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The Russia-U.S. Conventional Military Balance

The Saker

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In a recent column for the Unz Review I wrote that “under any conceivable scenario Russia does have the means to basically completely destroy the USA as a country in about 30min (the USA, of course, can do the same to Russia). Any US war planner would have to consider the escalatory potential of any military action against Russia.”

This still begs the question of whether Russia could challenge the USA militarily if we assume, for demonstration’s sake, that neither side would be prepared to use nuclear weapons, including tactical ones. If, by some mysterious magic, all nuclear weapons were to disappear, what would the balance of power between Russian and the US look like?

Why Bean Counting Makes Absolutely No Sense

The typical reply to this kind of question resorts to what US force planners call “bean counting”. Typically, journalists use the yearly IISS Military Balance or a source like Global Firepower and tallies of the number of men, main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, infantry combat vehicles, combat aircraft, artillery pieces, bombers, missiles, surface ships, submarines, etc. presented by each side in a chart. The reality is that such bean counting means absolutely and strictly nothing. Let’s take a simple example: if a war happens between, say, China and Russia then the fact that China has, say, 1000 tanks in its Yunnan province, will make no difference to the war at all, simply because they are too distant. When we apply this caveat to the Russian-US conventional military balance we immediately ought to ask ourselves the following two basic questions:

- a) What part of the US military worldwide would be immediately available to the US commanders in case of a war with Russia?
- b) On how many reinforcements could this force count and how soon could they get there?

Keep in mind that tanks, bombers, soldiers and artillery do not fight separately – they fight together in what is logically called “combined arms” battles. So even if the USA could get X number of soldiers to location A, if they don’t have all the other combined arms components to support them in combat they are just an easy target.

Furthermore, any fighting force will require a major logistics/supply effort. It is all very well to get aircraft X to location A, but if its missiles, maintenance equipment and specialists are not there to help, they are useless. Armored forces are notorious for expending a huge amount of petroleum, oil and lubricants. According to one estimate, in 1991 a US armored division could sustain itself for only 5 days, and after that it needed a major supply effort.

Finally, any force that the US would move from point A to point B would become unavailable to execute its normally assigned role at point A. Now consider that “point A” could mean the Middle-East, or Far East Asia and you will see that this might be a difficult decision for US commanders.

“Heavy” warfare

We have one very good example of how the US operates: Operation Desert Shield. During this huge operation it took the US six months and an unprecedented logistical effort to gather the

forces needed to attack Iraq. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia had been prepared for decades to receive such a massive force (in compliance with the so-called Carter Doctrine) and the US efforts was completely unopposed by Saddam Hussein. Now ask yourself the following questions:

a) In case of war with Russia, which country neighboring Russia would have an infrastructure similar to the one of the KSA, prepositioned equipment, huge bases, runways, deep ports, etc. ? (Answer: none)

b) How likely is it that the Russians would give the USA six months to prepare for war without taking any action? (Answer: impossible)

One might object that not all wars run according to the “heavy” scenario of Desert Storm. What if the US was preparing a very ‘light’ military intervention using only US and NATO immediate or rapid reaction forces?

Light (or rapid reaction) warfare

I will repeat here something I wrote in December of last year:

The Russians have no fear of the military threat posed by NATO. Their reaction to the latest NATO moves (new bases and personnel in Central Europe, more spending, etc.) is to denounce it as provocative, but Russian officials all insist that Russia can handle the military threat. As one Russian deputy said “5 rapid reaction diversionary groups is a problem we can solve with one missile”. A simplistic but basically correct formula. As I mentioned before, the decision to double the size of the Russian Airborne Forces and to upgrade the elite 45th Special Designation Airborne Regiment to full brigade-size has already been taken anyway. You could say that Russia preempted the creation of the 10’000 strong NATO force by bringing her own mobile (airborne) forces from 36’000 to 72’000. This is typical Putin. While NATO announces with fanfare and fireworks that NATO will create a special rapid reaction “spearhead” force of 10’000, Putin quietly doubles the size of the Russian Airborne Forces to 72’000. And, believe me, the battle hardened Russian Airborne Forces are a vastly more capable fighting force than the hedonistic and demotivated multi-national (28 countries) Euroforce of 5’000 NATO is struggling hard to put together. The US commanders fully understand that.

In other words, “light” or “rapid reaction” warfare is where the Russians excel and not the kind of conflict the US or NATO could ever hope to prevail in. Besides, if the “light warfare” was to last longer than planned and had to be escalated to the “heavy” kind, would the USA or Russia have its heavy forces nearer?

Shock and Awe

There is, of course, another model available to the US commanders: the “shock and awe” model: massive cruise missile attacks backed by bomber strikes. Here I could easily object that bombing Russia is not comparable to bombing Iraq and that the Russian air defenses are the most formidable on the planet. Or I could say that while the USA has an excellent record of success when bombing civilians, its record against a military force like the Serbian Army Corps in Kosovo was an abject failure.

[Sidebar: 78 days of non-stop US/NATO airstrikes, 1000+ aircraft and 38’000+ air sorties and all that to achieve what? Ten or so Serbian aircraft destroyed (most on the ground), 20+ APC and

tanks destroyed and 1000+ Serbian soldiers dead or wounded. That is out of a force of 130'000+ Serbian soldiers, 80+ aircraft, 1'400 artillery pieces, 1'270 tanks and 825 APCs (all figures according to Wikipedia). The 3rd Serbian Army Corps basically came out unharmed from this massive bombing campaign which will go down in history as arguably the worst defeat of airpower in history!]

But even if we assume that somehow the US succeeded in its favorite “remote” warfare, does anybody believe that this would seriously affect the Russian military or breaking the will of the Russian people? The people of Leningrad survived not 78, but 900 (nine hundred!) days of an infinitely worse siege and bombing and never even considered surrendering!

The reality is that being on the defense gives Russia a huge advantage against the USA even if we only consider conventional weapons. Even if the conflict happened in the Ukraine or the Baltic states, geographic proximity would give Russia a decisive advantage over any conceivable US/NATO attack. American commanders all understand that very well even if they pretend otherwise.

Conversely, a Russian attack on the USA or NATO is just as unlikely, and for the same reasons. Russia cannot project her power very far from her borders. In fact, if you look at the way the Russian military is organized, structured and trained, you will immediately see that it is a force designed primarily to defeat an enemy on the Russian border or within less than 1000km from it. Yes, sure, you will see Russian bombers, surface ships and submarines reaching much further, but these are also typical “showing the flag” missions, not combat training for actual military scenarios.

The sole real purpose of the US military is to regularly beat up on some small, more or less defenseless country, either in order to rob it of its resources, overthrow a government daring to defy the World Hegemon, or just to make an example of it. The US military was never designed to fight a major war against a sophisticated enemy. Only the US strategic nuclear forces are tasked to defend the USA against another nuclear power (Russia or China) or actually fight in a major war. As for the Russian military, it was designed to be purely defensive and it has no capability to threaten anybody in Europe, much less so the United States.

Of course, the western corporate media will continue to “bean count” US and Russian forces, but that is pure propaganda designed to create a sense of urgency and fear in the general public. The reality for the foreseeable future will remain that neither the USA nor Russia have the means to successfully attack each other, even with only conventional forces.

The only real danger left is an unprepared and unforeseen sudden escalation which will lead to a confrontation neither side wants nor is prepared for. The Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006 or the Georgian attack on Russian peacekeepers in 2008 are two scary reminders that sometimes dumb politicians take fantastically dumb decisions. I am confident that Putin and his team would never make such a dumb decision, but when I look at the current pool of US Presidential candidates I will tell you that I get very, very frightened.