

# The Best Armed Forces on the Planet: America or Russia?

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Global Research, March 28, 2018

[The Saker](#) 18 January 2017

Region: [Russia and FSU, USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

Relevant article selected from the GR archive, first crossposted on GR in January 2017.

*In my recent article "[Risks and Opportunities for 2017](#)" I made a statement which shocked many readers. I wrote:*

*Russia is now the most powerful country on the planet. (...) the Russian armed forces are probably the most powerful and capable ones on earth (albeit not the largest ones) (...) Russia is the most powerful country on earth because of two things: Russia openly rejects and denounces the worldwide political, economic and ideological system the USA has imposed upon our planet since WWII and because Vladimir Putin enjoys the rock-solid support of about 80%+ of the Russian population. The biggest strength of Russia in 2017 is a moral and a political one, it is the strength of a civilization which refuses to play by the rules which the West has successfully imposed on the rest of mankind. And now that Russia has successfully "pushed back" others will inevitably follow (again, especially in Asia).*

While some dismissed this as rather ridiculous hyperbole, others have asked me to explain how I came to that conclusion. I have to admit that this paragraph is somewhat ambiguous: first I make a specific claim about the capabilities of the Russian military, and then the "evidence" that I present are of a moral and political nature! No wonder that some expressed reservations about this.

Actually, the above is a good example of one of my worst weaknesses: I tend to assume that I write for people who will make the same assumptions I do, look at issues the way I look at them, and understand what is implied. My bad. So today I will try to spell out what I mean and clarify my point of view on this issue. To do this, however, there are a number of premises which I think need to be explicitly spelled out.

First, how does one measure the quality of an armed force and how can armed forces from different countries be compared?

The first thing which need to immediately get out of the way is the absolutely useless practice known as "bean counting": counting the numbers of tanks, armored personnel carriers, infantry combat vehicles, artillery pieces, aircraft, helicopters and ships for country A and country B and come to some conclusion about which of the two is "stronger". This is utterly meaningless. Next, two more myths need to be debunked: high tech wins wars and big money wins wars. Since I discussed these two myths in some detail elsewhere ([here](#)) I won't repeat it all here.

Next, I submit that the purpose of a military force is to achieve a specific political objective.

Nobody goes to war just for the sake of war and “victory” is not a military, but a political concept. So yes, war is the continuation of politics by other means.

For example, the successful deterrence of a potential aggressor should be counted as a “victory” or, at least, as a successful performance of your armed forces if their goal was to deter. The definition of “victory” can include destroying the other guy’s armed forces, of course, but it does not have to. The British did win the war in the Malvinas/Falkands even though the Argentinian forces were far from destroyed. Sometimes the purpose of war is genocide, in which case just defeating a military forces is not enough.

Let’s take a recent example: according to [an official statement by Vladimir Putin](#), the official objectives of the Russian military intervention in Syria were to 1) stabilize the legitimate authority and 2) create conditions for a political compromise. It is undeniable that the Russian armed forces fully reached this two objectives, but they did so without the need for the kind of “victory” which implies a total destruction of your enemies forces. In fact, Russia could have used nuclear weapons and carpet bombing to wipe Daesh, but that would have resulted in a political catastrophe for Russia. Would that have been a “military victory”? You tell me!

So, if the purpose of a country’s armed forces is to achieve specific and political objectives, this directly implies that saying that some country’s armed forces can do anything, anywhere and at any time is nonsense. You cannot access a military outside a very specific set of circumstances:

- 1) Where: Space/geographical
- 2) When: Time/duration
- 3) What: political objective

Yet, what we see, especially in the USA, is a diametrically opposite approach. It goes something like this: *we have the best trained, best equipped and best armed military on earth; no country can compete with our advanced stealth bombers, nuclear submarines, our pilots are the best trained on the planet, we have advanced network-centric warfare capabilities, global strike, space based reconnaissance and intelligence, we have aircraft carriers, our Delta Force can defeat any terrorist force, we spend more money training our special forces than any other country, we have more ships than any other nation, etc. etc. etc.* This means absolutely nothing.

The reality is that the US military played a secondary role in WWII in the European theater and that after that the only “kinda victory” it achieved is outright embarrassing: Grenada (barely), Panama (almost unopposed). I would agree that the US military was successful in deterring a Soviet attack, but I would also immediately point out that the Soviets then also successfully deterred a US attack. Is that a victory?

The truth is that China also did not suffer from a Soviet or US attack, does that mean that the Chinese successfully deterred the Soviets or the Americans? If you reply ‘yes’ then you would have to accept that they did that at a fraction of the US costs, so whose military was more effective - the US or the Chinese one? Then look at all the other US military interventions, there is a decent list [here](#), what did those military operations really achieve. If I had to pick a “least bad one” I would reluctantly pick the Desert Storm which did liberate

Kuwait from the Iraqis, but at what cost and with what consequences?!

In the vast majority of cases, when the quality of the Russian armed forces is assessed, it is always in comparison to the US armed forces. But does that make sense to compare the Russian armed forces to a military which has a long record of not achieving the specific political objectives it was given? Yes, the US armed forces are huge, bloated, they are the most expensive on the planet, the most technology-intensive and their rather mediocre actual performance is systematically obfuscated by the most powerful propaganda machine on the planet. But does any of that make them effective? I submit that far from being effective, they are fantastically wasteful and amazingly ineffective, at least from a military point of view.

Still dubious?

Okay. Let's take the "best of the best": the US special forces. Please name me three successful operations executed by US special forces. No, small size skirmishes against poorly trained and poorly equipped 3rd world insurgents killed in a surprise attack don't qualify. What would be the US equivalent of, say, [Operation Storm-333](#) or the liberation of the entire Crimean Peninsula without a single person killed? In fact, there is a reason why most Hollywood blockbusters about US special forces are based on abject defeats such as [Black Hawk Down](#) or [13 hours](#).

As for US high-tech, I don't think that I need to dwell too deeply on the nightmares of the F-35 or the Zumwalt-class destroyer or explain how sloppy tactics made it possible for the Serbian Air Defenses to shoot down a super-secret and putatively "invisible" F-117A in 1999 using an ancient Soviet-era S-125 missile first deployed in 1961!

There is no *Schadenfreude* for me in reminding everybody of these facts. My point is to try to break the mental reflex which conditions so many people to consider the US military as some kind of measuring stick of how all the other armed forces on the planet do perform.

This reflex is the result of propaganda and ignorance, not any rational reason. The same goes, by the way, for the other hyper-propagandized military - the Israeli IDF whose armored forces, pilots and infantrymen are always presented as amazingly well-trained and competent. The reality is, of course, that in 2006 the IDF could not even secure the small town of Bint Jbeil located just 2 miles from the Israeli border. For 28 days the IDF tried to wrestle the control of Bint Jbeil from second rate Hezbollah forces (Hezbollah kept its first rate forces north of the Litani river to protect Beirut) and totally failed in spite of having a huge numerical and technological superiority.

I have personally spoken to US officers who trained with the IDF and I can tell you that they were totally unimpressed. Just as Afghan guerrillas are absolutely unanimous when they say that the Soviet soldier is a much better soldier than the US one.

Speaking of Afghanistan.

Do you remember that the Soviet 40th Army who was tasked with fighting the Afghan "freedom fighters" was mostly under-equipped, under-trained, and poorly supported in terms of logistics? Please read [this appalling report](#) about the sanitary conditions of the 40th Army and compare that with the [20 billion dollar per year](#) the US spends on air-conditioning in Afghanistan and Iraq! And then compare the US and Soviet occupations in

terms of performance: not only did the Soviets control the entire country during the day (at night the Afghan controlled most of the country side and the roads), they also controlled all the major cities 24/7. In contrast, the US barely holds on to Kabul and [entire provinces are in the hands of the insurgents](#). The Soviets built hospitals, dams, airports, roads, bridges, etc. whereas the Americans built exactly nothing. And, as I already mentioned, in every interview I have seen the Afghans are unanimous: the Soviets were much tougher enemies than the Americans.

I could go on for pages and pages, but let's stop here and simply accept that the PR image of the US (and Israeli) military has nothing to do with their actual capabilities and performance. There are things which the US military does very well (long distance deployment, submarine warfare in temperate waters, carrier operations, etc.) but their overall effectiveness and efficiency is pretty low.

So what makes the Russian armed forces so good?

For one thing, their mission, to defend Russia, is commensurate with the resources of the Russian Federation. Even if Putin wanted it, Russia does not have the capabilities to built 10 aircraft carriers, deploy hundreds of overseas bases or spend more on "defense" than the rest of mankind combined. The specific political objective given to the Russian military is quite simple: to deter or repel any attack against Russia.

Second, to accomplish this mission the Russian armed forces need to be able to [strike and prevail at a maximal distance of 1000km or less from the Russian border](#). Official Russian military doctrine places the limits of a strategic offensive operation a bit further and include the complete defeat of enemy forces and occupation of his territory to a depth of 1200km-1500km (*Война и Мир в Терминах и Определениях*, Дмитрий Рогозин, Москва, Вече, 2011, p.155) but in reality this distance would be much shorter, especially in the case of a defensive counter-attack. Make no mistake, this remains a formidable task due to the immense length of the Russian border (over 20'000km of border) running over almost every imaginable type of geography, from dry deserts and mountains to the North pole region. And here is the amazing thing: the Russian armed forces are currently capable of defeating any conceivable enemy all along this perimeter. Putin himself said so recently when he declared that "[We can say with certainty: We are stronger now than any potential aggressor, any!](#)" I realize that for a mostly American audience this will sound like the typical garden variety claptrap every US officer or politician has to say at every public occasion, but in the Russian context this is something quite new: Putin had never said anything like that before. If anything, the Russian prefer to whine about numerically superior their adversaries seem to be (well, they are, numerically - which every Russian military analyst knows means nothing).

Numerically, the Russian forces are, indeed, much smaller than NATO's or China's. In fact, one could argue for the size of the Russian Federation, the Russian armed forces are rather small. True. But they are formidable, well-balanced in terms of capabilities and they make maximal use of the unique geographical features of Russia.

[Sidebar: Russia is a far more "northern" country than, say, Canada or Norway. Look at where the vast majority of the cities and towns in Canada or Scandinavia are located. Then look at a map of Russia and the latitudes at which the Russian cities are located. The difference is quite striking. Take the example of Novosibirsk, which in Russia is considered a southern Siberian town. It is almost at the same latitude as Edinburgh, Scotland, Grande

Prairie, Alberta or Malmö in Sweden]

This is why all the equipment used by the Russian Armed Forces has to be certified operational from temperatures ranging from -50C to +50C (-58F to 122F). Most western gear can't even operate in such extremes. Of course, the same also goes for the Russian soldier who is also trained to operate in this range of temperatures.

I don't think that there is another military out there who can claim to have such capabilities, and most definitely not the American armed forces.

Another myth which must be debunked is the one of western technological superiority. While it is true that in some specific fields the Soviets were never able to catch up with the West, microchips for example, that did not prevent them from being the first ones to deploy a large list of military technologies such as phased-array radars on interceptors, helmet-mounted sights for pilots, supercavitating underwater missiles, autoloaders on tanks, parachute deployable armored vehicles, double-hulled attack submarines, road-mobile ICBMs, etc. As a rule, western weapon systems tend to be more tech-heavy, that is true, but that is not due to a lack of Russian capabilities, but to a fundamental difference in design. In the West, weapon systems are designed by engineers who cobble together the latest technologies and then design a mission around them.

In Russia, the military defines a mission and then seeks the simplest and cheapest technologies which can be used to accomplish it. This is why the Russian MiG-29 (1982) was not a "fly-by-wire" like the US F-16 (1978) but operated by "old" mechanical flight controls. I would add here that a more advanced airframe and two engines instead of one for the F-16, [gave the MiG-29 a superior flight envelope](#). When needed, however, the Russians did use fly-by-wire, for example, on the Su-27 (1985).

Last but not least, the Russian nuclear forces are currently more modern and much more capable than the comparatively aging US nuclear triad. Even the Americans admit that.

So what does that all mean?

This means that in spite of being tasked with an immensely difficult mission, to prevail against any possible enemy along the 20'000+km of the Russian border and to a depth of 1000km, the Russian armed forces have consistently shown that they are capable of fulfilling the specific political objective of either deterring or defeating their potential enemy, be it a Wahabi insurgency (which the western pundits described as "unbeatable"), a western trained and equipped Georgian military (in spite of being numerically inferior during the crucial hours of the war and in spite of major problems and weaknesses in command and control), the disarmament of 25'000+ Ukrainian (supposedly "crack") troops in Crimea without a single shot fired in anger and, of course, the Russian military intervention in the war in Syria were a tiny Russian force turned the tide of the war.

In conclusion, I want to come back to my statement about Russia being the only country which now openly dares to reject the western civilizational model and whose leader, Vladimir Putin, enjoys the support of 80%+ of the population.

These two factors are crucial in the assessment of the capabilities of the Russian armed forces. Why? Because they illustrate the fact that the Russian soldier knows exactly what he fights for (or against) and that when he is deployed somewhere, he is not deployed as a

tool for Gazprom, Norilsk Nickel, Sberbank or any other Russian corporation: he knows that he is fighting for his country, his people, his culture, for their freedom and safety.

Furthermore, the Russian soldier also knows that the use of military force is not the first and preferred option of his government, but the last one which is used only when all other options have been exhausted. He knows that the Russian High Command, the Kremlin and the General Staff are not hell-bent on finding some small country to beat up just to make an example and scare the others. Last but not least, the Russian soldier is willing to die for his country and while executing any order. The Russians are quite aware of that and this is why the following circulated on the Runet recently:



Translation: under both photos it says “private of the US/Russian Army, under contract, deployed in a combat zone”. The bottom central text says “One of them needs to be fed, clothed, armed, paid, etc. The other one just needs to be ordered “this way” and he will execute his mission. At any cost”

At the end of the day, the outcome of any war is decided by willpower, I firmly believe that and I also believe that it is the “simple” infantry private who is the most important factor in a war, not the super-trained superman. In Russia they are sometimes called “makhra” – the young kids from the infantry, not good looking, not particularly macho, with no special gear or training. They are the ones who defeated the Wahabis in Chechnia, at a huge cost, but they did. They are the one which produce an amazing number of heroes who amaze their comrades and enemies with their tenacity and courage. They don’t look to good in parades and they are often forgotten. But they are the ones which defeated more empires than any other and who made Russia the biggest country on earth.

So yes, Russia currently does have the most capable armed forces on the planet. There are plenty of countries out there who also have excellent armed forces. But what makes the Russian ones unique is the scope of their capabilities which range from anti-terrorist operations to international nuclear war combined with the amazing resilience and willpower of the Russian soldier. There are plenty of things the Russian military cannot do, but unlike the US armed forces, the Russian military was never designed to do anything, anywhere, anytime (aka “[win two and a half wars](#)” anywhere on the planet).

For the time being, the Russians are watching how the US cannot even take a small city like Mosul, even though it had to supplement the local forces with plenty of US and NATO “support” and they are unimpressed, to say the least. But Hollywood will surely make a great blockbuster from this embarrassing failure and there will be more medals handed out than personnel involved (this is what happened after the Grenada disaster). And the TV watching crowd will be reassured that “while the Russians did make some progress, their forces are still a far cry from their western counterparts”. Who cares?

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