

Russia presses ahead with the rebuilding of its military forces

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President Vladimir Putin and other senior officials have repeatedly stressed that the upgrading of Russia's military capacity is a top priority of Kremlin policy and that Russia is preparing for armed conflicts.

The Kremlin is currently carrying out a comprehensive modernization programme of the army and navy. The military rearmament coincides with increased attacks on the working class and fierce conflicts within the ruling elite.

In a speech in February on Russia's "Day of Defence of the Fatherland", Putin declared: "Ensuring Russia has a reliable military force is the priority of our state policy. Unfortunately, the present world is far from being peaceful and safe. Long obsolete conflicts are being joined by new, but no less difficult, ones. Instability is growing in vast regions of the world."

At a meeting of the Defence Ministry in late February, Putin reiterated that the army must be prepared within the next five years to meet the "present danger."

In early February, the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Red Army over Hitler's Wehrmacht in the Battle of Stalingrad was the occasion for a nationalist campaign glorifying Stalin. By such means, the regime is responding to growing international conflicts while seeking to divert attention from social tensions and discontent with the Kremlin's policy at home.

Russian military spending has risen steadily in recent years. The current defence programme is the largest since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The plan is to increase military spending from 2011 to 2020 by 11 percent each year, raising the proportion of modern weapons in the army to 70 percent by 2020. Most of the Russian army's weapons date back to Soviet times.

Expected total expenditure is around \$657 billion. In

2012, the Kremlin spent some 908 billion rubles (\$31 billion) on the military.

An important part of the rearmament program is the expansion and modernization of the Russian fleet. By 2020, the Kremlin plans to spend some \$132 billion to upgrade its navy and increase its fleet of nuclear-armed submarines.

This would enable the Russian fleet to project a stronger presence in both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Russia is currently negotiating with Ukraine regarding refurbishing the Black Sea fleet, which is stationed in the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol in the Crimea.

Last Thursday, the Russian navy staged surprise war games in the Black Sea, with 30 warships, military aircraft and armored vehicles and 7,000 marines. President Putin personally witnessed the unscheduled drill from a helicopter. Neighboring Georgia condemned the exercises, stating that they ran "contrary to the interests of stability and predictability in the European neighborhood."

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said that Russia must project a permanent military presence in the Mediterranean in order to defend its interests in the region. On March 17, Shoigu announced that a permanent group of five to six combat ships would be dispatched to the Mediterranean Sea.

At this point, the only base for the Russian navy in the Mediterranean is located in the Syrian port city of Tartus. During last month's negotiations over the bailout of the Cypriot banks, the government of Cyprus allegedly offered the Kremlin the use of a naval base in Limassol (See: "Europe threatens Cyprus with bankruptcy in power struggle with Russia"). This was vehemently opposed by the European Union, most notably Germany, which has lined up behind the US-

led campaign to carry out regime-change in Syria by means of a sectarian civil war.

The Kremlin weapons programme is part of an accelerating international armaments race. China is also sharply increasing military spending, while the US continues to outspend the rest of the world when it comes to the military. The remilitarization is being fueled by the neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and North Africa, which have exacerbated tensions between the great powers.

The NATO-sponsored civil war in Syria has, in particular, raised tensions between the US and Russia and worsened Moscow's relations with Germany and France.

Russia sees its economic and geopolitical interests endangered by the Syrian conflict and the war preparations against Iran, which could destabilize the Caucasus and Central Asia. (See: "Syria's civil war destabilising the Caucasus"). An escalation of the war in Syria and a war by the Western powers and Israel against Iran threaten to bring military conflicts to the borders of the Russian Federation. The Russia-Georgia war in the summer of 2008, which proved that significant parts of the Russian army were insufficiently prepared, served as the starting point for an expansion of military spending.

Since then, conscription has been reduced from two years to one, changes have been made in the command structure, and a number of generals and officers have been fired. Nevertheless, the Russian army finds itself in a desperate state, with the poorly trained soldiers using hopelessly outdated weapons from the Soviet era.

The level of suicides in the military is extremely high. Reports of brutal treatment of soldiers by their superiors are commonplace. The food is so bad that some soldiers go hungry or eat rancid food.

The increased military spending and reform measures have created tensions in the Kremlin and within the ruling elite. Finance Minister Alexey Kudrin resigned in 2011 because he disagreed with the scale of the military budget. In contrast, the current finance minister, Anton Siluanov, has made the military rearmament programme his ministry's main priority.

Last November, Putin fired Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who had overseen the military reforms for several years. Serdyukov had encountered strong opposition from the officer corps, and the arms industry

also opposed him, mainly because he had imported armaments from the West. The current re-equipping will rely primarily on the Russian defence industry.

In February, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin said the weapons program should be combined with an expansion of the arms industry and the construction of new weapons factories, in part to help overcome the dependence of the Russian economy on oil and gas exports.

After the United States, Russia is the second largest arms supplier in the world. It significantly increased its arms exports last year. By far the largest importer of Russian weapons is India, but the Kremlin also supplies the Assad regime in Syria, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. In February, Anatoly Isaikin, head of the state arms company Rosoboronexport, said that Russia would be delivering air defence systems and military equipment to Syria.

However, according to Isaikin, Russia is not selling fighter jets to the Syrian government, as reported in the Western media.

The upgrading of Russia's military capacity is connected to social attacks on the working class and a strengthening of the repressive state apparatus at home. The budget for 2013-2015, which provides for draconian cuts in education and health, allocates about a third of total government expenditures to the military. This brings the share of spending on the military and state forces from 5.6 percent to 6.1 percent of Russia's gross domestic product.

Last year, Putin declared that he regarded Stalin's industrialization policy of the 1930s and 1940s as a role model. A "re-industrialization" of the economy will supposedly reduce dependence on commodity exports through increased exploitation of the working class. Already, many Russian workers earn less than their counterparts in China.



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