

# COMBAT CAPABILITY OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S MILITARY FORCES - MYTH OR REALITY?

**Researcher Mirela ATANASIU, Ph.D.\***  
**Colonel Professor Gheorghe CALOPĂREANU, Ph.D.\*\***

**Abstract** *The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the military actions in eastern Ukraine in what is commonly known as hybrid warfare, the power demonstration of the Russian Armed Forces in Syria and the reported incidents in different places at the NATO borders have been and continue to be so many concerns for the Alliance, USA and many European chancelleries.*

*How justified are these fears? What is the real combat capability of the Russian Armed Forces?*

*The study aims, by comparative analysis of data published by recognized experts to identify with reasonable accuracy, the scale and potential effects of the current Russian military power.*

**Keywords:** Russia, NATO, military forces, combat capability, power.

## Introduction

**M**isunderstandings that have dragged on between Russia and NATO remain unresolved for decades. Meanwhile, the “great bear of the East”<sup>1</sup> has accumulated a number of complaints (related to Euro-Atlantic structures eastward enlargement, including former Communist states) which

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\* Centre for Defence and Security Strategic Studies / “Carol I” National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania

\*\* Commandant (Rector), “Carol I” National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania

<sup>1</sup> The brown bear in Russia’s vast territory is one of the symbols of Russian rule since the sixteenth century. See details: A. Rossomahin, D. Khrustalyov, *Russia Medvedev: Origins imaging (XVI-XVIII centuries)*, in: *Borders: Almanac of the Center for Ethnic and National Studies of ISU*, Vol. 2: Visualization of the nation, Ivanovo, Ivanovo State University, 2008, URL: <http://cens.ivanovo.ac.ru/almanach/rossomahin-khrustalev-2008.htm#2>, accessed on 24.05.2016.

initially flared up in 2008 by intervention in Georgia. Subsequently revisionist and interventionist policy manifested by the Russian Federation culminated in violation of international law in the process of taking over the peninsula of Crimea, in invasive military action specific to the hybrid war in eastern Ukraine (which, although neither currently are recognized by Russia as own work still continues) and in air and sea incidents to the Alliance's borders at the limit of breaching Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which sparked concern of all NATO and EU Member States, especially those located on the east and south flanks of the Euro-Atlantic organization. Thus, tension reached the international security environment and in particular the political and diplomatic relations between the West and the Russian Federation.

### **1. Effects of Revisionist Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation**

Until some time ago, the Euro-Atlantic area was characterized as one with a high level of security, stability, prosperity and consensus. Amid the emergence of the economic and financial crisis occurred in 2008 that affected primarily the US and the Western Europe, Russian Federation's policy externally became revisionist one which contributes to the current trend to reconfigure the system of international relations and also to the transformation of the European security environment characteristics.

After Russian power declined after collapse of the USSR and political, military, economic and social disorganization impending the '90s, immediately after its economic revival under Vladimir Putin, the Russian Federation launched a process which constitutes normality for the specifics of this nation irrespective the historical era that has gone through - *expansion*. So far, the Russian Federation by investing heavily in developing its military security dimension, though not reached the level of development that it has as empire or union of states and taking the risk of suffering a major economic collapse, by promoting a foreign policy of weakening credibility in the possibilities of security provided by NATO and EU cohesion through propaganda and misinformation, and by exploiting the international situation in continue dynamic and the European states concern to combat threats to security induced to the European security environment from the Middle East and North Africa (terrorism international migration) fights to achieve the aim of re-impose as a great world power in the world.

*The first effect* of this aggressive orientation in the external policy and actions of the Russian Federation to the West was to challenge the status of the US as the sole global power, at which other countries want to renegotiate their status on the international stage, for example China in the global plan, or Turkey regionally.

*The second effect*, on the Western security, of the use of political, energy, military and information instruments by the Russian Federation on the region's states was to affect the above mentioned characteristics of the Euro-Atlantic area, meaning weakening the level of Euro-Atlantic *security*, dissemination of *instability* in the region, the threat of economic *prosperity* and political *consensus* of the EU and NATO Member States.

Moreover, inevitably, aggressive military actions of the Russian Federation triggered various reactions. EU and US imposed economic sanctions on Russian state since 2014 in response to the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, sanctions were tightened after the downing of Flight MH17 in July 2014. There were immediate reactions of fear among some European member or non-member states of NATO that feel threatened their territorial integrity and sovereignty by being in the immediate vicinity of the Russian Federation. Therefore, due to the perceived threat, NATO has started a whole process of strengthening its military power on its eastern and southern flank, one of the actions in this regard being the placement of US missile shield elements in Romania.

Thus, amid overlapping divergent interests of West and Russia power manifested on the one hand, by including in the western sphere of influence of some former Soviet space states by NATO and the EU in the political-military or economic enlargement process, to the east and, on the other hand, the subsequent actions of the Russian Federation in an attempt to maintain/regain supremacy over some strategic "buffer" states between former opponents of the Cold War, relations between the West and the Russian Federation were heavily damaged.

The type of NATO - Russian Federation relations and the level of openness to dialogue at the moment has been clearly articulated by both sides. Thus, the Russian Federation stated in its Security Strategy for 2016 that "NATO expansion and its geographical proximity to the borders of the

Russian Federation represents a threat to its national security”<sup>2</sup>, and in the statement issued following the NATO-Russia Council on April 20, 2016 by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was expressed that NATO and Russia have persistent misunderstanding and that no operational cooperation will be possible until the Kremlin does not return to respect for international law<sup>3</sup>. Therefore relations remain strained and cooperation between the parties is limited until the political dialogue will be directed to assume purposes of taking firm commitments to be implemented. Meanwhile, both sides strengthen their military capabilities, which is reflected in the increased militarization, the deployment of troops and stepping up military exercises in southern and eastern flank of NATO.

## **2. Comparative Analysis of the Military Capabilities of NATO and Russian Federation**

Currently perception of the balance of conventional forces between NATO and the Russian Federation ranges for which we provide a comparative analysis of military capabilities held by them, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In some journals such as *Jane's Defence Weekly* is shown that the Russian armed forces is usually labelled as “a paper tiger” equipped with obsolete weapons systems and led by outdated and dysfunctional command structure<sup>4</sup>. In the same article, it shows that in the last five years to equip land forces budget tripled in 2016 the figure amounted to 285.25 bln. Roubles, a sum that was used to upgrade military equipment<sup>5</sup>. But among the arguments which lead some experts to label it as a “paper tiger” are some realities such as that 65% of expenses incurred for land forces are consumed on staff salaries, only about 4.5% being directed to endowment<sup>6</sup>,

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<sup>2</sup>*Russian National Security Strategy for 2016: Key Updated Points*, January 2, 2016, URL: <http://sputniknews.com/russia/20160102/1032599111/russia-national-security-strategy.-html>, accessed on 24.05.2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Discursul Secretarului General al NATO Jens Stoltenberg după Consiliul NATO-Rusia*, April 20, 2016, URL: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50091.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm), accessed on 25.05.2016.

<sup>4</sup>*IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, vol. 53, no. 11, March 16, 2016, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Idem.

<sup>6</sup> Idem. See the graph in the same article on page 24.

the persistence of the poor C2 (command & control) capabilities and lack of interoperability between different combat platforms. However, here it is admitted that the Russian armed forces remain, at least writable, one of the most powerful and oversized military forces held by the states of the world, being ranked by the *Global Firepower*<sup>7</sup> specialists on second place among the global military powers being surpassed only by the US. There are few countries that can boast with an armed force of about 850,000 fighting equipment, without numbering tanks and heavy equipment that also include several thousands of pieces.

In 2008, war with Georgia was seen as a test of Russian military capabilities<sup>8</sup>. By the end of the conflict, the Russian lost 5 military ships, including a strategic bomber<sup>9</sup>. Although the operational command of Russian was often carried out (after their encrypted radio stations have failed) with personal mobile phone that did not provide the level of security specifically for military operations<sup>10</sup>, however, the Russian military power won the war in Georgia against an inferior military forces.

As immediate response after only 2 months, Russia embark on an ambitious program to modernize military equipment endowment and restructuring its armed forces, which provided for to spend 700 billion by 2020<sup>11</sup>. Dollars. Between 2008-2015 the program was backed by a budget allocated to defence in permanent growing, although economic conditions were not conducive to such a development: initially due to the global financial and economic crisis which affected Russia, although to a lower extent than European countries or the US, later as a result of their illegal actions in Crimea that have attracted severe economic sanctions from the European Union and the US.

Military spending for defence of the Russian Federation for 2015 were 3,965 bln. Roubles, representing 5.42% of national GDP, and 4.26% of

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<sup>7</sup> Analysis website exploring the various states of the world military power that can be viewed at: <http://www.globalfirepower.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Wojciech Lorenz, NATO Narrows Military Gap on Its Eastern Flank, in Strategic File No. 20 (55), September 2014, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2014, p. 2

<sup>9</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *The Revival of the Russian Military. How Moscow Reloaded*, in Foreign Affairs. Putin's Russia Down but not Out, May-June 2016, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Idem.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

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the budget (gross EUR 3.117 billion Roubles) represented the total for Chapter “national defence”. Thus, that year Russia was between the few states which spent on defence more than 5% of the state budget. For 2016, the draft budget allocated for defence expenditure was reduced to about 3.9% of GDP<sup>12</sup>, acknowledging the inability to support the same level as a result of further punitive economic sanctions, but also as direct consequence of the decrease in oil prices.

In terms of budget allocated for defence in the NATO press release on January 28, 2016<sup>13</sup>, is shown that NATO states had a contribution estimated for 2015 in the amount of 871 bln. Dollars of which US represents 75% of the total budget of the Alliance<sup>14</sup>. So the US is the main supplier of Euro-Atlantic security. If we were to compare, in quantitative terms, the firepower of the Russian Federation to the US as were reported at the beginning of 2016 we see as follows:

Type of capability		Russian Federation	USA
<b>Rank in the world</b>		2	1
<b>Personnel</b>	Manpower available	70,000,000	<b>145,215,000</b>
	Fit-to-service	47,000,000	<b>120,025,000</b>
	Reaching military age annually	1,355,000	<b>4,220,000</b>
	Active military personnel	766,055	<b>1,400,000</b>
	Active military reserves	<b>2,485,000</b>	1,100,000
<b>Land systems (pieces)</b>	Tanks	<b>15,398</b>	8,848
	Armoured fight vehicles	31,298	<b>41,062</b>
	Self-propelled guns	<b>5,972</b>	1,934
	Towed artillery	<b>4,625</b>	1,299
	Multiple-Launch Rocket Systems	<b>3,793</b>	1,331
<b>Air power (pieces)</b>	Total aircrafts	3,547	<b>13,444</b>
	Fighters/interceptors aircrafts	751	<b>2,308</b>

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, p. 170.

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2016\\_01/20160129\\_160128-pr-2016-11-eng.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_01/20160129_160128-pr-2016-11-eng.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/editorials/2015/03/02/Indefensible-Europe-cuts-NATO-spending-while-the-U-S-pays/stories/201502280081>.

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	Attack aircraft (fixed-wing)	1,438	<b>2,785</b>
	Transport aircrafts	1,124	<b>5,739</b>
	Trainer aircrafts	370	<b>2,771</b>
	Helicopters	1,237	<b>6,084</b>
	Attacks helicopters	478	<b>957</b>
<b>Navy (pieces)</b>	Fleet strength	352	<b>415</b>
	Aircraft carriers	1	<b>19</b>
	Frigates	4	<b>6</b>
	Destroyers	15	<b>62</b>
	Corvettes	<b>81</b>	0
	Submarine s	60	<b>75</b>
	Patrol craft	<b>14</b>	13
	Mine warfare craft	<b>45</b>	11
<b>Oil resources</b>	Oil production	<b>10,110,000 barrels/day</b>	8,653,000 barrels/day
	Oil consumption	3,320,000 barrels/day	<b>19,000,000 barrels/day</b>
	Proven oil reserves	<b>80 bln. barrels/day</b>	36.52 bln. barrels/day
<b>Logistics (no.)</b>	Labour force	75,290,000	<b>155,900,000</b>
	Merchant marine strength	<b>1.143</b>	393
	Major ports/terminals	7	<b>24</b>
	Roadway coverage	982,000 km	<b>6,586,610 km</b>
	Railway coverage	87,157	<b>224,792 km</b>
	Serviceable airports	1,218	<b>13,531</b>
<b>Financial resources</b>	Yearly defence budget	46,6 bln. \$	<b>581 bln. \$</b>
	External debt	599 bln. \$	<b>17.260 bln. \$</b>
	Reserve foreign exchange/gold	<b>377.8 bln. \$</b>	130.1 bln. \$
	Purchasing power parity	2,553 bln. \$	<b>17,350 bln. \$</b>
<b>Geographic al resources</b>	Square land area	<b>17,098,242 km<sup>2</sup></b>	9,826,675 km <sup>2</sup>
	Coastline	<b>37,653 km</b>	19,924 km
	Shared borders	<b>22,407 km</b>	12,048 km
	Waterway coverage	<b>102,000 km</b>	41,009 km

Source: *Military power comparison results for United States of America vs. Russia*, 21.01.2016, Global Fire Power,

<http://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.asp?form=form&country1=United-States-of-America&country2=Russia&Submit=Compare+Countries>

From the comparative table above, we can see, for example, the 15,398 Russian tanks exceeds the number of 8,848 registered American tanks, but the Russian air forces are outnumbered by the number of US aircraft (3,547 versus 13,444). The Russian Federation budget for defence is overwhelmed by the US budget, constituting less than 11% of the US.

As regards developments in terms of Russian military capacity, it was exposed in part in the military intervention in Ukraine in 2008 when ground forces were used. With Syria, Westerners have the opportunity to see “at work” and Russian air forces to make us a better idea of the level of their real military capabilities. Already, there have been a series of demonstrations of force in air raids on the Syrian theatre stated in the *Military Balance 2016* that used sophisticated weaponry such as Kh-555 and Kh-101 cruise missiles launched over the forces of Islamic State organization using Tu-95MS and Tu-160 strategic bombers in November 2015<sup>15</sup>. Naval capabilities were exposed in the Caspian Sea where Russian Federation launched NK *Kalibr* 3M14 cruise missiles.

The amount of Russian precision ammunition remains limited, most ammunition consists of cluster bombs. Other capabilities that the Russian Air Force are deficient are unmanned aircraft (UAV) - especially for high and medium altitudes, communications and electronic interceptors (EMP) and visualization satellite systems,<sup>16</sup> chapters where NATO forces are the most advanced.

However, things should not be viewed simplistically as there are specialists even Americans such as the Chief of General Staff of the US Army who recently stated that “The US military force is under high risk in terms of its level of preparedness to defend its nation and respond to large

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<sup>15</sup> *The Military Balance 2016. The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economies*, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*, p. 163.



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scale conflict”<sup>17</sup>. In the same idea it occurs the analysis submitted by two experts of *RAND Corporation*, showing that in a grim scenario of a quick attack on the Baltic States, Russian forces can reach in the Estonian or Latvian capitals in 30-60 hours, which it will make the US and its allies to be territorially, military, and numerically overcome<sup>18</sup>. The same experts believe that given its advantage of geographical proximity, the Russian armed forces will engage in approximately 10 days, 27 ready to fight battalions (30,000-50,000 troops in manoeuvring formation). Even in the context of the continue deployment with forces on the eastern flank of NATO, the forwarded defence capability of the allies will not be to measure with the ground forces generated in the territory by the Russian Federation. The same analysts show that the original ratio of forces in the area will be in the benefit of Russia as follows: tanks (7: 1), combat infantry vehicles (5: 1) attack helicopters (5: 1), mouths of artillery (4: 1 ) long area rockets artillery (16: 1), short area air defence (24: 1) long area air defence (17: 1)<sup>19</sup>.

Handling its nuclear capacity is one of Russian Federation military strategy attributes and the threat of a limited nuclear war was one of the scenarios posed to Western countries, in the context of the Doctrine approved by Moscow in 2000 about whether to respond with a pre-emptive tactical nuclear weapons if it feels threatened by overwhelming conventional forces. Incidentally, in 2009 Russia carried out a scenario exercise which simulate an attack on Poland and the Baltic states. Subsequently, the Kremlin administration changed that Doctrine reducing the role of nuclear dimension in its defence. However, this option cannot be removed in case of conflict because to the Russian conventional military power the controversial system *Iskander* is added that although has conventional load can be armed with nuclear warheads (as it has done with

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<sup>17</sup> *US Army Chief Sounds Alarm: Military at 'High Risk'*, April 8, 2016, URL: <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/land/army/2016/04/07/army-chief-sounds-alarm-military-high-risk/82763640/>, accessed on 26.05.2016.

<sup>18</sup> David A. Shlapak, Michael Johnson, *Outnumbered, Outranged, and Outgunned: How Russia defeats NATO*, Aprilie 21, 2016, URL: <http://www.rand.org/blog/2016/04/-outnumbered-outranged-and-outgunned-how-russia-defeats.html>, accessed on 26.05.2016.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*.

the system *Tochka*)<sup>20</sup>. With the latter two, the Russian Land Forces have the capability of a remotely powerful inland attack.

### **3. Possible Future Directions of Action of NATO and Russian Federation**

While NATO itself is an organization that aims essential defence and is created to ensure peace, security and stability of the allied states, Russia has always had in history expansionist trends, just not always economic situation, as is the case at present enabled it to support lasting conflict with a stronger opponent took as a whole. Moreover, although in this paper we presented some opinions of specialists dealing with scenarios and war games, most experts in the area of International Relations and Political Sciences believe that Russia is not able at the moment to deal with NATO<sup>21</sup> because a military force must be also economically sustainable, which cannot be said at present about the Russian state in the context of the economy suffering from sanctions imposed by the West and the decline in oil prices. Initiate an aggression against a NATO ally would collapse, not only financially, the Russian Federation, because, although on short-term may hold military supremacy, subsequently it would be overwhelmed by NATO forces both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Meanwhile, if Russia wants to gain great global power status needs a network of military bases to lie in the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic Oceans. But although Russia intervened in Georgia and Ukraine to assert its status as great global power cannot only convince by sequential actions, but also it needs support-based capabilities and resources that have not accumulated yet. In these circumstances, the Kremlin's recent actions are more a result of its fears, rather than a projection of real power backed by a strong military foundation and an efficient economy.

As regards NAT, it was seen from the agenda referred for the Summit to be held in Warsaw in July 2016 is taking seriously the threat

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<sup>20</sup> *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, vol. 53, no. 11, March 16, 2016, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> See: Clayton Browne, *Russia's Military Modernizes, But Still Not Ready For Prime Time*, September 10, 2015, URL: <http://www.valuewalk.com/2015/09/russias-military-modernizes/> or Tomáš Baranec, Juraj Beskid, *Is Russia Really a Global Military Power?*, August 17, 2015, URL: <http://neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/1692-is-russia-really-a-global-military-power>.

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coming from the east, taking a number of measures of deterrence and reassurance for the allies. In this sense, it was constituted the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) with which, if necessary, will be held three airborne infantry brigades, a Stryker brigade and an US armoured brigade. Added to this, air police missions, maritime patrols and robust exercises are multiplying. Measures were taken to ensure Turkey – with *Patriot* batteries, AWACS surveillance aircraft and an enhanced maritime presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Also, the size of the NATO Response Force tripled reaching more than 40,000 troops, with the new Spearhead Force at its core. NATO Forces Integration Units have been activated (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland<sup>22</sup> and recently Romania<sup>23</sup>).

From our point of view, at present, none of the two parties to which we refer is not interested to lead a war by classic military means. Both sides were arming themselves because they created a high level of distrust on the intentions of one another, each suspecting the other of having wary intentions.

Perhaps the Russian Federation will continue probing the NATO frontiers with actions to the limit of international law and the provisions of the Washington Treaty. It also will be involved in fields of operations where NATO also activates because of two reasons: to ensure international visibility and expand its influence in the region. So intervention in Syria will continue because this action creates an image generally positive removing media attention from the status quo seeks to maintain in Crimea and its involvement in the Donetsk and Lugansk separatist actions. At the same time, by participating in peace talks Syrian on the table with the US, is trying to create a context of equality with still the biggest global power of the moment.

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<sup>22</sup> *NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU)*, URL: <http://jfcbs.nato.int/page5725819/nato-force-integration-units>

<sup>23</sup> NATO Force Integration Unit Romania, 2016, URL: <https://www.jfcnaples.nato.int/operations/nato-force-structures/nfiu-rou>, accessed on 26.05.2016.

### **Conclusions**

Russia's annexation of Crimea and repeated attempts to further destabilize Ukraine is a challenge for the Ukrainian state neighbours, but also for European and Euro-Atlantic security environment as a whole. In this context, the Ukrainian geopolitical crisis led to deterioration of relations between the US and Russia, a situation which leads to "balance of power" disruption in the area of European security system and to changing global power relations. Geopolitical causes of the crisis are found in the existence and manifestation of current divergent interests of geopolitical actors. Thus, the recent string of events in the Eastern border of the transatlantic community constitutes the turning point in relations between the West and the Russian Federation, presenting relevant issues not only for the evolution of relations between these actors, but also the specific characteristics of each party.

Gordian knot of analysed relations is represented by common neighbourhood, with vital importance for Russia's interests and strategic importance to the West, and the throughput of the main transport routes of hydrocarbons from Russia to Europe. This neighbourhood is affected by Western initiatives oriented towards stabilization, self-government capacity building, promoting democracy and the free market and Russian attempts to maintain its political, economic and military sphere of influence by perpetuating instability in the region. It is an area that Moscow does not want imbued with Western values and the Georgian war (2008), annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (2014) and subsequent war in eastern Ukraine confirms that Moscow does not manifest willingness to leave these countries to choose own policy direction.

We believe that the Russian Federation still has not the military capability required to support a direct confrontation with NATO in the long term, and it is aware of that. As a result, we believe that the Kremlin administration will continue to lead the politics of distrust, discredit and split the allies by non-military means specific to hybrid warfare.

The political dialogue between states and organizations of the Euro-Atlantic area is currently precondition for initiating relieve tensions in the security environment, which is why maintaining open channels of dialogue with the Russian Federation is crucial.



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