

# Russia's armed forces

## Defence capabilities and policy

### SUMMARY

Reforms launched under Vladimir Putin have restored some of the Russian armed forces' former glory. Russia now has a streamlined, mobile and mostly professional military, equipped with modern weapons. The impact of these changes was visible in Syria, Russia's first military intervention outside the post-Soviet region.

Despite this increased capability, there are demographic and financial constraints on Russian military power. The armed forces are not attracting enough recruits to go fully professional, and therefore still need conscripts – who are less well-trained than career soldiers – to make up the numbers. Moscow has spent billions of dollars on new weapons, such as the innovative nuclear missiles unveiled by President Putin in 2018, but not all branches of the armed forces are equally well equipped.

Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy raises the question of how much of a threat its military represents. Officially, the role of the armed forces is to defend Russian territory, but in practice Moscow uses military force to assert control over its post-Soviet sphere of influence, for example in Ukraine. Russia also uses hybrid methods such as cyber-attacks, including against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries. NATO's overall numerical superiority means that Russia is likely to avoid all-out war with the alliance. However, the risk that it might use nuclear weapons and other niche strengths to escape retaliation for a limited attack (for example in the Baltic region) cannot be entirely discounted.



*Russian Armata tanks at the 9 May Victory Day parade in Moscow.*

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## Military capability

### The revival of the Russian armed forces

In its heyday, the Soviet Union was one of the world's two military superpowers, with the world's largest armed forces and an arsenal of conventional and nuclear weapons that matched and in some areas even exceeded those of the United States and its allies. The 1990s saw the breakup of the Soviet Union, the scaling back of Russia's global ambitions, and a corresponding decline in the role of the military. With Russia in deep economic crisis, military spending dropped precipitously, by [94 %](#) in real terms from 1988 to 1998. Whereas the number of active military personnel was estimated at around [4 million](#) in the 1980s, by 1998 it had shrunk to one quarter of that.

After Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, military spending began to increase again. However, the armed forces continued to suffer from low morale and obsolete weaponry in the early 2000s. Organisational structures inherited from the Soviet period were equally ill-adapted to modern needs; designed with the threat of a slowly unfolding, drawn-out global conflict in mind, these were geared to gradually mobilising huge numbers of troops and weapons, whereas the regional conflicts in which the Russian armed forces were likely to be involved required the capacity to deploy highly trained soldiers and sophisticated weapons rapidly, but on a much smaller scale.

Attempts to [transform](#) the Russian military into a modern fighting force did not really start to have an impact until after the 2008 war with Georgia. Lacking modern equipment and effective coordination, Russian troops struggled to deploy into Georgian territory and only prevailed thanks to massive numerical superiority. The conflict served as a wake-up call and led to former defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov's 'New Look' reform programme. In 2012, Serdyukov stepped down over a corruption scandal, but changes have continued under his successor Sergey Shoigu.

The overall effect of reforms has been to make the armed forces more streamlined, mobile and autonomous, with fewer senior officers, and a shorter command chain. There has been massive investment in new weapons, and snap military exercises are organised regularly on a large scale. Ordered at short notice, these are designed to test the armed forces' rapid response capacity. One such [drill](#), carried out in the south-western Russia in the summer of 2020, involved 150 000 troops.

Interventions in Ukraine and Syria showed how much more capable the Russian armed forces have become. In [Crimea](#), in 2014, a small number of highly trained and disciplined troops implemented a well-prepared undercover operation to illegally annex the peninsula. In [Syria](#), Russia demonstrated for the first time its capacity to project military force beyond its traditional post-Soviet sphere of influence. Despite the only limited resources invested in the campaign, it decisively changed the course of the conflict and achieved its political goal of preserving the Assad regime.

#### Syria: A military and commercial opportunity

The Syria campaign was a valuable [learning opportunity](#) for the Russian armed forces. It is estimated that, although no more than 5 000 troops were ever deployed at a time, frequent rotation ensured that [10 times](#) as many personnel, including over half of Russia's military pilots and artillery specialists, gained direct combat experience.

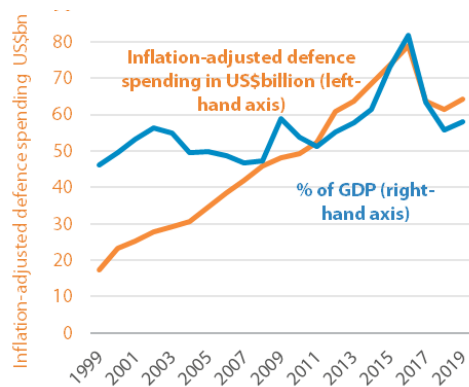
The war also gave Russia a valuable [foothold](#) in the eastern Mediterranean. As well as keeping its strategically important Tartus naval base, Russia now has an airbase near Latakia. These facilities make it much easier for Russian ships and planes to operate in the Mediterranean. Anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles stationed in Syria give Russia the capability to disrupt NATO operations in the area.

For the defence industry, the war promoted exports by showcasing [weapons](#) such as Kalibr cruise missiles, fired from ships and submarines in the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean Seas, which succeeded in hitting Syrian targets at distances of over a thousand kilometres.

## Personnel

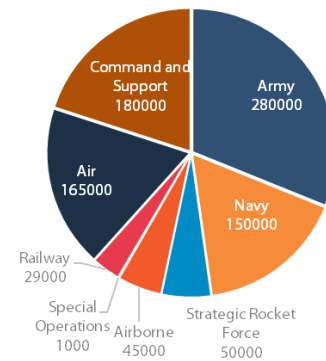
Figure 1 – Russia: Defence spending, armed forces personnel

### Defence spending

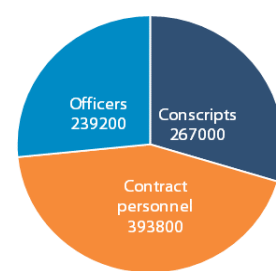


### Armed forces active personnel (2019)

#### By service



#### By category



Data: [SIPRI](#) (defence spending); IISS [Military Balance](#) (armed forces personnel).

*Defence spending rose steadily in the 2000s, reaching a peak in 2015. Most armed forces personnel are now professionals, but slightly over one-quarter are still conscripts.*

Despite these successes, the armed forces still face significant constraints. With a total of 900 000 active personnel, they are under-staffed compared with the official target of just over one million, set by [presidential decree](#) in November 2020. Russia still relies on national service to make up the numbers, but given the increasing complexity of modern warfare, conscripts are not always sufficiently trained to carry out tasks, especially since the length of national service was cut from two years to one in 2008. The share of conscripts in the armed forces has [fallen](#) steadily, from 307 000 in 2016 to 260 500 in 2018. Meanwhile, the number of contract service soldiers [doubled](#) between 2012 and 2019. However, the long-term goal of full professionalisation [declared](#) by Vladimir Putin is still a long way off. Moreover, given that some contracts are as short as two-years, not all professional soldiers are particularly experienced.

Due to a demographic dip in the 1990s, the pool of potential recruits is shrinking. Labour markets are tight and, though military salaries were substantially increased in 2019, they are not particularly competitive; starting at just over [28 000](#) roubles (€320) per month, plus free housing and various bonuses, they are below the national [average](#) of 49 000 roubles (€560).

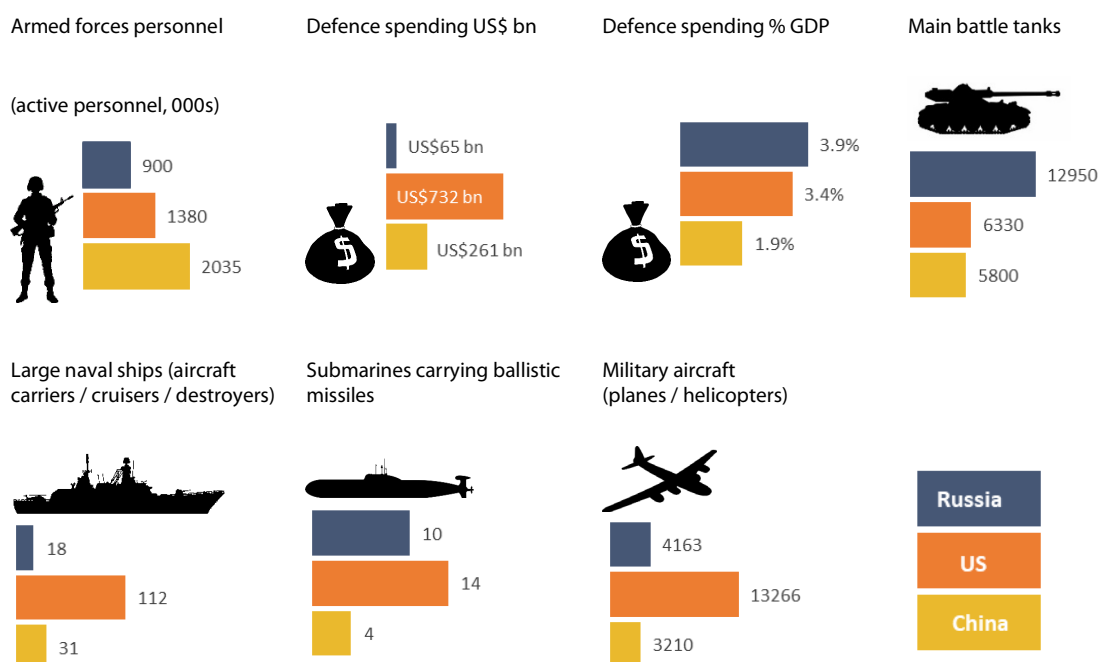
There is also strong resistance in the defence establishment to the idea of scrapping national service; according to Colonel-General Yevgeny Burdinsky in an October 2020 TV [interview](#), besides costing too much, a fully professional army would deprive young people of the opportunity to 'fulfil their dream and their right to defend the state'. Such feelings are also widespread among the general public: a 2019 [poll](#) showed record-high support for military service, with 60 % agreeing with the statement that it was something that every real man should experience.

### Low morale among Russian conscripts

Although most Russians [feel](#) that military service should remain compulsory, morale among conscripts is often low. [Hazing](#), or bullying of newcomers to the armed forces, has always been a serious problem in Russia. Given that some of the worst culprits used to be second-year conscripts, the number of incidents has fallen since the length of national service was reduced to one year, but it remains quite high. Draft dodging is also still widespread, with many young men preferring to avoid the harsh conditions endured by conscripts.

## Weapons

Figure 2 – Numerical comparison, armed forces of Russia, United States and China



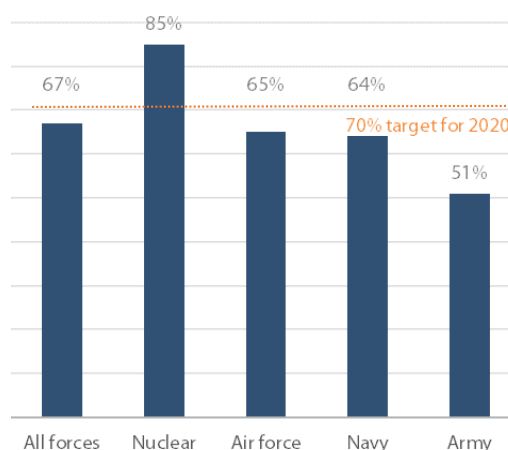
Data for 2019, from: IISS [Military Balance](#); SIPRI (defence spending); [Forbes](#) (main battle tanks); [TASS](#) (military aircraft)

*Russia's armed forces are smaller and less well funded than those of the US and China. In most categories of military hardware, they come in second or third place.*

In 2009, with the share of modern weapons in Russian arsenals estimated at just [10 %](#), then defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov set a target of raising that figure to 70 %, in line with the levels in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces (however, the definition of 'modern' remains unclear; apparently, it also includes [upgraded](#) older weapons). To meet this goal, an ambitious 10-year [procurement programme](#) was launched in 2011, with a budget of 21 trillion roubles (€515 billion at the average 2011 exchange rate). Although not all this funding was actually spent, in December 2020 Vladimir Putin [announced](#) that the target had been met. Modernisation is particularly advanced in Russia's nuclear forces (86 %), whereas other branches are lagging behind; Putin did not give a breakdown for 2020, but Defence Ministry [figures](#) suggest that in 2019 the air force and navy had 65 % and 64 % respectively, followed by the ground forces with 51 %.

A new procurement programme was launched in 2018, also scheduled to last 10 years and with a similar budget of 20 trillion roubles. In real terms this is only worth about half as much as the previous programme due to inflation, but according to [Putin](#), the share of modern weapons will continue to rise, reaching 76 % by 2024.

Figure 3 – Share of modern weapons in Russian armed forces (end of 2019)



Source: Russian Defence Ministry, cited in IISS [Military Balance](#).

Russia has innovative weapons in several areas. It has placed particular emphasis on upgrading its nuclear arsenal; in 2018, Vladimir Putin announced a new [generation](#) of nuclear missiles, which he claims are virtually unstoppable by NATO defences. Of these, *Avangard* is a hypersonic glide vehicle, travelling at 20 times the speed of sound and launched from intercontinental ballistic missiles; [deployment](#) already started in 2019, making Russia the first country in the world to have this type of weapon, although the United States is set to follow suit in [2022](#). Most other innovative Russian nuclear weapons are at a less advanced stage of development; for example, the potentially deadly *Burevestnik*, a nuclear-powered, nuclear armed cruise missile with almost unlimited range and manoeuvrability, may not be [ready](#) for another decade.

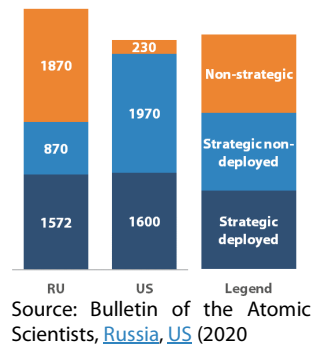
Nuclear warheads are classified as **strategic** or **non-strategic**. Although there is no universally agreed [distinction](#) between these two categories, the most potent weapons capable of causing large-scale damage to civilian targets are usually counted as strategic, whereas non-strategic weapons are smaller and suitable for use against military targets, for example on a battlefield. **Deployed** weapons are available for immediate use, whereas weapons in storage are **non-deployed**, and therefore less relevant to the initial stages of a nuclear conflict. The 2011 New START Treaty (recently extended until February 2026 – see below 'Arms control and non-proliferation') limits Russia and the United States to 1 550 strategic deployed nuclear warheads each, thus ensuring parity in the most dangerous category of nuclear weapon. However, its limits do not apply to non-strategic warheads, an area where Russia has perhaps [10 times](#) the US arsenal – although this superiority is offset by American strengths in other areas, such as [precision conventional weapons](#).

Unlike its nuclear forces, Russia's conventional arsenal is mostly smaller and less sophisticated than those of NATO countries, although here too it has some niche strengths, such as air defence. The S-400 system is one of the Russian defence industry's most successful exports, and is widely [considered](#) a match for competitors such as America's Patriot.

In most areas, modernisation efforts face two main obstacles: although Russia is spending more on defence than previously, there is still not enough money to purchase state-of-the-art weapons across the board; at the same time, Russia's defence industry, which currently supplies all the armed forces' needs, does not always have the requisite capacity. An example of both problems is the [T-14 Armata tank](#), whose manufacturer claims that it can outgun any of its foreign competitors. However, almost six years since it was first unveiled at the May 2015 Victory Day parade, no T-14 tanks have entered service, owing to both technical issues and prohibitive costs. The [Su-57](#), Russia's first fifth-generation stealth fighter plane, is also a case in point; although the defence procurement programme initially [envisaged](#) acquiring 52 of these by 2020, in fact the first plane was not [deployed](#) until December 2020. According to current plans, Russia will have 76 in service by 2028 – still far fewer than the 540 operated by the US Air Force.

To make the best use of limited funding, Russia's armed forces have focused mainly on [upgrading](#) existing weapons (such as the Soviet-designed fourth-generation Su-27 and Su-33 fighters), and purchasing

Figure 4 – Russia/US nuclear warheads



### Obstacles to modernising the Russian navy

Russian naval shipbuilders used to import gas turbine engines from Ukraine, but this source was cut off in 2014. Under an import substitution programme, domestic manufacturers have [started](#) supplying the engines, but are not expected to fully replace Ukrainian sources before [2021 to 2022](#). In addition, Russian shipyards generally lack the capacity to build large ships, limiting the navy's blue-water capability (i.e. its capability to operate beyond coastal waters). Russia has only one, ageing, aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov*, whose [poor condition](#) was apparent during its 2016 trip to Syria. Currently out of action because of a [fire](#), the carrier is not due to resume service until 2022, and even if enough money can be found to build a [replacement](#), construction will take over a decade.



new weapons based on older designs, which although not as innovative as the latest models are still highly capable and far more affordable.

In the past, Russia sometimes compensated for the shortcomings of its domestic defence industry by purchasing foreign weapons, such as Israeli [drones](#) and Italian [armoured cars](#). As Russia lacks the capacity to build large naval ships, in 2011 it agreed to buy two French [Mistral](#) helicopter carriers – its largest ever defence procurement contract. [Sanctions](#) adopted by the European Union, the United States and allied countries such as Ukraine against Russia in 2014 put a stop to purchases from most potential foreign suppliers (though technically exempt from sanctions as a pre-existing contract, the Mistral deal was cancelled in 2014). The same sanctions prohibit western exports of dual-use goods to Russian arms manufacturers, such as high-tech electronic and optical components, slowing down production of some types of weapons (see box above on naval modernisation).

## Hybrid capabilities

Hybrid measures are usually [defined](#) as non-military methods used to destabilise an adversary, such as disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure and interference in electoral processes. Ukraine provides many examples of how Russia uses a broad package of hybrid measures in combination with military force. In Crimea and the Donbass, Russian [disinformation](#) aimed to win local support and deflect foreign criticism. Economic measures – such as a [trade embargo](#) and a [dramatic increase](#) in the price charged to Ukraine for Russian gas – went hand-in-hand with [cyber-attacks](#) on Ukrainian government offices and energy infrastructure. Meanwhile, Russian spies succeeded in deeply [infiltrating](#) the Ukrainian military and intelligence services.

Russia uses hybrid measures not only in combination with military action but also as a low-cost, low-risk alternative to it. Here again there are numerous examples, ranging from attempts to influence the results of the [US](#) and [French](#) presidential elections, to a [sophisticated hack](#) of US tech company SolarWinds, which Russia is suspected of carrying out. [Described](#) as the cyber equivalent of Pearl Harbour due to its potentially devastating impact, the Solar Winds attack could give Russian intelligence wide-ranging access to US government data. For some, Russia's dominance of European [energy](#) markets is also an important hybrid weapon.

Whether at war or in peacetime, many of Russia's hybrid activities are coordinated by the GRU military intelligence agency, which is part of the armed forces. They also rely heavily on non-state actors, such as the 'volunteers' fighting in the Donbass, [freelance hackers](#) involved in cyber-attacks, or trolls posting disinformation under fake profiles for the so-called Internet Research Agency in Saint Petersburg. In Syria, mercenaries from [private military companies](#) supported the Russian air campaign, fighting alongside Syrian government ground forces. Although these actors nominally operate on their own initiative, there is strong evidence of links to the Russian state. For example, [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), an entrepreneur and Putin associate, is on the US sanctions list for financing internet trolls on the US presidential campaign, and he is also thought to be behind Wagner and other private military companies.

### Western responses to hybrid threats

Since 2014, the European Union and the United States have attempted to hold Russia to account for its hybrid actions, for example by adopting [economic sanctions](#) in response to Russian support for Donbass rebels; these have hit not only the defence industry (see above), but also the wider economy; one [estimate](#) suggests that by 2018 they had cost Russia 6 % of its gross domestic product (GDP). A second set of EU [sanctions](#) targets intelligence officials responsible for cyber-attacks.

In 2014 NATO [confirmed](#) that that 'cyber defence is part of NATO's core task of collective defence', meaning that a Russian cyber-attack on one NATO country could trigger a collective response under Article 5. NATO countries have also [strengthened](#) their cyber-defences. Nevertheless, given that it is often impossible to identify authors of cyber-attacks such as the SolarWinds hack conclusively, robust NATO responses are difficult.

NATO's Strategic Communications [Centre of Excellence](#) and the EU's [East StratCom Task Force](#) tackle disinformation from Russian and other sources. There is also a joint EU-NATO Centre of Excellence for [Countering Hybrid Threats](#) created in 2017.

Hybrid measures offer Russia multiple advantages. Whereas economic and demographic weaknesses prevent Moscow from achieving conventional military parity with NATO forces, hybrid operations such as cyber-attacks [require](#) only limited financial and human resources, and are an area where Russia's lack of democratic accountability allows it to use methods that would be considered unacceptable in western democracies. In 2015, US intelligence agencies [rated](#) Russia as the world's leading source of cyber-threats. Whereas military actions are domestically controversial and risk triggering international condemnation or even retaliation, hybrid operations are often carried out by non-state actors, allowing the Russian state to deny responsibility.

## Russia's defence policy

### Russian military strategy – Defensive or offensive?

Official Russian strategy documents convey Moscow's concerns about a chaotic and unpredictable world in which it faces multiple threats. Top on the 2014 [Military Doctrine's](#) list of risks and threats is an increasingly active NATO and its assumption of 'global functions carried out in violation of the rules of international law'. Russia is particularly worried about the alliance's expansion into its traditional buffer zone, bringing its military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders. In addition to the military threat posed by NATO, the doctrine points to presumably Western-directed foreign efforts to undermine the very foundations of the Russian state, for example by promoting extremism and subverting traditional patriotic values.

According to the Military Doctrine, Russia will only use its armed forces 'to repel aggression against itself and/or its allies, to maintain (restore) peace as decided by the UN Security Council or another collective security body, as well as to protect its citizens abroad'. Rather than offensively promoting Russian influence, the role of the armed forces is stated to be defensive, aimed at 'deterring and preventing military conflict', protecting Russia from threats which, it is implied, come mainly from the West.

There is a gap between declared military policy and how Russia actually uses its armed forces in practice. Moscow's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine do not meet any of the doctrine's conditions for the use of force, as there was no aggression against Russia, and most pro-Russia separatists in both countries were not Russian citizens at the time when conflict started. Moreover, whereas the doctrine envisages military action 'in accordance with generally recognised principles and norms of international law and international treaties of the Russian Federation', Russia's incursions into neighbouring countries violate principles such as territorial integrity enshrined in the UN Charter, as well as the 1994 [Budapest Memorandum](#), in which Russia committed to respecting Ukrainian sovereignty and borders. Mandated neither by the UN Security Council nor any other collective security body, the Syria campaign is equally difficult to square with the doctrine's criteria.

Russian actions during the Syrian campaign – such as its relatively restrained response to Turkey [shooting](#) down one of its warplanes in November 2015 – suggest that it prefers to avoid direct confrontation with numerically superior NATO forces. In Syria, Russian forces [coordinated](#) closely with US counterparts to reduce the risk of conflict. After dozens of Russian mercenaries were killed in a [clash](#) with US-backed Kurdish fighters, the Kremlin declined to take action, insisting it had nothing to do with them.

However, this does not mean that the risk of Russian military aggression against NATO countries can be discounted. Some observers speculate that Russia could leverage its niche strengths and NATO vulnerabilities in a limited conflict allowing it to make gains while escaping retaliation. For example, air defence batteries along Russia's western flank in strategic locations such as Crimea and Kaliningrad create anti-access, area-denial [zones](#) that even sophisticated NATO stealth aircraft would probably find difficult to penetrate. These zones extend from Russia deep into neighbouring areas, including the Baltic States, parts of Poland and Ukraine, and most of the Black Sea. Strong air defence fits in with Moscow's declared goal of protecting its territory from foreign attacks, but could

also provide cover for its own aggression against neighbouring countries. Given the unacceptably high costs of total war, it could be [argued](#) that Russia's capacity to repel anything short of an all-out onslaught leaves NATO without a credible response to limited Russian aggression, for example against the Baltic states.

## The nuclear question

Russia's official stance on first use of nuclear weapons has changed over the years. In 1982, at a time when Moscow still had a conventional advantage, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev pledged that his country would never be the first to use nuclear weapons. However, after that advantage disappeared, Russia [withdrew](#) its 'no first use' policy in 1993. The 2000 [Military Doctrine](#) stated that nuclear weapons can be used 'in response to large-scale aggression involving conventional weapons in situations that are critical for the national security of the Russian Federation and its allies'. Perhaps reflecting the fact that the above-mentioned upgrades to conventional forces have given Russia more non-nuclear options, declared nuclear policy has, if anything, become more restrictive since then; the two most recent versions of the doctrine (from [2010](#) and [2014](#)) only allow a nuclear response to a conventional attack if 'the very existence of the state is in jeopardy'.

Russia's [nuclear deterrence policy](#), published for the first time ever in June 2020, adds more details on what the Kremlin considers to be existential threats: the launch of ballistic missiles, whether conventional or nuclear, against Russian territory; the use of weapons of mass destruction; and attacks on critical Russian state or military facilities intended to disrupt its nuclear response. This wording is quite similar to that of the US 2018 [Nuclear Posture Review](#), which also envisages the use of nuclear weapons 'to defend the vital interests of the United States [against] significant non-nuclear strategic attacks' such as attacks on civilian population and nuclear forces'.

As with conventional weapons, some observers believe that Russia is more willing to use its nuclear assets offensively than official doctrine suggests. For example, the US 2018 [Nuclear Posture Review](#) expresses a widely held belief that, in order to compensate for the weakness of its conventional armed forces, Russia is prepared to contemplate limited nuclear strikes even in smaller-scale conflicts where its vital interests are not threatened, using them to rapidly end fighting or to deter a NATO intervention. As evidence for this idea of '[escalating to de-escalate](#)', Western analysts point to debates on the topic among Russian military analysts; they also note that Russia has a large arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons, and that its large-scale military drills regularly [include](#) simulations of nuclear strikes. Despite this, Moscow's official policy is that nuclear weapons are a deterrent, to be used only under extreme pressure; in 2018, Vladimir Putin [ruled out](#) the idea of a pre-emptive strike.

## Hybrid measures in Russian military thinking

Hybrid measures play a prominent role in Russian military thinking. In 2013, chief of general staff General Valery Gerasimov [claimed](#) in a Russian military journal that 'the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and in many cases have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness'. These remarks led to talk of the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' as a revolution in Russian military thinking, prioritising hybrid activities over military force.

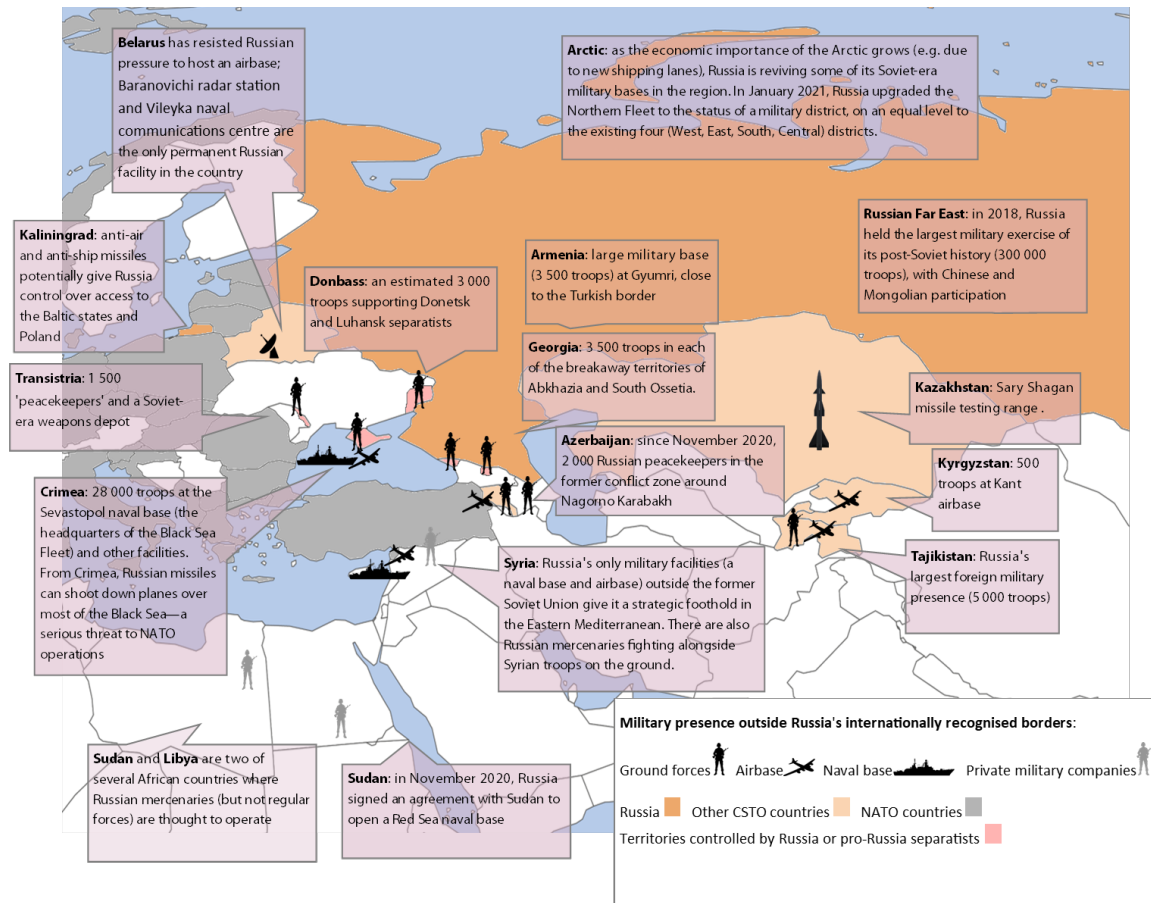
Analysts have [warned](#) against exaggerating the importance of Gerasimov's ideas. After all, there is nothing particularly [new](#) about hybrid methods – arguably just another name for the '[active measures](#)' which were such a central part of Soviet foreign policy – nor are they unique to Russia. Continued heavy investment in weapons is a clear sign that Moscow still attaches great importance to its conventional forces, and Gerasimov himself has [emphasised](#) that military strategy is above all about preparing for and fighting wars.

Hybrid threats also feature in the Military Doctrine, which identifies various types of hybrid activities used by foreign (presumably Western) powers in an attempt to destabilise Russia: cyber-attacks, efforts to foment ethnic and social tensions, and support for illegal armed groups. This view of Russia



as the target, rather than the origin, of hybrid threats is widely shared in the political establishment; the parliament regularly [points](#) to 'foreign interference' in Russian elections, although without producing substantial evidence to back its claims. However, as explained in the previous chapter, Russia itself is one of the main perpetrators of hybrid activities.

Map 1 – Russian military activity, at home and abroad



Source: Troop figures from IISS [Military Balance](#).

## The Russian military in the service of foreign policy goals

The 2015 [national security strategy](#) and 2016 [foreign policy concept](#) outline Russia's broader foreign policy goals and concerns, as well as the central role played by the armed forces in addressing them. Both documents emphasise Russia's ambition to assert itself as a great power, a 'centre of influence' in a world that the United States and its allies seek to dominate, but which is increasingly polycentric; to this end, Russia opposes Western efforts to contain its influence and to prevent it from pursuing an independent foreign policy. Russia's desire to exclude Western influences from its post-Soviet sphere of influence is expressed by the national security strategy, which notes that 'the West's stance aimed at countering [Eurasian] integration processes and creating seats of tension ... is exerting a negative influence on the realisation of Russian national interests'.

Russia's wars in Syria, Ukraine and Georgia are fully consistent with its foreign policy goals. Although Western sanctions over Ukraine have [hurt](#) Russia's economy, perhaps Moscow considers this a price worth paying to keep NATO out of its neighbourhood; with parts of Ukraine and Georgia under Russian occupation, some argue that NATO membership prospects for both countries appear to have been [shelved](#) indefinitely.

The national security strategy and other documents identify international terrorism as a major threat, and indeed this was the [pretext](#) for launching the Syria campaign. However, in practice many Russian airstrikes [targeted](#) moderate rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army, which, although opposed to Assad, were not universally considered as jihadists, whereas the task of fighting ISIL/Da'esh was left to the United States and its allies. In fact, the main purpose of the intervention appears to have been maintaining Russian influence in Syria and the wider Middle East, and this goal has been largely [achieved](#).

Large-scale military drills such as the four-yearly Zapad joint exercises with Belarus send a strong [warning](#) against Western challenges to Russia's dominance of its neighbourhood. Belarus, together with Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, is a member of the Russia-led [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) (CSTO) military alliance.

Admittedly, the alliance offers Moscow little military value, given that CSTO allies have much smaller armed forces than Russia's, and in any case there are questions about how willing they would be to comply with the mutual defence obligation enshrined in the CSTO Treaty; for example, it is highly questionable that Kazakhstan, which pursues a [multi-vector foreign policy](#) prioritising friendly relations with both Russia and the West, would want to be dragged into Moscow's quarrels with NATO. For its part, Russia also prefers not to take sides in regional conflicts involving CSTO allies (such as the recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over [Nagorno Karabakh](#)).

Although the commitment to collective defence is doubtful, the alliance is useful to Russia as it consolidates influence over neighbouring countries, and also gives it a [veto](#) over foreign military bases, such as the US base in Kyrgyzstan that was [closed](#) under Russian pressure in 2014, thus keeping NATO forces at arm's length. Russia has bases of its own in three CSTO countries: Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Reflecting both the growing importance of Asia and the difficult state of relations with the West, Russia is pursuing a [pivot to the East](#). Closer economic and diplomatic ties are underpinned by security cooperation with partners such as China (see box to the right) and India. Some of that cooperation takes place under the auspices of the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) (SCO), comprising Russia, China, India, Pakistan and four central Asian countries. Although the SCO is not a military alliance, its members regularly conduct [joint military exercises](#). The Russian armed forces also work with Asian counterparts in other formats, such as the annual [Vostok exercises](#) in Russia's Far East, which in 2018 were carried out on a scale unprecedented since Soviet times (300 000 troops) and included participants from China and Mongolia.

In line with its aspirations to project international influence, Russia is increasingly engaged in [Africa](#). In November 2020, Russia [agreed](#) with Sudan to establish a naval base on the Red Sea. However, so far it has almost no official military presence on the continent other than ([very limited](#)) participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Support for Moscow's political and economic goals therefore comes from private military companies such as Wagner. According to [US intelligence](#), Wagner has

#### The nuclear threat as a foreign policy tool

Whether or not Russia would ever willingly use any of its nuclear weapons, it often invokes them as a threat. For example, referring to EU and US economic sanctions against Russia, in October 2014 Putin [hinted](#) at the consequences for strategic stability of 'discord between large nuclear powers'. Also in the tense post-Crimea context, Russia attempted (unsuccessfully) to deter Denmark from joining NATO's missile shield, [warning](#) that Danish warships would become targets for Russian nuclear missiles.

#### Russia-China defence cooperation

China is a potential threat to Russia's thinly populated, thinly defended Far East; in 1969, Moscow and Beijing fought a brief, [undeclared war](#) in the region. Now that [relations](#) have improved, defence has become a key part of what Russia's Foreign Policy Concept describes as 'strategic cooperation' with China. Both countries view US THAAD missile defences in South Korea with [concern](#), and are [working together](#) on their own anti-missile systems.

deployed 3 000 of its own personnel and 2 000 Syrians to Libya in support of General Haftar's Libyan National Army, which controls eastern Libya – not enough to give Haftar a decisive victory over the Turkey-backed Government of National Accord in the west, but sufficient to stem his losses and ensure that Russia has a say in negotiations between warring factions to determine the country's future. Wagner is also present in [Central African Republic](#), where it has deployed several hundred 'instructors' to support embattled government forces. [Reportedly](#), Russian companies have obtained mining concessions in exchange for this military backing. There are further reports of Russian mercenaries in [Sudan](#), Burundi and [Mozambique](#).

## Arms control and non-proliferation

Russia is party to a series of [arms control and non-proliferation](#) agreements. The latter include the multilateral Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty [limiting nuclear weapons](#) to Russia, the United States and three other nuclear states, and the chemical and biological weapons conventions, which completely ban military use of chemical and biological agents. Arms control agreements are mostly bilateral (United States and Russia/Soviet Union), and relate to nuclear weapons. Since 2000, several arms control agreements have unravelled, due in part to failure to adapt them to new developments such as the rise of China as a military power, and the emergence of new types of weapons.

Russia's selective compliance with arms control agreements is also a serious problem. Signed in 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty ([INF Treaty](#)) prohibits the United States and Russia from having ground-launched missiles with a range of 500 to 5 500 km. Such missiles are of particular concern because if launched from western Russia, they could reach practically the whole of Europe. The United States first publicly [accused](#) Russia of violating the treaty in 2014, but development of the banned SSC-8 missile is [thought](#) to have already begun in the mid-2000s. Refusing to accept Russian assurances that the SSC-8 is a short-range missile (the US estimates its maximum range at 2 500km), Washington decided to [withdraw](#) from the treaty in 2019. It is now [developing](#) its own ground-launched intermediate-range missiles, and expects to start deploying them in 2023. However, [NATO](#) has ruled out deploying such weapons in Europe, and Russia has also [declared](#) that it will not be the first to do so.

In 2011, the United States and Russia signed the New START Treaty, which limits the number of strategic deployed nuclear warheads and the weapons (intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, heavy bombers) used to deliver them. Apart from reducing numbers of the world's most dangerous nuclear weapons, [New START](#) requires both sides to notify each other of certain types of changes to their arsenals, and to allow 18 [in-depth inspections](#) per party, per year, thus bringing transparency and predictability.

The United States has declared Russia to be in compliance with New START, unlike the INF. The treaty was due to expire in February 2021, with the option of extension for a further five years. However, until recently its future was looking doubtful; while Putin had expressed his support for unconditional extension, former US President Donald Trump was much more [sceptical](#), and favoured a revised treaty, covering a wider range of weapons and possibly including China. With negotiations failing to make much headway, one of US President Joe Biden's first actions was to renege New START just days before its expiry, allowing it to remain in force until 2026.

However, in the longer term a new treaty will still need to address the concerns both sides have about each other's nuclear weapons. For the United States, it is worrying that New START does not include non-strategic nuclear warheads – an area where Russia has strong numerical superiority. Moreover, some of the innovative weapons that Moscow is currently developing – such as the *Burevestnik* cruise missile mentioned above – arguably fall outside the scope of the treaty.

For its part, Russia has problems with NATO's European [missile shield](#); although defensive, in Moscow's view the system facilitates US aggression, due to its capacity to protect Europe from a Russian counter-strike, thereby allowing NATO to launch a nuclear strike on Russia with relative impunity; Putin [argues](#) that it risks 'the complete devaluation of Russia's nuclear potential'. Such

claims are systematically [rejected](#) by NATO, which points out that its missile defences simply do not have the capacity to block a large-scale Russian attack, and would therefore be more useful in intercepting smaller missile attacks by rogue states such as Iran. Striking the right balance between these differing concerns will be extremely difficult, especially given the current lack of trust between Washington and Moscow, and the prospects for a comprehensive arms control agreement to replace New START therefore look dim.

A new nuclear arms control treaty may also aim to include China, but this will be even more challenging. China has far fewer nuclear weapons than Russia and the United States, although their number is steadily growing, and could perhaps even [double](#) over the next 10 years. In July 2020, Beijing [declared](#) that it would only join trilateral negotiations on New START if the United States were willing to reduce its arsenal to the size of China's.

## The armed forces in Russian public opinion

Opinion polls have repeatedly highlighted the importance that Russian citizens attach to the military. For them, the armed forces are Russia's [most trusted](#) institution, the main source of [national pride](#), and the second most [important influence](#) (after the president) in national life. Comparing the results of such polls over time shows that the prestige of the armed forces is currently at an all-time high. [Asked](#) in 2017 to assess Vladimir Putin's performance, respondents put military reform at the top of the list of his achievements. However, surveys also show that Russians are more [afraid](#) of war than anything else except family illnesses. In 2019, a [majority](#) were in favour of the Russian armed forces ending their operations in Syria.

Even if Russia is often described as an [authoritarian state](#), its leaders cannot completely ignore public opinion, which plays a part in shaping defence policy. With military casualties in Ukraine mounting, in 2015 Putin [signed](#) a decree making it illegal to publish information about the deaths of Russian forces 'during special operations' in peacetime.

The **European Parliament** [resolution](#) of March 2019 expresses concerns about Russia's 'large-scale militarisation' of the Black Sea, including Crimea, its 'provocative large-scale military manoeuvres' in regions bordering EU countries, and its 'readiness to use military force ... including advanced nuclear weapons' against other nations, and calls for greater EU resilience to Russian hybrid threats.

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[eprs@ep.europa.eu](mailto:eprs@ep.europa.eu) (contact)

[www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu](http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu) (intranet)

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