

RUSSIAN MILITARY TRANSFORMATION— GOAL IN SIGHT?

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In March-April 2014, Russia mounted military operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine using ground forces which were entirely different from the Russian military which had been seen in action in Georgia in August 2008. This paper, completed 6 months earlier in September 2013, describes the process of Russia achieving this new force which is more flexible, adaptable, and scalable for achieving Russian foreign policy aims than the old post-Soviet Russian armed forces that were used in Georgia.

The depth and scale of change that the Russian military has undergone during the last 6 years of transformation is impossible to overstate. During most of this time, service personnel in Russia were expressing disorientation and discontent at the relentless pace of upheaval. But from late-2011 onwards, this transformation entered a qualitatively new and stable phase. While there has been change at the most senior levels of leadership, the dominant characteristic of the transformation process now is continuity. Those expecting radical changes of direction with the appointment of new Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu were disappointed, and the eventual shape of the Russian military at the end of the transformation process is now finally becoming clear.

This monograph reviews the overall direction and intention of Russia's military transformation, with particular reference to the specific range of threats—real and hypothetical—against which it is intended to ensure. Stated aspirations for transformation will be measured against known challenges facing the defense establishment and Russia as a whole, with the conclusion that several specific goals are unlikely to be met.

Fundamental organizational changes that finally broke the Russian armed forces away from the Soviet model in 2008-09 are now irreversible. It has been clear for some time that Russia no longer sees its military as a counter to a massive land incursion by a conventional enemy. While the idea of vulnerability to U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization hostile intentions remains strong, this vulnerability finally is no longer seen in Cold War-era conventional military terms: instead, it is missile defense and precision strike capabilities that have come to the fore, even while lingering suspicions over a limited Libya-style intervention still provide a driving force for military modernization.

Russia's current officially stated threat assessment overstates the likelihood of armed attack from the United States and its allies. If any potential major adversary is mentioned in Russian discourse, it is almost inevitably one in the West. As always, the potential for a military threat from China is the exceptional case which, if discussed at all, is approached in exceedingly delicate terms.

There is a persistent argument voiced by senior military commentators wielding prodigious authority in Russia that foreign powers are planning to seize Russia's natural resources, including by means of a paralyzing first strike by precision munitions against which Russia's air and space defenses will be entirely insufficient. This provides the backdrop for repeated statements by Vladimir Putin emphasizing defense against this eventuality. As a result, spending priorities and the transformation process overall are skewed and fail to address more realistic security threats to Russia. Spending on offensive strategic weapons has also been increased as a direct result of this perspective.

One area needing special consideration is Russian activity in developing and introducing new types of strategic weapons, while maintaining strengths in non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, the real and immediate security threat facing Russia is an entirely different one from an entirely different direction—Russia’s southern periphery, where incursions, insurgency, weapons proliferation, and terrorism are all expected to increase in intensity following the U.S. and allied drawdown in Afghanistan and as a result of continued instability in the Middle East.

Russia has embarked on an expensive program of rearmament, running in parallel with its transformation schedule. The overambitious nature of the procurement plans was noted immediately on their announcement, and is now becoming clear. Both the capabilities of the defense industry and the level of funding allocated pose threats to realizing rearmament goals.

But many of Russia’s remaining problems in implementing its transformation aims are not with money or equipment, but with people. Demographic change in Russia now means that service personnel are at a premium, and, for the first time in Russia’s history, conscripts are a valuable asset rather than a disposable commodity. The examples of noncommissioned officer training and junior officer assignments show that Russia still awaits the fundamental cultural shift in how it treats its service people that is essential for dealing with human capital as a finite resource.

Deep and persistent challenges, including those of manning, funding, and procurement, mean that many ambitions for the Russian military will not be achieved in the short- to medium-term. But the uses of Russia’s armed forces which were observed in Ukraine in 2014 bears out the authors’ earlier conclusion that post-transformation, the Russian military now provides a more flexible foreign policy tool which should be expected to be used more frequently in the future.

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