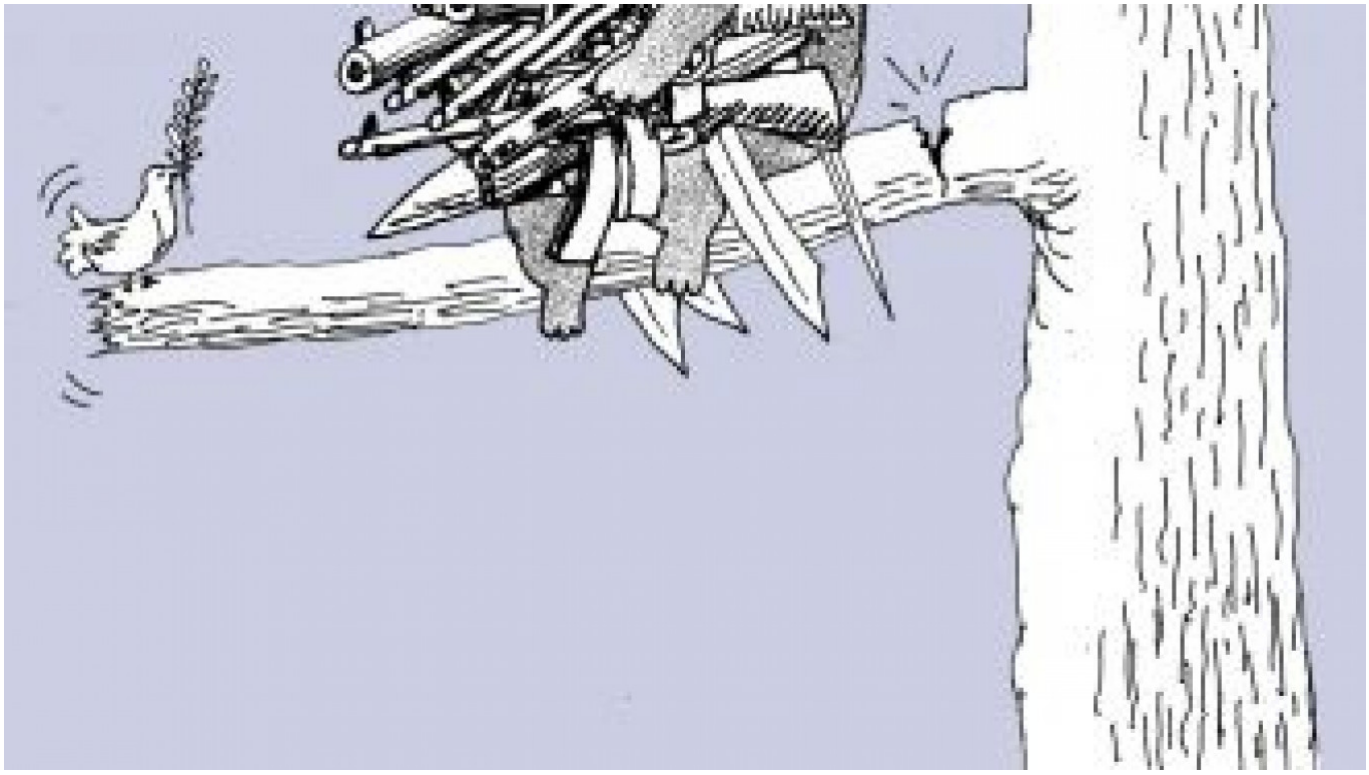
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Strong Military Doesn't Mean a Strong Nation

By Sergei Karaganov

September 12, 2012



Russia is moving toward a major military buildup even though the external military threat is at an all-time low. The Moscow leadership is committed to pursuing this military course in one form or another, convinced that a strong army is needed in the unfolding world order and that the buildup will stimulate the country's development.

Meanwhile, many adhere to the conventional theory that maintaining a large military force is less important than it was in the past. Indeed, most of the major problems of the modern world, such as climate change, the large gap between the wealthy and the poor or the growing relative shortage of raw materials and food, can be solved by military means.

In the past, to paraphrase Prussian military theorist Karl von Clausewitz, war was simply a continuation of politics. But after two world wars and the emergence of nuclear weapons, the ethical paradigm has shifted such that the use of force is now regarded as a failure of politics.

At the same time, however, another set of factors contradicts the argument that military force plays a decreasing role in world affairs and is no longer the leading instrument of state policy.

For example, Western powers won in Yugoslavia and Libya, although with mixed results. Russia won in Chechnya — albeit at a terribly high price — and achieved a clear victory in Georgia in 2008.

In addition, nuclear deterrence, as a demonstration of military strength, has worked over the past 60 years to prevent a major world war. But while the United States and Russia have signed modest nuclear arms reduction treaties, they, along with other countries that have nuclear weapons, are committed to modernizing their nuclear arsenals or, in many cases, augmenting them.

The use of military force has undermined many of the ethical norms of international relations. The West claimed that its attacks against Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya were justified on humanitarian grounds. But the results are what matter most: The world witnessed that weaker states get attacked, while stronger ones do not. The regime in non-nuclear Iraq was swept aside in a matter of months, while the nuclear regime in North Korea, which has a worse human rights record, remains untouched.

In the medium term, the global economic slowdown puts limits on the insatiable appetite of the military lobby, but it also strengthens fringe groups at home who seek to start wars as a means of diverting attention from domestic problems. In this regard, the West's military campaign in Libya was a boost to the political tactic of initiating an easily winnable, short military campaign against a weak opponent.

Now Russia has set out to rebuild its military might, despite finding itself in a historically unprecedented situation with regard to its military security. A country that for millennia has been focused on the national idea of protecting itself against external threats to ensure its territorial sovereignty now faces no threats at all, and there is nobody that could pose a serious threat anytime soon.

Moscow propagandists often point to NATO's superior strength in conventional forces as an external threat to Russia. But they conveniently fail to mention that Europe has been reducing those forces and military expenditures.

Although China is becoming a greater military and political rival of the United States, it is doing everything possible not to threaten Russia.

The real threat of conflict is growing rapidly on Russia's southern periphery. Military force might have to be used to prevent, or worse, put an end to such conflicts. But these are not threats to Russia's existence.

Even in the long term, Russia faces no discernible threat of a traditional, large-scale military attack. That is, of course, unless Moscow chooses to worry about the U.S. delivering a massive strike using high-precision conventional missiles. But even if Washington succeeded in developing these weapons, it is absurd to imagine this strike against Russian territory because Moscow would be able to respond with a nuclear counterstrike.

The Kremlin has suggested on several occasions that a U.S. missile defense system could spark an arms race between the two countries. Most likely, though, Moscow's opposition to missile defense is being used as a political bargaining chip in an attempt to gain concessions from Washington in other areas.

But despite the absence of a real threat, Russia's planned military buildup is unavoidable. I think the Kremlin has chosen to strengthen the military as a means of showing the world that Russia is capable of developing something tangible. The years of empty talk about modernization, with no concrete steps other than the Skolkovo technology park, have shown that Russian society and the elite have not yet matured enough for a modernization breakthrough.

A weakening of the economy could lead to a weakening of national sovereignty as well. The 1990s gave President Vladimir Putin and many of his supporters confirmation that weaker countries are not respected and are beaten up one way or another. To make matters worse, Russian society has become "genetically programmed" to defend its territorial sovereignty at all costs, and it has done so with amazing courage and self-sacrifice throughout its history.

In the end, it seems that the military buildup is intended to compensate for Russia's relative weakness in other traditional areas of strength — economic, technological, ideological or psychological.

It is easy to condemn Russia's approach to power projection as being inappropriate in the modern world, and on the whole this condemnation is justified. But the modern world is changing so rapidly and unpredictably that the present course might actually prove prescient.

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