Wherever one looks, Russia is carrying out aggressive military and informational attacks against the West in Europe, North and South America, the Arctic, and the Middle East. This “war against the West” actually began over a decade ago, but its most jarring and shocking event, the one that started to focus Western minds on Russia, was the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Given this pattern, the National Security Council (NSC) in 2014 invited Stephen Blank to organize a conference on the Russian military. We were able to launch the conference in 2016 and bring together a distinguished international group of experts on the Russian military to produce the papers that were then subsequently updated for presentation here.

The results presented here are sobering, to say the least. Ray Finch and Aleksandr Golts highlight the domestic program of military mobilization of Russian society that began before 2014 and has only intensified since then. It aims to engender a positive, heroic image for the military and the idea that Russia is under siege from the West. This campaign has also gone hand in hand with signs of greatly enhanced defense spending, although there have been cuts in 2017-2018 due to sanctions. However, despite the fact that Paul Schwartz rightly points out that Russia’s science and technology sectors are wounded and suffer from excessive militarization, he and Steven Rosefielde undermine the complacent and excessively comfortable notion that Russian economic weakness—which is real—will lead to the collapse of the system or its retreat from its current posture.

The examination of current military operations in Ukraine and Syria by Keir Giles and Stephen Blank confirm that, from Moscow’s point of view, the use of force has, on balance, proven successful. These operations also highlight Vladimir Putin’s determination to uphold and extend the great power status of Russia and to be seen as an advance of Russian domestic policy. Indeed, foreign and defense policies are, to a large degree, resources for the consolidation and legitimacy of the regime at home. Beyond that, these analyses highlight enduring aspects of Russian military operation (e.g., deception operations). Russia’s determination to project power abroad is not exclusively for domestic purposes, but it is also intended to force a revision of global order and attain enduring recognition as a great global power whose voice must be heard in all major international crises.

In this context, Russia’s nuclear and information warfare programs assume greater importance. The chapters on nuclear weapons by Mark Schneider and James Howe, therefore, make for sober consideration. Schneider and Howe carefully examined the major nuclear buildup—part of which Putin discussed in his speech to the Federal Assembly on March 1, 2018. They show a huge buildup of these weapons, including new types of weapons like hypersonics; the violation of almost all of the existing arms control treaties; and, long-range scenarios and their possible use in a war. Lieutenant Colonel Pentti Forsström duly shows that, in war planning, conventional and nuclear scenarios are relatively seamlessly
fused, and that Russia sees its nuclear weapons as instruments of warfighting. Similarly, Tim Thomas demonstrates that, for Moscow (and unlike Washington), cyber and information war are two sides of the same coin, not separate phenomena. Moreover, he demonstrates the range of uses and importance that these linked forms of war have today for Moscow.

Those discussions then lead to an analysis of the conventional buildup of the Russian armed forces, theater by theater, including the Navy. Jacob Kipp stresses the historical forces that now undergird the development of the Russian Army, while Isabelle Facon looks at the use of the Army for conventional operations and the strategy behind it. Ariel Cohen focuses on the ongoing insurgency in the North Caucasus. Katarzyna Zysk goes into great detail regarding the buildup in the Arctic that now has the potential to threaten North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies and provide a base for threatening the North Atlantic maritime highway to Europe. James Sherr reminds us that the Black Sea basin remains potentially the most dangerous area not only because of Ukraine but also because of the threats to the Balkans, something that former Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Curtis Scapparotti mentioned in his congressional testimony. Sébastien Peyrouse demonstrates the substantial Russian military presence in Central Asia, while Richard Weitz’s focus on the Pacific and the Far East reminds us of just how important that area is to Moscow.

All in all, therefore, this volume provides an enormous amount of information on a subject that will only grow in importance, and that demands the most careful assessment and scrutiny by policymakers and all those interested in the defense of U.S. and allied interests.

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