

# Russia's Military *Assessment, Strategy, and Threat*



**Alexander Golts and Michael Kofman**

June 2016

---

# **Russia's Military** *Assessment, Strategy, and Threat*

---

Alexander Golts and Michael Kofman



June 2016

## **ABOUT CGI**

The Center on Global Interests (CGI) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit foreign-policy research institution founded in 2012. The Center promotes the rigorous study of modern-day Russia and Eurasia through objective analysis, academic publications and public events geared towards audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. As part of its mission to maintain scholarly independence, CGI does not accept funding from the U.S. or foreign governments.

The Center on Global Interests does not take an institutional position on policy issues. The views represented here are the author's own.

©2016 Center on Global Interests.  
All rights reserved.

### **CGI Leadership and Staff**

President and Founder: Nikolai V. Zlobin

Board of Directors: Bruce G. Blair (Chairman), Ambassador Richard R. Burt,  
Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering (Senior Advisor)

Director of Operations: Michael Purcell

Program Associate: Olga Kuzmina

Program Associate: Alec Albright

1050 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 500  
Washington DC 20036  
Phone: +1-202-973-2832  
[www.globalinterests.org](http://www.globalinterests.org)

Cover image: Kremlin.ru

The full text of this report can be accessed at [www.globalinterests.org](http://www.globalinterests.org). Limited print copies are also available at no cost. To request a copy, please send an email to [info@globalinterests.org](mailto:info@globalinterests.org).



# Contents



<b>Introduction:</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Need for a New Assessment</b>	
<i>Michael Purcell</i>	
<b>The Russian Military: A Force in Transition</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Michael Kofman</i>	
<b>The Limits of Russian Military Reforms:</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Another Lost Opportunity</b>	
<i>Alexander Golts</i>	
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>20</b>



# Introduction: The Need for a New Assessment

**Michael Purcell**

*Director of Operations, Center on Global Interests*

**T**he purpose of this publication is to address a simple, but historically persistent, question: How do we assess Russia's military capability, capacity, and intentions? But simple questions do not always have simple answers. It is helpful, but not sufficient, to reference the much recycled observation that "Russia is never as strong, or as weak, as we think it is." This publication provides the reader enough detail and context to move beyond this truism.

While Russia's recent demonstrations of invigorated military capability in Ukraine and Syria create the sense of a new threat on the international stage, it is also important to note the historical symmetry of the timing of this publication. As we near the 25th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it is not without some bitter irony that NATO will be energized by a pressing need to deter Russian aggression not seen since the end of the Cold War at the forthcoming Warsaw Summit. As much as anniversaries are arbitrary, it is nonetheless hard to avoid a sense of collective failure. The United States and its allies may regretfully contemplate how they might have more ably integrated Russia into Euro-Atlantic security architecture during the decade after the Soviet collapse.

On the other hand, it does not require much contemplation to conclude that Russia's military actions during the last decade have provided ample evidence of continued suspect intentions, justifying a serious review of the orientation of NATO's collective resources. Russia's Armed Forces can now only be perceived as the preferred tool to achieve Russia's foreign policy objectives. This conclusion will likely elicit a tangible response from the United States and its allies, as defense planners are by nature not inclined to willingly accept risk in

regards to the national defense, particularly when opportunity costs are not easy to measure.

While the preceding conclusion is enough to prompt a policy response, the appropriate degree and intensity of such a response remains unclear. For this, it is necessary to better understand, based on a quantitative and qualitative look at manpower and material, Russia's true military capability, as well as the institutional levers that control this capability.

Fortunately, we have the assistance of two of the most insightful and informed voices in the field to provide help in this daunting task. Michael Kofman, an American analyst currently serving as a fellow at the Kennan Institute, has played a key role in rationalizing policy makers' perceptions of Russia's military actions and potential by combining deep technical expertise with incisive strategic analysis. Alexander Golts, a Russian journalist and military analyst, has provided unvarnished and deeply nuanced commentary on the sometimes wild vacillations of the condition and course of the Soviet, and then Russian, Armed Forces and its relationship to Russian society for over 35 years. Both authors provide balanced and balancing accounts, which encourage policy prescriptions based more on reality than conjecture ■

# The Russian Military: A Force in Transition

**Michael Kofman**

*Global Fellow, Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*

**A** combination of military reforms, launched late in 2008, and modernization, initiated in 2011, has transformed the Russian military. The results of these programs have been at the same time impressive and incomplete, resulting in a state of permanent change for the Russian military without an easily discernible destination. Hence, it is difficult to categorically describe the Russian armed forces today, except as a force in transition. There are discernible areas of success, failure, and continued change, as there are useful cases from recent conflicts that offer insights into what the present day Russian military can do. Arguably, any capability analysis offers a snapshot, but is the Russian military on a fixed trajectory? Can we say with confidence what its future will be?

Russia's armed forces underwent a period of chaotic reform between late 2008 and 2012 under Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov. After 2012 his successor, Sergey Shoigu, has led a phase of consolidation and incremental revision. Shoigu introduced a robust program of snap readiness checks, smaller joint force drills, and larger scale annual strategic exercises. Meanwhile, the modernization program which promised to spend \$700 billion between 2011-2020 in order to bring the overall state of equipment up to a 70-percent modernization level, began to steadily produce results. At first it was impossible for Russia's anemic defense sector to absorb the spending in the early years — and parts of the defense-industrial complex still remain woefully incapable of timely or quality production — but Russia's services began to see upticks in modernization and procurement of new equipment. The impact of these purchases can be felt in the deployment of new weapons systems that had long been in the research and



development phase from the 1990s. These include Novator's family of Kalibr land-attack and anti-ship cruise missiles, the S-400 air defense system, and the newer lines of Su-35, Su-30SM, and Su-34 aircraft.

### ***The State Armament Program***

Russia has been purchasing hardware ranging from strategic nuclear forces, submarines and ships, to combat aviation, tactical aviation, and a host of land warfare systems. In recent announcements it is alleged that the level of modernized equipment in the force has increased from 30 to 47 percent, and will reach 50 percent by the end of 2016. Of course, the values attached to these figures are almost metaphysical. What does the term “modernized” mean? How is this quality defined? While modernization is in a general sense an improvement to the technical sophistication of forces, units, weapon systems, and equipment, there is no absolute standard to be met and success can be met relative to previous standards. It is unclear that there is any specific standard by which Russian officials will ultimately declare the force as having attained the goal of 70 percent modernization.

However, judging by upgrades to infantryman's equipment and ground combat vehicles, the improved capabilities of new air defense systems and helicopters, and the production of fourth generation fighters, Russia's armed forces have been improving at a steady pace from a procurement perspective. Almost everything is slower than expected and behind schedule; overpromising and under-delivering is often the norm in defense industries, though Russia's in particular needed a lengthy spool-up time to restore industrial production capacity.

Russia's air force has been steadily adding Su-30SM, Su-35 and Su-34 aircraft while upgrading substantial parts of the existing fleet of Su-27s, Mig-31s, Su-24s and Su-25s. The aging strategic bomber force has been given a new lease on life with modernization programs and the deployment of the new Kh-101/Kh-102 air to ground cruise missiles, maintaining its mission and extending the strike range. Despite a spate of accidents in 2015 that saw the loss of six different air craft within a few months, the air force was able to sustain an intense level of operations in Syria, at times matching the pace of Western counterparts. Meanwhile, helicopter procurement proceeded apace with Mi-28N, Mi-35 and Ka-52 purchases, with all three being tested during combat operations in Syria. At

first modernizations were being counted as “new” equipment, but in recent years the MoD has become more honest in procurement accounting.

Land system procurement has been fickle, focused on mobility and modernization of existing systems. Despite being much lauded in some reports for having impressive firepower, which Russian combat vehicles do have, there remain long-standing problems with munitions and the need to match the sophistication of Western fire control and sighting systems. Even though Russia has completed a new family of main battle tanks (MBT), infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) and

armored personnel carriers (APC), these remain prototypes in field trials, and it is unclear whether the funding will be available to serially produce them for the force.

---

***Today much of the Russian land force fights with heavily modernized Soviet models rather than new equipment.***

Today much of the Russian land force fights with heavily modernized Soviet equipment rather than newly designed or engineered vehicles. Its principal tank is not the T-90A, but the less sophisticated T-72B3, with many T-72B1 and T-80U still present in the force. Most of the artillery, for which the Russian army is renowned, similarly dates back to the Soviet era, with longer range munitions and better barrels, but little has been done in terms of innovating designs. Russia's more important capability is its improved air defense: a host of new systems like S-400, Pantsir-S1, and modernized existing variants like the Tor-M2 continue to prove a potent shield against top tier combat aviation. However, Russia has been unable to realize more advanced designs, such as the long range missile for the S-400 (40N6), or the much anticipated S-500 Prometheus system.

Other new capabilities can be seen in areas such as unit communications, improved guided munitions, a range of electronic warfare systems, battlefield reconnaissance, and targeting. Although for years Russia failed to develop drones and was forced to license and produce Israeli designs, it has handily adapted the technology to enhance its ability to deliver more accurate and timely

offensive fires, as demonstrated both in Syria and Ukraine. Slowly but surely the Russian military is adapting to a more information-driven battlefield, attempting to

incorporate technologies effectively demonstrated by U.S. forces in combat operations in the 1990s and early 2000s. It remains unclear how widely distributed the effects are throughout the force, but it seems that elite infantry and select combat units are substantially better equipped when it comes to communication equipment. Supporting companies of engineers, electronic warfare, and special forces reconnaissance now augment some of the brigades.

The Russian Navy has seen an outsized amount of spending, given that the country is primarily a land power. This is due to the navy's importance in strategic nuclear deterrence, power projection, and equally important status projection. The Russian leadership sees the navy as core to the country's image of a great power, able to operate outside its region and project power abroad. In practice the Russian Navy is becoming a green water force, focused on sea denial in maritime approaches and coastal defense. Its new platforms are much smaller, but they are multipurpose and far more capable when it comes to firepower, packing anti-ship and land attack capabilities in a corvette class vessel. Submarine production is in substantially better shape, with three out of eight new Borey-class nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines in service and one Yasen-class multipurpose submarine in sea trials, of which six have been laid down. Russia's improved Kilo submarines are stout performers, yet new diesel designs are not ready, and air independent propulsion seems to be nowhere in sight.

---

***The two main threats to the Russian military's modernization program are budgetary constraints and Western sanctions.***

Due to the woeful performance of many shipyards and several high profile cases of corruption, most items for the Russian Navy have taken years longer than expected to build, complete sea trials, and put into service. As Soviet platforms are modernized, and new smaller classes of ships are built, the navy still suffers from a proliferation of ship classes. Russia's navy has a case of distributed

“classisity,” whereby there are only two to three ships within every class and few unified platforms. New ship classes are announced regularly. Despite these shortcomings, Russia's navy is largely staffed by contract servicemen, and the submarine force has demonstrated renewed life after years of being parked at the pier. Meanwhile, the Black Sea Fleet is being wholly revived from its grave and will be able to project power into the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly if upgrades to Syria's port infrastructure in Tartus are successful. These upgrades will enable ships from other fleets to rotate through the squadron and maintain a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea.

The two chief threats to Russia's modernization program are budgetary constraints, largely caused by the steep fall in oil prices and Western sanctions following its war with Ukraine. Russia's defense budget has increased in recent years and reached a peak in 2015 of 3.3 trillion rubles, or 4.2 percent of GDP. Due to the economic crisis and sanctions, such spending levels cannot be sustained in real terms, with the MoD budget witnessing a contraction of likely close to 10 percent, much of it in the state armament program responsible for procurement of new weapons. Meanwhile, severing defense cooperation with Ukraine has dealt a body blow for at least five years to anything dependent on Ukrainian engines, which unfortunately for Russia is most military helicopters, both new frigate classes, some existing ship classes, and heavy air lift. Similarly, being cut off from Western chips and circuitry boards has sent Russia searching in the Asia-Pacific region for advanced electronics manufacturers.

### ***The Armed Forces***

The Russian military went through a dramatic period of consolidation and reorganization in 2009-2012. Its most significant achievements are: abandoning the Soviet mass mobilization model, incrementally reducing the conscript share of the force, and improving readiness across military districts as well as mobility within Russia. The overall force continues to increase in size and is perhaps 900,000-strong today (some argue closer to 850,000), with the army, airborne and naval infantry constituting perhaps 300,000 of that force. Russia's plan to add 50,000 “contract service members” per year to the armed forces appears to be on track, encouraged by the economic crisis, which makes military service a relatively attractive option. Thanks to strategic exercises featuring more than 50,000 servicemen and numerous joint force trainings conducted throughout the past year, Russia's force has become a much more reliable instrument of

national power. Through the establishment of the National Defense Management Center and other capabilities to improve command and control at the senior decision making level, Russia's military is able to respond much faster to decisions made by the political leadership. While successes here should not be overstated, a percentage of the Russian force is now able to respond quickly to national decisions, deploy to Russia's borders in the event of a contingency, and likely be "the first with the most" in any part of the former Soviet Union. This force may be improvised, and task-organized in nature, but could well number 30,000 or more troops depending on time available for force generation.

Russia's force posture is indicative of the government's shifting priorities. There is a revival of bases in the Arctic, a network of military outposts from which Russia can control the Northern Sea Route, maintain visibility, effect area denial

---

***Russia's military is likely to be "the first with the most" in any part of the former Soviet Union.***

at key chokepoints and restore presence in its part of the high North. This includes 13 airfields, 30 border guard stations and 10 search and rescue bases, along with a radar network. Less prominent is the slow trickle back of units to Russia's Western borders. Under Serdyukov's reforms, which created four military districts, the Western Military District saw a drawdown in strength, perhaps from 50 battalions around Moscow down to 22.

As a result, in early 2014 there were very few units near the Russian border with Ukraine, no established command staff to integrate planning, and no command above the brigade level to assemble units arriving from other military districts. The 40,000-50,000 troop deployment on Ukraine's borders between late February 2014 and March of 2014 was done competently, and quickly, given it was an improvised staff of the 58th and 20th Army working to piece tactical battalions from their respective armies into two strike groups.

Since November 2014 Russia's General Staff has been slowly announcing the formation of additional divisions: two on Ukraine's Eastern borders and one between Ukraine and Belarus. The restoration of the 2nd and 4th divisions, even though they are more honorific titles for what are really half-divisions, along with a number of independent brigades has bolstered the Western Military District outside Moscow. These changes indicate Ukrainian and Belorussian

contingencies in mind, along with a partial reversal from brigades to a mixed force organization of divisions, brigades, battalions and regiments. From Russia's force posture we can infer the following priorities: first, the need for permanently stationed units and a higher level command staff on Ukraine's borders in case of a second war; second, a mobile and elite force able to intervene in Central Asia in the event of a crisis or political instability in one of the former Soviet Republics; third, a force to deter a potential color revolution in Belarus; and, finally, territorial defense against NATO or China.

Despite loud pronouncements from senior Russian officials, there is little indication of a force posture designed for an offense against NATO in the Baltics, or General Staff planning for large scale conventional conflict, given the absence of a functioning reserve or capable mobilization system to support the current standing force. New units being created in the colossal Western MD are reviving permanent military presence, but being positioned on southern vectors of attack towards Ukraine. However, Russia has drawn important lessons from U.S. use of military power, particularly the combination of special forces and high end conventional capability. Hence Russia stood up its own version of the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in 2012, titled Special Operations Command (KSO), which performed quite capably during the seizure of Crimea in February-March 2014, and subsequently in Eastern Ukraine and in Syria. One of the few known combat casualties in Syria was a KSO operator who was killed in combat in a reconnaissance role, supposedly designating targets for Russian air-launched cruise missiles.

### ***Lessons from Recent Wars***

The annexation of Crimea is not a useful case study to judge the impact of reforms on the Russian military as a whole, but there are valuable lessons from the February-March 2014 operation. First and foremost, it was a debut for the much more responsive military, able to get underway on short notice of a political decision by the national leadership. Compared to the three weeks it took for the first units to deploy at the outset of the second Chechen War, the ability to start moving major pieces around Russia is a notable leap in responsiveness and readiness. Next, it demonstrated the capability to use tier one special forces for extraterritorial operations, one that requires not just the force component, but advanced communications. The military accomplishment reflected developments

in a select slice of Russia's force, namely elite infantry and special forces, which confirmed their readiness, competence and mobility. The seizure of Crimea was an effective use of military power to achieve political objectives, combining the speed and deniability of special forces together with the compelling power of a large conventional show of force.

In contrast, the operation in Eastern Ukraine followed a messy conflict escalation cycle, in which Russia attempted several approaches: political warfare, irregular warfare, a hybrid mix and ultimately conventional warfare. In Ukraine, the Russian army did not fight as an army, instead sending in organized tactical battalion groups from a host of units spread throughout the country. These formations were used decisively in two battles: in Illovaisk in August 2014 and Debaltseve in February 2015. Russian special forces, airborne, and other units were combined into rotating battalions. This approach did not reflect how Russia trains to fight a conventional adversary, or how its armed forces are structured. The fight against Ukraine, the best conventionally armed former Soviet Republic (although this is not a high bar), revealed that much of Russia's modernized Soviet equipment was more than capable to quell likely adversaries on its borders. Russian T-72b1 and T-72b3 tanks were more than able to take on Ukraine's T-64 variants, while artillery dominated the battlefield.

In Ukraine, Russia applied new technological capabilities, such as drones and electronic warfare upgrades, together with traditional doctrines of position and maneuver warfare, resulting in a capable economy-of-force effort. Although Russia may not have been able to lock in political gains, it did achieve several decisive battlefield victories and kept costs low to its own force in what was effectively an inter-state war, however undeclared. The reason for battalion rotations remains unclear; some suggest the strain on the overall force was too great, thereby requiring units from all over the country, while others indicate that this was all part of a strategy to maximize unit experience in battle and distribute casualties among different brigades, in an effort to minimize the political cost of sustaining the conflict. The larger lesson for the Russian General Staff was that permanently based units were needed on Ukraine's borders, and division-level staff is required to take in and support supplied battalions in war, even when it is an economy-of-force approach.

Syria represents the first Russian expeditionary operation since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a daunting task for a military that appeared ill-suited to

sustain such operations abroad. Despite limitations in air and sea lift, with Russia's landing ships being on average well over 25 years old, the military was able to sustain a high intensity of air operations. At peak times Russia conducted more than 80 sorties per day, with multiple flights per aircraft, matching Western capacity. Syria was not just a military operation with political objectives, but a debut for a series of new capabilities and platforms. These included strategic bombers, land and air launched cruise missiles, new helicopters, tactical aviation, and electronic surveillance aircraft. Combat sorties were integrated with special forces that provided targeting information and drones, as part of a more information-driven approach to warfare.

Remarkably, none of Russia's legacy Soviet aircraft fell out of the sky, or were shot down by enemy fire, with the exception of the incident with Turkey in which Russia lost a Su-24 and a Mi-8 helicopter. This was surprising given the Russian air force's terrible performance in the 2008 war with Georgia, when seven aircraft were lost within five days, and most to friendly fire. By contrast, in Syria the Russian air force demonstrated it could effectively conduct a campaign with modernized aircraft and largely unguided munitions. However, weaknesses can be seen in the accuracy of Russia's new line of KAB precision guided munitions, as well as in the absence of targeting pods for aircraft. Russia did lose 4 of its new Ka-52 helicopters in what appeared to be a refueling accident at a forward operating Syrian base (T4).

---

***The costs of being in Ukraine, Syria, and retaining a high operational tempo of exercises is still a manageable feat for the Russian military.***

The Russian air force was able to achieve desired effects in shaping the battlefield, but in technical sophistication it visibly lags behind Western analogues. Russia's Navy showed that it now had comparable land attack capabilities to the United States, albeit in smaller numbers, and smaller class vessels could project long range firepower. The combat experience will undoubtedly drive further Russian research and development, particularly into munitions, which are a handicap both for the Air Force and Army. Shortages of



sea lift were exposed as well, forcing Russia to purchase and reflag older Turkish cargo vessels, and repurpose other transport ships.

Syria is considered to be a relatively cheap deployment, officially listed as costing 40 billion rubles (\$500-\$600 million), although the true figure is unknown. In large part it has also been used as an advertisement for Russian equipment, perhaps able to pay for itself having generated new arms sales discussions with Algeria, Indonesia, India and Iran, among others. The intervention was launched at the same time as Russian forces were still present in Ukraine, and the annual strategic exercise, Tsentr-2015 was being held, which in total amounted to a significant investment of operational capacity. This suggests not only that the force is not as overstretched as some have argued, but that the costs of being in Ukraine, Syria, and retaining a high operational tempo of exercises is still a manageable feat for the Russian government.

## ***Conclusion***

How long this operational tempo can be sustained is uncertain, as financial constraints will ultimately force Russia to choose between the quality and readiness of the force, or procurement of new and modernized equipment. It is safest to describe the Russian military as a force still in transition, with new units being formed, reorganized, and reorganized again in an ongoing quest to balance competing internal equities, service interests, and warfighting needs.

Russian armed forces have abandoned their Soviet past of mass mobilization, but they are only part way down the path towards developing a high readiness military staffed by contract soldiers and specialists. Whether Russia's leadership stays the course, or chips away at the accomplishments of recent years with changes to accommodate those in the armed forces who wish to return to the way things were, remains in question. In the coming years the Russian military will remain a place where the Soviet past of the 1980s and a partially realized Russian force of the present coexist together ■

# The Inherent Limits of Russian Military Reform: Another Lost Opportunity

**Alexander Golts**

*Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Ezhednevny Zhurnal and Columnist, The Moscow Times*

**T**he role played by the Russian army in the seizure of Crimea, the hybrid war in the Donbas and the intervention in Syria shows that the Armed Forces has become the most effective instrument in Russia's foreign and domestic policy. From a military perspective, this first became apparent on February 26, 2014 when President Putin ordered a "snap inspection" of the Russian Army in concert with the annexation of Crimea. The Russian General Staff likely called this exercise to dissuade Ukrainian resistance on or the mobilization of forces to the Crimean Peninsula. General Philip Breedlove, then Supreme Commander of NATO allied forces in Europe, stated that Russia deployed a "very sizeable and very ready" force of 30,000-40,000 on the Russian-Ukrainian border. A similar massive exercise was conducted on September 20, 2015. While the February 2014 snap exercise demonstrated improved readiness and operational ability, "Center-15" focused on increasing strategic mobility in the context of full-scale intervention in a Central Asian state destabilized by civil war. The hypothetical invasion featured both airborne and ground forces, as well as significant air support maneuvers. Exercise organizers did not hide that one of "Center-15's" main objectives was to prepare troops for possible ground operations in Syria.

Indeed, on September 30, 2015 Russian combat aircraft made their first strikes on targets in Syria. The speed of the Russian response to the November 24, 2015 downing of the Su-24 by Turkish fighter jets looks even more impressive. Within two days, Russia deployed the highly capable S-400 anti-aircraft system to Syria, providing the capability to contest a sizeable portion of the region's airspace and complicating the U.S.-led coalition's planning options. These examples are undisputable illustrations of the Russian command structure's

improved rapid decision-making and strategic deployment abilities. It is appropriate to recall that in 1999, during the beginning of the Second Chechen War, it took more than two weeks to deploy federal troops in response to the Chechen separatist incursion into Dagestan.

The establishment of 30-40 priority units that are strategically mobile and highly ready was the main accomplishment of the military reforms of 2008-2011, making the operations discussed above feasible. The essential task of the first stage of this reform was the rejection of the traditional mass-mobilization armed forces model. From 2008-2011, Russia's military realized important structural changes that reduced overhead and increased operational flexibility. The armed forces eliminated 135,000 of 355,000 officer positions and all "skeleton units;" units who were only filled in leadership positions and were effectively unusable without mobilization, were dismantled.<sup>1</sup> Another critical reform shifted the Ground Forces organizational structure from a division to a brigade structure. Meanwhile, Russia's six military districts were reorganized into four Joint Strategic Commands, encompassing not only Ground Forces, but Air Force and Navy units as well. These efforts were the first combined attempt to institutionalize joint operations theory in practice.

### ***The Historical Pull of Mass Mobilization***

In aiming to reject the concept of mass mobilization, the Russian political leadership was attempting to abandon the concept of defending the country through the mobilization of millions of reservists, a mindset that has prevailed in Russian strategic thinking for the last 120 years. Today, according to the former chief of the General Staff, Nikolai Makarov, only 700,000 reservists would be mobilized in the event of war. Under this new approach, the strength of the armed forces is dependent on a smaller number of *kontrakniki*, better trained contract soldiers, rather than on the conscripted masses. Accordingly, Defense Minister Shoigu established a goal to recruit nearly 500 thousand *kontrakniki* by 2020.

---

<sup>1</sup> Of the 1,187 units that composed the ground forces at the time, only 189 remain.

Russia's decision to move away from the mass mobilization concept demanded a transition to higher levels of training and education. Former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov planned to replace the old military education system, which

---

***The essential task of the first stage of reform was the rejection of the traditional mass-mobilization armed forces model.***

was built on churning out low-skilled officers to lead the mass-conscription force, with a structure that focused on training smaller numbers of truly professional military officials. To shift the focus on quality, the number of defense institutions had to be reduced to 17, including three educational and scientific centers, 11 military academies, and three military universities. The curriculum was likewise planned to be reformed, requiring officers to take courses in the humanities and sciences in addition to their military studies. The former aimed

to increase the contextual knowledge and leadership skills of trainees, while the latter intended to build proficiency in modern weapons systems technology. At the same time, the promotion process had to become more competitive, transparent, and, above all else, based on qualification rather than seniority.

### ***A Partial Reversal of Reforms***

In November 2012, Putin sacked the reform-minded Serdyukov amid a corruption scandal. Serdyukov's dismissal resulted in the reversal of many of the reform efforts discussed above. For example, Serdyukov's replacement, Sergei Shoigu, decided to retain 18 of the military academies and 15 of the branch academies previously marked for closure as under the control of the separate branches (rather than "joint" control). This decision reversed the quality over quantity paradigm that had been dominant after 2008. Other institutions that were formerly under the aegis of the Ministry of Defense were subordinated under the respective service commands. Preoccupied with bureaucratic tasks and parochial service branch concerns, military education officials became less focused on providing the level of cadet training originally envisioned by the reforms. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defense quickly returned to the policy of "expanded reproduction" of lowly educated officers. As a result, the number of

officers on the rolls will increase, marking a step back towards the mass mobilization concept.

A similar story unfolded in regard to reservists. At the end of 2008, the Ministry of Defense announced that for the first time in Russian history members of the reserve would serve on a paid, voluntary basis. Reservists would have to be assigned to separate special units that would be under the command of the military district likely to employ it in the case of conflict. Unfortunately, the Russian generals decided to bring the idea to an absurd end. They proposed to undertake an “experiment” that would recruit only about 5 thousand soldiers and officers as reservists. If successful, the number of reservists would add up to eight thousand, enough to man only about two brigades. But the reorganized Ground Forces would require 60 brigades of the reserve to reach planned wartime strength. This means that 58 brigades would have to be formed through the so-called “mobilization resource”, drawing on all males in the population, just as it had been in Soviet times. It’s clear that the real goal of the “experiment,” started only in 2014, is to intentionally compromise the initiative to modernize the Russian system of reserve organization.

In 2013, the Kremlin instituted a reform that allowed students to fulfill their obligatory military service without leaving the walls of the university. Under this initiative, students were required to devote a portion of one day per week to military training over a period of up to two years. Upon completion of this course, students would undergo three months of intensive boot camp style training, after which they would enlist in the reserves as privates or sergeants.

“We want you to think of this as a really good opportunity to learn without leaving the educational process...In a year we need to [increase] the reserve from 80 to 100 thousand people,” Shoigu, quite sincerely, said in an effort to convince students. From the Ministry of Defense’s prospective, the student training program offered a huge upside, providing the opportunity to bring tens of thousands of new troops into the ranks. However, this initiative did not suit the generals. Military commanders don’t need “paper” soldiers, but real soldiers,

---

***Sergei Shoigu has skillfully balanced the reform-minded modernizers with the interests of the old guard.***

because only active troops determine the number of positions available for general officers. As a result, only 15 thousand students, of the nearly 60 thousand planned, took part in the new program in 2015.

As an experienced politician, Sergei Shoigu has skillfully balanced the reform-minded modernizers with the interests of the old guard, who hold steadfast the principle that modern great powers possess standing professional armies of less than a million men. As a result, reforms were initiated, but clearly contradicted the ideological foundations on which Vladimir Putin built the state. Thus, the conservative military brass found opportunities to return to the old mass-mobilization system. Importantly, all strategic military exercises, up to the most recent "Tsentr-2015," included training on mass mobilization. Likewise, Russia's Military Doctrine contains numerous paragraphs on mobilization. We can conclude, then, that the General Staff, after making a cursory turn toward modernization, has returned, full-heartedly to embracing the mass mobilization concept.

### ***The Consequences of Inconsistent and Incomplete Reform Efforts***

In March 2014 the Kremlin chose to not repeat the Crimea scenario in eastern Ukraine. Unlike the peninsula, which was relatively easy to cut off from mainland Ukraine by controlling the highway and railway lines along the Isthmus of Perekop, separating the Donetsk and Luhansk regions would require the establishment of numerous checkpoints across hundreds of roads. Even if such checkpoints could be successfully implemented, temporary "state borders" would need to be established. In short, more than twice the 40,000 Russian troops stationed along the Ukrainian border would be required to guarantee the operational success of such a grand undertaking. Lack of personnel forced Putin's hand in this regard; a repeat of Crimea was not possible. This limitation was on display in February 2015 when pro-Russian separatists tried to capture the strategic Ukrainian railway junction Debaltseve.

The Russian command had to commit a tank battalion from Buryatia, a republic on the border on the Mongolian border, to support the separatist offensive.

Ironically, the Russian General Staff based their deployment model along the lines of the so-called “Powell Doctrine,” which is based on the idea of a full-fledged advance, followed by immediate withdrawal. The hybrid war in Ukraine

---

***Unprofessional practices will increase fissures within the command structure and with society.***

necessitates completely different requirements, the first of which is the sustained presence of large numbers of troops. Russian military leaders have found themselves in a bind in this regard, due to the shortage of well-trained personnel. The Ukrainian conflict has also exposed the Russian military’s discipline and morale problems. Trying to hide losses, commanders have staged “secret” funerals for those soldiers who had been killed in operation, a practice that has been expectedly ill-received by

the Russian population. In addition, military officials have claimed that Russian troops fighting in eastern Ukraine were simply using their vacations to take part in the conflict, and not operating under formal orders. However, it is well known that a vacationing soldier is obliged to report and specify the place of intended rest. Thus, at least some degree of complicity and deception are at play. Ultimately, morale and discipline in the ranks are based on full confidence in the commanders, who, in turn, are fully responsible for the lives of their subordinates. The unprofessional practices described above are likely to increase fissures within the command structure, and, ultimately, with society.

The Ukrainian crisis has also led to an increase in the intensity of the confrontation between Russia and NATO. The Kremlin felt it necessary to create a new tank army and three Ground Force divisions orientated toward Russia’s western border. Eight new major operational formations, more than 25 divisions (combined arms, Air Force, Air Defence, Navy), and 15 brigades were created last year. This substantial increase contradicts Ministry of Defense planning, which dictates that the number of armed forces this year should grow only by 10 thousand troops. This is far from enough to form 40 new units. The single way out is to forget about the Serdyukov reforms and re-create skeleton units, where the number of officers will be disproportionately larger than the number of soldiers in ranks. It is no coincidence that a shortage of officers has turned out

immediately, when just two years earlier "surplus" lieutenants had to be appointed to NCO positions.

In a situation when the Russian army has seemingly demonstrated its efficacy, the problems of inconsistent and incomplete reform are becoming increasingly apparent. On the one hand, the Kremlin was limited to "quantitative" changes – the downsizing of the officer corps and the number of military units – and thereby abandoning the qualitative changes that were clearly contrary to the

"ideological foundation" of the centralized state built by Vladimir Putin. An effective and sustainable reform of the armed forces, if passed through up to the "quality" stage, could in the long term have a major positive impact not only on military organization itself, but also on Russian society as a whole. The abandonment of the concept of mass mobilization and transition to all-volunteer Armed Forces could dramatically change the relationship of citizen and state for the better. Nonetheless, the President hit the brakes, because not only he, but also a considerable part of the population still considers the army an exact copy of an authoritarian state. The result is reforms halted in place, stopped just as it began to build momentum. And the Putin regime has provided only a few combat-ready units, which were enough to capture Crimea. Average trained, well-paid military units carried out the order for aggression. All these factors suggest that "liberal" military reform will not lead to any positive developments in a country that remains authoritarian ■

---

***“Liberal” military reform will not bring any changes to a country that remains authoritarian.***



## About the Authors

**Alexander Golts** is deputy editor-in-chief of the website *ej.ru* and a columnist for *The Moscow Times*. He previously served as deputy editor-in-chief of the magazine *Yezhenedelnyi Zhurnal*, military editor for the newsmagazine *Itogi*, and a member of the editorial board of *Krasnaya Zvezda (Red Star)*. From 2002-2003, he was a visiting fellow at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation. His publications include *Russia's Armed Forces: 11 Lost Years* (Zaharov, 2004) and *Militarism: The Main Obstacle to Russia's Modernization* (Liberal'naya Missiya Foundation, 2005).

**Michael Kofman** is a Global Fellow at the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Kofman spent years managing professional military education programs and military to military engagements for senior officers at National Defense University. There he served as a subject matter expert and adviser to military and government officials on issues in Russia/Eurasia. He has represented the Department of Defense in a number of track one and track two efforts with Russia and Pakistan, along with strategic dialogues and conferences with experts in the field. His prior experience includes working at the U.S. Institute of Peace, HSBC Bank, and The Diplomatic Courier. He has published and co-authored articles on security issues in Russia, Central Asia and Eurasia, along with numerous analyses for the U.S. government.

**Michael Purcell** is Director of Operations at the Center on Global Interests. He previously served over 20 years with the U.S. Marines as an armor officer, Eurasian foreign area officer, and strategic planner across a wide range of command staff assignments. He has extensive political-military experience in the former Soviet space and participated in numerous military operations abroad. He holds an advanced degree from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School and a certificate in economics from the Moscow Higher School of Economics.

