

Military Reform in Russia

By Bettina Renz, Nottingham and Rod Thornton, Hewler

Abstract

The Russian military is currently undergoing a modernization process. It is long overdue. After the end of the Cold War, the armed forces received little investment and any changes made were mostly minor. The main effort went into the replacing of conscripts with professional service personnel. Little new equipment was procured and structures and outlook remained wedded to Cold War philosophies. This all changed, however, with the war against Georgia in 2008. It was the Russian failures seen in this conflict that began the current, well-financed modernization drive. This process is, though, not without its problems.

Russia's post-Cold War political leaders and senior military officers were well aware, ever since the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, that the country's armed forces were in urgent need of radical reform. Changes were made, but they only resulted in minor alterations. Fundamental transformation only occurred after the war with Georgia in 2008. The poor performance of the Russian armed forces in that conflict brought home the fact that reform was needed and since then serious attempts have been made to create a Russian military fit for the 21st century. Using new funding that has now pushed Russia into the top three of the world's defence spenders, the armed forces are now undergoing a process of change that will leave them smaller, more deployable and, it is hoped, more effective in contemporary conflict situations. In this article we take stock of what has and has not been achieved over the past four years. We conclude that whilst substantial changes have been achieved in an impressively short time-scale, significant hurdles have still yet to be overcome. In the meantime, an incomplete reform process has left the Russian conventional armed forces weakened, with significant implications for Russia's strategic posture.

The Ground Forces

The Russian ground forces' performance in the conflict with Georgia received severe domestic criticism. The 58th Army was seen to be slow to react—despite the fact that many of its units had been on exercise not far from the Georgian border when hostilities broke out. Once engaged in combat, moreover, operational efficiency was hindered by command-and-control failures, a lack of coordination and an inability to direct precision-guided munitions. The technologies to enable all three were lacking in the army. The ground forces' structure was also ill-suited to the conduct of the type of modern warfare characterised by the conflict with Georgia. The traditional Russian division (c. 10,000 personnel) lacked the flexibility to cope with the demands of a fast-moving conflict scenario. Such large divisions might well have been suited to the type of large-scale opera-

tions seen in the World Wars and which were later envisaged as likely by both sides in the Cold War. But post-1989, western militaries soon realised that the division was too unwieldy a formation for the types of expeditionary operations they were now being called upon to conduct. Instead of dividing their armies into divisions, the armies of the likes of the US and UK began to adopt a smaller formation as the standard building-block—the brigade.

In Russia, too, the recognition that the division had outlived its usefulness was appreciated. But no reforms were made until the experience with Georgia painfully demonstrated just how necessary they actually were. Thus just after the war President Dimitri Medvedev announced a programme to completely overhaul the ground forces' structure; including replacing all of its divisions with what were called permanent-readiness brigades. Some 83 brigades have now been created out of the 203 old divisions (few of which were ever fully manned). And although encouraging noises were being made within only a few months about how these new brigades were beginning to operate, it was difficult to see how such radical structural changes could have become embedded so quickly. Even manning these brigades was proving difficult. Such problems still persist to this day with the so-called 'permanent-readiness' formations: they cannot really be 'ready' for operations if, for instance, they do not have their full troop complements.

The Air Force

The Russian air force's performance in the Georgian War also did not escape criticism. The operational effectiveness of any modern air force relies on two elements in particular: skilled personnel and cutting-edge technologies. Russia's air force has few of either. The post-Georgia plans for the long-overdue modernization of the air force thus concentrated on introducing better-trained personnel—within a more streamlined organization—and new equipment. The personnel aspects could be dealt with more easily than those related to equip-

ment. The air force could not suddenly replace many hundreds of Soviet-era aircraft with newer models. But progress is being made—even though the 1500 or so ‘new’ aircraft (including 350 front-line combat aircraft) that will gradually be introduced by 2020 are really no more than upgraded models of machines first seen in the 1980s and 1990s. Even this move, though, should improve the current figures indicating that only 40 to 60 per cent of aircraft in most regiments are actually combat-capable. It has also been decided to overhaul and extend the lives of some squadrons of Tu-95 and Tu-160 strategic bombers. More significantly in terms of genuinely ‘new’ aircraft, the air force is expected to begin taking delivery before 2020 of the Sukhoi T-50. This is described (perhaps optimistically) as a genuine ‘fifth-generation’ fighter.

It is questionable, though, whether these ambitious plans for the air force are completely realistic. In economic terms, and in terms of the Russian defence industry’s capacity to make good on the orders, there seems to be something of a disconnect between aspiration and the actual capacity to deliver.

The Navy

For much of the post-Soviet era, the Russian navy struggled to put even one reasonably sized surface vessel to sea. Indeed, besides the few ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) that it managed to keep on patrol for deterrence purposes, Russia had no real operational navy to speak of throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. What building programmes there were during this period tended to concentrate either on SSBNs or on small patrol craft. The effect of such cost-cutting was that the navy came to adopt only two rather divergent maritime roles: that of nuclear deterrence and coastal protection force.

In recent years, however, the navy has been given a new emphasis. Russian politicians, particularly current president, Vladimir Putin, have come to appreciate the idea of the power-projection capability that naval units can generate. Many larger ships have now been overhauled and refitted and some new destroyers and frigates launched. Making use of such vessels, Russian flotillas began to be sent, in the later 2000s, on blue-water voyages to the likes of South America, India and the Far East, and to take part in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. The navy does, however, lack the overseas bases that would further enhance its long-range capabilities. It can currently only make use of Tartus in Syria. Negotiations are, though, ongoing in relation to re-establishing former Soviet bases in places such as Yemen (Aden) and Vietnam (Cam Ranh Bay).

Finally, the navy currently only has one carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov* that is old and unreliable. Thus Rus-

sia has little ability to project actual combat power to overseas shores. With the idea of correcting this in mind, in 2007 a number of Russian admirals began to talk about laying down *six* new aircraft carriers. Such a building programme is, though, viewed as unrealistic. Even if an aircraft carrier or two was to be built in the coming years this still leaves a capabilities gap in the meantime. To partially plug this gap, the Russian Defence Ministry has decided—in a current feature of Moscow’s arms procurement policy—to look abroad. A 1.9 billion US dollar contract has been signed to buy three or four *Mistral*-class amphibious assault ships (LHDs) from France. Again, it was Georgia and the naval failures in that war which also provided the catalyst for this order, as at the time, the navy did not even have the class of vessel that could put troops ashore from the Black Sea in a combat situation.

The Defence Industry

Ambitious talk about the scope of Russian military modernization has, of course, to be mindful of economic reality. But even if Russia’s economy does remain capable of providing the requisite funding for some of the more ambitious plans, the country’s defence industrial base is not currently capable of producing the necessary sophisticated technologies. For this industry itself cannot suddenly overcome the years of under-investment and mismanagement to now produce the cutting-edge military systems demanded by politicians and senior military officers alike. The likes of LHDs are incapable, for example, of being built in Russian shipyards.

After the Georgian war, Medvedev stated that reform of the defence industrial sector would become a focus of his attention as the then new president. There is, however, no quick-fix solution. New factories and machine-tools are needed as, indeed, are new personnel: more than 90 per cent of the sector’s workforce is now aged over 50. A career in the defence industry is today not as attractive to bright young Russian science and engineering graduates as it was to their Soviet forebears.

Looking abroad is again an option to overcome the sector’s deficiencies. And the likes of sniper rifles (Britain), drone aircraft (Israel) and armoured personnel carriers (Italy) have been purchased (with no little attendant domestic controversy). Indeed, development of the T-50 itself requires Indian technological assistance. Such a reliance on foreign weapons assistance is seen only as a temporary measure. It is hoped that Russia’s defence industry can skip a generation of development by taking western technologies and copying/reverse-engineering them to produce indigenous Russian variants. Of course, Russia is not able to import the really high-end systems, such as those associated with command-and-

control systems, since foreign manufacturers treat them as sensitive technologies and not for sale abroad.

Nuclear Triad

The Soviet Union, as with other major nuclear powers of the Cold War era, relied for deterrence on a nuclear triad. Nuclear weapons could be delivered by air-, land- or sea-based systems. But Moscow's triad started to break down once the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Air-delivered and silo-based weapons became especially vulnerable to a lack of investment. Emphasis thus fell on developing the relatively cost-effective truck-mounted Topol-M ICBM and keeping enough SSBNs at sea to maintain a credible deterrent. New SSBNs are being built—but painfully slowly. While one new such vessel has just become operational, there are currently only about 10 of the older SSBNs left and most of these are under repair. An additional problem has been with the *Bulava* missile that is designed to be launched from the new SSBNs. This is still undergoing tests. Early firings of this missile were producing a failure rate of more than 50 per cent and whether or not the *Bulava* will ever become operational is open to debate.

Senior Russian political and military figures are already nervous about not having enough nuclear weapons to maintain a deterrence capability. And they become ever more nervous the closer the United States comes to fielding its much vaunted Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) shield. Hence Moscow's diplomats are doing everything possible to thwart the development of this shield by protesting long and hard about the establishing of BMD-linked facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Kremlin concerns over the weakness of its nuclear deterrent means that it was more than pleased with the START agreement of March 2010. The limits imposed

favour the Russian side in that it is not being asked to cut any of its own warheads or delivery systems. This is because the numbers of both in its triad are below the negotiated caps—only the US side has to bring down its numbers. Additionally, and importantly, the new START agreement means that Russia does not have to lower the number of its tactical nuclear weapons. It has many more of these than the US. These are prized and important assets to Moscow. And they become even more prized when it is borne in mind that Russia feels militarily vulnerable in the midst of its current reform process.

Conclusion

As it undergoes this reform process, the Russian military is in a state of flux. It is weaker. There are many senior figures in Moscow now who appear to lack confidence in the armed forces' ability to deter aggression (Georgia was not 'deterred!'). This mindset can have two results. Either Russia tries to avoid any military confrontation by energetic diplomacy or it tries an opposing tack: making aggressive noises in order to deter any future aggression against it. In November 2011, Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov did warn of the potential for even local conflicts escalating into full-scale war with the possibility of tactical nuclear weapons being used. Such 'rocket-rattling' does not mean that Russia has necessarily lowered its nuclear threshold. It does indicate, however, the vulnerability that the country feels. If faced with an adversary who might be able to exploit the current weakness of its conventional forces as they undergo reform, Russia might feel it has a legitimate recourse to the nuclear option—even in 'small wars'. For the Kremlin, resorting to tactical nuclear weapons in such conflict scenarios might be seen as a necessity, and not a choice.

About the Authors

Bettina Renz is a lecturer in international security at the University of Nottingham's School of Politics & International Relations. She has published widely on reforms of the security sector in contemporary Russia.

Rod Thornton is a lecturer at the University of Hwiler, Iraq. Prior to academia he served for nine years in the British Army. Among his publications are *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2007); *Organizational Change in the Russian Airborne Forces: The Lessons of the Georgian Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Department of Defense, 2011), and *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Department of Defense, 2011).

Suggested Reading

- Roger McDermott, Bertil Nygren and Carolina Vendil Pallin, *The Russian Armed Forces in Transition: Economic, Geopolitical and Institutional Uncertainties*, London: Routledge, 2012.
- Bettina Renz and Rod Thornton, 'Russian Military Modernization: Cause, Course and Consequences', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 51(1), 2012, pp. 44–54.