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# Russia's defense strategy

Jacques Fontanel

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Résumé : La Russie, ne renonce pas à une politique de puissance. Après avoir subi une forte érosion de ses positions stratégiques, Vladimir Poutine reste l'homme fort de Moscou et, bon stratège, il a su maintenir une puissance nucléaire importante, équivalente à celle des Etats-Unis surtout depuis l'Accord SORT, tout en renonçant au principe du « no first use » et en s'engageant à la fois dans l'option des frappes préemptives et dans la doctrine de la réponse graduée. Il a engagé des guerres conventionnelles contre la Tchétchénie et la Georgie, qu'il a remporté. La modernisation de l'armée se heurte cependant aux contraintes financières et la modernisation des forces conventionnelles s'inscrit dans une démarche plutôt dissuasive, compte tenu du caractère hypothétique des menaces des grandes puissances. La Russie reste toujours une superpuissance militaire, sans doute la plus déterminée à l'utiliser si besoin était, compte tenu du baillon qui a été posée sur les expressions de l'opinion publique.

Summary : Russia does not renounce to a power policy. After having undergone a strong erosion of its strategic positions, Vladimir Putin remains the strong man of Moscow and, as a good strategist, he has been able to maintain a significant nuclear power, equivalent to that of the United States, especially since the SORT Agreement, while renouncing the principle of "no first use" and committing himself to the option of pre-emptive strikes and the doctrine of a graduated response. It has engaged in conventional wars against Chechnya and Georgia, which it has won. However, the modernization of the army is hampered by financial constraints, and the modernization of conventional forces is part of a dissuasive approach, given the hypothetical nature of the threats from the major powers. Russia still remains a military superpower, probably the most determined to use it if necessary, given the gag order that has been placed on expressions of public opinion.

Keywords: Russia, military power, nuclear weapons, deterrence, Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia

Mots clés : Russie, puissance militaire, armes nucléaires, dissuasion, Tchétchénie, Ossétie du Sud, Abkhazie

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<sup>1</sup> Cet article élargit et actualise le texte de la Conférence donnée, en français, à l'Université de Rabat et en anglais à l'Université Concordia de Montréal.

The President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, has relaunched Russia's military power policy, despite the limited means of the country due to the economic crisis and the kleptocracy of the oligarchs, who have little interest in the collective interest. Russian-style capitalism allows a few people close to power to get rich very quickly, in a country that has still not recovered from the violence of the economic transition (Aganbeguyan, Fontanel, 1994). If there is to be a defense, it must first be based on the protection of their interests, as if the famous erroneous trickle-down theory once claimed by Ronald Reagan in the United States would paradoxically also apply to Russia.

The procrastination of the defense strategy since 1990 has not allowed to engage a serious policy of restructuring the whole military-industrial complex, especially since the crisis of Russia's public finances can be solved only if the price of energy materials increases, especially gas and oil. Today it is difficult for Moscow to raise the issue of non-renewable energies and the fight against global warming, but if the trend of public actions undertaken in the world continues during the next decade, the price of oil should remain at a minimum, and more certainly increase with the inevitable growth of individual and collective energy consumption.

Moscow has officially refused to renounce the power policy of the USSR. Vladimir Putin has decided to boost military budgets and is seeking to equip Russia with a nuclear arsenal that would make it as formidable in the event of conflict as the United States and NATO. To do this, he has the same weapons as Washington, inherited from the USSR. In the conventional sector, in which Moscow always seemed to have a comfortable lead over European countries during the Cold War, the financial means now dedicated to this type of weaponry are relatively low, which should reduce its offensive action in European theaters. The question is rather to know if the skills have been maintained in a sector increasingly concerned by digital technologies and artificial intelligence. Let's also add that future wars will involve many cyberattacks against weapons, companies or public services, and that in this field the training of Russian scientists is particularly competitive.

However, for the last two decades, Russia has been experiencing a significant erosion of its strategic positions. Today, the balance of power in conventional weapons is largely in favor of NATO and the United States. The "Ivanov doctrine" of April 2000 highlighted the

recognition of Russia's military inferiority, but it also marked the concern to contain the aggressive actions of potential adversaries, insisting on the nuclear doctrine, the sanctuarization of national territory and areas of vital interests, especially the CIS countries. It is on this point that strategic thinking must evolve in the years to come.

Indeed, the Warsaw Pact has been definitively dead for 18 years, while NATO has expanded, notably with the former popular democracies. Thus, in 1990, an agreement between Gorbachev-Kohl-Clinton led to the membership of reunified Germany in NATO. In 1999, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic joined NATO, which set itself new objectives concerning cyber security, the fight against terrorism, peacekeeping in the Balkans, a Partnership for Peace and the establishment of a Mediterranean Dialogue. In 2004, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the three Baltic countries of the former USSR (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) were admitted as members of NATO. Finally, other countries have shown interest in joining in the near future, notably Croatia and Albania.

In 2002, there was a NATO-Russia Council, but it did not really have the effect expected by Vladimir Putin, who considered the new memberships in NATO to be a major provocation against Russia. Today, Georgia and Ukraine are candidates. Russia can legitimately feel under siege. Moscow could have expected these peoples to remain close to it and to remain in its zone of influence. However, the People's Democracies were not a democratic choice. It had been imposed by the war and the "vassalization" of their leaders to Moscow had not been accepted willingly. For the countries forcibly attached to the Soviet Union, national resistance to independence existed even before the collapse of the USSR. In this context, the fear of all these European countries of this form of Soviet imperialism is tenacious.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Russia's main significant effort has been to renovate its nuclear forces. The abandonment of the "no-first-use" doctrine applied since 1993 has been confirmed and gives greater weight to Moscow's statements concerning the option of pre-emptive strikes and the need for graduation of the response. This new global strategy also implies a gradual recasting of strategic forces, with a view to developing a nuclear use with "moderate losses", at least enough to avoid a nuclear apocalypse, while providing a particularly significant warning to the adversary. An indiscriminate strike would lead to a major nuclear conflict that could lead, through a process of uncontrolled escalation, to the destruction not only of Russia's territory,

but also of all its enemies. A renovation of the national arsenal has been undertaken, which makes it possible to revive the capacity of the arsenals to produce and innovate, particularly with regard to the potential for modulating the intensity of strikes according to the desired tactics on the battlefield.

There is little doubt that, in a situation of military conflict, the use of nuclear force will be more easily engaged by a highly centralized country that is more plutocratic than democratic, with a plutocracy that has been able to constitute itself with the endorsement, but also the vassalage due to the President of the Russian Federation. Vladimir Putin has become the strong man of the Russian Federation and he organizes the administrative services according to the progressive organization of a personal power. His occasional run-ins with some oligarchs who want more freedom in their actions show the President's ability to eliminate any opposition, without any qualms.

Since the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT1) was signed in May 1972, the United States and the USSR, then Russia, have signed several agreements concerning nuclear weapons (SALT2, then SALT3, which was not ratified because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), in particular with a view to reducing their expenditure, whereas the nuclear apocalypse could take place with 20 times fewer weapons. In May 1988, Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF agreement, which provided for the elimination of intermediate-range and short-range missiles, i.e. 4% of the arsenal, with "in situ" verification. In this sense, it was more a question of arms reduction (even if limited) than of arms control. In 1991, Gorbachev and Bush signed START 1, which provided for the reduction of intercontinental land-based (ICBM) or submarine-based (SLBM) nuclear rockets in the strategic arsenals of the two superpowers, by around 30%. The USSR's warheads should not exceed 7,000, as opposed to 9,000 for the United States, as well as the number of bombers. In 1993, Start 2 provides, for 2003, 3500 American nuclear warheads (against 10,000) and 3000 Russian (against 10,000), with the disappearance of multiple independently remotely piloted warheads (ICBMs), especially Russian, in exchange for the reduction of half of American submarine missiles. Start II was ratified in 1996 by the United States and in 2000 by Russia. In 2002, George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin decided to reduce their nuclear arsenals by two-thirds in a decade (SORT, Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty). This marked the end of strategic parity, followed by the signing of a new strategic partnership. However, Russia continued to improve its nuclear weapons, as did the United States.

Dependence on nuclear weapons therefore implies their modernization. The new strategy proposes to use possible attacks, which implies more flexible, mobile, resilient and stealthy weapons. However, today, the means made available to the Russian armies are not yet commensurate with the announced ambitions. Thus, if the strategic forces are decreased within the framework of the SORT agreement, the obsolescence of most of the nuclear weapons is unavoidable, affecting in particular the siloed delivery systems and the SS25. The acquisitions of the SS-27 (about 40 are available) do not today provide the forces necessary for the realization of the desired military strategies. Therefore, today, the pre-emptive option is more of a defensive approach; it does not imply an attempt at active intimidation based on a possible power victory. It is in fact the restoration of deterrence, putting in place the forces necessary to inflict unacceptable damage on the potential enemy, in order to prevent him from affecting the vital interests of the Russian nation.

However, Russia is raising its head and wishes to become a real player in the very limited space of the great powers. Strongly weakened by the end of the USSR, it is raising its head, even if it is no longer able to be sufficiently attractive in Europe to maintain politico-military links with the European countries that used to belong to the Warsaw Pact. The former people's democracies feel more threatened by Moscow than by Europe and the United States, more interested in NATO than in a military agreement with Moscow. Face. Faced with Russia, Europe does not have sufficient military power, especially in the face of the nuclear threat, despite the availability of British and French nuclear forces. However, the use of the latter remains dependent on NATO and its American guardian. Japan itself is a country militarily vassalized by Washington. Finally, the battle of military power is clearly in favor of the United States, despite the rapid growth of the Chinese threat, dominated by a Communist Party that grants all powers to its President. Chinamerica is now presented as the dominant military power situation, but it must be remembered that Russia remains a dominant nuclear power, at least as well equipped militarily and strategically as the United States. Finally, Washington has embarked on operations as the world's policeman in Iraq and Afghanistan, with questionable results in the short term, which are likely to become even more mixed in the long term, given the civilizational and religious differences that separate the United States from the two occupied countries. It is never a good idea to try to do good for the people by occupying their territory in the long term.

To broaden the scope of its options, Russia may decide to pursue a unilateral policy of building sub-strategic delivery systems, contrary to past agreements and in retaliation for American violations of the Anti-Strategic Missile Treaty. The SS-26 can provide a flexible weapon system capable of enhancing a credible "operational" deterrent. Potentially, Russia has an interesting potential to conduct an effective escalation strategy in regional theaters.

However, it should be noted that Russia has engaged in several military battles since the collapse of the USSR and the results obtained by the Kremlin are becoming more and more strategically satisfying. After a defeat in Chechnya during the Yeltsin presidency, the violence of Russian actions in Chechnya, South Ossetia and Abkhazia testifies to Vladimir Putin's strong determination to restore Russia's power, its firmness with regard to Russia's national interests and its voice in the international concert. Of course, the adversaries did not have sufficient military means either, but the extreme violence of the action testifies to a strong resolution to enforce what is self-supposed to be its "right".

The disappearance of the USSR in 1991 resulted in a real "balkanization" of the Caucasus. Inter-ethnic wars and civil wars are multiplying against a background of economic disaster. Abkhazia (8000 km<sup>2</sup> and 350,000 inhabitants) and South Ossetia (3900 km<sup>2</sup> and 50,000 inhabitants) came into conflict with the power of Tbilisi. South Ossetia is asking to be attached to North Ossetia, i.e. to Russia. Chechnya, a region conquered by the tsarist power, which had undergone accelerated Russification in order to counter the power of Islam, renewed its desire for independence and national and religious liberation and instituted it at the end of 1991, before the fall of the Soviet Union, by putting Sharia law into practice. This situation was hardly acceptable to Russia, given the reintroduction of Islam in a Caucasus that had been eradicated after 70 years of forced atheism. The result was the first bloody war in Chechnya, which under Boris Yeltsin's presidency led to a military and humanitarian failure on the part of Russia in the face of fierce resistance from Chechen fighters. Under these conditions, the call for a return to an Islamic Caucasus demanded by the Chechens was accompanied by terrorist attacks on Russian territory, even if a presumption of strategic action by the FSB was made in order to justify a centralization of power in the Kremlin. The second war, initiated by Vladimir Putin, was victorious, with the capture of Grozny in February 2000 and the reintegration of Chechnya into the Russian Federation, after a partial extermination of the opposition

forces. This war, of unprecedented violence (300,000 dead), allowed Moscow to show the amoral effectiveness of its action and to establish an authoritarian power supported by the FSB forces under the pretext of reinforcing national security provisions, to the detriment of individual freedoms, especially of expression. Today, the regime of anti-terrorist operations established in 2000 is still in force. Although Russia is opening up economically to liberalism, from a political point of view authoritarianism prevails, with the omnipotence of the leader, following the example of the tsars or Stalin.

In 1922, the Autonomous Republic of South Ossetia was attached to Georgia. In 1989, it entered into military conflict with the Georgian central power, which denied it any right to express its identity. When Georgia became independent, civil war quickly broke out between the State Council of Shevardnadze, the former president Gamsakhurdia and the independence fighters of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, former autonomous republics of the USSR. As soon as the USSR fell, South Ossetia declared itself independent from Georgia, arms in hand. In 1992, Russia intervened in the war alongside the Ossetians. Moscow and Tbilisi then mutually recognized their territorial integrity and provided for the peaceful settlement of the conflict. In August 2008, as the majority of South Ossetians had Russian passports, President Medvedev decided to intervene militarily to protect the population and force Georgia to make peace, in response to Tbilisi's desire to join the European Union and NATO. The war initiated by Georgia against the separatists led to an instant and victorious Russian response. The result was an "ethnic cleansing" of ethnic Georgians. Russia recognizes the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which is condemned by the members of the European Union and the United States.

In Abkhazia, the Georgian authorities accepted an over-representation of Abkhazians in the autonomous region in exchange for abandoning separatism. The war that followed allowed the Abkhazians to drive 270,000 Georgians out of the autonomous region and reverse the demographic ratio in their favour. Since the end of the fighting, the Abkhazians, firmly supported by Russia, have maintained their desire for independence or to become part of Russia. Abkhazia adopted a new constitution in November 1994 and proclaimed its independence by referendum on October 3, 1999, recognized by fewer than 10 countries. The separatists, mostly Orthodox, seek autonomous status within the Moscow Patriarchate, while they are attached to the Georgian Patriarchate. Religious considerations in the Caucasus are always put forward, especially since the collapse of the USSR.



However, Russia's military missions are dependent on heavy financial constraints after the high human cost of the dual economic transition and military conversion. The Russian army and the military-industrial complex have suffered a significant loss of funding from the Ministry of Defense, due to price inflation for military equipment, mainly adapted to the nuclear sector. The procurement policy is still insufficient and forces the naval, land and space forces to adapt their strategies to the funding granted. In addition, the resources made available to the armed forces in terms of equipment and training are clearly inferior to those of their foreign counterparts.

Finally, despite Vladimir Putin's declared will, the professionalization of the forces is made difficult by its cost. Halving the number of men from 1.5 million to 800,000, the declared objective, would cost more than 200 billion rubles, which is still a little less than a third of total military expenditure. In this context, the effort required takes time, all the more so since conventional forces no longer have the deterrent role they had in the Soviet Union. The Chechen experience has highlighted Russia's relative powerlessness in asymmetric conflicts, the weakness of the strategies put in place and the insufficient effectiveness of the weapons available. While Russian industry is still capable of producing the weapons necessary for the restoration of its forces, financing them is more problematic, unless one engages in a war economy logic. The modernization of conventional forces is part of a purely dissuasive approach, given the hypothetical nature of threats from the great powers, including China, concerning Russian territory.

Even if it can no longer claim to have universal industrial and military skills, Russia has made significant efforts in research and development, with a view to forcing companies to modernize and to regain competitiveness in military products on the war field and in exports. It has undoubtedly not lost its ambitions, but times are hard for it with the delicate learning of markets, globalization and the progressive distancing of its historical allies. However, if it no longer has the global influence of yesteryear, it remains a great military and nuclear power with which the world must always count.

Russia has undergone a serious power crisis and is having difficulty asserting itself internationally and strategically. However, it has important assets, now that the restoration of public services and justice has begun. Its gas and oil production provides significant support to the economy as a whole and it has the economic means to sanction, if necessary, European countries that are heavily dependent on these

energy materials. With Vladimir Putin, the desire to restore Russia's military, political and strategic power is an increasingly strong objective. The question is whether he will personally have the time to do so, since he will have to give up his mandate as President. Unless the constitution is changed in due course. Russia is still a military superpower, probably the most determined to use its nuclear forces if necessary, given the gag order that has been placed for so many years on the unspoken expectations of the national public.

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