

Combating a Modernized Russia

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Abstract

In response to weaknesses exposed during its 2008 war with Georgia, Russia undertook a drastic military modernization program encompassing Land, Sea, Air, and Nuclear assets. These assets include modernized mechanized forces, generation 4++/ 5th aircraft, and new ballistic missiles all of which appear to achieve parity with and in some cases surpass NATO capabilities. In concert, Russia reformed its outdated military doctrine. With its renewed strength, Russia has pursued a more aggressive foreign policy as it annexed Crimea, supported dissidents in Eastern Ukraine, and forward deployed troops to Syria, in support of the Assad regime. These operations have served to display a renewed Russian force that is capable of conducting full spectrum operations both close to its borders and afar, through forward force projection. NATO and the US have commenced a limited response in hopes of avoiding escalation. The response includes enacting sanctions, increasing readiness, and rotational forces. While tangible Russian aggression is likely to subside despite rhetoric, NATO/US military planners will have to adapt to the new strategic environment, one in which Russia is able to contest operations not only from the Baltic but now through the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, and the Levant.

Key Words: Motor Rifle Brigades, T-14/Armata MBT, Full Spectrum Warfare, Forward Force Projection, Operation Atlantic Resolve, Heavy Brigade Combat Teams, Article 5 of the NATO Treaty

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, much of Russia's military was neglected, underfunded, and filled with conscripts. Futile attempts were made to alter this course in the early 2000's. While resulting in a victory, Russia's five-day war in 2008 with its tiny and outgunned neighbor, Georgia, demonstrated the inherent problems of a lack of professionalization, modern equipment, and command and control capabilities. In the conflict, Russia lost no less than four strike aircraft, three tanks, and forty vehicles. In response, Russia began to pursue a massive overhaul of its armed forces seeking to both improve capability and professionalization. Resultantly, Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and the Levant since 2014 has been facilitated by its military modernization undertaken since 2008. As a result, NATO has responded in a limited and restrained manner through measures, such as increasing readiness and reassuring commitments. In order to deter future Russian aggression, NATO needs to increase conventional high intensity conflict capabilities and readiness on the continent.

Russian Equipment Modernization

The most easily identifiable element of Russian military modernization has come in the form of equipment: land, sea, air, and nuclear. Under the 2008 plan, the Russian Army seeks to acquire over 2000 new vehicles 700 of which will be armored (Blank, 2015). The most alarming of these vehicles includes a new main battle tank, the Armada or T-14. The T-14 represents the next generation of ground combat vehicles. Russian sources claim the T-14 not only has improved armor and weapons systems but innovations such as “Active Protection System” able to intercept incoming missiles. However some experts are skeptical of these claims (“Armata T-14”, 2015). Despite some skepticism the T-14 represents a major threat to US/NATO armored formations that have not been significantly updated in capability since the end of the Cold War (Bender, 2015). Moving from armored to infantry forces, the Russians have reequipped the individual soldier with the newest body armor, communications, and small arms. General Scales, a weapons expert, points out how the new Russian body armor can stop the standard 5.56mm NATO round while NATO body armor is not always capable of stopping the standard Russian small arms ammunition. It must be noted however that the extent to which this equipment is issued outside of elite Russian units is unclear (Scarborough, 2014). In addition, Russian troops now bring better personal radios to the fight. The implication of these advancements is that US/NATO armor formations could be unable to effectively engage Russian tanks while allied infantry could be vulnerable to Russian Infantry forces who are now operating with superior personal protection and increased lethality.

The modernization of Russia’s Air Force (RAF) has been relatively swift in comparison with its ground forces. Part of the reason for this is that the Russian aerospace leaders such as Mikoyan (MIG) and Sukhoi (SU) were able to sustain production and research and development through export to foreign markets, following the fall of the USSR. In 2014 alone, the Russian Air Force received 42 SU 30 and SU 35 aircraft (Pyadushkin, 2015). These aircraft are fourth generation plus plus fighters. Not only are they highly maneuverable but they possess the most advanced avionics and radar systems. These capabilities achieve parity with or exceed many of the legacy fighters that make up the backbone of U.S. and NATO tactical aircraft inventory: F-15s, F-16s, F-18s. In addition, the RAF modernization plan includes the procurement of Sukhoi’s fifth generation fighter, the PAK/ 50 (“Sukhoi Company”, 2015). This aircraft is designed with stealth technologies in order to compete with U.S made F-22 and F-35 aircraft. The consequence of such acquisitions is that given the limited number of F-22s available air supremacy, a pillar of all U.S. engagements since the end of World War II, could be in jeopardy as most legacy fighters would be outmatched by the large number of Russian generation 4++ aircraft (Donnelly, 2015). The possibility of such an outcome could be devastating as U.S ground forces could become vulnerable to enemy air attack. This is especially dangerous since Russia now has its own fully operational GPS satellite network known as GLONASS capable of guiding precision munitions (“Russia”, 2015). The aforementioned acquisitions only highlight an overall process of phasing out Cold War era aircraft, tactical, strategic, and airlift with new modern systems.

To complement its conventional force modernization, Russia has begun to overhaul its strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Vladimir Isachenkov of the Associated Press reported that in 2014 the Russian nuclear forces received 38 ICBMs with another 50 to be delivered in 2015. Some claim these missiles could penetrate US ballistic missile defense system (Isachenkov, 2015). Land based missiles are also being reinforced with an additional 40 Yars road mobile Ballistic Missiles. In addition, Russia has begun fielding a new Submarine Launch

Ballistic Missiles on board the new Project 955 class ballistic missiles submarines (“Profile”, 2014) The new SSBNs will serve as the platform for which Russia will once again conduct nuclear deterrence patrols which have been limited to virtually nonexistent since the end of the Cold War. Although, some also question the vitality of Russian claims of increased deterrence patrols as they have actually decline recently (Kristensen, 2013). The nuclear force modernization has come in part as a response to the US ballistic missile defense program. The deployment of new systems within the Russian nuclear triad presents a renewed nuclear threat to the U.S. and Eastern NATO members. The Eastern members are within range of Russia’s shorter range nuclear ballistic and ground launched cruise missiles such as the Iskander missile. It is these short range threats that are truly dangerous as there is little to no advanced warning, thus allowing for a Russian surprise first strike against Eastern Europe (“Iskandar”, n.d)

Evolution of Russian Military Doctrine

While equipment modernization is important to maintaining an effective fighting force, proper doctrine and tactics is essential to maximizing one’s equipment and strengths while minimizing operational risk. The most threatening change in Doctrine since 2008 has been the declaration that NATO and its Eastward expansion was the biggest threat to Russian national security(William, 2014). One of the most notable changes in doctrine is the desire for the army to become a professional all volunteer force (Thorton, 2011). However, this process has failed as Russia has been unable to retain its contracted soldiers. The high turnover rate decreases the combat effectiveness of units and sheds light on the possibility that the professionalism and effectiveness of the forces in Ukraine is not widespread outside of the small elite units (Thorton, 2011) The transition of Russian military tactics can best be examined by looking at the operations they conducted in Ukraine and Crimea in 2014 and are currently conducting in Syria today. It is these operations that have served as a great source of intelligence on Russian equipment and tactics for western militaries.

The Russian involvement in Eastern Ukraine (EUK) and the Crimea has been branded by most media outlets as a new kind of war, hybrid war. They cast it as hybrid because it involved the deployment of unconventional or non flagged troops in concert with information warfare to first instigate dissent as a precursor for conventional Russian support in EUK. However, as Kofman of the Wilson Center points out, this concept of full spectrum, encompassing both unconventional, conventional, and physiological operations might be new to Russia, but it is old to U.S military planners who have used it extensively (Kofman, 2015) Cable believes Russia’s EUK operations should be viewed as as an “attempt to employ diplomatic, economic, military, and information instruments in a neighboring state where it perceives vital national interests to be at stake.” (Kofman, 2015) For comparison one could look at the beginning stages of the US operations in Afghanistan. The US began with covert CIA operatives and military special forces working with dissenters, the Northern Alliance, to root out the Taliban. This was later followed up with conventional US support in the form of both airpower and ground troops. In addition, the US would often disseminate pro American pamphlets and radios pre-tuned to pro American radio stations. Thus, when compared against other American operations the “hybrid warfare” is actually just full spectrum warfare. The implications of such operations in Europe and against NATO allies is that the unconventional tactics would not bring Article 5 of the NATO treaty into effect. Thus, an ally would be severely weakened before NATO allies could respond, during the conventional phase of operations (Kofman, 2015). The challenge facing allied planners now is

not how to fight a revolutionary new kind of war, but how to confront a Russia that is able to bring all its assets to the fight, both military and nonmilitary.

When Russia became directly involved in Syria in 2015, it signaled not only a political shift but a transformation and rebirth of military capability. Thus far, Russia has deployed several fighter and attack aircraft, surface to air missiles, and a motor rifle battalion. The deployment of these weapons systems alone shows how the Russian military has managed to modernize and can once again achieve some levels of forward force projection through its airlift capability. The airlift operation was conducted despite the closure of certain air routes over Europe by NATO (“Bulgaria”, 2015). The aircraft have been employed in a manner that one is accustomed to seeing NATO and the US militaries operate but not the Russian Military. The aircraft have been used to strike targets in support of troops on the ground with precision guided munitions, while operating from a forward deployed airstrip. Not only does this show a shift in tactics but it also displayed a capability increase as the Russians have fixed the GPS problems they faced during the Georgian War, as they are now able to drop precision guided munitions. Combine this with the fact that Russian warships launched cruise missile strikes from both the Mediterranean and Caspian Sea and one can see that this is no longer the incompetent Russian Bear of 2008 but a capable fighting force that is able to conduct modern operations both close too and far from its borders. This power projection capability has been a pillar of US military dominance and while Russia may lack the capacity they have showcased the capability (Gorenburg, 2015).

NATO/US Response to Russian Aggression

In face of renewed Russian aggression facilitated by military modernization, NATO and the US have chosen to respond with a series of more moderate responses. NATO’s first response was to emplace economic sanctions on Russia for its operations in EUK. These sanctions have been somewhat effective. Yet, it is hard to tell how effective as their implementation occurred almost simultaneously with a downturn in oil prices. This in concert with sanctions and uncertainty has caused economic woes in Russia and forced the government to spend massive amounts of money to support the Russian Ruble (Dreyer, 2014). The rest of NATO’s responses have come primarily from the US in what the U.S has termed *Operation Atlantic Resolve* (OAR). OAR is designed to reassure eastern NATO of U.S. support. Thus, U.S troops will be deployed on a rotational basis to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria (“Operation”, 2015). The rotational forces will include light infantry soldiers and no more than a brigade of tanks and infantry fighting vehicles in the aforementioned countries (Vandiver, 2015). Meanwhile in the air, the US has increased its close air support air and sovereignty capability and capacity in Eastern Europe through its deployment of additional A-10 attack, and F-15 fighters to Eastern allies in what the air force has called a “Theater Security Package” (Cenciotti, 2015).

NATO as a whole has responded by creating a brigade sized Very High Readiness Force to complement the NATO Response Force which is set to grow from 13 to 40 thousand troops (Almasy 2015). In addition to these increases, NATO has recently held its largest military exercise since 2001, in which the alliance members combated a simulated enemy operating in a manner very similar to that of Russian Tactics in Ukraine (Swartz, 2015).

The NATO and US response to Russia in Syria has been much less defined. For the most part, the US and NATO have simply verbally condemned Russia’s support for the Assad regime

while stressing the need for communication to prevent any inadvertent engagements in the airspace over Syria. This situation did take a drastic turn however on November 24, 2015 when a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24 attack aircraft for violating Turkish airspace (Bacon, 2015). This came less than a month after Turkey gave stern warnings following an event where Turkish F-16s were locked onto by Russian radar. Thus far, both sides have called for calm.

As it stands, NATO and the US have completed what some might consider to be half measures in the face of Russian aggression. NATO and the US have refused to provide lethal aid to Ukraine or to put Ukraine on a fast track to join NATO. The US has also refused to return permanent Heavy Brigade Combat Teams (HBCT) to Europe do to cost and a fear of escalation. In the near future, NATO's limited response measures in Europe are likely to continue as too drastic of a response such as Ukraine entering NATO ahead of schedule might cause an escalation in the conflict. In Syria, NATO and most importantly US policy towards Russia appears to include increasing cooperation despite the recent downing of a Russian aircraft by Turkey. The cooperation comes as the Islamic State militants pose a threat to not only regional stability but the security of NATO countries and Russia. However, some still fear the birth of a proxy war as the US and Russia continue to arm opposing sides. Accordingly, Russia will most likely continue to demonstrate a very nationalistic and authoritative foreign policy in rhetoric but not in action. The Russian economy is currently struggling to much for Russia to continue to use political and economic capital in risky and controversial policies abroad.

Conclusion

However Russian military modernization and operations in both Europe and the Levant, will have long term consequences for the U.S and its NATO allies. First and foremost is that the US will have to reevaluate its refocus to the Pacific region as resources will be needed both in Europe and the Pacific as Russia has once again proven itself serious threat. Secondly, as the commander of NATO forces Gen. Breedlove pointed out, US military planners will have to adapt to the change in the strategic situation with the capture of Crimea and the stationing of assets in Syria. With these developments, Russia can now project area denial capabilities from the northern Baltic to the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean (NATO, 2015). This type of capability coupled with a lack of high readiness armored units within NATO creates two problems. First, it leaves the alliance vulnerable despite the fact that large scale Russian aggression is unlikely to continue. Secondly, it affects how US commanders can operate in key areas of the world such as in the Eastern Mediterranean when supporting operations in the Middle East and in support of Israel. The challenges these developments created are likely to persist into the foreseeable future for two reasons as well. First is that the deployment of HBCTs to counter Russian aggression is unlikely for the aforementioned reasons. Secondly, funding for a definitive capability or capacity increase is not likely in the current or future fiscal situation. To cope with these problems in a fiscally restricted environment, NATO and the US will need to continue to shift their training from low intensity COIN operations to high intensity conflicts against simulated near peer competitors, in which blue forces face effective red air and cyberspace capabilities are encountered in support of red mechanized formations.

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