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## Russia: Big Threat or Paper Bear?

By: Eric Margolis

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The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming! Or are they? That depends on whom you ask.

President Dimitri Medvedev announced last Tuesday that Russia would modernize its large but decrepit armed forces, starting in 2011. New nuclear and conventional weapons systems will be acquired, but there will also be large cuts in Russia's 1,027,000 armed forces, including large numbers of officers. Defense spending could rise 30%.

Conservatives in North America and Europe are warning the Kremlin's military overhaul threatens Europe and shows Russia has aggressive intentions. Eastern European capitals are particularly worried. But the facts tell a different story.

According to Russia's defense minister, Anatoli Serdyukov, only 10% of Russia's current arms can be considered modern. The rest are outdated or obsolescent. His figures appear accurate. Serdyukov hopes to raise to 30% the number of modern weapons by 2015, provided Russia's economy, badly battered by the nosedive in oil prices, can afford it. That remains in doubt.

President Medvedev claimed the defense buildup was due to the need to modernize aging nuclear forces, and growing threats to Russia around its borders. He particularly cited "attempts to expand the military infrastructure of NATO near Russia's borders." Medvedev was expressing a deeply felt Russian anxiety.

The US-led NATO alliance has pushed right up to Russia's frontiers. Mikhail Gorbachev's agreement with Washington to withdraw the Red Army from the protective glacis of Eastern

Europe in exchange for NATO's agreement not to advance east was blatantly violated by three US presidents as the alliance moved to the shores of Black Sea and Baltic.

In recent years, the US has been expanding its influence into the Caucasian states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In addition, the US has set up bases in former Soviet Central Asia and Pakistan.

What Medvedev did not mention was Moscow's growing unease over its huge neighbor, China. There are only 20–25 million ethnic Russians in the distant, vulnerable Russian Far Eastern provinces facing 1.3 billion Chinese. Chinese-Russian relations are amicable, but tens of thousands of Chinese are steadily slipping across the border into Russia. At the same time, Russia's Pacific region is being drawn ever deeper into China's economic orbit.

Russia has announced defense modernization plans for the past two decades. The little war in Georgia last year showed that Russia's ground and air forces badly needed new communications gear, modern command and control techniques, better tactical integration, drones, and improved space reconnaissance.

So Moscow plans to downsize its land forces and try to make them more mobile and responsive by focusing on 3,500–4,000 man brigades provided with better air and land transport. These reforms make it clear that NATO in Europe will no longer be the "main enemy." Future military operations will focus on a new "Great Game" around Russia frayed borders in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as President Medvedev noted.

To put all this in perspective, during the Cold War, Russia used to have 12 million men in 100 divisions (about a third immediately combat ready) and a stupendous force of 50,000 battle tanks. Today, Russia's modest million-man armed forces are unable to defend or even properly monitor the immensity of the Russian Federation, which borders on 14 nations.

In fact, Russia's borders, 57,792 km, are the world's longest, encompassing an immense area almost twice the size of the United States.

Scaremongers who warn of a new Russian military threat should do the math and study maps. Russia spent \$40 billion last year on defense. Medvedev's planned increases – if they ever materialize – will increase military spending to \$52 billion.

The United States will spend US \$741 billion on its military this year. Add another \$54 billion for the department of Homeland Security.

President Barack Obama has just earmarked \$200 billion this year to finance America's occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. That alone is more than the combined defense budgets of Russia and China.

The US accounts for almost half the world's total military spending. Russia must also take into account the \$330 billion military spending of America's wealthy NATO allies and Japan.

I think we can safely allow the Ruskis a few more modern weapons systems. The Red hordes are not at our gates quite yet.