervene everywhere, these 3 goals are commensurate with the actual capabilities/means of Russia.

One cannot win a war by engaging in the kind of warfare the enemy excels at. You have to impose upon him the kind of warfare you excel at. If Russia tried to "out-USA the USA" she would inevitably lose, she therefore chose to be different in order to prevail.

There are still many out there who are nostalgic for the "good old days" of the Cold War when any anti-US movement, party, regime or insurgency would automatically get the support of the USSR. These are the folks who deeply regret that Russia did not liberate the Ukraine from the Nazi junta, who fault Russia for not standing up to the USA in Syria and who are baffled, if not

disgusted, by the apparently cozy relationship between Moscow and Tel Aviv. I understand these people, at least to some degree, but I also see what they plainly fail to realize: Russia is still much weaker than the AngloZionist Empire and because of that Russia will always prefer a bad peace to a good war. Besides, it is not like there was a long line of countries waiting to defend Russia when her interests were affected. Does anybody know which countries, besides Russia, have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia? Answer: Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru! Yep, not even Kazakhstan or Syria... Isn't friendship and partnership a two-way street?

The truth is that Russia does not owe anything to anybody. But even more importantly, Russia does simply not have the means to engage in a planetary zero-sum game against the AngloZionist Empire. Since Vladimir Putin came to power he achieved a quasi-miracle: he made Russia into a semi-sovereign state. Yes, I wrote semi-sovereign because while Russia is militarily safe she remains economically subservient to the AngloZionist Empire. Compared to the Empire, her economy is tiny and her armed forces only capable of defending the Russian homeland. And yet, just as the tiny Russian contingent in Khmeimim achieved results way superior to anything which could have been expected from it, Russia is still the only power on the planet who dares to openly say “*niet*” to the AngloZionist Hegemon and but to even openly challenge and even ridicule its legitimacy and so-called ‘values’.

The war between the Empire and Russia will be a long one, and its outcome will remain uncertain for many years but, as the Russian saying goes, “Russia does not start wars, she ends them”. The Papacy fought against Russia for 1000 years. The Crusaders for roughly a century. The Swedish Empire for 21 years. Napoleon for just a few months. Queen Victoria, Napoleon III and Abdülmecid I (what I call the “Ecumenical Coalition against Russia”) for about 3 years. The Kaiser Wilhelm II also for 3 years. The Trotskysts for a decade. Hitler for 4 years. The Jewish mobsters (aka “oligarchs”) for 9 years. And yes, they all eventually were defeated, even after a temporary victory, but each time Russia paid a huge price in blood and suffering. This time around, the Russian leaders have chosen a different strategy, they try as hard as possible not to give the West a pretext for a full-scale military confrontation. So far, this strategy has been successful and besides a two terrorist attacks (in Egypt and Syria) and a two-year long recession (apparently ending soon), Russia did not have pay the horrendous price countries at war with the West typically have had to pay. It would be delusional to expect the Russians to change course at this time, especially since time is now clearly on the Russian side. Just look at all the problems all the enemies of Russia have to which she does not have to contribute at all: the US and EU are both in a deep and potentially devastating political crisis, the US is sitting on an economic time-bomb while the EU is quite literally imploding. The Ukraine has turned into a textbook example of a failed state and is likely to break apart, while Turkey is undergoing the worst crisis since its foundation. And each passing day just makes things worse and worse for the Empire. This reminds me of the monologue of Captain Willard in the movie “Apocalypse Now”: *“I’m here a week now... waiting for a mission... getting softer. Every minute I stay in this room, I get weaker, and every minute Charlie squats in the bush, he gets stronger. Each time I looked around the walls moved in a little tighter”*. Replace Charlie with Ivan and the jungle with the taiga, and you get a pretty good picture of the dynamic taking place: every days the walls of the Empire are moving in a little tighter while the AngloZionists are completely clueless as to what to do to stop this.

Conclusion

In international affairs, as in many other areas, it is better to never say never. So I will only say that to see the Russian armed forces going into an offensive operation remains exceedingly unlikely. Nor will Russia defend even an important partner at “any cost”. The primary mission and military posture of the Russian armed forces will remain fundamentally defensive and while Russia might use her armed forces in support of a political goal or to help an ally, she will do that with extreme caution not to allow that engagement to escalate into a regional war or, even less so, a direct war against the Empire.

Unlike the West where a possible war with Russia is almost never discussed (and, when it is, it is done in an absolutely ridiculous manner), the prospects of war with the West are discussed in the Russian media on an almost daily basis, including on the main, state-funded, TV stations. As for the Russian armed forces, they are engaged in huge rearmament and force-training program which, so far, has been roughly 50% completed. These are all clear signs that Russia is preparing, very intensively, for war. Should the Neocon “crazies in the basement” trigger a war they will find Russia ready, militarily and psychologically, to fight and to win, no matter what the costs. But Russia will never again volunteer for the role of global anti-US agent or engage her armed forces if there is a viable alternative to such an engagement. So no, most definitely not, the Russians are not coming.