

## BRIEF

LARGE-SCALE WAR  
AND NATORUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE  
SERIES NO. 4

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Soon after Russia launched its large-scale attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, an increasing number of officials and experts expressed their surprise at the poor performance of the Russian Armed Forces. It seems apparent that despite the two State Armament Plans covering 2011–20 and 2018–27 and the annual strategic exercises, the Russian Armed Forces remain less effective than their capability would suggest on paper. However, this does not mean that the Kremlin's military instrument of power is toothless. The Russian forces have teeth but are seemingly unable to bite.

UNDERPERFORMING  
RUSSIAN FORCES

The list of examples of the poor performance of the Russian Armed Forces is lengthy. The Russian air force has not gained full control of the Ukrainian airspace. The United States assesses that Russia is suffering failure rates as high as 60% for some of the precision-guided missiles it is using to attack Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Logistics has proved to be a major factor limiting land combat capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Russian forces apparently rely on cheap unencrypted commercial radios from China and sometimes mobile phones that enable Ukrainian signal intelligence to locate transmitting units and target them. Mobilised reservists have reportedly been issued rifles from World War 2, legacy steel helmets and civilian clothes, adding credibility to assessments that Russia lacks a developed and proven system of mobilising reserve forces.<sup>3</sup> Postings on social media have also revealed numerous examples

of poor, and sometimes even unprofessional, behaviour by Russian troops that likely has contributed to the high rate of casualties.

This has already prompted commentators to downplay the threat posed by the Russian military and suggest that it would not prevail against NATO forces in the case of a direct conflict. Andrei V. Kozyrev, the foreign minister of Russia under Boris Yeltsin, called the Russian Armed Forces a 'Potemkin military' in a post on Twitter.<sup>4</sup> Recently imposed sanctions will further delay or even prevent Russia from rebuilding its inventory of equipment and ammunition, not least precision-guided munitions. But is it correct to write off the conventional threat posed by the Russian Armed Forces?

RUSSIA AS A THREAT TO ITS  
NEIGHBOURS

The Russian military was not perceived as a threat to NATO members in western or southern Europe before 24 February 2022, except for its ability to launch missile attacks against high-value targets. This perception is still relevant, and most would agree that the massacres of civilians in Bucha would very unlikely be replicated in the suburbs of Lisbon and Amsterdam.

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If NATO deterrence failed, Russia would constitute an existential threat to its neighbours. Several scenarios are plausible for Alliance members bordering Russia, including the occupation of

smaller countries (e.g. the Baltics) as well as more limited scenarios that could entail the seizure of territories claimed to be “historically Russian” and inhabited primarily by “oppressed Russian speakers.” According to the Kremlin’s narrative, Ukraine is not worthy of present-day sovereignty. In occupied territories, civilians have been arrested, tortured, executed or deported. In late March 2022, 90% of Mariupol’s buildings had been damaged and 40% destroyed, including hospitals, schools, kindergartens and factories, not to mention nearly 5 000 people killed.<sup>5</sup> The regional police stated that more than 1 200 civilians had been killed by Russian occupiers in the Kyiv region.<sup>6</sup>

## HOW WELL WOULD NATO ALLIES DO?

Ukraine has military capabilities that most individual NATO Allies lack and of which, in some cases, there is a shortfall throughout the whole Alliance. How many NATO members would have been able to defend against attacking Russian forces for more than a month as Ukraine did, until Moscow decided that further attacks against Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy were pointless?

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Would they then also have the capacity to continue with operations of various intensity against the Russian forces, as the Ukrainians do on the southern and the eastern fronts? How many Allies are, like Ukraine, able to employ a layered air defence system comprising long-range, medium-range, and short-range missile systems to protect against Russian air and missile attacks? Or to conduct deep strikes against Russian airbases and fuel depots with ballistic missiles and attack helicopters? And how many NATO members are able to punish Russian long-range artillery and prevent it from destroying cities and vital infrastructure? Not to mention the capability to push Russian forces out of occupied territories, including large cities, or sink major surface combatants?

In all fairness, members of a collective defence organisation are not expected to develop militaries that cover the full spectrum of forces and capabilities. Membership allows individual nations to focus on delivering only a small part of the total volume of forces and capabilities that the Alliance would have to field. Still, the benefit of being able to focus resources on developing and maintaining relatively few forces and capabilities comes with a commitment to building up and holding expensive stockpiles that allow the fight to be sustained.

Each military unit that NATO member A or B provides to the Alliance has to meet qualitative and quantitative requirements and, no less important, be available when needed. Working through the list of member states, starting with Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, and so on, it soon becomes evident that most are still mainly geared towards counter-insurgency operations outside Europe against poorly trained and equipped terrorist organisations. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO Heads of State and Governments agreed to deliver “heavier and more high-end forces and capabilities, as well as more forces at higher readiness.”<sup>7</sup> In June 2017, NATO defence ministers agreed to new capability targets, stepping up in key areas, including heavy equipment and air-to-air refuelling.<sup>8</sup> To their credit, many Allies have started to deliver these forces and capabilities, but due to the reluctance to meet the spending target of 2% of GDP, the speed by which these become available does not correspond to today’s security environment. One only needs to pay attention to the fact sheet of the 2022 US Defense Strategy that describes the threats posed by Russia as ‘acute.’<sup>9</sup>

The conventional elements of NATO’s deterrence and defence posture agreed at the 2016 Warsaw Summit rely on a relatively limited forward presence consisting of multinational battlegroups deployed in each of the Baltic states and Poland as a ‘tripwire’ that, if needed, could be rapidly reinforced by larger forces that in peacetime are deployed in central Europe or in continental US. Six years later, these forces are still on relatively low readiness and their deployment would also be slowed down by insufficient preparations

related to military mobility. The roles of existing headquarters involved in the Baltic Sea region are unclear.<sup>10</sup> Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas recently said that NATO's current posture would not be sufficient to repel a Russian attack and that the Baltic states would have to rely on being "liberated" by reinforcements from Germany, Poland and other European countries.<sup>11</sup> Based on Russian atrocities against civilians committed by Russian forces in the occupied areas of Ukraine, the prospect of first being subjected to a temporary occupation and then being liberated is totally unacceptable.

## FOR HOW LONG COULD NATO ALLIES SUSTAIN THE FIGHT?

While many of NATO's high-end forces and capabilities are tangible and can be publicly displayed, there is another less visible but critical and highly sensitive category of items that is crucial for any warfighting effort: stockpiles of ammunition, petroleum, oil, lubricants, spare-parts, food and other supplies. Most information related to the stockpiles necessary for high-intensity warfare against an enemy like Russia is obviously classified since it could be used to assess how long NATO forces could sustain a potential armed conflict. However, this is a serious issue with a significant price tag and there is public information that can be used to illustrate the importance of stockpiles.

One observation from the relatively modest campaign in Libya in 2011 was that several European NATO members quickly depleted their stocks of precision-guided munitions. On the one

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hand, this is not surprising since all ammunition and especially precision-guided munitions come at a very high cost. On the other hand, that particular campaign was of a relatively limited size in comparison to a potential armed conflict with Russia. Of the €100 billion Germany recently

decided to allocate for a special fund to equip the Bundeswehr, €20 billion will be earmarked for ammunition.<sup>12</sup> A senior official of the Estonian Ministry of Defence recently stated that the cost of ammunition per day of warfighting amounts to approximately €100 million, which should be assessed in relation to the entire defence budget for 2022 of €750 million.<sup>13</sup> The contribution Danish land forces could offer NATO in 2020 was assessed as suffering from low stocks of battle decisive munitions, and in early 2022, the media reported that the lack of ammunition impacted on the training of forces.<sup>14</sup> Despite the obvious need to support Ukraine with whatever munitions that are immediately available, this will only worsen the shortfalls of NATO nations. Given the significant cost associated with rebuilding the stockpiles necessary to defend European populations, territory and forces, as well as the many practical challenges related to ramping up the production of ammunition, this effort is unlikely to produce acceptable results before 2030.<sup>15</sup>

*Ukraine is buying NATO time to strengthen its own forces and capabilities*

Reconstituting the Russian Armed Forces after the war in Ukraine will take time and likely be further delayed by economic sanctions and embargos, but one should not underestimate the will of President Putin to rebuild and, if necessary, again employ Russia's military capabilities. By inflicting significant casualties on Russian forces, Ukraine is buying NATO time to strengthen its own forces and capabilities.

Costly and destructive wars that rational governments would prefer to avert through negotiation can obviously still occur due to miscalculations about the other side's capabilities.<sup>16</sup> President Putin has clearly demonstrated that he can take decisions based on incorrect intelligence, and this is why Russia has proved to be more unpredictable than previously assessed.

## CONCLUSION

Russia constitutes an existential threat to its neighbours. Performing poorly against Ukraine

does not necessarily mean that Russian forces would be equally unsuccessful against smaller NATO Allies if Moscow could catch the Alliance off guard. Depending on the specific Ally targeted, the outcome could be much better for Russia, at least in the short run.

In the short term, NATO Allies must not waste any time in strengthening their atrophied warfighting

capabilities. Given the current shortfalls related to rapid reinforcement – readiness and military mobility – existing forces and capabilities should be deployed along the borders of Russia, ready to defend every square metre of Alliance territory against any aggression. Members of NATO and the EU should also provide all necessary support to Ukraine, enabling it to significantly degrade the Russian forces.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Phil Stewart, “[Exclusive: US assesses up to 60% failure rate for some Russian missiles, officials say](#),” Reuters, 25 March 2022.
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- <sup>3</sup> Mark F. Cancian, “[Russian Casualties in Ukraine: Reaching the Tipping Point](#),” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 31 March 2022.
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- <sup>9</sup> “[Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy](#),” US Department of Defense, 28 March 2022.
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- <sup>16</sup> “[Russia’s army is in a woeful state](#),” The Economist, 22 April 2022 (updated on 9 May 2022).

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