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The Russian Military

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Introduction

The Russian military suffered years of neglect after the Soviet collapse and no longer casts the shadow of a global superpower. However, the Russian armed forces are in the midst of a historic overhaul with significant consequences for Eurasian politics and security. Russian officials say the reforms are necessary to bring a Cold War-era military into the twenty-first century, but many Western analysts fear they will enable Moscow to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy, often relying on force to coerce its weaker neighbors. Some say Russian interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014–2015—both former Soviet republics seeking closer ties to the West—demonstrate that President Vladimir Putin is prepared to use military might to reestablish Russian hegemony in its near abroad.

Meanwhile, Russia is bolstering its military and intelligence ties with Syria, Iran, and Iraq. These moves have raised serious concerns in Washington about Moscow's motives in this volatile and strategically important region.

What are Russian conventional military capabilities?

Both in terms of troops and weapons, Russian conventional forces dwarf those of its Eastern European and Central Asian neighbors, many of which are relatively weak ex-Soviet republics closely allied with Moscow. Russia has a military pact with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan through the [Collective Security Treaty Organization](#), formed in 1992. Moscow also stations troops in the region: Armenia (3,300), Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (7,000), Moldova's separatist Transnistria region (1,500), Kyrgyzstan (500), Tajikistan (5,000), and Crimea (20,000).

As part of defense reforms, most Russian ground forces are to be professionalized and reorganized into formations of a few thousand troops for low- and medium-intensity conflicts. But for the foreseeable future many will remain one-year conscripts with limited training (military service is compulsory for Russian men aged eighteen to twenty-seven). The Airborne Assault Forces, which comprises about thirty-five thousand troops and whose commander answers directly to Putin, is Russia's elite crisis-reaction force. A Special Operations Command, also a reserve of Putin, was created in 2013 to manage special operators outside Russian borders.

Moscow is intent on remilitarizing its Arctic territory and is restoring Soviet-era airfields and ports to help protect important [hydrocarbon resources and shipping lanes](#). (Russia has the world's largest fleet of icebreakers, which are regularly required to navigate these waters.) In late 2013, Putin ordered the creation of a new strategic military command in the Russian Arctic.

SELECTED CONVENTIONAL MILITARY DATA

Country	Troops (active)	Tanks	Combat Aircraft
RUSSIA	771,000	22,000	1,337
ARMENIA	44,800	109	15
AZERBAIJAN	66,950	433	44
BELARUS	48,000	515	72
GEORGIA	20,650	123	12
KAZAKHSTAN	39,000	300	122
KRYGYZSTAN	10,900	150	33
MOLDOVA	5,350	0	0
TAJIKISTAN	8,800	37	0
TURKMENISTAN	22,000	680	94
UKRAINE	121,500	700	203
UZBEKISTAN	48,000	340	135

CSTO

Source:
IISS: The Military
Balance 2015

Julia Ro *cfr*



Meanwhile, rearmament has been slow, and much of the military's equipment remains decades old. The once formidable Soviet navy is now little more than a coastal protection force. All of the navy's large vessels, including its sole aircraft carrier, the non-nuclear Kuznetsov, are holdovers from the Cold War. (By comparison, the United States has ten nuclear carriers and builds several new warships each year.) While Russia plans to reestablish its "blue-water navy," analysts say it won't be able to produce a new fleet of large warships for at least a decade. The navy's immediate focus is building nuclear submarines and smaller surface vessels for coastal defense and sea lane protection.

The Russian air force remains the second-largest in the world, with approximately 2,500 aircraft in service, but most date from the 1980s. New variations of the Sukhoi Flanker, a multi-role fighter, are expected to serve as Russia's main combat aircraft for at least the next the decade. Meanwhile, Sukhoi is developing several more advanced warplanes, including a fifth-generation "stealth" fighter, the T-50. Russia does not

yet operate [armed drones](#), but military leaders say that research is underway. The current fleet of strategic bombers, which resumed regular patrols in 2007, is expected to fly for at least another twenty years, allowing designers ample time to develop replacements.

What are Russian nuclear capabilities and doctrine?

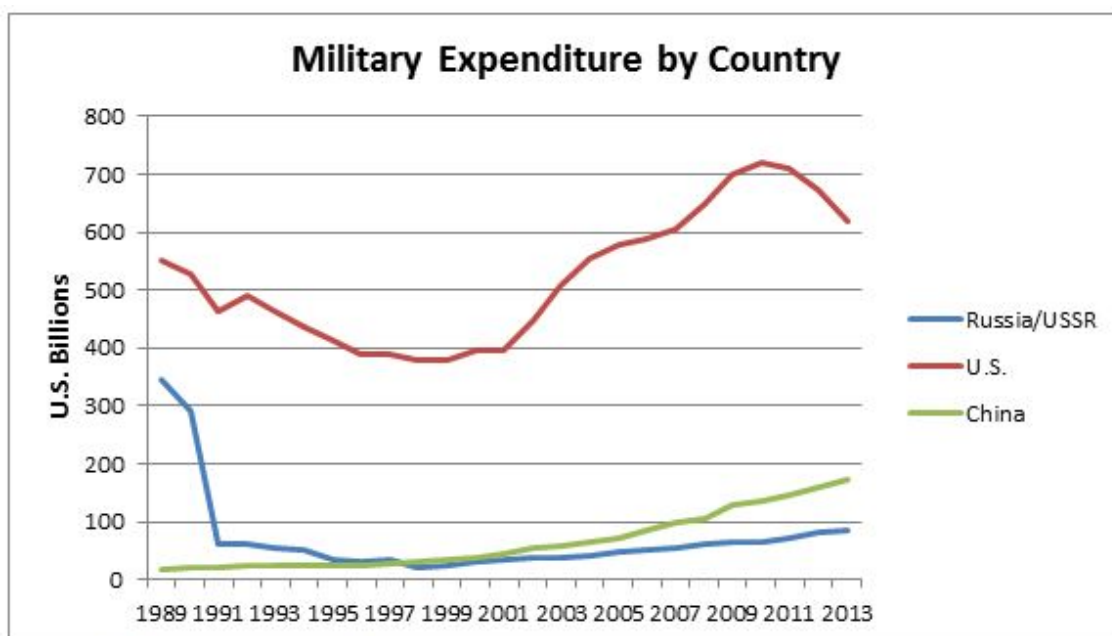
Russia's vast nuclear arsenal remains on par with the United States and is the country's only residual great power feature, according to military analysts. Moscow keeps about 1,500 strategic warheads on deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarines, and heavy bombers. These numbers comply with the so-called [New START treaty](#), which came into force February 2011. Russia is also believed to have a few thousand nonstrategic nuclear weapons, which are lower-yield munitions that can be deployed and used on the battlefield.

Russia leaned on its nuclear deterrent as its conventional force languished in the years after the Soviet collapse. In 2000, Moscow lowered its [nuclear threshold](#), permitting the use of atomic weapons in response to conventional attacks that pose an existential threat. (By comparison, Soviet doctrine had reserved nuclear weapons for use only in retaliation for a nuclear attack.) The most recent [military doctrine](#), approved in December 2014, reaffirmed the post-2000 policy.

Much of the Russian nuclear deterrent is being modernized: A new class of ballistic missile submarine is coming into service; some strategic bombers are being upgraded; and there are plans to replace all Soviet-era ICBMs over the next decade or so.

What is the Russian military budget?

At close to \$90 billion for 2013, the Russian military budget has more than doubled over the last decade, trailing only behind the United States (\$640 billion) and China (\$188 billion), according to the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#). (Data includes funding for armed services, paramilitary forces, military space activities, foreign military aid, and military R&D.)



Source: SIPRI (Figures are at constant 2011 prices and exchange rates)

Note: No data available for Russia/USSR in 1991

But analysts say recent spending remains well below Soviet levels. Second, Russia still spends a fraction of what the United States and many of its allies spend per soldier. And third, high inflation rates in the defense industry as well as endemic corruption consume a large portion of newly allocated resources.

In 2015, Russia was about halfway through a ten-year \$700 billion weapons modernization program, with priorities given to strategic nuclear weapons, fighter aircraft, ships and submarines, air defenses, communications, and intelligence. But defense spending is closely tied to global energy prices, which can fluctuate significantly. (Oil and gas account for more than half of Russia's federal revenues, according to the [U.S. Energy Information Administration](#).) A roughly 50 percent plunge in oil prices from mid-2014 to early-2015, coupled with the rising costs of international sanctions, has forced Russia to consider major budget cuts, however Putin has thus far [exempted defense spending](#).

What prompted the reforms?

The five-day conflict with Georgia in August 2008 exposed major deficiencies, particularly in command-and-control systems, hardware, weaponry, and intelligence. Though ultimately successful, the operation confirmed that Russia's mass-mobilization military, where millions of conscripts could marshal to protect the motherland, remained outdated.

In the weeks after the conflict, Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov, a powerful reformer appointed by Putin, recommitted the military to a lengthy overhaul involving massive personnel cuts, rearmament, and reorganization into a professional force capable of responding quickly to acute crises.

What does Russia consider threats?

Russian leaders acknowledge that there is now little threat of a large-scale [NATO](#) land invasion—a top concern during the Cold War—but they repeatedly condemn the bloc's eastward expansion, including its plans to roll out a [ballistic missile defense shield](#) across Europe. The United States, which developed the system, says it is only designed to guard against limited missile attacks from "rogue" states like Iran, but Moscow believes the technology could be updated and may tip the strategic nuclear balance in favor of the United States. Furthermore, Putin and his military leaders frequently express concern with conventional precision weapons being developed by rivals.



Moscow also fears that Western powers are working covertly to undermine its interests in the region. Russian

leaders believe the United States and its allies orchestrated the so-called color revolutions—a series of popular uprisings in former Soviet satellites in the early 2000s. "Russian foreign policy appears to be based on a combination of fears of popular protest and opposition to U.S. world hegemony, both of which are seen as threatening the Putin regime," writes [Dmitry Gorenburg](#), an expert on the Russian military at CNA Corporation, a Virginia-based research institution.

Many Western and Russian analysts say Moscow's concerns with NATO divert attention away from more practical threats like those looming on Russia's southern periphery, including [ethnic insurgencies in the North Caucasus region](#), weapons proliferation, and a potential resurgence of the [Taliban in Afghanistan](#).

Russia has for years provided diplomatic and military support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime. In 2015, Moscow expanded its military outreach to the wartorn country, sending combat aircraft, battle tanks, and other advanced equipment to regime strongholds in the west. Russia also inked an agreement with Syria and the Shia-led governments of Iran and Iraq to share intelligence in fighting the [self-proclaimed Islamic State](#).

What are Russia's objectives in the region?

Military modernization will enable the world's largest country by far (and one of the most sparsely populated) to better defend its vast territory and national interests. But the conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia have aroused concerns about Putin's willingness to use military force to preserve Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

Shortly before annexing Crimea in March 2014, Putin said he would defend the rights of Russians abroad, and in April he referred to a large swath of Ukrainian territory as Novorossiia or New Russia, a term used by the Russian tsars. Some believe one of Putin's main objectives is to establish control over the entire northern coast of the Black Sea, connecting Russia in the east to Moldova in the west. "Mr. Putin may seek to create Novorossiia one slender slice at a time, thereby reducing his chances of massive confrontation with the West. An intermediate goal would be to connect Crimea by land to Russia," wrote regional specialists [Hans Binnendijk and John E. Herbst in the New York Times](#).

Moscow has provided ethnic Russian insurgencies in eastern Ukraine with training, personnel, and heavy weapons. In November 2014, Russia acknowledged rebel elections in the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, a move that echoed its unilateral recognition of separatist governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after its conflict with Georgia in 2008. (Moscow provoked further international censure in late 2014 and early 2015, signing treaties to formally integrate the two breakaway Georgian regions with Russia.)

But Putin's assertiveness has come with a cost. The [Group of Eight \(now G7\)](#) cut Moscow out of its elite club in March 2014, and top Russian officials, banks, and businesses face an array of [Western sanctions](#) that may, along with slumping energy prices, push the economy into recession. The Russian military has also suffered: France canceled the sale of two advanced warships to the Russian navy; and Ukraine has moved to end its extensive defense-industrial cooperation with Moscow.

Looking ahead, states that border Russia are chiefly concerned with its "hybrid warfare" capabilities, which by many accounts were deployed successfully in Crimea and to a lesser extent in Eastern Ukraine. The [International Institute for Strategic Studies](#) describes hybrid warfare as "the use of military and non-military tools in an integrated campaign designed to achieve surprise, seize the initiative and gain psychological as well as physical advantages utilizing diplomatic means; sophisticated and rapid information, electronic and cyber operations; covert and occasionally overt military and intelligence action; and economic pressure."

In an ominous move, Russia withdrew in March 2015 from the Joint Consultative Group on the [Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe](#). The forum, which set national limits for the deployment of

major weapons systems and heavy military equipment, was seen as a cornerstone of the post-Cold War security system.

What is NATO's strategy toward Russia?

NATO is fundamentally [reassessing its defenses in Europe](#), particularly in the East. In early 2015, allies agreed to establish new command centers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. The outposts, which are expected to open in 2016, will support a new rapid reaction force of about five thousand troops. In a major crisis, military leaders say that up to two more brigades, for a total NATO force of about thirty thousand, could be marshalled. "This will be the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense since the end of the Cold War," Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in January.

The United States has shored up NATO's air presence over Poland and the Baltic states, and other allies, including the UK, Germany, and Denmark, are providing reinforcements as well. In 2014, allied jets intercepted Russian warplanes more than four hundred times without altercation.

NATO members are also bolstering security collaboration with Ukraine, an alliance partner since 1994. But as a non-member, Ukraine remains outside of NATO's defense perimeter, and there are clear limits on how far it can be brought into institutional structures. The United States plans to send an [armored brigade](#) to train troops in western Ukraine on route clearance, counter-battery fire, and electronic warfare. Meanwhile, President Barack Obama's administration is considering providing Kiev with lethal, defensive weapons, but some Western European leaders worry this may escalate the conflict.

U.S. General Philip Breedlove, NATO's top commander, has stressed that military force alone will not shift the battle's momentum. "We don't want a war of grand proportions in Ukraine. We must find a diplomatic and political solution," he [told Congress in February 2015](#). "What is clear is that this is not getting better. It is getting worse every day."

In the longer term, some defense analysts believe the alliance should consider advancing membership to [Finland and Sweden](#), two Partnership for Peace countries with a history of avoiding military alignment. (Nordic peers Denmark, Iceland, and Norway are charter NATO members.)

Additional Resources

In a series of blog posts, CNA's Dmitry Gorenburg examines Russian [air](#), [naval](#), and [ground force](#) capabilities.

This report from the Congressional Research Service discusses the role of [nonstrategic nuclear weapons](#) in U.S. and Russian military strategy.

This CFR backgrounder provides an in-depth look at the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) and its transformation in the wake of the Cold War.

This CFR backgrounder reviews the development of [U.S. ballistic missile defense systems](#), assessing emerging threats from North Korea and Iran, as well as ongoing tensions with Russia.

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