Military Power in the Modern World: Opportunities and Problems for Russia*

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The ideas outlined in this article are designed to stimulate a discussion about defense policy — a discussion that is the question of military power, its role and influence in international relations, is becoming acute once again, though it seems we in the world and we in Russia do not know for what ends we now need military power and how much of it is needed.

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Military Power Losing Significance

There is a widely held view that military power — the main tool of states since time immemorial — is progressively losing importance. This assertion is especially popular in Europe, which, having struggled through so many wars in its history made the choice for pacifism in the second half of the 20th century.

Indeed, military power cannot resolve most of the contemporary world's primary problems — climate change, demands for greater prosperity from increasingly active masses, the world financial crisis, and a growing relative shortage of food. The changed political culture and structure of the economy have made the seizure of territories and their populations senseless from an economic standpoint. Attempts to keep such territories and people under control have proven futile. It is no longer possible to exploit a population to one's benefit. Almost all military victories of the past two decades have ended in political defeats.

In an era of truly mass communications which hinder (although do not eliminate) the intentional manipulation of information, the moral and political costs of the use of military force tend to grow, particularly when used on a large scale and for a long period of time. To a certain extent, military force is being delegitimized. If, paraphrasing Clausewitz's cliched expression, in the past war was a normal extension of politics; today, after two world wars and the emergence of nuclear weapons, the use of military force is often considered a failure of politics.

The use of force is not ruled out, yet of course. But more as a hit and run operation.

The decreasing effectiveness of military power and its delegitimization stem largely from a nuclear stalemate chiefly between Russia and the United States. The risk of the escalation of any major conflict to a nuclear and global level compels large states to reduce the use of force to far lower levels. The nuclear factor largely contributed to the peaceful resolution of the deepest political and ideological confrontation in history — the Cold War. But for this factor, the unprecedented, swift and profound redistribution of power in the world from the traditional West to a rising Asia would not be as smooth. Historically, such shifts were almost

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always accompanied by wars, which either propelled or halted change. Thus, Russia and the U.S., remaining in a nuclear stalemate and to a smaller extent other nuclear powers, may justly consider themselves security godparents of the Asian economic miracle.

The experience of the past few years seems to confirm the idea that a country's military potential will not have decisive significance as an instrument of politics or as an indicator of influence and power in the modern and future world. The strongest country in military terms — the United States — has essentially lost in succession the two wars it initiated (in Iraq and Afghanistan), thereby politically devaluing its multi-trillion dollar spending on the armed forces.

Also major international conflicts have become rarer during last 20 years in spite of their greater visibility which create a different impression.

Military Power Is Still Very Relevant

However, there is a different set of factors and arguments that contradict the view that the role of military power as a major instrument of government policy is diminishing in the modern world. After all, wars have been won recently. One may recall the conflicts in Yugoslavia, Libya, Chechnya, and Georgia, as well as the Sri Lankan government's victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Nuclear deterrence works as it prevents large-scale wars, and no country will reduce its nuclear arsenal in earnest, but, to the contrary, will keep perfecting it. Only romantics fight a losing battle with nuclear deterrence — both reactionary ones (U.S. advocates of missile defense) and progressive-liberal ones (dreamers eager to see a global zero and minimum deterrence at a level of 50-200 warheads on each side). The new world leaders, such as China and India, which would seem to benefit most from peaceful competition, are quickly arming themselves. The rivalry between the main competitors of the future — the U.S. and China — is

being militarized before our very eyes. Discussions of future wars over natural resources and water are intensifying.

These and similar speculations can be considered remnants of a Cold War mentality. It is true that the discussion surrounding the problem of military, especially nuclear security, is still largely determined by those old-timers who, consciously or subconsciously, try to return to past agendas. And if I were accounted one of those veterans, many of whom are my friends, though I by and large disagree with them, I would not be offended. In for a penny, in for a pound.

But one cannot deny there are objective reasons for the growing universal sense of danger in the modern world, and, as a consequence, for renewed reliance on military strength in the policies of many states. Daydreams — the liberal's dream of a world government, or the reactionary's dream of a new concert of powerful nations that would rule the world — do not come true. The planet is moving towards habitual chaos, but on a new, global level and in conditions of a qualitatively more profound and comprehensive interdependence. The old institutions of international governance — the United Nations, the IMF, the EU, NATO, and the G8 — are weakening. The newer institutions — the G20 or emerging regional structures — are not yet fully operational.

Many ethical norms of international coexistence are being abandoned. Respect for state sovereignty and traditional rules of foreign policy conduct are imperfect principles, yet they served as some kind of support points. Whatever reasons led the instigators of the attacks on Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya, the result was the same: all saw that the weak are attacked while no one comes to their aid. Those having at least some strength are not attacked. Non-nuclear Iraq was razed to the ground under false pretexts, while a successfully nuclear-capable North Korea, even less pleasant in a humanitarian sense, remains untouched.

In this new world, establishing direct control of a territory and its resources no longer makes sense. But through the aid of military methods one can control access to them. It is no accident that naval forces are the main focus of the military augmentation

of rising regional powers. Naval routes — both those that are operational today and those that are likely to open in the future (in the Arctic) — remain the focus of the great powers' interest, just as it was in the era of classical geopolitics. So far there have been no major wars for the primary resource of the future — fresh water, but the indicative trend towards blocking the upper reaches of rivers (such practices will be particularly dangerous for Indochina and Hindustan) may bring about a situation in which this problem will entail the use of force.

Nuclear arms proliferation has contributed to the renaissance of military might. Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and possibly Iran have put their neighbors in a vulnerable and politically inferior position. They, in turn, have been trying to compensate for this inferiority by acquiring nuclear arms of their own or by reinforcing their conventional armed forces and missile defenses. Or through attempts to weaken the stronger neighbor from within — precisely what the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf are doing now in a bid to overthrow the secular regime in Syria, which is friendly to Iran.

Structural changes in the international system also promote a shift towards greater reliance on military strength. Having encountered large-scale challenges at a time when the institutions of global governance have been losing strength, societies have rushed to seek protection from the customary institution — the state. The renationalization of world politics and, partially, the economy has begun. This trend has gained strength as Asia — a continent of traditional states — began to rise and emerged in the forefront of world politics. Old geopolitics, the concept of the balance of power, has staged an amazingly fast comeback, although in a new disguise. Although this old geopolitics continues to be criticized verbally (though all the more anemically), it is being translated into reality ever more outspokenly: through the destabilization of Iran's ally, Syria, and creating counterbalances to China. Or through resisting the elimination of what is left of the military-political division of Europe. And, of course, it is impossible to believe the propaganda

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claims that such action is taken in support of democracy. Moreover, the principle of the balance of power is not only being revived with regard to Europe, where it emerged and caused so many wars, including two world wars, but it is beginning to dominate in Asia, despite a foreign policy culture of the past centuries that rejected such an approach in this region.

Yet nation states have become weaker qualitatively. They are increasingly unable to control the informational, financial, economic, and political processes within their own territories. They grow ever more dependent on the outside world. Eliminating this sort of dependence, insulating oneself from it, is practically impossible. Thus an extra incentive appears for the use of an instrument that nation states and governments still control almost entirely, i.e., military force.

In the medium term, the global economic crisis, which may well last for a decade or more, could contribute to the re-militarization of the world politics. On one hand, the crisis restricts the appetite of military lobbies; on the other, it radicalizes politics, making the "hawks" stronger and increasing the temptation to start wars in order to distract people from internal despair and to blame an inability to cope with the economic crisis on foreign factors. Something of the sort can be seen in the attitude of most great powers towards the Middle East. Intervention in Libya appeared to be the classical "small victorious war." The war was won, but jubilation died down in virtually no time as the crisis went on and Libya itself fell hopelessly apart.

There is yet one more circumstance behind the wish to rely on military strength. Whatever the political and economic grievances many countries have against the West, everyone proceeded from the assumption that its policy was rational and predictable.

The invasion of Iraq was doomed from the outset. There was no way to democratize the Middle East and develop the ideology that appeared to be victorious during the Cold War. The net effects were the *de facto* fragmentation of Iraq and the consequent qualitative strengthening of Iran — the regional Western archrival. It is even harder to determine a rational explanation for the deployment of NATO forces to Afghanistan. The first phase of the operation, the

elimination of Taliban and Al Qaeda bases from the air and support, with Russia's assistance, of the anti-Taliban groups, was logical. But the ground invasion into this "graveyard of empires" — a land no great power could conquer over thousands of years and where the Soviet Union lost so much of its strength so recently — is very hard to understand.

Things went from bad to worse. Using the excuse of supporting democracy, Western countries contributed to the collapse of authoritarian, yet secular, regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and now, in Syria, though they well know that these overthrows were instigated not only by the disgruntled masses, but also by the fundamentalist Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf, who are far more reactionary in terms of Western values than the regimes that have already fallen or are about to fall. The Islamic regimes that are coming to power by catering to public uproar inevitably become more anti-Western and anti-Israeli. Even the supporters of conspiracy theories are in amazement.

Having lost its strategic benchmarks, Western political behavior is inevitably radicalized amid the persisting crisis. This factor adds to the general picture of the chaotic and unpredictable world in which humanity is destined to live for the foreseeable future. It is also an additional argument for those, including those in Russia, who tend to rely on that which is easy to understand: sovereignty and military strength. Though clearly the modern world calls for more reliance on different sources of power — economic, ideological, and moral — "soft" power.

The Second "Unfreezing"

The military political situation is further complicated what I would call the second "unfreezing." The collapse of communism in Europe was followed by what is commonly referred to as the "unfreezing" of numerous conflicts that had been "frozen" by structural confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Yugoslavia was the first to explode. Then a war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a conflict started in Transdniestria, and Chechnya blew up.

The former Yugoslavia was forcefully suppressed by Westerners finally. Russia fought in Chechnya for almost a decade and imposed peace in Transdniestria. Some of the conflicts were "frozen" again (Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict) by joint efforts.

Fortunately, not everything "unfroze." There are many explanations why the Soviet Union did not follow the standard suit of other empires that had disintegrated through civil war and bloodshed. My understanding is pure luck.

Central and East European countries, where nationalism and mutual suspicions were very strong, were lucky too. They were quickly accepted and tightly embraced and taken under control by NATO and the European Union.

One could have given a sigh of relief, but in the middle of the 2000s there happened something I would call a "second unfreezing," which was in fact a distant echo of the bipolar world's collapse. The second "unfreezing" was a result of not only and not so much of the collapse of the bipolar world order as of the weakening of the Old West.

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The first-ever real globalization benefited the West at first but then led to explosive growth in peripheral Asian regions that had been controlled by the West and Cold War rules and institutions and/or wretched a miserable life in poverty and weakness for about 200 years.

The process was tremendously augmented by the staggering failure of the West that had dominated the world for nearly 500 years. It began with logically unexplainable escapades in Iraq and Afghanistan; and continued with structural economic problems in the USA and the EU, which were brought to the fore by the crisis of 2008, and, most importantly, with the increasingly obvious inability of Western democracy in the form it had assumed by the beginning of the 21st century to solve severe structural problems.

Europe is almost gone from the world geopolitics and there is virtually no evidence of its presence in East Asia where it

once used to be a dominating player. And yet it tries to prove otherwise — through purely symbolic "civil presence," or engaging in rearguard action (such as in Libya) or welcoming "Arab democratic revolutions" that essentially bring catastrophic consequences for it.

The USA, which has preserved a considerable part of its might but has lost the ability to use it because of structural economic problems, the split among its elites and two defeats, is trying to contain China, but merely symbolically, too. Old alliances, such as PATO, ANZUS, CENTO, SEATO and the like, has crumbled away or waning. India has calmly rejected an alliance offered almost humbly by Washington.

Meanwhile, the region is being swept by military-political passions over reefs that were hitherto unknown. Countries are bringing back old claims against each other but mostly against Japan, and everyone is afraid of China that remains quite peaceable for the time being.

Objectively, with no pan-regional security architecture, the departure of the West and the rise of China create a rapidly growing, albeit not catastrophic, security vacuum in the region.

The results of the "second unfreezing" in another part of Asia — the Greater Middle East — appear to be even more alarming. The loosening of control over the region, put in place through tacit cooperation-rivalry between the Soviet Union and America at first and then led by the USA, has created a security vacuum in the region, which looks almost appallingly hopeless.

Russia and Military Might

Russia has begun to augment its military capabilities. From the standpoint of military security, it is in a more favorable position today than ever before. In the course of a millennium, the pivotal idea of Russian statehood has been defense from outside threats and the preservation of sovereignty. No major foreign power intentionally threatens Russia today, and none of them will pose a threat in the medium term. Russia's status as a nuclear superpower makes the probability of a massive attack against it negligible.

Gone are the ideological confrontation and the political controversies that could lead Moscow towards a direct military confrontation with the West. The theoretical possibility had existed before 2008, as long as NATO threatened an alliance with Ukraine. That alliance would have created an utterly unacceptable situation for Russia from the standpoint of military security. It could also be complicated by the origin in Ukraine of a schism and conflict, into which all of Europe probably would have become embroiled.

Such a threat has not become a reality, for which Moscow and Europe should be grateful to the incumbent Georgian leadership and to those who encouraged Georgia to attack South Ossetia. Russia's victory in the Five-Day War prevented a far riskier scenario.

True, this is no guarantee against aggressive behavior of NATO. Until the 1990s the alliance was purely defensive. But the perception of triumphalism and impunity, developed after what appeared to be victory in the Cold War, and the loss by a crisis-stricken Russia in the last decade of the past century of its potential for political deterrence, triggered euphoria and a series of interventions. But NATO is in no condition to threaten Russia, and indeed the raptures over its own successes are waning.

China, anticipating an escalation in its competition with the U.S., including the military-political sphere, is doing everything it can not to arouse Russia's concerns. After bewildered questions from Moscow, Beijing curtailed the exercises it had been holding a few years ago to practice troop redeployments at long distances. The modernization of Chinese nuclear power is not aimed, to the extent that such is possible, at Russia. Beijing has pursued explicitly friendly policies. Indeed the relations between two countries in spite of all remaining and new suspicions are remarkably friendly and stable. Contrary to oft-repeated claims, China is not conducting a demographic or investment expansion.

While strengthening its friendly relations with China, Moscow adheres to a policy of retaining its overwhelming nuclear supremacy at both the strategic and tactical levels. This can be observed in the renewed modernization of Russian forces and the actual refusal to conduct further talks on their reduction with the U.S. This level of

deployment of nuclear forces is probably seen as a means to deter an attempt to achieve conventional superiority by any country or to use it for political purposes.

The risk of conflicts has been increasing along the southern border of Russia. The Israel-Palestinian conflict is unsolvable for the foreseeable future. The Iranian situation that threatens an armed conflict, an almost inevitable large-scale war or a series of smaller wars in the Middle East, and the aggressive expansion of part of the Islamic world — all would inevitably launch the metastases of armed conflicts onto the territory of Russia and its neighbors. These conflicts will have to be prevented or neutralized, including through the use of force.

The threat of these metastases, as well as the ideological and political offensiveness of part of the Islamic world, which is attempting to compensate (with the help of oil money) for its losses in international economic and socio-political competition, has arisen as the most probable along the spectrum of challenges to Russia's military security.

No traditional large-scale military threats are envisioned in the long term. True, it is possible to frighten oneself with scary stories about the U.S. building up a capability to deliver a massive strike against Russia or other countries with conventional high-accuracy missiles. Most likely, that is a bluff. But even if one assumes that such missiles make an appearance, it is clear that Russia's response can be only nuclear.

There is another way to scare oneself — fanning tensions over the European missile defense system and beginning to squander money by the example of Soviet "hawks," who in their time obtained and spent huge budgets to combat U.S. President Ronald Reagan's fictitious "Star Wars" plan. I hope that those who are waging the current campaign against the European missile defense pursue some more rational goals: politically tying America's hands, restricting maneuvering room in this area, gaining a useful and plausible excuse to refuse any further steps towards negotiated nuclear weapons reduction.

My hope is strengthened by the observation that almost nobody in Russia is paying any attention to the fact that almost 95% of all

ABM systems are deployed in the Pacific — against North Korea. But most probably against China, too.

Although there are no threats in sight, the continuation of Russia's policy of strengthening its military potential is certain, not least because of a need for modern armed forces capable of containing or actively preventing immediate threats to security. After nearly twenty years of unilateral disarmament due to the systemic crisis that began in the late 1980s, creating such forces anew is obligatory. I believe that in the eyes of Russia's current leadership (although no open statements have been made), the policy of military reinforcement is primarily driven by Russia's positioning itself in the international arena as a major power and by the understanding that the current model of Russia's development does not provide many other means of guaranteeing a leading position.

But economic stagnation is threatening and could erode sovereignty, as Russians ascertained in the 1980s and the 1990s. But the society seems prepared almost at the genetic level to safeguard that sovereignty, as it has done with a rapturously audacious courage in the course of its history. Russia is one of the few nations on Earth which eventually defeated all invaders: the Mongols, Napoleon, and Hitler.

The military buildup is probably expected to compensate, for the time being, for the relative weakness in other elements of power — economic, technological, ideological, and psychological. Russia possesses amazingly little allure for the outside world. It is respected mostly as a strong player. (Why the nation of Pushkin, Gogol, Tchaikovsky, Tolstoy, Pasternak, Shostakovich, and Solzhenitsyn has such a shortage of soft power and appeal is a separate story.)

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It is easy to criticize this stance as not relevant to modern global realities. But the world is changing so rapidly and unpredictably today that this venture may prove the appropriate one. Of course, it is far better to be strong in all spheres — economic, technological,

cultural, and spiritual. This has not yet happened. Only military reform has been relatively effective.

Russian Reform

Indeed, the most remarkable thing about ongoing military reform is that it has been rather successful, despite endless obstacles, negative reaction to it and the recent scandalous dismissal of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. The abuse of authority by Defense Ministry officials does not negate the essence of the reforms. All other reforms talked about for many years — pensions, the housing and utilities sector, the judiciary, education, and politics — are moving at a snail's pace. But military reform continues. The promised mammoth defense spending.

The reform of the armed forces is truly revolutionary. An immense, mobilization-based, traditional Russian and Soviet army, designed primarily for major ground wars against a potential threat from the West (long absent) is being replaced by a compact, more professional, and permanently combat-ready army, capable of providing an adequate response to low- and medium-intensity conflicts. For the prevention of large-scale conflicts, reform increasingly relies on nuclear weapons, which are also being upgraded.

Powerful nuclear arms, essentially not intended for use, are still necessary in order to render absurd any attempts to put pressure on Russia on the basis of superior conventional forces. In addition, a nuclear sword of Damocles is crucial for "civilizing" hotheads, particularly now that fundamental changes in the world, unprecedented in depth and pace, are leading to the loss of strategic benchmarks and even common sense.

In essence, the ongoing modernization of the armed forces is reasonably expected not only to ward off security challenges and reinforce Russia's international political status, but also to close many channels of the global arms race that can harm international military and strategic stability. By guaranteeing its security and status, Russia simultaneously regains the role of a key safeguard of international security and peace.

Although difficult, active rearmament is in progress. The defense-industrial complex has in many ways been bled dry and, in contrast to the armed forces, has undergone little reform, remaining a shadow of the Soviet Leviathan, but not long ago, the Russian army was a pale shadow of the Soviet.

Numerous problems and mistakes stand alongside the achievements. Reform has deliberately not been a subject of discussions or research. Apparently, the military and political leadership came to the opinion that any discussion would produce such strong opposition that it would once again halt reform. Even the official documents — the 2009 National Security Strategy and the 2010 Military Doctrine — fail to reflect the processes underway in the armed forces. They simply lie in different, little intersecting, dimensions. Nevertheless, Russia is moving along a path of transforming itself into a contemporary, strong military power. What benefits it will derive from this transformation is an open question, as are, admittedly, the majority of other questions in today's world.

Summary

However, Soviet experience teaches that it is foolish to wantonly spend money on superfluous weapons or unnecessary development programs for the armed forces. It is foolish to over-arm oneself to the net result of creating more enemies scared of Russia. The risk is great. The Soviet Union was not the only country of unrestrained militarization, producing and maintaining more tanks than the rest of the world combined. Other countries, far more democratic and advanced, were doing the same.

The strengthening of the military can compensate for weaknesses in other elements of power only to a certain extent. In order to remain a great and sovereign power in the future, Russia will have to modernize and diversify its economy. Otherwise it will have

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no basis for strengthening its military potential. It is necessary to restore and enhance soft power — the country's appeal to the world and to its own citizens — through the revival and creation of a new Russian identity based on a great culture achievement in sciences and a glorious history of military victories.