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SWP Comment

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The Attack on Ukraine and the Militarisation of Russian Foreign and Domestic Policy

A stress test for military reform and regime legitimacy

Margarete Klein and Nils Holger Schreiber

Moscow's decision on 24 February 2022 to invade Ukraine constituted a culmination in the militarisation trajectory of Russian foreign policy since 2008. At the same time, the war has exposed the weaknesses of the military reform launched by Moscow in 2008. The high losses of the country's armed forces in Ukraine limit Russia's military power projection capabilities, for example in Syria and in other conflicts. Moreover, military setbacks and partial mobilisation have undermined an important pillar of the regime's legitimacy.

Since 2008, the importance of military assets in Russia's foreign policy toolbox has increased. The successful assertion of national interests is increasingly linked to the credible threat of military force ("coercive diplomacy") or the use of military power. This was demonstrated in the war against Georgia (2008), the forced annexation of Crimea (2014), as well as with the destabilisation of the Donbas, the intervention in Syria (2015), and the use of mercenary groups in Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic. As a result of these operations, Moscow was not only able to assert its interests against or within these countries, but also managed to expand its influence in the Middle East and Africa more generally. Furthermore, the credible threat of military escalation has had a deterrent effect, for

example, on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) ambitions in Georgia and Ukraine.

The militarisation of foreign policy is also reflected in domestic policy. For example, the share of defence and armaments spending in Russia's gross domestic product rose from 3.1 per cent in 2008 to 4.1 per cent in 2021. With a share of 10.6 per cent of the total budget (2020), the modernisation of the military clearly enjoys priority over social spending, such as for education and health. Moreover, the militarisation of education and memory policy plays an important role in legitimising Russia's authoritarian political system.



A reality check of Russia's military reform

The most recent invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 continued the trend towards the militarisation of foreign policy, but at the same time it represented a qualitatively new stage in this process. Up until then, all of Russia's military interventions had been limited – either temporally, such as the Five-Day War against Georgia, or functionally, as with the intervention in Syria, which was limited to the air force and military police as well as mercenary groups. In contrast, the attack on Ukraine in February 2022 was Russia's first full-scale war effort against a large country.

This is precisely why it represents the first genuine reality check for Russia's military modernisation programme. It reveals not only deficits in the planning and execution of the invasion, but also the structural weaknesses in the military reform programme.

The military reform process was launched in 2008 after the Georgian war and was aimed at transforming the Russian armed forces from an outdated, traditional mobilisation army into modern armed forces with high operational readiness. The Russian military was to cover the whole range of possible military operations, from combating transnational threats to regional warfare.

The reform was embedded in a debate that has been ongoing since the early 2000s about the characteristics of modern wars and the kind of warfare that Russia had to prepare for. To put it simply, two interconnected models of modern warfare were at the forefront of this debate.

The "new type of war" is based on a holistic understanding of war. In the early, non-military phases of a conflict, the aim is to weaken the opponent through "active measures" such as disinformation and subversion in the sense of "psychological warfare". As soon as the war moves into the military phase, not only are regular soldiers used, but also irregular violent actors who act in close coordination with the military

leadership. As a result, Moscow considerably expanded its pool of these so-called proxies. Besides volunteer units, they include above all private military companies such as the formally illegal Wagner Group.

The second guiding principle of Russia's military reform is the notion of "6th generation warfare", also called "non-contact warfare", which also dominates the debate on the final military phases of the new type of war. Behind this concept stands the idea that in the future, military operations – such as the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 – will be fought over long distances, predominantly through the use of modern air- and space-based systems.

Through the lens of the "new type of war" concept, the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 can be understood as a consequence of the failure of non-military assets of influence in the run-up to the conflict. Attempts to draw parts of both the Ukrainian armed forces and population to Russia's side with disinformation and subversion had been largely unsuccessful. When the decision was made to invade again – this time openly and on a massive scale – the planning was obviously based on faulty strategic reconnaissance. Moscow had assumed that the Ukrainian armed forces were weak and that the political leadership in Kyiv would quickly collapse.

Over the course of the war, however, it became apparent that Russia's armed forces had enormous difficulties in implementing core principles of 6th generation warfare. Although the share of "modern" weapons in Russia's total arsenal was officially stated to be more than 70 per cent in 2020, and showcases of modernisation were presented at arms fairs and parades to great media effect, quite a few of the new systems, such as the T-14 Armata main battle tank and the Su-57 fighter aircraft, have not yet entered mass production. More problematic than delays in the production of individual systems is the insufficient degree of digitalisation of command, reconnaissance, and communication systems in the Russian armed forces. Reports from the front show that Russian soldiers have been using

Soviet-era road atlases instead of digital maps or have had to resort to open mobile phone connections due to the lack of encrypted communication systems. Additionally, abandoned Russian tanks revealed that important electronic components were missing from these systems. This is likely to also be a consequence of the endemic corruption in Russia's military.

The low level of digital connectivity in the Russian armed forces makes it difficult for its air force, air defence, artillery, and infantry units to work together in a coordinated manner. As a result, the Russian armed forces did not succeed in controlling the airspace in Ukraine, as envisaged in the concept of 6th generation warfare. In addition, there have been coordination problems between the regular forces and the proxies. Since the battalion tactical groups, which were only 75 per cent manned, lacked infantry units in particular, mercenary groups and troops from the national guard often had to take over their tasks. The latter include the so-called Kadyrovtsy, a de-facto private army of Chechen ruler Ramzan Kadyrov, although it is formally subordinate to the National Guard.

The war has also revealed that the actual level of training and professionalisation of the Russian armed forces is significantly lower than reported on paper. Although it is true that Russia's armed forces had massively expanded the number, frequency, scope, and complexity of major military exercises since 2008, Russian soldiers deployed in Ukraine have reported – especially in battalion tactical groups – that training has been insufficient in scope and duration, and that sometimes it is conducted solely for photo op purposes. This also undermines the Russian armed forces' efforts to professionalise, which had appeared successful at first glance. Whereas the Ministry of Defence had planned for 124,000 contract soldiers, so-called *kontraktniki*, in 2008, according to official figures, this figure had already risen to 405,000 by 2020. However, this number has little significance for the actual pool of well-trained, deployable contract soldiers,

who are not only essential for operating complex weapons systems, but also for maintaining discipline in Western armies as non-commissioned officers. The Russian programme to train professional non-commissioned officers had failed due to the continuance of traditional military culture, which is not geared towards delegating military leadership downward beyond the officer corps. As a result, the invasion of Ukraine has often been characterised more by chaos (“bardak”) and recklessness (“rasgildiatstvo”) rather than efficient implementation of modern concepts of warfare.

Material losses and compensation strategies

The extent to which Russia's leadership can continue to credibly rely on military threats or the use of power to assert its foreign policy interests crucially depends on whether it succeeds in compensating for the material and personnel losses of the country's armed forces in Ukraine. This applies all the more as the war against Ukraine develops into a prolonged war of attrition.

According to the independent analysis website Oryx, which only counts losses in heavy weapons categories documented by imagery, Russia's military had lost 1,541 battle tanks, 1,814 infantry fighting vehicles, 66 combat aircraft, 72 helicopters, and 12 ships by 6 December 2022. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence's figures for the same period are significantly higher.

The material losses vary in severity. Hardware in some categories can be replaced quickly because either industrial production capacities are not affected by sanctions or stocks are available. This is particularly true for artillery systems and ammunition as well as armoured vehicles. More difficult to replace are modern systems that rely for their production and maintenance on components whose export has been sanctioned by the European Union (EU) and the United States. Moscow's leadership is now relying on a mixture of import substitution, economic mobilisation, and sanctions evasion.

The former is the weakest part of the compensation strategy due to Russia's industrial base, which is not very innovation-friendly. Already after 2014, Moscow had only managed to successfully substitute these goods in 7 out of 127 goods categories. The increasing mobilisation of the economy in favour of the arms industry cannot fundamentally change this, even if the producers of weapons and military equipment now have priority access to scarce goods categories. The possibilities to obtain defence equipment from abroad are limited by Western sanctions and the reluctance of potential supplier countries, such as China. The only exceptions so far are Belarus and Iran, which supplies Russia with drones.

From “quiet mobilisation” to partial mobilisation

Furthermore, the personnel losses of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine have also been substantial. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced on 21 September 2022 that 5,937 Russian soldiers had fallen. Conversely by 25 November 2022, however, BBC's Russian service and the independent Russian media company Mediazona had already identified 9,311 fallen Russian soldiers by name. They assume that the number of fallen is twice as high – that is, around 20,000 – and that a total of 84,000 Russian soldiers have been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner of war. This would correspond to a casualty rate of 44 per cent of the invasion force, which in February 2022 comprised about 190,000 soldiers, or about 10 per cent of the total Russian armed forces.

In order to fill the personnel gaps, Russia's leadership initially tried to mobilise “quietly” from late spring 2022 onwards, that is, to recruit soldiers and mercenaries through short-term temporary contracts and high monetary incentives. To this end, the Kremlin made use of both Russia's regional governors and its proxies. Thus, the federation subjects were instructed to set up a regional “volunteer battalion” of about 400 men each. In addition, “private”

military companies such as Wagner and Redout specifically recruited men with combat experience. Job advertisements shared on Telegram channels offered wages and financial benefits several times higher than the regular pay. Several indicators reveal the high demand for personnel in the Russian armed forces. In the summer of 2022, for example, the age limit for temporary soldiers was raised above the previously applicable maximum age of 40 to the end of regular working age in Russia. In addition, Wagner was allowed to recruit “volunteers”, even in prisons. Furthermore, for foreign *kontraktniki* serving at least one year in the Russian armed forces, the possibility of an accelerated acquisition of Russian citizenship was set as an incentive in September 2022. The latter is primarily aimed at migrants from Central Asia.

The successful Ukrainian counter-offensive in the north-east near Kharkiv in August 2022 then impressively demonstrated that quiet mobilisation alone was not enough to fill the substantial personnel gaps in Russia's military. As a result, President Vladimir Putin called for partial mobilisation on 21 September 2022. By the time of its suspension on 31 October 2022, 318,000 reservists were reported to have been called up, according to official figures. Following the annexation of the four Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya, and Kherson, which was proclaimed by Moscow in parallel to the partial mobilisation, conscripts could now also be deployed for “defence” in Ukraine. The term “defence” in this context encompasses both the defence against Ukrainian attempts at liberation and the offensive capture of those parts of the four regions not yet conquered by Russia.

Neither the now possible use of conscripts nor the mobilisation of reservists will increase the fighting strength of the Russian armed forces in a qualitative and not only quantitative way in the short term. It is true that they theoretically have a reserve of around 1.6 million men at their disposal who have served as conscripts and regular soldiers in the past five years or have “mili-

tary experience”, for example, because they have completed paramilitary courses. However, this is not the same as an active reserve, whereby reservists regularly participate in exercises. In the five years following their retirement from the armed forces, only 10 per cent of former conscripts receive refresher training. According to leaked information, only a three-week course was planned for reservists called up as of September 2022, and not infrequently it was much shorter.

This shows that Russia’s leadership is currently striving to fill the personnel gaps in purely quantitative terms. The ban on *kontraktniki* preventing them from terminating their contracts before the completion of the “special military operation”, which is anchored in the partial mobilisation decree, can also be seen as an emergency measure in this sense. This ensures that precisely those soldiers who, as specialists, are difficult to replace – due to their ability to operate complex weapon systems – can be deployed indefinitely. After months in combat, however, their readiness for deployment is likely to have declined considerably.

The military value of Putin’s decree is therefore low in the short term, but the risk of military follow-up costs is high. In the future, it will be much more difficult to recruit new *kontraktniki* or to persuade existing regular soldiers to extend their contracts. The morale, cohesion, and operational readiness of the units hastily reinforced by reservists are also likely to remain low. It is questionable whether the problems from the rash and often improvised first round of mobilisation could be overcome in a new wave of conscription – as the Ukrainian general staff expects for January/February 2023. This is because organisational and personnel elements, that is, training facilities and instructors, for the extended training of reservists are lacking, or they are tied up by the war effort. Russia is trying to remedy the situation by outsourcing parts of its training capacities. In mid-October 2022, Russia agreed with Belarus that Moscow’s armed forces may use Belarussian training grounds and

“Wagner” established two training centres in Russia. However, this has not yet had a major impact. Therefore, it is to be expected that the invasion of Ukraine will continue with outdated concepts of warfare based on quantity and not on quality, even if a second wave of mobilisation follows. This would further reduce the practical relevance of the 2008 reform project.

Limited military room for manoeuvre externally

Russia’s material and personnel losses and the difficulties in compensating for them inhibit the Kremlin’s ability in the short to medium term to continue enforcing its foreign policy interests as it did before the war, that is, through the threat of military force or the use of conventional armed forces as well as through the incentive of military cooperation. Above all, Moscow is likely to face problems in conducting new personnel- and hardware-intensive missions and in carrying out operations that rely on rapidly deployable units or the Black Sea Fleet. According to American figures, more than 85 per cent of the deployable units are now tied up in Ukraine, with airborne troops and marines in particular suffering disproportionately high losses. The Black Sea Fleet, in turn, has lost several ships, including the missile cruiser “*Moskva*”, and it also has hardly any manoeuvring space beyond the Black Sea due to restricted access through the Dardanelles Strait.

This is likely to reduce Moscow’s power projection capabilities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It is to be expected that Russia will continue its engagement in Syria. At the same time, it must try to avoid escalation and maintain its presence with reduced personnel and especially proxies. The war is also undermining Moscow’s efforts to expand its political influence in the MENA region, Africa, and Asia through training assistance and arms sales. Confidence is not only eroding with regard to the effectiveness of Russian weapons systems, but also concerning the reliability

of deliveries in view of Russia's high domestic demand. This is evidenced by the fact that Russia's arms exports are expected to shrink by an estimated 40 per cent from 2021 to 2022.

In the post-Soviet space, too, Russia's military is coming under pressure because it is a fundamental component of Moscow's hegemonic policy and becoming increasingly important for the Kremlin due to the dwindling economic dependence of many countries on Russia. Moscow cannot reduce its troop presence in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as well as in the breakaway territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh without thwarting its own claim of acting as a security guarantor in the region. At the same time, Russia's capacities to react to regional crises are diminishing. As late as January 2022, Moscow had intervened in Kazakhstan under the umbrella of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). But when fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan flared up again in September 2022 and tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan escalated shortly afterwards, the Kremlin avoided further military involvement. As a result, the Moscow-dominated CSTO is rapidly losing relevance. Only with regard to the union state with Belarus has there been an intensification of military cooperation since 2022. While ruler Alexander Lukashenko had always refused to allow a substantial Russian troop presence in his country, this is now creeping in. On 10 October 2022, Lukashenko announced that the so-called joint regional force groupings of Russian and Belarusian soldiers had been activated, that is, had been set up in the first place. The Belarusian defence minister assumes that 9,000 Russian soldiers will be stationed in Belarus within the framework of the joint grouping. This can be interpreted not only as preparation for a new offensive towards Kyiv, but also as an attempt to consolidate control over Russia's last ally – Belarus.

War and regime legitimacy

The trajectory of the war in Ukraine not only limits the room for manoeuvre with Russia's foreign policy, but also threatens to erode the established legitimisation strategy of Putin's regime.

During Putin's first two terms in office, the unwritten social contract was based on the promise of stability and economic prosperity in exchange for political loyalty or apathy. When this model began to falter, starting with the economic and financial crisis of 2009, the Kremlin switched to enacting Russian great power policies to compensate for this. The demonstration of military successes played a key role in this strategy. The effects were evidently demonstrated after the Crimean annexation, when approval ratings for President Putin climbed from 61 per cent in November 2013 to 88 per cent in October 2014.

Parallel to this, the prestige of the armed forces among the population grew, after having suffered massively in the 1990s due to unpaid wages as well as the deterioration of equipment and high personnel losses, especially among conscripts in the Chechen wars.

The share of those who positively assess the service of a relative or friend in the armed forces rose from 20 per cent in 2002 to 52 per cent in 2020. In the last decade, the armed forces have consistently been among the three institutions most trusted by respondents, along with the presidency and the Orthodox Church. The increase in popularity of the armed forces is part of a broader trend towards a militarisation of consciousness in Russian society. This can be seen in the incorporation of military-patriotic elements into education and memory policy as well as in the extensive inclusion of military victories in the national holiday calendar.

Against this backdrop, the possibility of a military defeat in Ukraine risks undermining a central pillar of Putin's legitimisation strategy. Admittedly, the validity of opinion polls is limited – due to the intensification of repressive measures since February 2022

and the almost complete disappearance of free media – it is nevertheless possible to identify broader trends. Although opinion polls continue to show high levels of support for the activities of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, this has already begun to decline – from 80 per cent in March 2022 to 74 per cent in November 2022. Most importantly, fewer and fewer respondents believe in a successful conclusion to the so-called special military operation – from 68 per cent in April 2022 to only 54 per cent in November 2022. It is particularly striking that negative feelings and individual concerns have increased significantly since the Kremlin’s announcement of a partial mobilisation. Only 23 per cent of respondents in October 2022 looked with pride on the developments of the past month, whereas 47 per cent expressed anxiety, fear, and horror, 23 per cent shock, and 13 per cent anger and indignation. This is especially true among younger respondents, with 58 per cent of 18–24 year olds opposing partial mobilisation.

This does not yet pose an immediate threat to the stability of Putin’s regime. The wave of initial protests after the partial mobilisation was put down by the security services. Although the flight of an estimated 700,000 Russians exacerbates the difficulty of calling up reservists, it also means in the short term that Russian citizens who are potentially ready to participate in protests are leaving the country.

Nevertheless, essential elements of the Kremlin’s previous legitimisation strategy are coming under pressure. The high losses and military setbacks are eroding the myth of Russia’s successful re-establishment as a great power. And by calling up reservists, the Kremlin is breaking the promise of the unwritten social contract, according to which military adventures abroad do not have a negative impact on the everyday lives of citizens.

At the same time, Putin cannot overcome the legitimacy deficits by reverting to the status quo ante. Western sanctions and the effects of the reorientation of European markets away from Russia in terms of ener-

gy policy undermine the Kremlin’s ability to claim economic successes. Therefore, the Kremlin has a growing incentive to continue the war against Ukraine. This offers the possibility to justify socio-economic hardship and increased political repression by referring to the necessity to continue fighting. It is known from research on authoritarian systems that they can survive even long wars; only disastrous defeats present a regime-endangering threat. Russia’s preparation for a prolonged war against Ukraine is revealed in the draft budget for 2023 and 2024, which provides for a massive increase of 50 per cent in defence and domestic security spending. In addition, preparations are being made to mobilise the economy for war purposes. Ukrainian media outlets also report that a second – and potentially much larger – mobilisation of reservists is being planned. To justify the costs associated with a prolonged war and reduce the risks to regime stability, the Kremlin is expanding the repression apparatus and adapting the narrative. Thus, the president, defence minister, and state-directed media are increasingly framing the war against Ukraine as an existential and at the same time fateful confrontation with a much larger opponent – the “collective West”. In this way, the military difficulties experienced so far can be accounted for and the population is sworn to the necessity of a long, costly war.

Challenges for German and European policy

The close interaction between Russia’s inward and outward militarisation processes is not only significant for its war against Ukraine, but it also harbours risks and dangers for German and European politics.

In contrast to Russia’s previous military operations, the war against Ukraine since 24 February 2022 has had an impact on Russia’s regime stability. If Russia loses the war, not only will its conception of its foreign policy role as a great power and its claim to a hegemonic zone of influence in

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the post-Soviet space be at stake, but also its previous legitimisation strategy.

Against this background, it can be assumed that the Kremlin will only be prepared to engage in serious negotiations if it either wants to avoid a disastrous defeat of its armed forces or impose a peace through surrender on Ukraine. In accordance with the logic of Russian regime legitimacy, substantial concessions in between do not make sense, but tactically motivated negotiation offers that merely serve to buy time for the personnel and materially exhausted Russian armed forces to regroup and reinforce themselves do.

It is to be expected that Russia will not only continue its warfare, but raise the level of brutality in order to increase the pressure on Ukraine. The massively intensified attacks on its civilian infrastructure since autumn 2022 already serve this goal. Area bombardments like those in Syria would be a further step. In addition, Moscow is warning of an escalation of the war beyond Ukraine's borders, thereby threatening EU and NATO members. In this way, the Kremlin is seeking to undermine their political, economic, financial, and military support for Ukraine. Although the use of nuclear weapons is rather unlikely due to high follow-up costs, the possibility of hybrid escalation is far greater. Cyberattacks, false identity deceptions ("false flag attacks"), and increased subversion efforts could be components of this. In addition, there are incentives for Russia to deliberately fuel conflicts that have spillover potential to EU countries, for example in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Libya, Syria, or Mali. Although the Kremlin is currently more status-quo oriented in international conflicts, deliberately pouring oil on the fires of smouldering or open conflicts usually does not require major military engagement.

In view of this situation, it is important for German and European policy firstly to strengthen resilience against hybrid Russian threats and to invest in capacities for mili-

tary reassurance and credible deterrence. In this context, it is also important to clearly communicate to Moscow the costs of nuclear escalation threats.

Secondly, the EU and its member states, together with NATO, should gear their economic, financial, and military support for Ukraine to the long term. Since Russia's leadership is sticking to its maximum goals vis-à-vis Ukraine, a prolonged war of attrition is likely to persist. Phases of intensive warfare may alternate with periods of reduced intensity, for example when Russia's armed forces require breaks to regroup or consolidate occupied territory. Therefore, aid to maintain state functions is just as vital for Ukraine as reliable security and military support from the West. To this end, a serious dialogue should be conducted on the form of possible security guarantees for Ukraine. The continued delivery of weapons systems and equipment as well as military training programmes are also critical. Since the Kremlin sees itself at war against the "collective West" anyway, the scope and quality of arms deliveries should be oriented less to Moscow's threats of countermeasures and more to the needs of the Ukrainian armed forces in their efforts to repel Russia's military aggression. Ultimately, Ukraine will determine whether the militarisation of Russian foreign policy is strengthened or broken.

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