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Russian Armed Forces: Military Doctrine and Strategy

Members of Congress may have an interest in the evolution and current state of Russian military doctrine and strategy to assess Russian intentions and capabilities. Russia has expanded its military capabilities over the last decade, which has been displayed in its invasion of Ukraine and intervention in Syria. Enhanced military capabilities have enabled the Russian government to expand its policy options and pursue more aggressive foreign policy decisions. These changes pair with recent statements and adjustments to Russian military doctrine that provide insight into how Russian leaders think about using force to advance foreign policy objectives.

Russian Military and Security Strategy Documents

Russia's official security doctrines are detailed in its 2014 Military Doctrine and 2015 National Security Strategy. Other key strategy documents include the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, 2017 Naval Strategy, and 2020 Principles of Nuclear Deterrence Strategy. These documents offer insight into how Russian leaders perceive threats and how Russian military and security policymakers envision the future of conflict. In addition, the Military Doctrine and the National Security Strategy identify the importance of information and the danger of internal, as well as external, threats.

The 2014 Military Doctrine divides the perceived nature of threats to Russia into two categories: military risks and military threats. Military risks are a lesser designation, defined as situations that could "lead to a military threat under certain conditions." A military threat is "characterized by a real possibility of an outbreak of a military conflict." Once fighting breaks out, Russian military theory and doctrine identify a typology of conflicts relating to the extent and type of conflict, gradually increasing in intensity: armed conflict, local war, regional war, large-scale war, and global (nuclear) war. These levels of conflict are important for understanding how the Russian military envisions the scale, nature, actors, and levels of escalation in war.

Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev stated in July 2019 that Russia would update its National Security Strategy in 2020. Although a new version has not yet appeared, most analysts expect its publication in the near future.

New Generation Warfare

In a 2013 speech, and in a subsequent article in the Russian-language newspaper *Military-Industrial Courier*, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov described Russia's conception of the nature of war in the modern era, defining it by the use of nonmilitary tools and politically led

conflict. Subsequent Russian actions in Ukraine strongly reflected this view, as they were characterized by the extensive use of non-state armed actors, information and disinformation operations, and other non-kinetic strategies.

"The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."

General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation

Gerasimov described the Russian military's awareness of the complex and interconnected nature of modern warfare, increasingly defined by a mix of non-kinetic tactics and conventional military force. Gerasimov's description was the culmination of various debates in the Russian military about what it perceives as the changing nature of war, or what it calls *new generation warfare* (NGW). NGW describes a holistic approach to modern war that encompasses a range of political, military, information, and economic tools across situations and locations. It presumes conflict will often be preceded by psychological and informational contests to weaken an adversary's morale and capability to sustain conflict. NGW does not lower the importance of military power; instead, it recognizes the added importance of non-kinetic and asymmetric tools.

Gerasimov's conception derived from a belief that Western countries were already using political strategies against adversaries, including supporting democracy movements to undermine or overthrow regimes. The Russian military and security leadership viewed the so-called color revolutions, democratic protests in Ukraine, and overthrow of Muammar al Qadhafi in Libya as examples of this Western strategy.

Use of Force

Russia's military strategy identifies the use of kinetic force as only one component in support of wider political or diplomatic objectives. Rather than seeking to dominate a battlespace, Russia prioritizes flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing conditions in a conflict. This can result in the injection of conventional forces, a reliance on irregular and non-state actors, or both, depending on circumstances and situations. During Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine, for example, Russia relied on irregular and non-state actors backed by the limited injection of Russian troops to defeat Ukrainian forces.

Russia's preference for the measured use of force, however, does not imply a trade-off between the decisive use of military power and escalation management. Russian

military strategy prioritizes the threat of further punishment. It would introduce high-end conventional firepower when a low-cost strategy appears insufficient, and it could escalate or de-escalate force depending on the situation. Military power is therefore calibrated to alter the situation on the ground and to demonstrate the potential for further escalation; it is applied as a component of Russia's overall coercive bargaining strategy. One example is Russia's heavy reliance on air power and bombing to support Syrian government ground offensives.

Military Doctrine

Operationally, Russia has historically emphasized mass fire offensive strategies. The concentrated use of artillery and rocket artillery, along with large tank units, remains at the core of Russian military doctrine. Russian military units, including tank and motor rifle units, have large numbers of artillery and rocket artillery that provide high levels of firepower. The Russian military is prioritizing the development of reconnaissance and targeted strike capabilities to increase the accuracy of its artillery and improve the military's capacity to impose costs and target an adversary's command and control. As a result, information, targeting, and coordination capabilities are increasingly central in Russian military doctrine. Russia combines this operational strategy with an increasing emphasis on coordination and integration across service branches. The Russian military views this integration as crucial for the creation of combined arms armies across its various military districts. Due to geography, Russia's forces are stretched thin, making a combined arms approach important for Russia to deal with threats in multiple strategic directions.

Russia's military doctrine also focuses on the initial period of war. In the event of large-scale war, Russia fears surprise attack, a fear reinforced by its experience in World War II. The Russian government perceives its own demographic, economic, and technological limitations in any long-term conflict—such as one potentially initiated by the United States and NATO using long-range precision strike capabilities from both air- and sea-based platforms. These capabilities present a serious threat to Russia's command and control capabilities and critical infrastructure.

In response to Western capabilities, and recognizing that modern warfare is defined by speed and technological sophistication, the Russian military is heavily influenced by an offensive doctrine that guides its concepts of deterrence and defense. As a result, Russian military doctrine seeks to decisively engage and resolve conflicts on terms favorable to Russia. The goal is not to seek to deny area access by an adversary (which some analysts compare with China's defensive capabilities and doctrine, commonly known as Area Access and Air Denial, or A2AD). Rather, Russian doctrine focuses on integrated defenses (especially aerospace defense forces) that treat the enemy as a system. It seeks to disrupt, deflect, and eventually punish an attacker in the initial stages of a conflict. These defenses are designed to operate in coordination with Russia's other capabilities to ultimately target and degrade an adversary's critical infrastructure and ability to sustain combat.

Strategic Deterrence and Escalation Management

Russian military doctrine emphasizes a concept of deterrence that is broader than just nuclear deterrence. Referred to as *strategic deterrence* in official Russian military doctrine, this concept includes nuclear weapons, strategic conventional weapons, and nonmilitary measures—including concepts such as NGW—across both peacetime and conflict. Russia would apply all of these capabilities to deter an adversary and manage escalation in the event of conflict. Additionally, Russian doctrine identifies units and capabilities as strategic by the mission they are intended to perform and not by type.

In June 2020, for the first time, Russia publicly revealed its official nuclear deterrence policy, *On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence*. In it, Russia sought to lay out the nature of threats and conditions for the use of nuclear weapons, as well as its overall nuclear deterrence strategy. Russia made clear it would view the launch of any ballistic missile toward Russia as nuclear due to the impossibility of knowing whether the warhead was conventional or nuclear.

In the 1990s, Russia's conventional military weakness forced military doctrine to rely heavily on nuclear weapons, including both strategic and nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW). In the 2000s, as its conventional capabilities grew, Russian military doctrine recognized the importance of strategic conventional weapons. Today, conventional weapons play an important role in Russia's concept of deterrence, although the Russian military views its deterrent capabilities as insufficient on their own. As a result, many analysts assert that Russia maintains an “escalate to de-escalate” strategy, where Russia might threaten the use of nuclear weapons early in a crisis if it risked losing a conflict.

Other analysts contend, however, that this explicit policy does not exist. They note that Russian military doctrine focuses on escalation management rather than thresholds for nuclear use and escalation control. Additionally, Russian doctrine gives policymakers flexibility in identifying the type and nature of its responses and does not exclude the possible use of NSNW. However, damage would be applied progressively and in doses to demonstrate the potential for further punishment and provide incentives for settlement. Accordingly, Russian military doctrine appears to utilize escalation management to control the growth of conflicts, deter outside actors, and support resolutions that are acceptable to Russia.

Russia's newly published nuclear doctrine notwithstanding, some ambiguous language and the secretive nature of the topic means that analysts continue to debate the true nature of strategic deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons in Russian military doctrine. For more, see CRS Report R45861, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization*, by Amy F. Woolf.

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