

EDAM Discussion Paper Series 2014/5



**RUSSIAN MILITARY MODERNISATION AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO:
LESSONS-LEARNED FROM THE UKRAINE CRISIS**

Can Kasapoğlu

Research Fellow, EDAM

Faculty Member, Girne American University

11 June 2014

Introduction:

Following Moscow's intervention in Ukraine, which brought about the annexation of Crimea and led to turmoil in eastern provinces, NATO members at Russia's doorstep now perceive Kremlin's political – military aggressiveness as substantially more threatening. Baltic members of the North Atlantic Alliance are calling for robust and permanent NATO presence in order to maintain tangible deterrence against Moscow¹, while the Polish Foreign Minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, openly voiced Poland's demand for deployment of two persistent NATO combat brigades in his country at the recent foreign ministers meeting².

This threat perception is underpinned by a visible effort by Moscow to modernize and upgrade its military capabilities. As expressed by a recent SSI monograph, "*fundamental organizational changes that finally broke the Russian armed forces away from the Soviet model in 2008–09 are now irreversible*"³. Moreover, the military modernization plans, which were initially designed under former Minister of Defense Anatoliy Serdyukov's management (2007 – 2012), now seem to gain more momentum under the incumbent defense minister, Sergey Shoygu, along with the new Defense Plan 2020 (*GPV 2020 in Russian acronym*) which aims to equip the Russian Armed Forces with up to 70% percent modern arms by the year 2020. Russian defense budget had been registered at 2.7 percent of GDP in the 2000s. More recently this ratio peaked at 3.5 %.

More importantly, Russia's military modernization is combined with geopolitical expansionism through political – military escalation towards neighboring nations. This puts extra burden on the North Atlantic Alliance's shoulders to boost military strategic posture for the defense of fragile members at Moscow's doorstep. US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel recently pointed out the necessity of higher defense spending by NATO members stating that Russia's moves showed that Europe "still lives in a dangerous world"⁴.

This paper aims to investigate Moscow's rising military posture and pressing threats vis-à-vis its geopolitical hinterland. In doing so, this assessment focuses on three key aspects, which have been playing critical roles since the 2008 Russo – Georgian War, namely the Russian Airborne Forces (*VDV – Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska*) and this elite unit's uptrend in the overall force posture, the role of strategic deployment in Moscow's ambitious expansionism, and finally, Kremlin's view of its strategic weapons arsenal in order to maintain operational security at global scale. The paper

¹ <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20140426/DEFREG01/304260024/Baltics-Hike-Budgets-Pursue-Permanent-NATO-Troop-Presence>, Accessed on: 19 May 2014.

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/02/world/europe/nato-orders-end-to-practical-and-military-cooperation-with-russia.html>, Accessed on 19 May 2014.

³ Keir, Giles and Andrew, Monaghan. *Russian Military Transformation – Goal in Sight?*, The Letort Papers, SSI, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 2014, p.ix.

⁴ <http://www.defensenews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2014305020023>, Accessed on 19 May 2014.

concludes its findings with respect to future Russian military capabilities and implications to the North Atlantic Alliance.

Rise of the Russian Airborne Units: VDV's Military Uptrend and Possible Implications

The Ukraine episode marked the peak of VDV's operational performance as well as Moscow's increasing reliance on employing this elite unit in politico-militarily sensitive operations in geopolitically significant spheres.

VDV is a separate branch in the Russian doctrinal order of battle with some 35,000 personnel⁵. Since the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan (1979 – 1989), elite VDV elements, or “the blue berets”, have remained at the core of Russian military pride and were seen as an example to follow for the rest of the Russian Armed Forces. While this special position has brought about more intensive operational burden on VDV, it has also enabled significant privileges such as higher salaries for VDV officer staff, better equipment and training for the troops, and more freedom of movement in doctrinal order of battle preferences for the higher echelons⁶. According to Soviet military doctrine, VDV units are seen as “deep interdiction operations” assets in a traditional fashion. Following the end of the Cold War, which had had raised the Chechen threat to Moscow, VDV acted as a robust counterinsurgency force, distanced from its original airborne and air-assault roles. Following the withdrawal of Russian operational elements from Chechnya in 2005 – 2006, which witnessed the last VDV unit's –*the 45th Reconnaissance Regiment with Spetsnaz troops*– exodus from the once hot zone, a critical time for this elite unit had come for finding a new role to stay in the forefront of the Russian military doctrine⁷.

Despite some operational shortcomings, by the Russo-Georgian War, Russian decision-makers were assured about the right role that befits VDV as a high readiness / quick reaction force that would be used as Moscow's arm in “the area of privileged interests”. Indeed, evidences from the Ukrainian “battleground” suggest that the upgrading of VDV's operational functions has been progressing under the 2008 template with some additional military and paramilitary functions. Visual evidence from the conflict zone shows that Russia's Crimea operations were undertaken by professional and robust units with no insignia, mostly resembling airborne elites⁸. The units came into prominence not only as a result of their combat skills but also their careful escalation-control strategy that enabled a smooth and fast takeover of important Ukrainian military facilities with minimum civilian and military casualties. Furthermore, it is reported that VDV's the 76th Air Assault Division, the 31st Guards Airborne

⁵ IISS, *The Military Balance 2014*, Routledge, London, 2014, p. 180.

⁶ Rod Thornton, *Organizational Change in the Russian Airborne Forces: The Lessons of the Georgian Conflict*, SSI, Carlisle Barracks – Pennsylvania, 2011, pp.1-4

⁷ Ibid, pp.4-6

⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XItZC1480N0>, Accessed on 15 May 2014.

Brigade, and the 45th Guards Independent Regiment (*a special operations unit under VDV*) have been clandestinely operating in Crimea during these sensitive operations⁹. In addition, recent YouTube videos, which showed downing of Ukrainian Mi-24 helicopter gunships over Slovyansk, have provided the evidence that advanced MANPADS (*Strela or possibly Igla series*) were probably delivered to pro-Russian militia in Ukraine, seized from arms caches, or used by clandestinely operating Russian forces¹⁰. In tandem, as recently as May 29th, pro-Russian elements downed another Ukrainian chopper (probably a Mi-8) claiming the lives of 14 personnel including a general, Serhiy Kulchytskyi. According to Kiev administration's acting President Oleksandr Turchynov, the attack was conducted through a "shoulder-launched, heat seeking missile"¹¹.

Considering the reported VDV presence on the ground and the profile of this elite unit, it could be argued that VDV is also responsible for preparing the local paramilitary defense with advanced arms and tactics against Kiev's anti-terror operations in the eastern parts of the country, along with orchestrating arms supplies to the anti-Kiev forces. In addition, according to Ukrainian officials and several press sources, VDV has expanded its operations into the Donetsk oblast through active participation of the 45th Regiment¹².

The recent "coup-like" intervention in Donetsk also deserves attention. On 29 May, the Vostok Battalion –an "officially disbanded" former elite unit, mostly consisting of battle-hardened pro-Moscow Chechen militia– stormed the rebel HQ in Donetsk (in the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic). It is known that, before being abolished, the unit was dispatched to help pro-Russian elements in 2008 Russo-Georgian War¹³. The recent intervention in Donetsk has shown that Moscow uses its covert operation forces not only as a tool of organizing and conducting paramilitary activities in regional contingencies, but also in order to discipline pro-Russian groups and to maintain operational order.

Emergence of Russian Rapid Reaction Forces and Implications for NATO

Starting from 2008, the trajectory of Russian military operations suggests that VDV could be expanded in order to constitute a larger rapid reaction force for launching similar operations in the

⁹ Andrew, S, Bowen. "Chicken Kiev", *Foreign Policy*, 15 March 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/15/will_russia_invade_ukraine, Accessed on: 15 May 2014.

¹⁰ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/05/02/amateur-videos-appear-to-show-ukrainian-military-helicopter-being-shot-down-over-slovyansk/>, Accessed on: 15 May 2014.

¹¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/separatist-leader-says-his-rebel-fighters-are-holding-osce-monitors-in-ukraine/2014/05/29/7677358e-e713-11e3-a86b-362fd5443d19_story.html, Accessed on: 01 June 2014

¹² <https://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/turchynov-anti-terrorist-operation-has-begun-in-northern-donetsk-343563.html>, Accessed on: 15 May 2014.

¹³ <http://www.rferl.org/content/vostok-battalion-a-powerful-new-player-in-eastern-ukraine/25404785.html>, Accessed on: 29 May 2014.

near future. Notably, in 2013, top Russian military figures, including Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu and VDV Commander General Vladimir Shamanov, have hinted at prospects of a rapid reaction force that would be organized on the core of the airborne forces. Furthermore, in his interview with RIA Novosti, Gen. Shamanov stressed that through the merger of VDV, the Special Operations Forces, the subordinate Spetsnaz brigades, and the naval infantry, the Russian Armed Forces' elites must constitute the fifth strategic command (*in addition to the RF's 4 strategic commands under the new order of battle*) which could be called the "mobile operational-strategic command"¹⁴. More importantly, Gen. Shamanov added, this force would be designed to operate both within and outside of the Russian Federation's borders¹⁵.

Within the Russian force structure, which consists of conscripts and professional contractors at the same time, the reduction of conscription to 12 months is expected to increase the proportion of professional soldiers in VDV units gradually. Furthermore, VDV keeps enjoying the priority in terms of defense funding over the Russian ground forces¹⁶. This military spending trend, along with Moscow's perception on the diminishing role of ground forces in modern warfare, has already granted VDV rapid reaction functions without officially bearing the title¹⁷.

From a political–military perspective, forming such a rapid reaction force, or an additional, "mobile strategic command", could cause a drastic shift in the regional military calculus and expand Moscow's influence in the former Soviet Union geography. More importantly, in combination with the Kremlin's *Siloviki* circles' ambitious and aggressive manner with regard to Russia's geopolitical expansionism in the 2000s, as seen in Georgia and Ukraine cases, such a defense perspective would put additional burden on the new members of NATO (i.e. Baltic States and Poland).

Strategic Deployment: An Emerging Tool of Moscow's Expansionism Since 2008

In light of the lessons-learned from the Russo – Georgia War and the ongoing Ukraine crisis, it can be argued that strategic deployment comes into prominence as a key aspect of the Russian military strategy in order to compensate for tactical and operational drawbacks on the battleground. Ariel Cohen and Robert Hamilton argue that (regarding the 2008 Georgia War):

"At the strategic level, Russia was able to execute a combined political-military strategy that isolated Georgia from its western partners while setting the conditions for a military success. At the operational level, these advantages were parlayed into success by the

¹⁴ Foreign Military Studies Office, *OE Watch*, Leavenworth-Kansas, April 2014, p.24.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Keir, Giles and Andrew Monaghan, *Russian Military Transformation – Goal in Sight?*, The Letort Papers, SSI, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 2014, p.38.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.25

early commitment of a decisive amount of forces to the theater of operations and sufficient, if not especially elegant, operational coordination. At the tactical level, despite disadvantages in capabilities at the small-unit level and use of tactics that exposed its forces to the risk of higher casualties, the offensive mindedness, superior numbers, and speed of Russian forces committed to the fight overwhelmed their enemy and translated into battlefield victory¹⁸.

Although no massive Russian land incursion was witnessed in Moscow's Crimean intervention, Russia has successfully used strategic deployment along the Ukrainian border to limit Kiev's troop concentrations close to the conflict zones, namely in Crimea and in the eastern parts of the country, while sending firm signals to the West through military drills and deployments conducted by combat-ready units. As stated by a RUSI April-2104 briefing paper, during the Crimean crisis, Russia's military formations *Klimovo, L'gov, Belgorod, and Polessya*, totaling some 50.000 personnel, put significant pressure on Kiev and forced the Ukrainians to keep an important force close to the capital and therefore unable to be moved closer to the conflict zones¹⁹. The Russian military deployment had anchored some robust Ukrainian units, such as the 72nd Mechanized Brigade, the 1st Tank Brigade, and the 30th Mechanized Brigade around the capital and in the vicinity of the Russian military build-up²⁰.

Notably, in April 2014, NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) released satellite imagery showing Russia's military build-up close to the Ukrainian border areas²¹. In light of the satellite imagery analysis with regard to type and volume of the Russian forces, the committed Russian forces' profiles suggest that the build-up fits for strategic combined arms operations with probably high-readiness levels under pre-determined combat missions and rules of engagement ordered by Kremlin. Given the strategic deployment capabilities of the Russians, it can be concluded that troop deployments could be increased to 40,000 – 50,000 level depending on the trajectory of current escalations.

¹⁸ Ariel, Cohen and Robert, E., Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*, SSI, Carlisle Barracks – Pennsylvania, 2011, p.7.

¹⁹ Igor, Sutyagin and Michael, Clarke, "Ukraine Military Dispositions: The Military Ticks Up while the Clock Ticks Down", *RUSI Briefing Paper*, April 2014, pp.1-2.

²⁰ Ibid.p.4.

²¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26968312>, Accessed on: 17 May 2014.

Figure 1 – Mil Mi-8 “Hips” and Mil Mi-24 “Hinds”



Figure 29 – Su-27/30 “Flankers” and Su-24 “Fencers”



Figure 17 – Tanks and IFV elements of MRR



Figure 24 - Probable airborne or Spetznaz (Special Forces) brigade



Russian Strategic Weapons: Maintaining Deterrence

Although Russia has not used its strategic weapons and non-strategic nuclear arsenal in Georgia or Ukraine, Kremlin has maintained its immunity to foreign intervention via politico-military maneuvers based on strategic weapon systems. For instance, right before the Victory Day on 9 May and amidst the Ukrainian crisis unfolding, Russia test-launched several strategic weapons on 8 May 2014 including advanced Topol intercontinental ballistic missiles, “shorter range missiles” from submarines in the Northern and Pacific fleets, that coupled with military exercises in which TU-95 strategic bombers and Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier took place²². With the presence of Belarusian, Tajik, Armenian, and Kyrgyz presidents in the planned exercises, the launches must be seen as a signal of deterrence towards third parties, especially NATO.

In fact, both doctrinal writings and strategic forces’ modernization parameters in the Russian defense planning should have given the North Atlantic Alliance a firm warning about Moscow’s future strategic weapons trend and Kremlin’s views on how to “use” its formidable arsenal. In this regard, the 2010 Russian Military Doctrine openly stresses that “*the Russian Federation reserves the right to utilize nuclear weapons in response to the utilization of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, and also in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation involving the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat*”²³. This firm statement of the doctrine marked an alarming factor through considering nuclear response against non-nuclear threats. Moreover, since the predecessor military doctrine, which was

²² <http://www.defensenews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2014305080023>, Accessed on: 19 May 2014.

²³ The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2010, Article 22

published in 2000 following the Allied intervention in Kosovo, Russian military thought has interestingly seen limited use of nuclear weapons as a tool of “conflict de-escalation”²⁴.

Notably, the Moscow is pursuing an ambitious strategic weapons modernization –as well as efforts of promoting their non-strategic assets– that includes major silo-based and mobile ICBM projects (i.e. SS-27 Mod1 and Mod2), submarine launched ballistic missiles and submarine platforms, strategic and tactical bomber aircraft (i.e. TU-95 upgrade), and short-range ballistic missiles with nuclear warhead delivery capacity (i.e. SS-26 Iskander)²⁵.

Finally, Moscow’s ambitious expansionism and strategic forces modernization trends should be seen as the harbinger of a problematic security environment for the North Atlantic Alliance. Firstly, the annexation of Crimea and further Russian provocations in the eastern part of the country is an open violation of 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which granted Kiev its territorial integrity in return for total nuclear disarmament of remaining Soviet nuclear assets on Ukrainian soil. In other words, Ukraine’s goodwill in nuclear disarmament is neither honored by the Russians by respecting Kiev’s sovereignty, nor fully backed by the Western signatories of the memorandum, namely the US and the UK, by being unable or unwilling to deter, and if necessary, repel Moscow’s aggression. Secondly, technical features of the current Russian strategic weapons modernization raises suspicions about the violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (1987), which bans land-based missiles between 500 and 5,500km ranges. Moscow is reported to violate the INF treaty especially through the technical features of SS-26 (Iskander) ballistic missiles and R-500 cruise missiles²⁶. The violation of the INF regime could pose a significant threat to the US-Russia bilateral relations and NATO – Russia military strategic balance in the mid and long term.

Conclusion:

Russia’s aggression towards its geopolitical hinterland would depend on three critical military parameters:

- ✓ Keeping high combat-readiness and professionalism of VDV, and other special operations units, along with its transformation into a large rapid reaction force,

²⁴ Nikolai, N. Sokov. “Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike ‘De-Escalation’”, *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 13 March 2014.

²⁵ Hans, M. Kristensen. *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control: Modernizing Nuclear Arsenal*, Presentation to Short Course on Nuclear Weapons Issues in the 21st Century-Elliot School of International Affairs / George Washington University, Washington D.C., 2013.

²⁶ Nikolai, Sokov and Miles, A. Pomper. “Is Russia Violating the INF Treaty?”, *The National Interest*, 11 February 2014.

- ✓ Maintaining the nuclear deterrent by introducing new strategic weapons into the Russian inventory, along with keeping non-strategic nuclear assets sharp both in doctrinal and operational terms,
- ✓ Relying on strategic deployment and large-scale exercises in order to mitigate the transitional caveats during the ongoing graduate to a new Russian Armed Forces by 2020 that envisages a decisive shift from the Soviet military thought and upgrade military inventory to 70% modern weapon systems level.

Given the Georgia and Ukraine templates, it can be argued that NATO would probably face a new expansionist pattern emanating from Kremlin's growing capabilities, expertise, and ambitions. This pattern depends on a carefully calculated political escalation by taking advantage of ethnic Russians and pro-Russia communities at Moscow's "areas of privileged interests", and promoting local militia presence. Political crises open the door for Russia's *Siloviki* elites to initiate paramilitary activities via proxies and commission elite units under a no-insignia type, covert fashion. Meanwhile, swift strategic deployment of units at high-readiness and robust combat-capable status onto border areas would pave the ground for either direct military incursion, as happened in Georgia 2008, or for anchoring adversary's military units away from the zone of action and putting pressure via gunboat diplomacy, as more recently witnessed in Ukraine.

Faced with such a pattern, NATO might have to deal with a different threat landscape and security environment. Especially, the Baltic members of NATO, namely Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, along with Poland, are expected to upgrade their modest defense spending and insist on stronger and permanent NATO military presence on their soil.

The defense of Baltic States, as well as other members at Russia's immediate reach, would involve strengthening the credibility of Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty and the indivisibility of defense between the Allies.

From NATO's perspective, a set of counter-measures can be recommended. Firstly, ballistic missile defense efforts must be sustained in order to mitigate the Alliance's strategic vulnerabilities. In this respect, Turkey's T-Loramids project could augment NATO's capability provided that Ankara decides to choose an inter-operable system. Secondly, permanent NATO troop presence in Poland and Baltic States can send a firm political signal. . The enhancement of NATO Response Force (NRF) should also be taken into consideration. Moreover, cancellation of critical arms deals to Russia, such as the French Mistral assault ships, would be beneficial in order to prevent the Russians to gain more advanced weapon systems and to receive a determined politico-military signal from the Allies. Finally, establishing closer ties and strategic partnerships with non-NATO, like-minded nations would work as a counter geopolitical move against Kremlin's march into the "areas of privileged interests".

Above all, it should be underlined that Moscow's aggressive moves in Georgia and Ukraine cannot be fully addressed without getting a good understanding of Russia's military modernization. In other words, the North Atlantic Alliance must see Moscow's current geopolitical ambitions through the prism of tomorrow's military capabilities that Russia would enjoy in order to pursue its assertive agenda. Only then, the Allies can understand the essence of the evolving threat landscape which could bring about complicated security problems.