

# NATO-RUSSIA DYNAMICS:

## Prospects for reconstitution of Russian military power

A VIEW FROM THE EASTERN FLANK



By Andrew A. Michta and Joslyn A. Brodfuehrer

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#### Cover

Russian service members ride on armored vehicles during a military parade on Victory Day, which marks the 79th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two, in Red Square in Moscow, Russia, May 9, 2024. REUTERS/Evgenia Novozhenina

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## Executive summary

**T**he Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, brought war to the North Atlantic Alliance’s doorstep—altering the political-military dynamics between NATO and its neighbor to the east. Since the Russian invasion, NATO has been undergoing a dramatic change that has impacted its plans, command structure, Force Model, and capabilities requirements. The effectiveness of this change must be gauged against the adversary’s ability to field its forces and resource them in a way that negatively impacts the Supreme Allied Commander Europe’s ability to execute the new regional plans. The delta between how quickly Russia can rebuild its military and how quickly NATO can rearm, especially the European allies, will define the risk level for the Alliance should deterrence fail. A credible assessment of the speed with which Russia can reconstitute and expand its military—especially its land forces component, which has been significantly attritted during the current campaign in Ukraine—is crucial to accurately assessing NATO’s overall force posture and ability to respond should Russia choose to attack a member of the Alliance. Here, the expertise and assessments of the United States’ allies most exposed to the Russian threat along the eastern flank offer valuable insights from the frontline, augmented by their regional expertise and understanding of Russian culture, politics, and military infused with centuries of experience of living next door to Russia.

In support of United States European Command’s Russia Strategic Initiative, the Atlantic Council organized two workshops—in Warsaw, Poland, and in Helsinki, Finland—to gain a better understanding of alternative futures for Russian military reconstitution and its implications for security on the European continent. The workshops were designed to assess (1) how Russia will reconstitute its land forces in response to ongoing developments in Ukraine and NATO force adaptation, (2) the vulnerabilities hindering Russia’s vision for the reconstitution of its military, and (3) the threat of future Russian capabilities to the transatlantic security architecture.

### Key takeaways from this line of effort include:

- Russia has demonstrated that it can fight and mobilize at the same time.
- The pace of Russian military reconstitution has been faster than Western analysts expected, including both refurbished and new equipment and manpower mobilization. Still, the readiness of the Russian armed forces is not likely to be the principal driver of decision-making in Moscow; rather, any decision to attack a NATO member will factor in the “correlation of forces,” with the goal of exploiting the Alliance in a moment of weakness.
- Based on production data, the biggest risk of Russia attacking a NATO member will be in 2025–26 when peak production, refurbishment, and training/readiness lines intersect. One analyst projected Russia will produce well over one thousand tanks annually by then.
- Moscow will not, however, make decisions based on objective indices of readiness alone. It will decide to move against a NATO state when it deems that the window of opportunity has opened—hence, understanding the political culture that undergirds Russia’s decision-making is as important as having an accurate assessment of its military capabilities.

We are in a race against time, with the delta between Russian force reconstitution and NATO’s investment in real, exercised military capabilities constituting the level of risk in the European theater in the event of a full-scale war. Closing the gap will require NATO to prioritize rearmament across the board, including its defense industrial base in Europe and the United States.

# Introduction

**W**ith the return of war to the European continent, the United States and its NATO allies are facing down the most volatile security environment since the end of the Cold War. Despite losses incurred to its land forces in Ukraine since February 2022, Russia has mobilized its economy for war and has embarked on a major reconstitution of its forces to regain its warfighting edge in preparation for a long-term confrontation with NATO member states. The pace and scale of Russia's efforts to rebuild its military amid ongoing war has been unexpected, making it difficult to estimate accurate timelines. In early 2023, US intelligence officials testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that it would take a decade or more for Russia to totally recover from the losses it had sustained in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Months later, the German Council on Foreign Relations offered its own estimate, predicting that it would likely take five to eight years for Russia to rebuild.<sup>2</sup> Frontline allies on NATO's eastern flank have warned that the timeline could be much shorter. Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur was quoted as saying that Moscow needed no more than "two to four years for Russia to restore some capabilities or even the same capabilities they had" before the war,<sup>3</sup> and leading regional voices like Jacek Siewiera, head of Poland's National Security Bureau, believe the Alliance has a three-year window to prepare for war with Russia.<sup>4</sup>

Continued conflict in Ukraine, coupled with the rapid acceleration of Russian industrial production and Moscow's threats to station troops near the country's 830-mile-long border with new NATO ally Finland,<sup>5</sup> leave no room for doubt that Russia poses a chronic threat to the United States and its network of

allies across Europe—and this is unlikely to change anytime soon. What remains uncertain is how Russia will reconstitute its land forces in response to the changing battlefield in Ukraine and broader NATO adaptation and force posture alterations. To better understand Russia's calculus, the Atlantic Council convened experts and officials from frontline US allies most vulnerable to the Russian threat for workshops in Warsaw, Poland, and Helsinki, Finland, in spring 2024. This issue brief captures their perspectives, outlining trends in Russia's military reconstitution and their implications for Russia-NATO relations now and in the future.

The report is organized as follows: First, it provides the context for the overall transformation of United States European Command's (EUCOM) area of responsibility (AOR), highlighting the most significant strategic aspects of the ongoing NATO transformation to place assessments on the scope of Russian force reconstitution and the process as gauged by Polish and Finnish experts in a larger context of the current conditions across the AOR. Next, it summarizes the insights gathered in Warsaw and Helsinki, respectively, identifying their commonalities and differences. It then summarizes overall conclusions, melding the two views to provide a larger regional assessment of where those Polish, Finnish, and Baltic assessments of Russian force reconstitution align and where they diverge. This summary section also presents several unanticipated strategic insights that have informed the views presented by European analysts on Russian force reconstitution and on the overall threat Moscow poses to NATO along its eastern flank. Finally, the report sets forth a targeted set of recommendations for EUCOM.

1 Murray Brewster, "Ravaged by war, Russia's army is rebuilding with surprising speed," *CBC*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/russia-army-ukraine-war-1.7122808#:~:text=Russia's%20military%20has%20suffered%20enormous,in%20Ukraine%20and%20throughout%20Europe>.

2 Ibid.

3 "Russia can rebuild its military in 2-4 years, Estonian minister says," *LRT*, October 19, 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1803994/russia-can-rebuild-its-military-in-2-4-years-estonian-minister-says>.

4 "Polish security chief: NATO Eastern Flank states have 3 years to prepare for Russia attack," *ERR*, December 3, 2023, <https://news.err.ee/1609183456/polish-security-chief-nato-eastern-flank-states-have-3-years-to-prepare-for-russia-attack>.

5 Elisabeth Braw, "Putin miscalculated on Finland's border," *Politico*, April 8, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-russia-miscalculated-on-finland-border/>.

# The changing EUCOM AOR and NATO's adaptation

The Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 began the process of returning NATO to its collective deterrence and defense mission—but the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 accelerated and completed that process. With the return of war to the European continent, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Forces Europe (SHAPE) is being transformed into a strategic warfighting command and EUCOM is at the center of this ongoing transformation. However, even before Russia's second attack on Ukraine, NATO had already taken steps to reorient the Alliance to deterrence and defense. In 2020, NATO adopted the Concept for the Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), which was further refined and augmented with regional plans in 2023 at NATO's summit in Vilnius.<sup>6</sup> Considered the overarching strategic-level guide to modernizing NATO's collective defense system, the DDA is not a return to the past but rather a strategic framework for the Alliance to make a decisive turn to modern strategy to deter twenty-first-century military threats after decades of crisis response and management operations. The DDA is, in short, at the heart of the historic military adaptation of the Alliance.

The DDA emphasizes that preventing the transition to conflict starts in peacetime—not in crisis—and requires strong military deterrence to contest an adversary's attempts to gain advantage over the Alliance. For defense, the DDA holds that NATO force employment in response to an attack ensures the cross-domain integration of mutually reinforcing strategic-scale operations across the Alliance area. All such planning must take place against an accurate assessment of Russian military capabilities at a given time, with projections about their future growth and evolution.

Various open-source estimates place Russian losses in the war at hundreds of thousands killed and wounded. In a recent interview, French Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné put the total Russian losses since the beginning of the war at five

hundred thousand, including one hundred and fifty thousand killed in action.<sup>7</sup> While Russia does not disclose its casualties, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy put the number of Russians killed in action at one hundred and eighty thousand, while British estimates put the total number of Russian battlefield casualties at approximately four hundred and fifty thousand.<sup>8</sup> US Assistant Secretary of Defense Celeste Wallander recently testified that Russia's armed forces have suffered at least three hundred and fifteen thousand casualties in the fight, and Russia has expended \$211 billion to equip, deploy, maintain, and sustain operations in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> These figures have prompted Moscow to increase the maximum draft age to thirty,<sup>10</sup> opening a potential pool of about two million available recruits to help realize and ultimately exceed then Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu's stated December 2022 goal to increase the size of Russia's active-duty military to 1.5 million people.

To deter and, if need be, effectively defend the Euro-Atlantic AOR, the command structure under SHAPE rests on three Joint Force Commands (Brunssum, Naples, and Norfolk) and three Theater Component Commands (Allied Air Command or AIRCOM, Allied Land Command or LANDCOM, and Allied Maritime Command or MARCOM). LANDCOM is supposed to have multiple NATO Land Corps. Clearly, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) will need to rely on European conventional capabilities to a much greater degree, especially as the United States is now confronted by two near-peer adversaries in two major theaters (one of them in Europe and the other in the Indo-Pacific) at a time when its Joint Force is not formatted to provide the bulk of forces for both theaters. The effectiveness of this approach will be tested by the force the Russians are able to array against NATO forces. Hence, having an accurate assessment of the rates of Russian force reconstitution—especially the timelines—is a key for both EUCOM and NATO planning.

6 Stephen R. Covington, "NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA)," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, August 2, 2023, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/natos-concept-deterrence-and-defence-euro-atlantic-area-dda>.

7 "Russia's Military Setback is Apparent' - France Estimates 150,000 Russian Soldiers Killed in Ukraine," *Kyiv Post*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/32056#:~:text=%2C%22%20he%20added.-,Russia%20has%20not%20disclosed%20information%20on%20its%20casualties.,killed%20or%20wounded%20in%20Ukraine>.

8 Ibid.

9 "House Armed Services on National Security Challenges in Europe," *Politico Pro*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.eucom.mil/document/42806/house-armed-services-on-national-security-challenge-in-europe-gen-christopher-cavolipdf>.

10 "Putin Signs Law Raising Maximum Draft Age," *Moscow Times*, August 4, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/08/04/putin-signs-law-raising-maximum-draft-age-a82061>.



German soldiers transport US soldiers in an M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicle as they cross Vistula River during NATO Dragon-24, part of the Steadfast Defender 2024 exercise, in Korzeniewo, Poland, March 4, 2024. Source: REUTERS/Kacper Pempel

At the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid, leaders agreed to a new NATO Force Model designed to deliver an allied response at a much greater scale and at higher readiness than the current NATO Response Force, which it will replace.<sup>11</sup> The new Force Model will provide a larger pool of high-readiness forces across domains, which will be preassigned to specific plans for the defense of allies. The Force Model will improve NATO's ability to respond at very short notice to any contingency and enable allies to make more forces available to NATO on an assured basis. The Force Model rests on three tiers of force readiness levels: NATO will have well over one hundred thousand ready troops in up to ten days, around two hundred thousand in ten to thirty days, and at least five hundred thousand in thirty to one hundred and eighty days. Assessing correctly how quickly Russia can reconstitute its military will be an important variable as to whether these numbers and timelines are sufficient or need to be revised.

Today, NATO planners are grappling with the following strategic and operational questions:

- 1 How should NATO balance conventional and strategic deterrence, especially nuclear escalation management?

- 2 What should be targeted to maximize deterrence and lower the risk of vertical and horizontal escalation (e.g., installations, depots, ammunition dumps, elements of critical infrastructure, centers of political power)? These are the foundational issues SACEUR must work through, in addition to a major logistical challenge that NATO will have to confront—both in terms of movement across the Atlantic Ocean and how to ensure that, when NATO disperses its logistics to ensure that they are not easily targeted in today's near-transparent battlefield, that it does not undercut its own operations.

- 3 Finally, how can NATO augment the United States Transportation Command's (TRANSCOM) capacity to ensure the United States can move people and equipment across the Atlantic Ocean in a crisis?

For all the above problem sets, SACEUR has underscored on several occasions that EUCOM and NATO must gauge their capabilities against the capabilities of the adversary, especially to closely track how quickly Russia can reconstitute its land forces relative to how fast NATO can rearm. This is critical to gauging the level of risk when executing NATO regional plans should SACEUR be ordered to implement them.

<sup>11</sup> Under the NATO Response Force, the Alliance would make available forty thousand troops in less than fifteen days.

# Methodology and research questions

In support of EUCOM's Russia Strategic Initiative, the Atlantic Council organized identical workshops in Warsaw, Poland, and in Helsinki, Finland, on March 12, 2024, and March 14, 2024, respectively, to gain a better understanding of the trends and trajectories of Russian military reconstitution and its implications for Russia-NATO relations.

The daylong workshops brought together top regional experts from the academic, government, military, and think tank communities—the workshops were held in cooperation with the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) in Warsaw and the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) in Helsinki—for discussions guided by but not limited to the following questions:

- 1 What is your best assessment of where the Russians are with respect to the reconstitution of their land forces, and what accelerated developments might we expect to see in the short, medium, and long term?
- 2 What priorities will guide Russia's military reform and reconstitution, and on what timeline can we expect the Russian military to restore—and multiply—its military capabilities? Essentially—along what timelines and with what capabilities should SACEUR and NATO defense planners be thinking as they prepare for Russian military reconstitution?
- 3 In what ways might Russia's objectives align or misalign with its capacity to pursue them?
- 4 How will actors such as China, North Korea, and Iran support Moscow's efforts, and what role will Belarus play when it comes to Russian reconstitution (e.g., armament production, force deployment, and training)?
- 5 What are Russia's strategic goals in relation to the United States and NATO? When and what factors might push Russia to consider a direct military confrontation with the Alliance?
- 6 How will NATO's response to the war in Ukraine affect Russia's military reconstitution and strategic posture after the war ends, and how might potential end states in Ukraine shape the country's relationship with NATO allies and broader engagement across Europe?
- 7 How does NATO enlargement change Russia's calculus? What does Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO mean for Russian threat perceptions in Northern Europe? And, what adjustments might Russia make to its force posture and capability mix in response to the reality of an additional 830 miles of border with NATO?
- 8 What elements of Russian reconstitution pose the greatest threat to the United States and its NATO allies now and beyond the war in Ukraine?

To answer these questions, each workshop began with an extended, two-part plenary session to facilitate free-flowing discussion. The plenary discussion was followed by scenario-based breakout groups for a more in-depth discussion of alternative futures for a reconstituted Russian military and the impact each scenario could have on the European security environment. The workshops ended with another plenary session to review findings from the breakout discussions and assess broader trends and takeaways about the future of Russia's military reconstitution.

Whereas Polish experts and officials dominated the workshop in Warsaw, the convening in Helsinki included participation from the Finnish, Estonian, and Latvian Ministries of Defense. Despite significant differences in tradition and outlook, participants voiced several common perceptions regarding Russia's post-Ukraine trajectory. Both the key commonalities and takeaways that differed across workshops are explored in the sections that follow.



# The view from Warsaw

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## PERCEPTIONS SHAPE RUSSIA'S POLICY DECISIONS

In the discussion with Polish experts and officials, their underlying message was that any accurate assessment of the speed with which the Russians can reconstitute their forces must consider the context of Moscow's overall strategic priorities in the region. Russia aims to subjugate Ukraine so that it can mount a challenge to Central and Eastern Europe. A historical imperative for Moscow drives this, as Russia has historically defined its global status as a great power through its influence in Europe and ability to shape the Continent's security. Russia wants to be ready when either (1) the United States pulls out of Europe or (2) the United States is no longer willing or able to defend it. The crucial variable for Russia is how the United States views its relationship with Europe going forward. Moscow is watching closely the evolution of domestic debates in the United States and will likely seize the opportunity to lunge across NATO's fence even if it is not fully ready in terms of its military capabilities. In other words, Russia may not be militarily ready, but should it see a window of opportunity in the form of US retrenchment or potential withdrawal from Europe, it may consider the situation to its advantage and move.

One of the underlying themes during the discussion in Warsaw was the view that the Poles have both the capabilities and the will to continue supporting and supplying Ukraine, regardless of the pressure this puts on their own stocks and overall military readiness. Analysts also underscored Moscow's determination to continue the fight and do whatever is necessary to reconstitute its armed forces and compensate for its losses. But experts and officials underscored that while the West has the money to provide the requisite capabilities to offset the Russian forces and give the Ukrainians a fighting chance, the United States is, in effect, self-detering, showing excessive restraint when it comes to the risk of escalation. They argued that—numbers aside—in the case of the Russian military, political will is a force multiplier that should be factored into any US assessments of Russian force reconstitution. As a senior analyst from PISM observed: "If you have political will, you are in a stronger position."

Another aspect underscored by Polish analysts during the workshop was the fact that any assessment of how quickly Russia will reconstitute its military must be placed in the "systemic context of Russian governance" (i.e., account for the fact that in Moscow, a small group of people makes policy decisions and that decision-making is channeled through a "narrow decision-making process"). Although this constrained pipeline can often result in miscalculation, it also gives the decision-making

process a degree of unpredictability when it comes to how and when force will be employed. One could argue that the way the decision to invade Ukraine again in 2022 unfolded proves the point. This should alert Western analysts to the fact that a capabilities calculus need not be the principal driver when it comes to the application of military power, for Russia has shown a pattern of miscalculation and hence is likely to miscalculate more. However, such miscalculations have not undercut the regime's ability to function thus far.

Polish experts and officials repeatedly underscored that the West is "psychologically weaker and risk-averse, not prepared to fight, and not ready to sacrifice as we value our good life above all else." They expect that Russia will move well past three hundred and sixty thousand troops deployed in Ukraine and that by 2026, this number will have doubled. They believe Russian mobilization is on track, and that Moscow is doing everything it can to achieve these goals. Accordingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime—having overcome initial setbacks, especially the shock of the brief rebellion by mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin—believes it is now on a winning trajectory in Ukraine, and it views the West as increasingly uncertain of itself and reluctant to continue supporting Ukraine, especially after Kyiv's failed second offensive. Russian planners also bank on the political calendar in the United States and across Europe to constrain the West's ability to counter their force reconstitution. Polish experts underscored that the United States and Europe were unlikely to do anything significant in the run-up to the NATO summit in Washington in July and the US presidential election in November but that the Russians would go to great lengths to score significant gains in Ukraine before these milestone events to humiliate the West. This increases the risk of more instability and reckless scenarios driven by Moscow's calculation/miscalculation in the coming months. One analyst suggested that Russian actions against a NATO member state could be in the cards, especially if Moscow decides the Alliance is too fragmented for collective defense enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty to remain credible.

There was consensus among experts and officials in attendance that the next three years will be crucial for European security when factoring in Russia's ability to reconstitute its forces and delays on the NATO side. One analyst argued that Russia has shown that it can both fight and mobilize simultaneously. Russia has allocated \$160 billion this year alone for additional defense spending, and this figure will likely grow in the coming years, with Russia already having more than doubled defense spending from last year. Several analysts emphasized that Russia is relying on sheer numbers—its numerical advan-

tage in terms of numbers of troops, artillery, and munitions—as though having abandoned former defense minister Anatoly Serdyukov’s reforms, the country has returned to the playbook from the Soviet era.

Several experts and officials underscored that while Moscow may be aware that it doesn’t have the requisite capabilities to defeat NATO, there may be a “moment of opportunity” when Putin will decide to move militarily against the Alliance—and that the case will likely involve one of the Baltic states, which Putin must consider to be the weakest link in the Alliance. One analyst also suggested that Russia’s goal could be to develop capabilities to fight both in Ukraine and against NATO in the Baltics, especially if the Russians are planning for minor operations in the Baltics to destabilize the flank and fracture the Alliance. Most of all, how the situation in Ukraine develops will have a massive impact on where the Baltic security equation ultimately ends up. If we have a cease-fire in Ukraine, Russia will be free to redeploy some of its troops north.

In light of the equipment, ammunition, and supply lines Russia receives from China, Iran, Belarus, and North Korea, the next two years will be fraught with the greatest risk for NATO, as Moscow may come to believe that even if it is not yet fully ready, there will never be a more favorable moment to widen the conflict and move directly against NATO. This assessment is in line with what Polish experts and officials have underscored repeatedly, namely that any assessment of the level of risk from Russia must factor in not only the numbers and combat-capable units but also Russian intelligence estimates and their overall assessment of the old-fashioned “correlation of forces” between Russia and NATO. They know that their equipment may not be the best, but they can use it effectively because the West is not ready to confront them.

## CULTURE MATTERS

For Polish experts and officials, another variable to consider when assessing Russia’s force reconstitution and readiness to go to war against NATO is the profound cultural change underway in Russian society. Today, one can speak of the ongoing militarization of Russian society, starting in the classroom, where students as young as fourteen and fifteen years old are being indoctrinated and prepared to fight for the motherland. There is systematic messaging across the Russian media that the country is at war with NATO and in a civilizational struggle against the West. These narratives have been reinforced by constant references to the Great Patriotic War, with Ukraine

described as an inheritor of Nazism. This “shaping of the narrative” is part of Moscow’s effort to prepare Russia for a long-term confrontation with NATO. One publication by a leading PISM analyst present at the workshop in Warsaw, which was featured in the discussion, concludes that “Russia has successfully overcome the initial crisis in its operations in Ukraine and has launched a large-scale transformation of its armed forces.”<sup>12</sup> It argues that reforms in the Russian military have been largely driven by the lessons learned the hard way on the battlefields of Ukraine.

A salient feature of the discussion in Poland was the repeated shifting of the focus from Russia’s readiness to the “relative unreadiness” of the West. Experts and officials underscored that Moscow will put a premium on exploiting fissures within NATO to accomplish its strategic objectives. It will seek to “fracture the Alliance through hybrid means as well as direct threats,” especially when it comes to the threat of vertical escalation to nuclear weapons. NATO should be ready for Russia to deploy the full spectrum of cyber, information warfare, and other hybrid operations, including interfering in the West’s elections and in its “cultural and political infrastructure.”<sup>13</sup> Another senior PISM analyst warned that since NATO remains constrained in its response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, Putin considers this “self-restraint” as an enabler facilitating his plans and reducing the “readiness requirement” when it comes to planning a war against NATO.

One participant in Warsaw posed an intriguing question as to why Russia did not escalate against the Alliance but instead chose to launch a drive into Ukraine. We should keep in mind that such decisions are driven not just by capabilities considerations but by historical and cultural factors. The participant suggested that the West is too beholden to the “numbers game” and has failed to pay sufficient attention to other factors that are sui generis to Putin’s regime. The risk Russia poses, he suggested, is not just a capabilities game; it has a lot to do with Russian culture and society, the trajectory of empire, and the fact that Putin is aging and may feel he does not have much time left to complete his imperial conquest. Putin may believe he can push his military to move sooner rather than later, even if it is not fully prepared for war against NATO. He will also be watching closely if time works against him (i.e., whether there is enough willpower in the Alliance to rearm at speed and scale or if Europe, in particular, continues to expect some sort of a political deal with Moscow, Berlin, and Paris to avoid tough choices). So, we should assume that while the United States obsesses about vertical escalation to nuclear, the risk of horizontal esca-

12 Anna Maria Dyer, *Stan sił zbrojnych Rosji po dwóch latach od agresji na Ukrainę* [Russia’s Armed Forces Two Years After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine], PISM, February 28, 2024, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/stan-sil-zbrojnych-rosji-po-dwoch-latach-od-agresji-na-ukraine>.

13 State-sponsored Russian propagandists are likely to seize upon the recent upheaval on US campuses to exploit divisions in American society over the war in Gaza much as Russian operatives sought to exacerbate racial tensions following the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.

lation is much higher and growing, with a real danger that the conflict may spread to NATO territory.

Understanding Russia’s rationale for escalating in Ukraine instead of testing NATO itself could be a good predictor of where Russia is likely to move next. Since Russia has moved militarily against countries that were once an integral part of the Soviet “inner empire” (i.e., the USSR itself) thus far, the Baltic states are the likely initial targets for any future Russian move against NATO. Other workshop participants disagreed, arguing that historically Russia has sought to enter Europe across the Central European Plain, and therefore that—should Moscow choose to attack NATO directly—it would likely strike from Belarus into Poland. In both cases, analysts underscored that historical and cultural factors—especially Putin’s repeated assertions that “there is no such thing as a Ukrainian nation”—would play a role in Russia’s subsequent imperial moves.

The question of Russian culture was also brought up when it comes to how the country is likely to respond to NATO’s support for Ukraine and how Putin will employ nationalist tropes from the Great Patriotic War to mobilize Russians to respond. This “civilizational aspect” of the second Russia invasion of Ukraine was an undercurrent of the workshop in Warsaw, leading some to argue that the Russian population will be willing to endure more to reconstitute the force faster since Putin has made the case that Russia is facing an existential threat from the West. One analyst warned not to dismiss Putin’s message of the “denazification of Ukraine” as sheer propaganda, for it resonates with the historical narrative of the Soviet victory in World War II and remains a potent cultural trope.

Another takeaway from the discussion was the fact that “reconstitution” is not only about military hardware or sheer numbers. If that were the case, one could come up with relatively accurate simulations and projections by looking at intelligence data on the capacity of the Russian military-industrial complex while also factoring in the flow of military assistance from China, Iran, and North Korea. We also need clarity on how effectively Russia has recruited and trained its new soldiers, and most of all their motivation and morale. These are all qualitative indices that are harder to assess accurately, for they speak to Russian society’s national and cultural cohesion. Our standard assumption is that those Russian officers and soldiers who survive combat will be better, tougher, and, most importantly, able to train the new recruits more effectively. But—as one attendee posited—these soldiers may also be tired, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and dispirited, more likely to demoralize the new ranks than inspire them.

In short, during the workshop in Warsaw, analysts asked whether the Russians were simply rebuilding their capability to replace the battlefield losses or whether they were, in fact,

“building better,” fielding a more capable force that would present a much tougher problem for the Ukrainians and the West. To put it differently, rather than learning new lessons, has the Russian army responded to the conflict by defaulting to the old Soviet lessons of mass rather than maneuver? As one expert said: “Are the Russians building better forces or just bigger forces?” The Russians are still very poor at jointness, though there has been some improvement. Also, Western attention has focused on the Russian land forces because they sustained most of the damage, but those forces alone cannot win the war. And, finally, which aspects of Russian history and culture do we believe are the key drivers of their force reconstitution? If we call those correctly, we will have a more accurate picture of how capable the Russian military is likely to be going forward.

## THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR

Part of the discussion focused on how the Russians fight, as this must be factored into the overall assessment of their capabilities and what their force reconstitution is likely to deliver. Polish experts and officials in attendance argued that the Russian approach to warfare still puts a premium on numbers rather than on the relative effectiveness of this or that operational or tactical approach. To understand how the Russians will fight going forward, it is important to understand their political objectives in this campaign and what they may try to achieve in a future conflict with NATO. In Ukraine, the objective is to obliterate independent Ukraine, dismantle it as a functioning state, and incorporate as much of the territory and the population as possible into Russia. This is in line with Putin’s consistent “Ukraine denial” he has manifested for years in multiple speeches or interactions with Western leaders. When it comes to fighting NATO, the objective is to fracture the Alliance politically, rendering it incapable of pooling its military resources and executing a coherent defense plan. So, while Russia has improved at conducting multidomain operations since February 2022, it is still not where it needs to be relative to the West. But it intends to offset those deficiencies with mass—hence Moscow’s plan to have a 1.5-million-strong military.

A decision by Russia to mount an attack on NATO—via a missile strike or Russian forces actually crossing NATO’s border—ultimately rests on Moscow’s calculations about a potential NATO response. Would the Alliance act in unison, or would NATO be riven by internal divisions between the eastern flank countries, on the one hand, and Germany and France on the other? If Putin calculated, based on his intelligence assessment, that the Alliance is sufficiently divided and unable to respond as one, he may be tempted to launch a probing attack above or below the threshold of war. In this scenario, the relative level of force reconstitution would be less of a factor than the political calculus in the Kremlin. In other words, the effectiveness of Russia’s



Volunteers, who joined the Russian armed forces and took military training in Chechnya, board a plane before departing for positions of the Akhmat battalion involved in Russia's military campaign in Ukraine, at an airport in Grozny, Russia, January 17, 2024.  
Source: REUTERS/Chingis Kondarov

force reconstitution would be a secondary consideration relative to the level of allied unity/disunity in a crisis.

The fact that the West has displayed a near-obsessive preoccupation with managing escalation in Ukraine has sent a powerful signal about what the “center of gravity” should be in any future use of Russian military power against NATO. In contrast, Russian force reconstitution is a secondary driver for Moscow’s decision-making in this case. Putin has most likely concluded that the most effective approach to warfare against the West is for Russia to create and sustain an enduring fear of escalation, while also sending signals that if the Alliance adheres to its self-imposed limits and manages escalation, Russia is not likely to escalate vertically to nuclear, though it will maintain that ace up its sleeve at all times. Here, the speed at which Russia will reconstitute its forces feeds into the political targeting of the larger Russian approach to warfare. In effect, it turns Russia into a chronic and existential threat to the West, with constantly shifting pressure points that increase the level of stress within NATO and push the Alliance toward an accommodation with Russia on its terms.

The war in Ukraine has already shown how far Russia seems prepared to go as it revises its approach to warfare. When it comes to personnel, the Russian approach to reconstitution seems to be “good enough” (i.e., raise enough manpower so Russia can stay in the fight for “as long as it takes” to meet and exceed the West’s similar commitment). The recent changes to the maximum draft age for Russian males with eligibility extended up to thirty years of age ensure that Russia will retain the flexibility when it comes to manpower and will be able to scale up beyond the 1.5 million current target for the armed forces if need be. Russia’s force reconstitution and effectiveness on the battlefield are likely to be positively impacted by its improved training and through an increase in the number of training sites. Insufficient training of soldiers remains a central challenge for the Russians—but Russia is learning from Ukraine. Moscow plans to course correct by expanding its network of training centers and developing instructional materials. In the short term, Russia’s efforts to rapidly bolster its personnel via conscription will weigh heavily on quantity without much qualitative edge, but in the long term, we should expect an increase in the number of well-trained soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

14 Dyner, *Stan sił zbrojnych Rosji*, footnote 11, [https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/stan-sil-zbrojnych-rosji-po-dwoch-latach-od-agresji-na-ukraine#\\_ftn11](https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/stan-sil-zbrojnych-rosji-po-dwoch-latach-od-agresji-na-ukraine#_ftn11).

The Russian military is fighting better in Ukraine and seems more prepared and equipped than a year ago, though not up to Western training and equipment standards. Once again, the “good enough” mantra seems to be the overarching approach to Russia’s military reconstitution, with a premium on numbers. The same goes for Russia’s defense production, which it has ramped up sufficiently to offset its losses and more. Russia has also dipped into its strategic reserves to accelerate the process of backfilling for the losses in Ukraine, both in terms of equipment and ammunition. Russia is increasingly capable of producing new components, for instance, new tank engines, not just refurbishing old equipment. Based on production data, the biggest risk will be in the 2025–26 period when the peak new production, refurbishment, and training/readiness lines intersect. One analyst projected that the Russians would be producing well over one thousand tanks per year by then.

Overall, Polish experts and officials emphasized that even as we can point to some key trends that are likely to favor a more rapid reconstitution of the Russian military than the current consensus in the West, there are many unknowns that we should acknowledge, especially when judging the relative effectiveness of new platforms, for instance, drones, compared to missiles and conventional artillery shells. We need a more complete picture of the relative impact of such platforms on the overall cost and speed of Russian force reconstitutions, and the anticipated effectiveness of the military Russia is likely to field against NATO. Even if we can credibly assess the veracity of the Russian claim that they can increase the production of artillery shells to four to five million per year, those claims must be assessed against the effectiveness of the new platforms used on the battlefield to gain a better picture of how dangerous the reconstituted Russian military will be. Also, can we reasonably project that Russia will have the capacity to field one new tank division a year, which would give it five additional tank divisions by the end of the decade? Several PISM analysts suggested that five years should be a realistic timeline to compare where Russia is likely to be and factor NATO’s rearmament rates against that to create an overall picture of the balance of power in EUCOM’s AOR.

The final point raised during the workshop was the importance of remembering the old Soviet-era adage about the “correlation of forces.” Russian decision-makers assess their relative power position vis-à-vis the West based on a cross-section of political, economic, and military factors, with trend lines favoring them or their adversaries in a given theater. This is a central point, as it highlights the opportunistic aspects of how Russia reaches decision points, and why the overall assessment of the correlation of forces may short-circuit what Western analysts

would consider the quantitative data driving Moscow’s choices. The correlation of forces approach means that Moscow will actively employ all aspects of state power, including active measures,<sup>15</sup> information operations, threatening nuclear escalation as a “slow-motion unfolding drama” to fracture the Alliance, and meddling in elections across the West. In short, in the Russian way of war, we must anticipate that Moscow will threaten “below the threshold” to intimidate NATO and thereby shift the correlation of forces in its favor.

## THE PRINCIPAL RISK

There was consensus in Warsaw that Russia’s principal objective in reconstituting its forces is to fracture NATO’s will to resist in the event of a direct threat. The Russian forces are growing rapidly both to complete the conquest or annihilation of Ukraine and to intimidate the West. The principal risk for NATO is that Alliance cohesion will not hold and that political unity with respect to Ukraine will fragment. The overarching objective for Russia is to drive NATO forces and infrastructure out of the eastern flank countries. In this regard, not enough attention is being paid in the West to the role of Belarus, whose military is now fully integrated with Russia’s and controlled from Moscow. Belarus also supports Russia’s wartime production, and some of its industries are modernizing. It has also cooperated with China (there is a Chinese industrial park outside Minsk). At a strategic level, when Putin thinks about NATO, he thinks of the United States; when Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka thinks about NATO, he thinks of Poland as his most immediate adversary. Lukashenka specifically mentioned that Poland’s acquisition of two hundred and fifty Abrams SEPv3 tanks is a direct threat to Belarus, and there is ongoing Belarusian KGB activity in Poland, seeking to impair the country’s critical infrastructure and to infiltrate Polish society. These are all factors that directly and indirectly augment Russia’s force reconstitution. Belarus functions as a proxy for Russia in putting pressure on Poland, especially at the border, where the migration crisis has drawn several thousand Polish soldiers away from training to effectively serve as border guards.

Polish experts agreed that Ukraine is a test case for both Russia and NATO, especially when it comes to capabilities and staying power. It is especially important in the context of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and how that pullout reverberated across NATO. An added factor that has to be considered in assessing the relative strength and cohesion of NATO in the face of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and a possible direct threat to the allies is the extent to which, over the past three decades, Russian money and influence have become embed-

15 One expert brought up the recent attempt to sabotage a gas pipeline in Poland. Another mentioned Russian efforts to sabotage a railroad linking Poland to Ukraine to interrupt the flow of supplies.

ded in Europe, with attendant influence and corruption. Russia will continue to use those assets to weaken NATO's political resolve, run agents of influence within Europe and the United States, and exploit political fissures within democracies. Any future confrontation between Russia and NATO has to account for the fact that the West has not been able to galvanize the Global South to support Ukraine in the conflict. In fact, Russia will continue to rely on Chinese influence across the Global South, as well as its own, to undercut the Western resolve to resist further aggression.

One final point to consider when looking at the level of risk Russia's force reconstitution model will pose to NATO is the recentralization of its command and control, including the movement away from the battlegroup model, with authority being pulled back from the division level across the Russian armed forces. The recentralization of command and control, including the air force, suggests that the Russians are going back to the previous Soviet model and thinking about their mass army to be employed in a similar way. This would suggest that, unless NATO revisits the lessons from the Cold War, it may end up confronting a massive Russian force on its frontier in two to three years, with its own forces too

small for the task should Moscow decide to attack. Some of that threat could be offset by the fact that Russia is now producing weapons and munitions, especially missiles, with components pulled from a variety of sources—some inferior to what it used to utilize—so in the assessment of Russia's force reconstitution we need to factor in these qualitative differences. Nonetheless, Russia's reliance on mass and sheer numbers will present the greatest challenge for EUCOM and NATO planners, notwithstanding the gaps in the quality of Russian systems. And where those gaps become potentially decisive, Russia will always have the option of defaulting to the threat of nuclear escalation.

In the final analysis, Moscow will not make decisions based on objective indices of readiness as planners would in the West. The Russians are watching NATO and the United States and looking for areas of weakness to exploit. Moscow will decide to move against NATO if it deems that the window of opportunity has opened that gives it a reasonable prospect for success. In other words, understanding the political culture that undergirds Russia's military decision-making is at least as important—possibly more so—than having a solid assessment of its military capabilities.

# The view from Helsinki

## RUSSIA WILL REMAIN A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

The workshop in Finland shared several similarities with that in Poland, especially when it came to the overall assessment of the Russian threat. However, the meeting was also marked by many differences stemming from Finland’s long-standing tradition of military nonalignment prior to joining NATO in 2023, and its territorial defense strategy. What permeated the discussion in Helsinki was that—much like in Warsaw—the Finns remain level-headed and clear about the immediacy of the threat Russia poses to their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and continued independence. The memories of the 1939–40 Winter War, which ultimately cost Finland 11 percent of its territory, were never far from participants’ minds and always shaped the discussions. In that sense, much as it was the case in Poland, the two countries share a uniform view of Russia as a relentlessly expansionist imperial power on their borders, one that cannot be negotiated with in good faith and has to be contained, deterred, and, if need be, defended against. As one FIIA analyst put it, when it comes to Russia’s intent, “Finnish clarity always prevails.”

Finnish participants argued that several features are increasingly apparent in how Russia is reconstituting its military power, and that they add up to what can be called the “re-Sovietization of the military and the country.” In the realm of Russia’s economy, we are witnessing a return to a more statist economic model better suited for wartime production. This trend first registered itself in 2014—an indication that after the seizure of Crimea, Russia had begun to prepare for a follow-on invasion, with a goal of moving to import substitution and quasi-autarchy in areas critical to waging war. The current approach across Russia’s industry today, including its defense sector, is quantity over quality—a throwback to the past. Russia’s defense industry is producing hardware less capable than Western systems, but in numbers that outstrip the West’s production ability. Finnish experts and officials in attendance consider this shift in approach to production a significant threat, even if Russian weapon systems and munitions are technologically inferior to NATO’s. The analysts also suggested—in line here with what Polish experts highlighted—that Russian culture and its brutal methods of governance should be looked at as a factor in how quickly Moscow will be able to reconstitute its military to threaten NATO. The Russian state has defaulted increasingly to brutality and coercion to keep Russian society in line and to accelerate force reconstitution. One expert observed that the death of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny in a Russian prison on February 16, 2024, is but one indication of this accelerating

trend; everywhere, repressive measures are likely to become the dominant form of governance.

Again, like the Polish experts, workshop attendees in Finland agreed that the Russian timeline to complete force reconstitution and directly threaten NATO is two to three years. However, they expressed more skepticism than their Polish counterparts about whether that goal is achievable, suggesting that the timeline would likely stretch up to five years. Nonetheless, Russian society’s military reconstitution and overall militarization is currently Moscow’s top priority. In fact, Russia has historically been quite effective at “monothematic resource allocation,” or focusing maximum resources into one line of effort, echoing the old propaganda line from the Great Patriotic War: *vsyo dla fronta* (everything for the front). We see a similar dynamic today: wartime production and mobilization are top Russian priorities.

At the same time, in light of the historical parallels to the Soviet Union, one has to ask whether the Russians have learned anything from the past. Here, the answer has to be parsed more carefully, with the victory in World War II validating the Soviet army and its traditions, while the ultimate implosion of the Soviet economic and political system is a big question mark. Similar to the workshop in Warsaw, the conversation in Helsinki often devolved into history and culture, with parallels from the national mobilization during World War II invoked to describe today’s Russia. Moscow is trying to stoke patriotic fervor among its population, and it appears to be largely succeeding. The new aspects of Russia’s military mobilization are a greater emphasis on traditional Russian culture, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, a return to the culture of pre-Soviet times, and the *Russkiy Mir* (Pax Russica). If this approach resonates with Russian society, it will accelerate the military reconstitution of the Russian Federation, but in this particular case, the jury is still out.

## CULTURE REMAINS THE KEY VARIABLE

The Finnish participants emphasized that Russia is digging deep into the imperial ideology of the pre-Soviet era, in line with Putin’s comment several years ago in which he criticized Soviet leaders who, in his view, “forfeited the great imperial Russian state.” They cautioned that the impact of Putin’s cultural revisionism is unknown, as it is possible that regional differences will prove to be more powerful than the imperial narrative and that the Russian Federation may start to fragment. However, on balance, there was a greater degree of opti-



A Finnish soldier sits on an armoured vehicle as Finnish and Swedish troops participate in NATO's Nordic Response 24 exercise near Hetta, Finland, March 5, 2024. Source: REUTERS/Leonhard Foeger

mism in Helsinki than in Warsaw that NATO would win the race to produce weapons and munitions, especially when it comes to newly produced systems.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, experts in both Helsinki and Warsaw agreed that the West continues to misread Russian military culture and how the Russians think about warfare. Finnish workshop participants emphasized that while we may correctly calculate that in strictly numerical terms, Russia may not be ready to confront NATO sooner than three to five years, the Russian political leadership may believe they will be prepared in a year or two, depending on how they see the overall “correlation of forces.” On this there was consensus in both Helsinki and Warsaw that the post-Soviet legacy remained strong when it came to the way that Moscow conceptualized strategy, with even more influence traceable to the tsarist era and its culture.

The nature of the fight Russia is preparing for in Europe came up repeatedly during the discussion and in private conversations with participants from Finland and the Baltic states. Russia is preparing to fight the war it wants—a close fight where mass and attrition would prove decisive. In other words,

Russia is preparing for “its combat, not ours,” to nullify NATO’s advantage in technology, long-range precision fires, targeting, and combined arms operations. Finland, arguably, understands Russia’s military culture better than other allies further west and has built its entire territorial defense concept around it. Finnish participants brought up their country’s experience with Russia, especially its imperialism and militarism, to underscore that to make a comprehensive assessment of Russian force reconstitution and the threat it poses, we need to account for the cultural aspect of the threat, not just the numbers of soldiers, tanks, missiles, or shells the Russians are currently assembling against NATO.

Many experts underscored the temporal aspect of war as being paramount in Russian decision-making, as evidenced by Russia’s 2022 decision to invade Ukraine for the second time. The Russian military was not ready for such a massive operation and began to fail in the early stages of the invasion. Workshop participants emphasized that it was Putin’s political judgment that time was not on Moscow’s side, and his imperial narrative that “there is no such thing as a Ukrainian nation” played a much greater role in the decision to launch the sec-

<sup>16</sup> As one expert put it: “Whether it’s two to three or five to ten years, Russian genuine rearmament will likely be slower than ours once the post-Soviet stocks have been depleted in Ukraine.”



ond invasion. The Finns posited that going forward, the West should always assess Russian capabilities in the context of how Moscow “narrates” its security priorities and how it sees its overall power position relative to NATO. In short, the timelines we are trying to establish may be irrelevant. Russia will move against the Alliance not when its forces are fully reconstituted but when it sees a window of opportunity to act. Hence, the right question to ask is not about numerical indicators but about what other indicators we should look for to know to suggest that the Russians see such a window of opportunity opening up. In order not to miss them, we should not follow our assumptions about preparing a force for battle (i.e., logistics, hospitals, etc.) but rather focus on whether forces are being brought to the border, thereby laying the groundwork for the kind of close fight the Russians intend to wage and one that the West would rather avoid.

The United States should not apply its cultural assumptions to how the Russians would operate. For instance, as one Finnish expert put it, NATO troops would not advance through a minefield until a path has been cleared, but in 2022, we saw Russian troops do precisely that because protecting manpower at all costs is not a priority in the Russian way of war. On the other hand, there are also new aspects to the Russian way of war today that were absent during the Soviet era. One example is money, which was not a main concern for the USSR, as the entire economy was structured in peacetime around supporting the Red Army (its soldiers were essentially free manpower). Today’s situation is different because Russian soldiers are paid. In a country with an average salary of approximately 70,000 rubles, money is used to lure prospective soldiers to war. The salary of a contract serviceman starts at 204,000 rubles,<sup>17</sup> with bonuses awarded to soldiers who take part in offensive actions and payments issued to their families in cases where they are killed in action. This is in addition to the significant signing bonuses of approximately 200,000 rubles from the central government.<sup>18</sup>

Bonuses continue to go up to attract recruits, with Finnish experts noting that bonuses from the central government now have to be supplemented with signing bonuses of 100,000 rubles from regional governments to maintain the incentive. The financial element behind how Russia builds its forces is signifi-

cantly different today than in the Soviet times. Taxes have gone up in Russia and are likely to continue to rise, which, as one expert pointed out, is indicative of the fact that even though Moscow projects the Russian sovereign wealth fund to grow by 40 percent over the next three years, Putin may be running out of money faster than many have predicted.<sup>19</sup> Tax increases in Russia, with some estimates putting them at up to 70 percent since the war started, could be an indicator that Moscow is not certain it has enough money to pursue its imperial ambitions. This underscores that Western analysts need to stop analyzing the Russian economy based on official Russian indicators. We should dig deeper and question Western assessments, setting store by the work of experts who know Russia, speak the language, and have traveled and lived there.

Another variable that should factor into the West’s assessment of Russian force reconstitution that is a product of Russian culture is the morale of its troops, especially how what Moscow promises them to recruit the force it wants squares with the realities of what is being delivered. This is not just about pay but also about the equipment these troops receive and the conditions under which they serve. Hence, the numbers tell only a part of the story, and they present an incomplete picture unless one takes into account the levels of morale and motivation, as they are tied to the overall deal the Russian government promises soldiers and what it can deliver.

The final aspect of the cultural dimension of Russia’s force reconstitution brought up by Finnish and Baltic experts in attendance was Moscow’s narrative of being under attack. This is an effective mobilization tool, as it frames the war in Ukraine in defensive rather than offensive terms. Since Putin’s narrative claims that the Ukrainian nation does not exist and that Nazis control the country, the Russian army is fighting both a defensive war and a war of liberation. Despite sounding absurd in the West, this narrative is quite potent in the context of Russian history and especially the Soviet experience in World War II. It should not be discounted as mere propaganda, for this ideological framing of where Russia allegedly finds itself at this moment in history, and the linkages with the Great Patriotic War, are bound to resonate across Russian society. In this narrative, Russia is not fighting against Ukraine but rather against NATO and the entire West. It is a civilizational struggle to save Russia

17 “Военная служба по контракту” [Military service under contract], accessed May 21, 2024, <https://contract.gosuslugi.ru/>.

18 Farida Rustamova, “How Russian Officials Plan to Recruit 400K New Contract Soldiers in 2024,” *Moscow Times*, December 22, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/12/22/how-russian-officials-plan-to-recruit-400k-new-contract-soldiers-in-2024-a83509>.

19 Bloomberg News, “Russia Sees Energy Sales Rebuilding Wealth Fund Even Amid War,” *Bloomberg*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-22/russia-sees-energy-sales-rebuilding-wealth-fund-even-amid-war>.

from the West—a potent message that can play a key role in mobilizing the population to sustain the costs of the progressive militarization of society.

## UKRAINE'S PIVOTAL ROLE IN RUSSIAN MILITARY RECONSTITUTION

Finnish experts emphasized repeatedly that when it comes to the speed of Russian military reconstitution, much will depend on how the war in Ukraine unfolds. This argument was similar to the one articulated by Polish experts during the workshop in Warsaw but was even more forcefully stated. As long as Ukraine can defend itself, it will slow down and complicate Russian military reconstitution, for Kyiv's resistance continues to attrit Russian manpower and materiel—effectively buying NATO time as it rearms. Support for Ukraine is critical for this reason. At the same time, Russian armed forces are “going to school” not only on how the Ukrainian military fights but also on the Western systems and procedures it uses, in the process degrading their future effectiveness should NATO have to go to war against Russia. Any assessment of Ukraine's role in slowing down Russian military reconstitution must be considered in this context if we are to accurately assess the trade-offs and their overall impact on Russian capabilities.

Today, Russia spends approximately 6 percent of its GDP on defense, and the military's needs consume about 16 percent of all government spending.<sup>20</sup> We must get a better picture of how Russian losses in Ukraine will impact those numbers. An accurate assessment of how quickly Russia can backfill for its losses in Ukraine will also be impacted by how its defense industry adapts to the new requirements. There was consensus in the room that the next two to three years would be crucial. We will see how adaptable the new Russian defense sector truly is, for, unlike in the Soviet era, today, Russia must rely on external suppliers for its defense industry. Another issue is how quickly Russia can assemble and train qualified workers and get the requisite equipment. It is likely that because of those factors, what China, Iran, and North Korea provide to Russia in the coming years will be an important factor to consider when assessing Russian force reconstitution.

Kyiv's continued resistance was viewed by Finnish and Baltic experts as a key variable when it comes to the resilience of Russia's economy. They admitted that Russia can probably survive many future economic shocks and keep pushing forward with the resources needed to rebuild its military, but every economic system has a breaking point. They suggested that while

the Russian economy may be able to take two or three major hits going forward and continue to support the war, if the West can enforce the sanctions regime it can cripple that economy. In this regard, Finnish views of Russia's economic resilience aligned with most US assessments. But when asked about when, specifically, Russia's economy could break, the experts argued that Russia could endure more economic punishment than US analysts think is possible and keep going. At one level, this is not just a war of attrition when it comes to the military it is also a war of attrition when it comes to the economy, and, without long-term consistent Western support, Ukraine will lose.

One Finnish expert stressed that the Soviet experience from the Great Patriotic War should not overly influence assessments of Russia's resilience and its staying power in Ukraine. One cannot draw parallels between the USSR in 1942 and the Russian Federation today, for back then the regime could send fourteen-year-old boys to work in munitions factories. Hundreds of thousands of Russians fled the country in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, and the country's population base is not up to the task of both manning the factories and the units at the front. Also, unlike during the Great Patriotic War, Russian strategies lack a simple, straightforward message to deliver to the population. Russia has not been invaded as it had been during World War II, and even the best propaganda cannot replace the experience of being brutalized by an occupying force.

Moreover, the fact that Russia must rely on outside help has to be humiliating for Russians.<sup>21</sup> As several Finnish and Baltic experts underscored, Russia and China do not trust each other, and many Russians believe Beijing is using them for its purposes. Others disagreed and argued that this is a quasi-alliance based first and foremost on shared interests, and those provide the basis for a degree of mutual trust. One expert described this as a “transactional loyalty” between two authoritarian regimes. For China, Ukraine is part of its long game that consumes US resources and will help it achieve its goals vis-à-vis Taiwan—creating the conditions for a “China [that] will not let Russia lose the war,” in the words of one participant. This is an important variable when thinking about Russian force reconstitution. Beijing may dig deep into its pockets to ensure Russia prevails, and that means the West should expect more money, equipment, and munitions to flow from China to Russia, especially if things in Ukraine start going badly for Moscow.

Finnish and Baltic experts underscored that China's planning is longer-term than Russia's. One expert argued that while Russia is not likely to be looking past 2050, China's horizon is 2070 and beyond. Earlier in the decade, experts working

20 SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), Global military spending surges amid war, rising tensions and insecurity, press release, April 22, 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/global-military-spending-surges-amid-war-rising-tensions-and-insecurity>.

21 One Finnish analyst observed that: “Stalin would die if he heard that Russia is relying on North Korea to be able to fight. During the Great Patriotic War, Mongolians sent horses to the Soviet Union, but those were not essential to victory.”

for the Finnish government estimated that Russia was likely to move militarily in 2021 in either Ukraine or Central Asia. This was based on Helsinki's assessment of Russia's foresight and prognostication work that stipulated these potential localized crises would become regional conflicts and that they could lead to a new system-transforming world war sometime between 2026 and 2030.<sup>22</sup> This was the worst-case scenario, but considering that Russia moved against Ukraine in 2022, the assessment has been largely vindicated thus far. Interestingly enough, other than providing access to its territory, Belarus has been largely marginal in this conflict, so Russia can't even claim that in its "de-Nazification campaign" in Ukraine, it is being assisted by its Slavic brethren. Still, the Russian Federation seems much more resilient today than during the twilight years of the Soviet era.

The discussion also touched on the role of nuclear weapons and especially on how effective Moscow has been in exploiting Washington's fear of vertical escalation in Ukraine. Several analysts argued that considering the signals coming from Putin's regime, tactical nuclear weapons are on the table and that the United States must convey in no uncertain terms that the consequences would be dire should Russia resort to a nuclear strike in Ukraine. Several Finnish and Baltic experts argued that if Russia decided to use a tactical nuclear weapon, this would render the discussion about the speed of its force reconstitution effectively moot, as the world would enter uncharted territory when it comes to NATO's relations with Russia.

An important lesson Moscow has learned from the war in Ukraine is that the West is slow when it comes to recognizing the threat Russia poses. That is an important factor in how Russia is likely to gauge its moment of opportunity to move relative to its overall level of military readiness. A Baltic expert suggested that the West's slow response will likely encourage Russia to be more reckless, regardless of how ready it is in strictly military terms. Also, the fact that the West continues to lag when it comes to revitalizing its defense industrial base—especially Europe—is likely to contribute to Moscow's

overall assessment that if it were to move against NATO, the sooner it does it, the more likely it is to catch the Alliance unprepared. This would support the argument that the timeline for Russia's aggressive action against NATO itself is probably shorter than Western estimates of when its forces will be fit for purpose. Furthermore, Moscow can draw comfort from the fact that in the case of Ukraine, there was a drawn-out buildup of Russian forces, and yet the West did not respond in kind and was caught unprepared when the invasion took place. So, if Russia decides to move in one to two years, it may believe it would be too short a time frame for NATO to respond. This particular position was articulated by the most senior Finnish experts in the room, and it likely reflects conversations inside the Finnish defense ministry. In the discussion that followed, there was a sense that Finnish experts believe that many allies have not yet fully acknowledged how dire the situation is and how quickly the fighting in Ukraine can escalate into a regional conflict and a full-scale global war.

One of the most striking aspects of the discussion was the sense of urgency conveyed by experts from the Baltic states, especially from Estonia, about how quickly Russia could move against their countries. The Balts have been greatly encouraged by the fact that Finland and Sweden are now in NATO, but they expressed deep concern that Russian force reconstitution was outpacing NATO's rearmament. They stressed repeatedly that there is no other way to deter Russia from attacking their countries than for NATO to field real, exercised military capabilities along the eastern flank.

On balance, the Ukraine war shows both Russia's strengths and weaknesses. It shows that Russia has defaulted to the Soviet experience because that is what it knows and remembers, but the question remains whether it can sustain this approach in the long run and—considering its limited resources—effectively reconstitute its forces relying on Soviet-era muscle memory. One Finnish expert suggested that having to go back in time to find a solution to the present-day military problem indicates a weakness.

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22 Interestingly, other Finnish analysts in the room did not challenge this statement.

# Trends and priorities for Russian reconstitution: An assessment

**M**ore than two years into Russia’s war of aggression—an assault on the rules-based order intended to bring about the subjugation of Ukraine and undermine the transatlantic alliance—Moscow has failed to topple the Ukrainian government, and NATO is stronger than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Sweden and Finland are in the Alliance. NATO has woken up to the threat and taken measures to bolster its posture in Europe with a new Force Model and suite of defense plans. And after decades of underinvestment, European allies are beginning to ramp up defense spending. These developments suggest the transatlantic alliance is buckling down to strengthen the credibility of its deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia and secure the European continent after decades of operating on a peacetime footing. But neither NATO’s adjustments nor the human and material losses Russia has incurred in Ukraine neutralize the chronic threat Moscow will pose to peace in Europe and beyond. The

United States and its NATO allies are facing down an adversary that has mobilized its economy for war and is consistently implementing plans to sharpen its warfighting edge in preparation for a long-term confrontation with the military alliance it perceives to be its main strategic and civilizational opponent.

Although timelines for Russian military reconstitution varied among experts and officials in attendance at the Atlantic Council’s workshops in Poland and Finland, what became clear was that the next two to three years will define the future trajectory of Russia’s strategic engagement across Europe and the associated risk level for the United States and its European allies. Trends in Russia’s efforts to rebuild its military simultaneous to carrying out the “special military operation” in Ukraine, when counterbalanced against the pace of US and allied efforts to accelerate adaptation and implement a force posture commensurate with the evolving threat, point to an Alliance



Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the Russian Land Forces Oleg Salyukov ride on Aurus cabriolets during a military parade on Victory Day, which marks the 79th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two, in Red Square in Moscow, Russia, May 9, 2024. Source: REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov

that is on the back foot relative to its most geographically proximate adversary. The eastern flank experiences the Russian threat acutely and has acted accordingly, while the rest of the Alliance lacks the same sense of urgency. Experts emphasized that Russia is learning that the United States and its European allies are slow to act, unable to accelerate and coordinate industrial production, and have no long-term strategic plan for how to support Ukraine—and is adjusting its approach to facilitate a strategic victory in Ukraine and position itself vis-à-vis the United States and the broader NATO alliance.

The delta between how quickly Russia can reconstitute its land forces relative to how fast NATO can rearm is widening, at least in the short to medium term. Following former Russian defense minister Shoigu's push to reform the armed forces in 2022,<sup>23</sup> Russia, in 2023, was able to form two general armies,<sup>24</sup> bolstered its armed forces by four hundred and ninety thousand people,<sup>25</sup> and increased military spending to 6 percent of its GDP—raising projected expenditures to \$109 billion.<sup>26</sup> Ongoing military modernization efforts have been met by an equal mobilization of Russia's defense industry, and following Shoigu's replacement with Andrei Belousov as defense minister,<sup>27</sup> Russia is gearing up for a long war. Significant advances in production output, which is expected to peak between 2025 and 2026, have resulted in the delivery of approximately one thousand five hundred tanks and three thousand armored vehicles to Russian forces per year and the replenishment of nearly two hundred

Iskander 9M723 ballistic and 9M727 cruise missiles in Russian stockpiles.<sup>28</sup> Russia continues to produce approximately two hundred and fifty thousand artillery munitions per month, putting the country on track to produce as much as three times more artillery munitions than the United States and Europe combined.<sup>29</sup> Accelerated production and refurbishment of arms and military equipment, coupled with an influx of dual-use components from malign actors such as China and Iran,<sup>30</sup> have allowed Putin to sustain military operations in Ukraine while bolstering stockpiles for scaled military activities beyond Russia's borders in the future.<sup>31</sup>

Given the war's substantial impact on Russian military manpower and equipment, experts in both workshops underscored that Moscow's strategy capitalizes upon Russia's relative advantage—its ability to generate mass. This inclination toward mass is reflected across Russia's strategic decision-making. Russia has lowered the draft age to replenish human capital amid heavy casualties and mass desertion of soldiers from its Southern Military District,<sup>32</sup> altered its command structure back to that consistent with a mass army,<sup>33</sup> and is multiplying equipment at its disposal by supplementing new outputs with refurbished Russian war stocks. Continued implementation of the Shoigu reforms and trends in Russian industrial production suggest that future Russian military reconstitution will continue to prioritize maintaining Russia's quantitative advantages by replacing losses sustained in Ukraine while simultaneously

23 Then Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu's push for military modernization in December 2022 included an ambition to (1) increase military personnel to 1.5 million people, (2) recreate the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts, and (3) shift away from battlegroups and toward divisions. Dyner, *Stan sít zbrojnych Rosji*.

24 Russia formed two new combined arms armies (CAAs), the 25th and the 18th, in 2023. Shoigu claimed in March that the Russian military plans to form two CAAs, fourteen divisions, and sixteen brigades by the end of 2024. According to the Institute for the Study of War, it is, however, "unclear if Shoigu is suggesting that Russia intends to stand up two additional CAAs over the course of 2024." Nicole Wolkov et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 20, 2024," Institute for the Study of War, March 20, 2024, <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-20-2024>.

25 Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024," RUSI (Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies), February 13, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russian-military-objectives-and-capacity-ukraine-through-2024>.

26 SIPRI, Global military spending surges.

27 Anton Troianovski and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Putin's New War Weapon: An Economist Managing the Military," *New York Times*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/13/world/europe/russia-defense-minister-ukraine-belousov.html>.

28 Watling and Reynolds, "Russian Military Objectives."

29 Katie Bo Lillis et al., "Exclusive: Russia producing three times more artillery shells than US and Europe for Ukraine," *CNN*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/10/politics/russia-artillery-shell-production-us-europe-ukraine/index.html>.

30 Markus Garlauskas, Joseph Webster, and Emma C. Verges, "China's support may not be 'lethal aid,' but it's vital to Russia's aggression in Ukraine," *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, May 8, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/chinas-support-may-not-be-lethal-aid-but-its-vital-to-russias-aggression-in-ukraine/>.

31 According to German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, Russia is already producing more arms and military equipment than it needs for its war against Ukraine. Martin Fornusek, "German defense minister: Russia already produces surplus military equipment," *Kyiv Independent*, April 25, 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/german-defense-minister-russia-already-produces-surplus-military-equipment/>

32 According to Ukraine's military intelligence agency, over eighteen thousand troops from Russia's Southern Military District have deserted. Martin Fornusek, "Military intelligence: Over 18,000 Russian troops of Southern Military District have deserted," *Kyiv Independent*, April 29, 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/military-intelligence-over-18-000-russian-troops-of-southern-military-district-have-deserted/>.

33 Watling and Reynolds, "Russian Military Objectives."



A burnt-out Russian tank stands on a hill overlooking the village of Bohorodychne, where heavy fighting has destroyed houses amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, April 17, 2024. Source: REUTERS/Thomas Peter

pursing “good enough” qualitative capabilities through refurbishing rather than fielding new, advanced capabilities and platforms.

All these efforts point toward a Russia that is operating at speed and scale to sustain its war in Ukraine but preparing for a possible future conflict with the United States and its European NATO allies—yet none of the eastern flank experts and officials present at our workshops were unduly worried. Moscow's efforts to reform its armed forces and amplify its industrial capacity have delivered marginal rewards, with Polish experts going as far as saying that reforms had taken Russia's force from “terrible to bad.” Beyond losses sustained on the battlefield, Russian efforts to beat the Alliance with mass and capacity are being stunted by limitations in resource-ability and reliability of industrial output. According to a recent report by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), as many as 80 percent of armored fighting vehicles are refurbished instead of new production and there is

reason to believe Russian ammunition manufacture will not be able to support significant territorial gains in Ukraine in 2025.<sup>34</sup> Serious manpower challenges will only further amplify the effects of production shortfalls. Facing high casualties in Ukraine, the Russian armed forces are increasingly turning to conscripts and minimally trained soldiers—but even government financial incentives have proven insufficient, necessitating supplemental payments from regional governments. To realize its ambitions in Ukraine and successfully position itself for a long-term confrontation with the Alliance, Russia will have to further draw down its remaining three million rounds of stored ammunition, raise taxes, and train up new forces.

These vulnerabilities do not seem to hinder Russia's vision for the reconstitution of its military nor reduce the likelihood of a Russia-NATO confrontation. Experts from Finland, Poland, and across the Baltic states emphasized that Russia will strike whenever the Kremlin believes a window of opportunity exists to exploit weakness or divisions in the West, even if doing so

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34 Watling and Reynolds, “Russian Military Objectives.”

must occur before Russian military forces reach a readiness level commensurate with the undertaking. Russian political-military decisionmakers are watching and want to be ready for a moment where (1) the United States pulls out of Europe or (2) is not willing and able to defend it. In this way, what matters more is continued US will and ability to defend its interests in Europe, allied solidarity, and Russian perceptions of each.

Such an opening could be coming faster than we think. Warsaw workshop attendees, who generally tended to see the timeline for Russian military reconstitution and confrontation with NATO as shorter, said the United States should expect the Kremlin to attempt to challenge, embarrass, or otherwise portray the West as divided and impotent amid a year of elections on both

sides of the Atlantic. The opportunity to do so on the heels of the transatlantic alliance's seventy-fifth anniversary and during a US presidential election year could simply be too tempting for Russia to pass up,<sup>35</sup> regardless of the health of its force or progress in its efforts to reform and reconstitute.

Russia is going back to what it knows—which could be interpreted as a “resovietization” of its armed forces and military decision-making—and trends show no indication that the reconstituted force that emerges will operate in ways much different from the force that invaded Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>36</sup> The deciding factor in how this plays out will be whether the United States and its NATO allies learn lessons from their friends living closest to the threat.

## Recommendations

**A** NATO still preparing to deter will not be sufficient to mount a response to a Russia that is arming itself to fight. Russia is implementing military reforms and leveraging the depth of its remaining stockpiles now to widen the delta in capacity relative to the West. The forces and capacity Russia is able to build now—during a year of elections on both sides of the Atlantic and at a time when the endurance of US commitments to Ukraine and the European continent more broadly have been called into question in light of interests in the Indo-Pacific—will define the future trajectory for Russia's strategic political-military engagement beyond Ukraine and the associated level of risk for the United States and its allies in the medium to long term.

The next two to three years, as emphasized by eastern flank experts and officials, will be crucial to Russia's ability to implement reforms and realize its vision for the reconstitution of its armed forces—which suggests that the greatest opportunity for the United States and its allies to curb Russia's efforts to rebuild is through coordinated and consistent action now.

Getting ahead of Russia before its forces are trained and its stockpiles have expanded could be the difference between Russia falling to its economic problems and lack of technological edge or confrontation between NATO and a capable Soviet-style mass army. Below are a series of takeaways and recommendations, grounded in discussions that took place in Warsaw and Helsinki, for EUCOM's consideration:

### Be ready for Russia to act on opportunity.

Progress on military reform and reconstruction will not be a factor constraining Russian strategic decision-making. Russia may decide to move militarily on a NATO ally if a window of opportunity (e.g., weakness or divisions between the United States and its European allies) is perceived—regardless of the health and readiness level of its force. For this reason, EUCOM must not peg expectations and risk assessments to perceived progress around Russian force reconstitution, as it is possible that a Russia-NATO confrontation could happen at any time

35 Andrew A. Michta, “The war in Ukraine could reach a decision point by the NATO Summit. Policymakers need to prepare now.” *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, April 23, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-war-in-ukraine-could-reach-a-decision-point-by-the-nato-summit/>.

36 Katherine Kjellström Elgin, *More of the Same? The Future of the Russian Military And Its Ability to Change*, CSBA (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments), March 18, 2024, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/more-of-the-same-the-future-of-the-russian-military-and-its-ability-to-change>.

across the continuum of Russian readiness.<sup>37</sup> Deterring such an escalation and ensuring the Alliance is ready to curb a Russian assault above or below the threshold of kinetic war will require a continued strong US force posture in the region as well as exercised US and allied military capabilities.

### Prepare for the correlation of forces.

Quantitative indicators are not the only data driving Moscow's choices. Russian political and military decision-makers assess the country's relative power and position vis-à-vis NATO based on a cross-section of political, economic, and military factors. The "correlation of forces" approach drives opportunistic Russian decision-making and grounds the calculus for employing a variety of tactics—ranging from lethal force to the country's toolbox of hydra-like influence activities—at the state's disposal. Focusing only on Russia's relative quantitative edge will disadvantage the United States. To accurately assess Russia's trajectory, EUCOM should ensure the military intelligence gathered and analyzed reflects the multifaceted vectors (e.g., political, societal, economic, military factors) shaping the Russian way of war. This includes preparing for hybrid activities that are already happening below the threshold to shift the correlation of forces in Moscow's favor.

### Guard against the narrative warfare underlying Russia's calculus.

Russia's efforts to reconstitute extend beyond the military domain. With an important year of elections on both sides of the Atlantic, it is likely that Russia will accelerate efforts to manipulate the information space to not only fissure transatlantic unity but sow discord in European perceptions of continued US commitment to European allies across the Continent—which could directly or indirectly knock the Alliance out of lockstep when it comes to rearmament and industrial cooperation. Russia is already leveraging extensive disinformation campaigns within and beyond the Alliance to destabilize the Euro-Atlantic area.<sup>38</sup> Shrinking the delta will require EUCOM to be mindful of the narratives and disinformation at play across the political landscape, necessitating stronger cooperation with Baltic allies that have proven successful in countering hybrid threats and a more active role for SHAPE's J10 Strategic Communications.

### Factor in "legacy considerations" around Russian leadership.

Beyond reconstitution and the readiness of the Russian armed forces, EUCOM must also remember that Putin is aging. "Legacy considerations" may speed a Russian decision to move against NATO in the short to medium term.

### Beat the Russians at their own game—with better technology and mobility.

Efforts to rebuild Russian military capacity concurrent with the fight in Ukraine place a premium on mass, emphasizing the maintenance of Russia's quantitative advantage. To counter Russia's relative strength in generating "good enough" capabilities and forces in large quantities, the United States should prioritize the "modern and many, not exquisite and few" in line with ongoing Department of Defense undertakings like the Replicator Initiative.<sup>39</sup> Prioritizing procurement, production, and integration of modern yet still low-cost and attributable capabilities and platforms across the European theater—and in the Baltic states, in particular—presents opportunities to enhance multidomain operations and counter Russia's relative advantages in mass while leveraging the qualitative advantages of the Western industrial base.

Efforts to counter Russia's quantitative advantages when it comes to capabilities and platforms must be matched by a parallel effort to enhance the mobility of forces and increase their numbers. Under its new Force Model, NATO will be able to source one hundred thousand forces within ten days and two hundred thousand in ten to thirty days. Mounting a response to a Russian provocation will come down to the Alliance's ability to get those highly ready forces where they are needed. NATO's biggest mass of forces is currently located furthest from the fight. EUCOM should work with its European allies to build on exercises conducted as part of Steadfast Defender to enhance military mobility and strengthen the critical infrastructure needed to move troops in the event of a confrontation.

When combined, these recommendations provide a flank-informed road map for understanding Russia's calculus and preparing the United States and its allies accordingly.

37 This is not to say that a Russian attack will be unexpected or come as a surprise (if anything, the Russian invasions in 2014 and 2022 demonstrate the opposite) but rather that Russian decision-making and risk appetite relative to reconstitution must not be calculated only through Western perceptions of readiness.

38 Rodrigue Demeuse, *The Russian War on Truth: Defending Allied and Partner Democracies Against the Kremlin's Disinformation Campaigns*, Committee on Democracy and Security, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, October 8, 2023, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2023-russian-war-truth-report-garriaud-maylam-014-cds>.

39 US Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks recently announced that the Pentagon aims to spend about \$1 billion in fiscal 2024–2025 on its Replicator Initiative, which aims to deliver thousands of autonomous systems across domains in less than two years. Jon Harper, "Hicks: DOD plans to invest about \$1B into Replicator initiative in 2024-2025 time frame," *DefenseScoop*, March 11, 2024, <https://defensescoop.com/2024/03/11/replicator-funding-2024-2025-hicks/>.



## Conclusion

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**F**or EUCOM and NATO, having real, exercised military capabilities in place will be key to ensuring that collective deterrence in the European theater holds, and that should it fail, the United States and its allies will have a decisive edge to defeat the Russian invader. The delta between the speed and effectiveness of Russia's military reconstitution and how quickly NATO can rearm will remain, in the near term, the key driver defining the risk level for both EUCOM and SHAPE.

At the same time, an accurate quantitative assessment of Russia's forces and the timeline for their reconstitution should always be placed in the larger historical and cultural context that shapes Moscow's decision-making processes. Taken together, the workshops in Warsaw and Helsinki painted a nuanced picture with a straightforward message: Russia is arming at speed and at scale to confront NATO, and the timeline for when Moscow may consider moving against the Alliance is likely to be shorter than much current analysis suggests.

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