

Is Russia making preparations for a great war?

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September 19 saw the start of the strategic military exercises entitled East-2014 in the Far East of Russia. Even against the background of the systematic increase in the number and scale of the Russian Army's exercises, which have been effectively conducted almost without a break since February 2013, this project has been distinguished by its long duration and the size of the forces and resources involved, which allow them to be classified along with the largest Soviet army exercises. At the same time, the European part of Russia and the Arctic are witnessing other large-scale exercises by the Russian Federation's Armed Forces, and their involvement in the conflict in Ukraine is also continuing. In total, these armed exercises involve over 200,000 soldiers and several thousand combat vehicles, hundreds of planes and helicopters, and about a hundred ships. The Russian army's activity has also been accompanied by preliminary information, disclosed on 18 September, on the shape of the Russian budget for the years 2015 to 2017, which show that in the situation of an apparent slowdown, military spending has become the undisputed priority of Russia's financial policy. For 2015, this will reach the value of 4.0% of GDP (compared to 3.5% of GDP in 2014), a rise of more than 10% in real terms (to a level of at least US\$84 billion). The increase in the Russian army's activity and military spending is being accompanied by an information campaign which is increasingly intense, and is being channelled to meet public expectations, according to which Russia must defend itself against the aggression of the West.

In the near term, it should be assumed that the principal objective of Russia's clear demonstration of power is to exert pressure on the West, to force it to make further concessions on the issue of Ukraine and confirm the Russian Federation's position as a superpower. However, given the length and scale of the enterprise – an increasingly prominent effect of which is the progressive militarisation of the state – the consequences of these apparent preparations for war may be far more serious. At present, it is increasingly relevant to question whether the spiral of militarisation which the Kremlin has set in motion has already reached the point of no return. The only way out in such a situation would be, in the best case, to achieve a spectacular success along the lines of Russia reducing the whole of Ukraine to a vassal state, by means of a permanent demonstration of and a (so far) limited use of force; and in the worst case, for Moscow to start a war on a far bigger scale than its actions in Georgia in 2008, or currently in Ukraine.

More and more activity ...

The East-2014 exercises, which started on 19 September and are intended to last until 25 September, are a direct continuation of the so-called 'unannounced' combat readiness tests held in the Far Eastern Military District on 11-18 September, which were the largest organised in recent years. According to official data, the reliability of which has been confirmed by partial information, the exercise involves 155,000 soldiers (including 6500 reservists), c. 8000 units of armament and military equipment (including 1500 tanks and 4000 armoured combat vehicles; the use of 450 combat vehicles removed from storage and prepared for participation in the project should be seen as a demonstration of mobile expansion), 632 planes and helicopters, and 84 warships and auxiliary units. The exercises are being held at 14 land and sea military ranges in the Far East of Russia (including Chukotka, Kamchatka, the Kurils, Sakhalin and the Arctic), and participates in them most operational and tactical units of all types of troops and divisions of the Central and Eastern Military Districts and the Pacific Ocean Fleet (including 4 nuclear submarines), as well as selected units from the Western Military District. The war games are predicated on regular armed clashes with the hypothetical enemy forces, and the project's main regional target audience should be considered the United States and Japan (the amphibious exercises should be seen in the context of the latter), not to mention China, although it is formally on friendly terms with Russia. Globally, these exercises are undoubtedly intended to demonstrate Russia's ability to carry out large military operations, regardless of its months-long commitment to another theatre (Ukraine), and in parallel with it. Further exercises on this scale are planned for 2015 in the European part of the Russian Federation, aiming westwards (also with the participation of the Belarusian army).

Although the East-2014 exercises should be regarded as the culmination of this year's training activity by the Russian army, they are neither the only nor the most difficult expression of its current commitment. On 16-22 September, tactical exercises of the Baltic Fleet's land component were held in the Kaliningrad region, with the participation of 1000 soldiers and 250 combat and specialist vehicles. Exercises were held on 18-19 September by units of the Air Force Western Military District located above the Arctic Circle as well as the Northern Fleet's aircraft. On 22 September weekly exercises by the Western Military District's Air Forces began, which involved 1500 soldiers and over 100 aircraft and helicopters, as did battalion exercises at the Russian military base in Tajikistan (500 men, 100 combat vehicles and specialised vehicles). On 23 September the so-called active phase of the Northern Fleet's tactical exercises began in the vicinity of the Arctic Novosibirsk Islands, which are a continuation of the training activities undertaken in this area in previous weeks by units of the Air Force and the Air-Amphibious Forces. In addition, joint Russian-Indian exercises entitled Indra-2014 began in the Volgograd region on 23 September. These *de facto* combat exercises are being carried out by Russian army groupings on the border between Russia and Ukraine (totalling over 40,000 soldiers, including the units in Crimea); in mid-September, at least four battalion tactical groups were playing a direct part in the activities in the Donbas. Apart from the above-mentioned projects, in recent weeks, the activity of Russian strategic bomber aircraft became regular (increasingly violating the airspace of the northern European and North American members of NATO, as well as Japan); a grouping of Russian Navy ships (mainly from the Black Sea Fleet) has also been maintained in the eastern part of the Mediterranean in connection with the civil war in Syria (continuously since the end of 2011).

... for more and more money

On 18 September, preliminary information was disclosed concerning the shape of the Russian budget for the years 2015-2017, as approved by the government. Despite a significant slowdown in economic growth (up to c. 1% of GDP per annum), high inflation (around 8%) and a decrease in the value of the rouble to the dollar (from 33 roubles to the US dollar in January to 38 roubles to the dollar in September) – which is at least in part a consequence of Russian actions against Ukraine – the rise in military spending has been maintained at the level assumed in the previous year (the difference between the rise in spending from the 'National defence' section of the Russian budget for 2015 as given in the budget estimates from October 2013, and that from September 2014, is barely 0.2%). The only change is that military spending will rise partly at the expense of other budget items. In 2015 it will reach 3 trillion roubles (c. US\$84 billion at the current exchange rate), compared to 2.47 trillion roubles in 2014 (a nominal increase of 21.4%), and in 2016 the estimated figure is 3.34 trillion roubles (which also accords with the 2013 estimates) and 3.52 trillion roubles in 2017. The practice of previous years shows that military spending is slightly higher in the final version of the budget, and is also increased during the year as part of the amendments to the budget law. As a result, if we also include the other items that make up the Ministry of Defence's budget, Russia's expenses for military purposes are about 10% higher than those recorded in the 'National defence' section of the Russian budget.

Taking Russia's current international and economic situation into account (lower oil prices; profits from exports, which are the budget's main source of revenue; and Western sanctions against Russian companies and the banking sector), the above assumptions of military spending raise questions about the real status of Russian finance. The military action against Ukraine, the costly permanent military exercises (especially on such a large scale), further increases in spending on a more intensive technical modernisation of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, as well as unpublished information on the implementation of the budget (the period from January to August this year saw a surplus of 905 billion roubles, which represents 2% of Russia's GDP), all call into question the information presented by the Russians themselves about the country's dramatically deteriorating financial condition.

Consequences and conclusions

The slow, ongoing militarisation of the Russian state – not only in a purely military sense, but also economically (the concept, implemented independently of the reform of the Russian Armed Forces, of basing the modernisation of all Russian industry on the rehabilitation of the armaments industry, which is to become the 'locomotive' of economic development), socially (the consistent building-up in Russian society of patriotic attitudes based on imperial resentments and shaping public sentiment in opposition to the West, which poses a real and direct threat to Russia) and politically (the management of the state), which has been observed at least since 2007 – raises questions about its long-term consequences. It is increasingly justified to claim that the spiral of militarisation which has been set in motion in Russia over recent years has already reached a critical 'point of no return', or is approaching such a point; and that the ruling team in Moscow has become

largely a hostage to its own policies. In Russia's current domestic and international situation, the increased activity of the Russian army and the rise in military spending will be extremely difficult to inhibit. Indeed, it may be impossible unless some kind of spectacular success is achieved, the easiest and safest (least bloody) variant of which may be Russia rendering the whole of Ukraine as its vassal state. However the consequence of the current activities, which represent Russia's most tangible preparations to wage armed conflict on a much larger scale than the operation in Georgia in August 2008 and the military engagement against Ukraine launched in February, may actually be that Moscow starts a full-blown regular war. It remains an open question – dependent on developments in Russia, but above all on the determination of the West (NATO, EU) to deter aggressive actions by Moscow – in which direction Russia will strike, as it does not have to be Ukraine, either in the medium or longer term.