

***Threat Inflation, Russian Military Weakness, and the Resulting Nuclear Paradox:
Implications of the War in Ukraine for U.S. Military Spending***

Lyle J. Goldstein¹

September 15, 2022

The horrific conflict resulting from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine continues to develop into a volatile situation for European security with the grave possibility of a wider war.² In turn, these escalatory pressures have led to calls for significantly enhanced United States defense spending. Yet, it is important that the U.S. not succumb to threat inflation, or “speech that gives an exaggerated sense of danger,” in regards to public and official perceptions of Russia.³ Historically, threat inflation has led to disastrous and unnecessarily costly U.S. foreign policy decisions. Russia is a weaker conventional military power than many in the U.S. had imagined; thus, there is no additional cause for intensified fear of a Russian military threat to the U.S. nor for the resultant expansion of the Pentagon budget. On the other hand, if the U.S. and NATO increase their military spending and conventional forces in Europe, the weakness of Russian conventional military forces could prompt Moscow to rely more heavily on its nuclear forces.

The paper begins by examining the long history of threat inflation in U.S. foreign policy, especially as that tendency has related to Russia. The paper then explores a salient explanation for Russia’s conventional military weakness, the comparatively feeble economic basis of Russian military power (see Figure 1, below). Authored by a military policy analyst with special expertise in Russian, Chinese, and U.S. military affairs, the article provides evidence of Russian conventional military weakness. The author’s extensive use

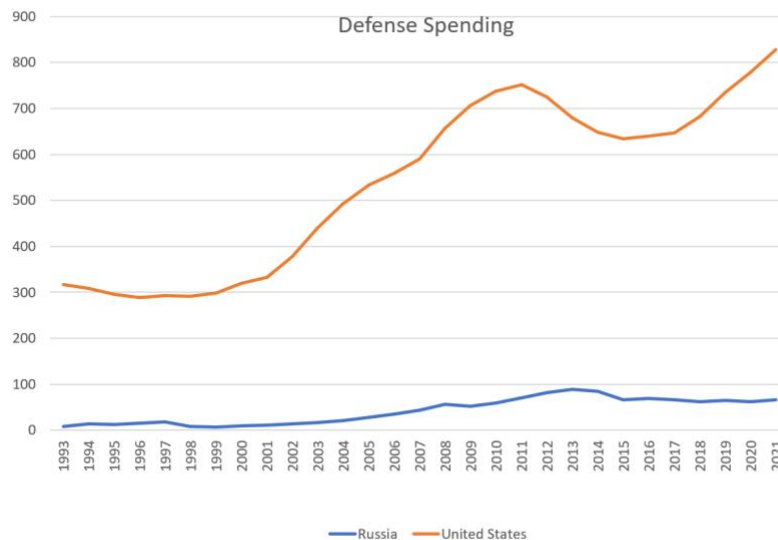
¹ Lyle Goldstein is a Watson Visiting Professor and the Director of Asia Engagement, *Defense Priorities*.

² Calls for escalation of the war continue to be widespread in Russian defense media. See, for example, Odintsov, Alexander [Одинцов, Александр]. (2022, July 23). “Почему Нельзя Затягивать Сроки Спецоперации на Украине” [Why the Period of the Special Operation in Ukraine Cannot Be Prolonged]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. https://topwar.ru/199304-pochemu-nelzja-zatjagivat-sroki-specoperacii-na-ukraine%20.html?utm_source=website&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=group; or Karnozov, Vladimir [Карнозов, Владимир]. (2022, July 21). “Donbas under the Fire of ‘Himars’” [Донбасс под Огнем ‘Хаймарса’]. *Independent Military Review* [Независимое Военное Обозрение]. https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2022-07-21/1_1198_donbass.html?ysclid=l6jkcyqrc877921723.

³ Friedman, Benjamin. (2020, June 17). “Alarms and Excursions: Explaining Threat Inflation in American Foreign Policy.” *CATO*. <https://www.cato.org/publications/alarums-excursions-explaining-threat-inflation-us-foreign-policy#threat-inflation-conflict-socialization>.

of Russian-language sources provides a deeper, insider’s view of the Russian military, revealing its multifarious, endemic problems.⁴

Figure 1. The Significant Disparity in U.S. and Russian Defense Spending (1993-2021)



Note: This disparity is actually understated, since this figure does not include total U.S. spending on nuclear weaponry -- some of which is outside of the Defense Department budget.

Sources for Figure 1: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). “Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security”. SIPRI Military Expenditure Database. Data displayed in current USD. Accessed August 10, 2022. <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

In addition to the necessity of controlling threat inflation and the accompanying padding of the U.S. military budget, decision-makers may also note a natural rebalancing of defense burdens toward Europe as a significant consequence of the war. However, the rather stark conventional military imbalance between Russia and NATO tends to underline an emerging “nuclear paradox,” namely that to the extent that Moscow has difficulties in generating sufficient conventional military power to balance against NATO, it will lean more heavily on nuclear weaponry.

In other words, because the Russian military is relatively weak, an over-reaction to Russian aggression could push the Russian leadership toward nuclear escalation. De-

⁴ Despite a significantly narrowed media space in Russia, one can still find candid appraisals regarding the strategic dilemmas confronting the Kremlin. Recently, see for example, Biryukov, Viktor [Бирюков. Виктор]. (2022, July 23). “Operational Pause Threatens to Turn into Positional Deadlock” [Операционная Пауза Грозит Перерастить в Позиционный Тупик]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. <https://topwar.ru/199535-operacionnaja-pauza-grozit-pererasti-v-pozicionnyj-tupik.html?ysclid=l6jjv1xhzm371056211>. In this piece, the author compares current Russian military tactics to those of the German Army in World War One and concludes quite critically: “This tactic did not lead to anything good for the German army.”

escalatory approaches would include, at a minimum: direct talks, reviving the arms control agenda, and pursuing military confidence building measures between NATO countries and Russia.⁵ Contrary to conventional wisdom, the U.S. defense budget does not need to continue to grow. Rather, cognizant of Russia's conventional military weakness, the U.S. military budget can instead be trimmed.⁶

A HISTORY OF THREAT INFLATION FOCUSED ON RUSSIA

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has stoked the pressure to increase the U.S. military budget. According to House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith, "the FY23 budget would be 'bigger than we thought,' as Russia's invasion of Ukraine ... complicated the U.S. security posture and impressed a greater sense of urgency for funding defense priorities."⁷

Recent scholarship on the American tendencies toward threat inflation explore causes related to the psychological formation of threat perceptions, as well as cognitive biases, and various internal processes of U.S. domestic politics, including institutional interests, a failed marketplace for ideas, and also a culture of "militarized patriotism."⁸

Western strategists have a long tradition of overinflating Russia as a threat. Major examples would, of course, include the famous "missile gap" that turned out to be completely backwards, when in fact the U.S. had a vastly larger nuclear arsenal compared

⁵ Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) are joint activities undertaken by militaries in order to build trust. Such activities may vary in complexity from simple reciprocal site visits and exchanges of information to encompass joint exercises and even forms of cooperative war-gaming. The author has participated in such efforts between the U.S. military and alternatively both the Russian and also Chinese armed forces. On CBMs, see for example: "Military Confidence Building Measures: How to Make Them Work." *Office for Disarmament Affairs, United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/disarmament/cbms/cbm2/>.

⁶ Some critics will surely cry "appeasement," and denounce any effort to bring peace (aside from Ukrainian victory) and related increases in Pentagon budgets. The appeasement trope is always wielded against those arguing for restraint in U.S. foreign and defense policy, for example in the Vietnam War, but also more recently in efforts to end the war in Afghanistan. See, for example, Meade, Walter Russel. (2021, August 16). "Biden's Chamberlain Moment in Afghanistan." *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-chamberlain-afghanistan-withdrawal-saigon-jihadist-taliban-kabul-pakistan-11629128451>. In fact, the comparison of Vladimir Putin to Adolf Hitler does not stand up to scrutiny even though it is quite popular with journalists. Yet, there is no evidence to suggest that the Kremlin harbors ambitions for world conquest, as Hitler clearly did. For the most part, Putin's uses of force have been on the territory of the former USSR (e.g. Georgia, 2008), implying these policies are related to the complex identity and sovereignty issues arising out of a collapsed empire. Nor do the related atrocities, horrifying and distressing as they might be, have any approximation to the scale of Hitler's atrocities. All wars, including many U.S. military interventions, have witnessed atrocities – but not remotely on the scale of those undertaken by Nazi Germany, including on the territory of Ukraine. Finally, nuclear weaponry did not exist in the 1930s, so options for all-out war between the great powers that may have existed in that unique historical period are simply impossible today since similar total wars between the great powers would utterly destroy the planet in a nuclear apocalypse.

⁷ Insinna, Valerie. (2022, 9 March). "Next US Defense Budget Will Get a Boost Due to Ukraine Invasion: Pentagon Comptroller." *Breaking Defense*. <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/03/next-us-defense-budget-will-get-a-boost-due-to-ukraine-invasion-pentagon-comptroller/>.

⁸ Cramer, Jane K. and Thrall, A. Trevor. (2009). "Introduction," in Jane K. Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall (eds.), *American Foreign Policy and The Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation Since 9/11*. New York: Routledge. pp. 11-12.

to the USSR in the early 1960s. As one recent assessment of that historical episode relates: “Influenced by a combination of inadequate information and partisan political motives, Democratic politicians cultivated the notion that the aging incumbent [President Dwight Eisenhower] had been asleep at the switch and that a new team was needed to reinvigorate government and restore U.S. nuclear superiority.”⁹ Nevertheless, the false perception of a gap helped to prompt an arms race that resulted in wasteful and dangerous arsenals of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons on both sides. U.S. Air Force intelligence had posited that the USSR had 500 “ICBM” missiles in 1957, when the real number in 1960 amounted to just two of these missiles.¹⁰ Such threat inflation of Soviet military might proved endemic during the course of the entire Cold War in which the U.S. spent over US\$10 trillion in 2022 dollars on nuclear weaponry.¹¹

In the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet Union did take destabilizing risks, to be sure, but these were generally in reply to U.S. provocations, such as placing nuclear missiles in Turkey, close to the USSR, as well as attempts to reverse the results of the Cuban Revolution and assassinate Fidel Castro.¹² Another example of the follies accompanying Cold War threat inflation concerns the U.S. support for the Apartheid regime in South Africa and Washington’s assistance to Pretoria’s various bloody regional wars to prevent majority rule in southern Africa more generally.¹³

As George Kennan, the author of the original containment strategy, later himself recognized, the U.S. would have been much better off had it consistently focused on improving itself rather than engaging in proxy wars and arms races.¹⁴ Indeed, Kennan, a Russia expert almost without peer in American diplomatic circles, also predicted that disastrous U.S.-Russia tensions would follow from the process of NATO expansion, as indeed has certainly occurred in present circumstances. In a 1998 interview with Thomas Friedman, Kennan warned: “There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This [NATO] expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves.”¹⁵ In making such a dark prediction, Kennan outlined the deleterious impact of continuous threat inflation that has powerfully contributed to the present catastrophe unfolding in Eastern Europe.¹⁶

⁹ Thielmann, Greg. (2011, May). “The Missile Gap Myth and Its Progeny.” *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011-05/missile-gap-myth-its-progeny>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Schwartz, Stephen, (ed.). (1998). *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Since 1940*. Washington DC: Brookings. p. xxii. The total reported in this assessment is \$5.821 billion, but that is in 1996 dollars.

¹² See, for example, Schwarz, Benjamin. (2013). “The Real Cuban Missile Crisis,” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/01/the-real-cuban-missile-crisis/309190/>.

¹³ See, for example, Lerner, Michael. (2012). “A Convenient Excuse: Apartheid South Africa and the ‘Soviet Menace’ during the Cold War.” *Journal of Political Inquiry*. 5, no. 5. <http://www.jpinyu.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/jpi2012lerner.pdf>.

¹⁴ Gaddis, John Lewis. (2011). *George Kennan: An American Life*. New York: Penguin, pp. 592, 654.

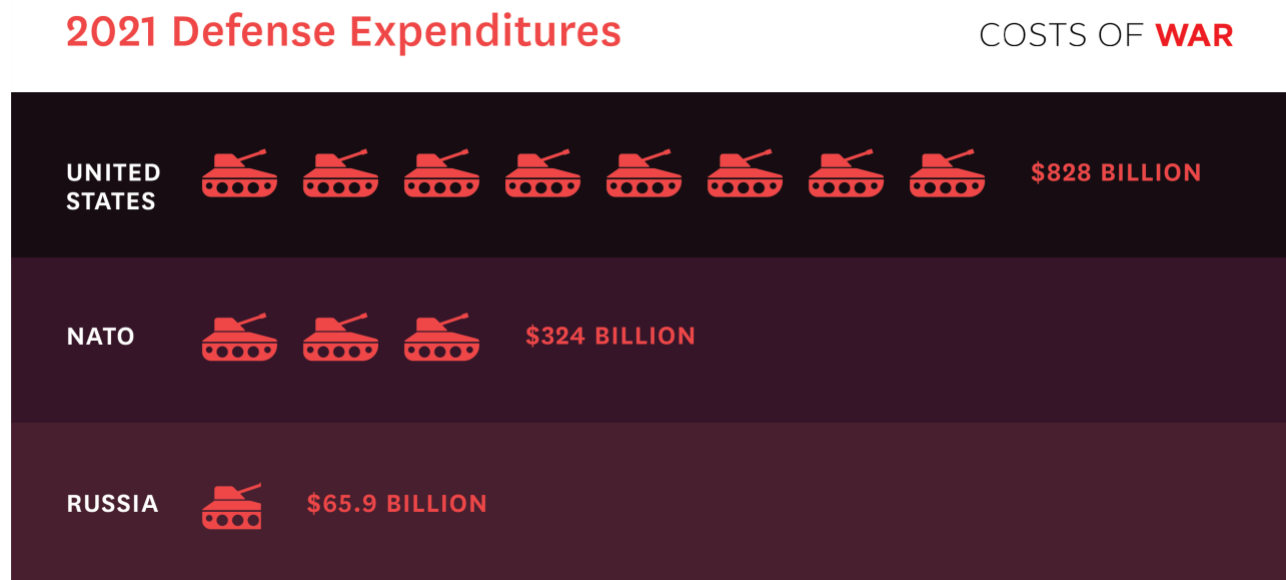
¹⁵ Friedman, Thomas. (1998, May 2). “Foreign Affairs: Now a Word from X.” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html?searchResultPosition=4>.

¹⁶ Many scholars contend that NATO’s continuous expansion toward Russian borders since the end of the Cold War is a significant cause of the present war in Ukraine. See, for example, Walt, Stephen M. (2022,

THE ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF RUSSIAN MILITARY WEAKNESS

Russia has invested far fewer resources in its military than the U.S. and views its own military strength as lagging very significantly behind the U.S. Many likely explanations can be offered for Russian military weakness in its war against Ukraine, including low morale among the troops, poor intelligence preparation, and the apparent lack of a strong unified command.¹⁷ However, one of the main reasons for Russia's military underperformance compared to pre-war expectations is economic in nature: namely that the Russian military is simply trying to do too much on a comparatively paltry budget. In addition, the Russians have invested heavily in nuclear weapons, leading to a comparatively weaker investment in conventional forces, equipment and training. As illustrated in Figure 2 (below), the Russian defense budget amounts to less than 1/10 of the U.S. defense budget, just 1/5 of NATO (non-US) spending and a measly 6% of the NATO defense spending on aggregate.

Figure 2. U.S., Other NATO, and Russian Defense Spending Compared (2021)



**Figure for NATO = Europe and Canada. Excludes U.S. Spending.*

January 19). "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis: The Greatest Tragedy about Russia's Potential Invasion Is How Easily It Could Have Been Avoided." *Foreign Policy*.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/19/ukraine-russia-nato-crisis-liberal-illusions/>.

¹⁷ Bo Lillis, Katie and Cohen, Zachary. (2022, March 22) "Who is Russia's top field commander in Ukraine? The US isn't sure." *CNN.com*. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/21/politics/us-russia-top-military-commander-ukraine-war/index.html>.

See also: Chesnut, Mary and Waller, Julian G. (2021, September 14). "Russia's Response to US Withdrawal From Afghanistan: Criticism of US, Concerns About Security Environment" *Russia Matters – Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center*. <https://russiamatters.org/analysis/russias-response-us-withdrawal-afghanistan-criticism-us-concerns-about-security>.

Sources for Figure 2: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). (2022, April 25). "World military expenditure passes \$2 trillion for first time". <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time>; North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). (2022, March 31). "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021)". https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/3/pdf/220331-def-exp-2021-en.pdf

Note: U.S. defense spending figure includes \$27 billion from Department of Energy spending on nuclear weapons. See "Department of Energy FY2021 Fact Sheet". (2020, February 10). https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2020/02/f71/doe-fy2021-budget-fact-sheet_0.pdf. There does not appear to be a similar accounting problem with the Russian figure. On this issue see Julian Cooper. (2018, October 1). "How Much Does Russia Spend on Nuclear Weapons", Commentary/Backgrounder. Stockholm: SIPRI. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2018/how-much-does-russia-spend-nuclear-weapons>.

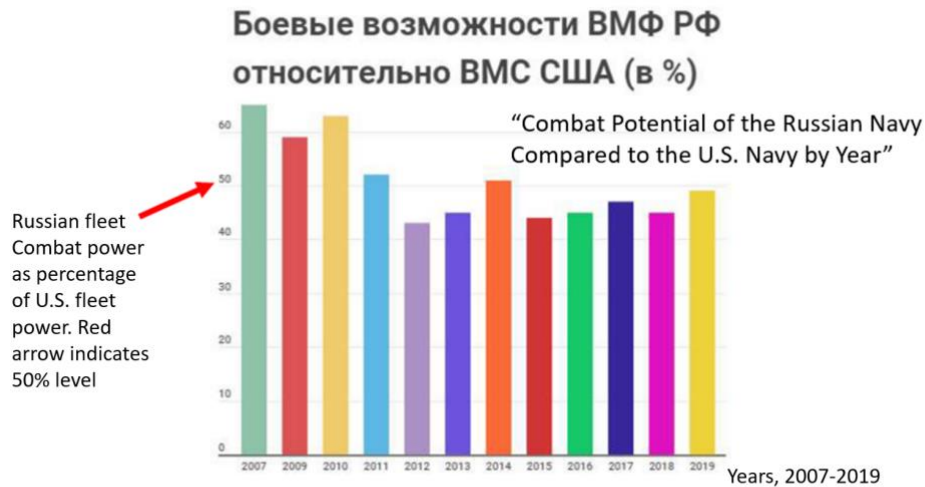
True, purchasing power parity metrics may capture reality with somewhat better fidelity, but it is also worth noting that the Russian military covers an enormous geographic expanse and the comparative figures do not address all the national security strategies that Moscow employs, nor all the threats it plans against. For example, the Russian military recently deployed to both the South Caucasus and Kazakhstan for peacekeeping and securing friendly regimes in power. Moreover, Moscow's strategists have been concerned about conflict emanating from Afghanistan in recent years, as well as the possibility of a military conflict with Japan.¹⁸ In other words, Russian forces are not only contending with a possible NATO conflict scenario, but many other perceived risks as well that span the vast area of Eurasia and beyond.

A more detailed illustration of the larger point can be seen in Figure 3 (below), which reveals a Russian quantitative estimate of naval combat power for the Russian fleet compared to the U.S. Navy. This estimate from 2020 reveals that the Russian Navy views itself as less than half the strength of America's fleet over the last decade.¹⁹ Of course, this comparison does not account for the fact that the U.S. has many allies (both NATO and non-NATO) with considerable naval power, including especially the UK, France and Japan.

¹⁸ See, for example, Ryabov, Kiril [Рябов, Кирилл]. (2021, August 21). "The New Threat: the Arms and Technology of the Afghan Army in the Hands of Terrorists" [Новая Угроза: Вооружение и Техника Афганской Армии в Руках Террористов]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. <https://topwar.ru/186108-novaja-ugroza-vooruzhenie-i-tehnika-afganskoj-armii-v-rukah-terroristov.html>; and Kistanov, Valery [Кистанов, Валерий]. (2022, January 26). "Why Does Japan Want to Become a Military Power" [Почему Япония Хочет Снова Стать Военной Державой]. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* [Независимая Газета]. https://www.ng.ru/vision/2022-01-26/6_8355_vision.html.

¹⁹ Flot.com. (2020, February). *The Combat Capabilities of the Russia Navy and the US Navy in 2020*. [Боевые возможности ВМФ РФ и ВМС США 2020]. <https://flot.com/nowadays/structure/techreadiness/2020/>.

Figure 3. A Window into Russian Thinking about the U.S.-Russia Naval Balance (Screenshot from Flot.com)



Source: Flot.com, 12 Feb 2020

<https://flot.com/nowadays/structure/techreadiness/2020/>

As revealed in Figure 4 (below), the U.S. Navy is considerably larger across almost all categories of warships. It has more than 10 times the number of aircraft carriers, more than five times the number of large surface combatants, and more than double the number of amphibious attack ships and nuclear submarines. Tellingly, Russia's navy only leads the U.S. in smaller, much cheaper corvettes and conventional submarines – both platforms optimized for defensive strategies, while the U.S. leads in ships optimized for offensive or expeditionary operations.

Figure 4. U.S. and Russian Military Power Compared across Selected Combat Capabilities

	RUSSIA	U.S.
Main battle tanks	13,530	6,209
Aircraft carriers	1	11
Amphibious warships	20	42
Cruisers	4	24
Destroyers	11	68
Frigates	15	21
Corvettes	40	-
Nuclear submarines	28	68
Non-nuclear submarines	21	-
Military aircraft	1,379	3,761
Attack helicopters	404	867
Nuclear weapons	6,500	6,125
Military satellites	109	141

Drawn from Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy and Routledge, "The Military Balance," Arms Control Association.

Taking the Russian Navy as a case study of the Russian Armed Forces as a whole, Russia's conventional military weaknesses due to economic problems and overstretch are amply evident. The service continues to be plagued by accidents and very considerable turmoil.²⁰ To name a few examples from recent decades, the *Kursk* submarine was lost in 2000 with all hands, while submersible AS-28 became trapped on the sea floor in 2005 and the crew was only rescued with foreign assistance. More recently, the experimental submarine *Losharik* suffered a fire in 2019 that killed 14 crewmembers. In that same summer, five were killed at a Russian naval missile test center in an explosion. A year earlier, the Russian Navy's only aircraft carrier was significantly damaged when a barge sank, sending a 70-ton crane crashing into the vessel, putting the warship out of action indefinitely.²¹

The fundamental reason that Russia's Navy has been in a continuous crisis since the collapse of the USSR has been its attempt to do too much on too few resources. Thus, the Russian Navy took a "building holiday" on submarine fabrication that lasted for approximately two decades and this has substantially weakened the force. Indeed, the

²⁰ Kramer, Andrew. (2019, July 2). "Russian Deep-Sea Military Vessel Catches Fire, Killing 14." *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/world/europe/russia-research-submarine-fire.html>.

²¹ Mizokami, Kyle. (2022, June 16). "Russia's Sole Aircraft Carrier Won't Return to Sea before 2024, If It Ever Does." *Popular Mechanics*. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a40278905/admiral-kuznetsov-russian-carrier-return-to-sea-2024/>.

Russian fleet is only recently starting to build the kind of shore infrastructure for maintenance that is standard in other world navies.²² In the case of large surface combatants, the building hiatus continues to this day, and the Russian military's resource woes are not likely to be resolved by the invasion of Ukraine. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the stricken Black Sea Fleet flagship *Moskva*, which was sunk by Ukrainian missiles on 14 April, 2022, had actually been launched more than 30 years ago and did not constitute a truly modern warship.

Parallel illustrations could be made for both the Russian air and ground forces, as well.²³ It is true that Moscow has been increasing its aerial fleet over the last decade, but that only came after a similar drought, as described above in military shipbuilding, in which Russia purchased only the minimal in new aircraft for the two decades from 1990-2010. Again, the major cause of this two-decade hiatus in Russian aircraft acquisitions was the severe post-Soviet economic crisis. In 2007, Russian air force pilots were reported to get only 20-25 of flying hours per year – roughly 10% of the norm in the U.S.²⁴ The hangover from that earlier period lingers and Russia's aerial forces remain relatively weak to this day. For instance, the very first Russian strategic bomber fully built in the post-Soviet period only made a first test flight in Jan 2022.²⁵ The financial outlook does not look much better for Russia's acquisition of new fighter-interceptors, as one analyst observed in mid-2021: "... Russia can barely afford to finance the Su-57 program ... 'This *Checkmate* [fighter] is facing exactly the same obstacles as the Su-57... The Russian government ... has no money to complete its development and get it into series production.'"²⁶ In a pattern familiar from the naval case illustrated above, Russia has just 37% of the total of U.S. combat aircraft (see Figure 4), and, once again, that imbalance does not account for U.S. allies that surround Russia on both major flanks and possess substantial aerial striking power.²⁷ Mirroring weaknesses in the Russian fleet, aircraft disasters are all too common in the Russian military, moreover, and major recent crashes include the loss of a Tu-22 bomber in Jan 2019, an AN-26 Transport in March 2018, and a Tu-154 jetliner in Dec 2016. All of these accidents involved very significant loss of life. Turning to Russian ground forces, one significant anomaly in the data presented in Figure 4 that demonstrates across-

²² Bolentkov, Dmitry [Болтенков, Дмитрий]. (2020, March 22). "In the Pacific Harbor -- How the Russian Submarine Fleet Will Be Changing: For the First Time in Recent History, It Will Be Fully Provided with Shore Infrastructure" [В Тихом Гавань: Как Изменится Российский Подводный Флот Впервые в Новейшей Истории Он Будет Полностью Обеспечен Наземной Инфраструктурой]. *Izvestiya* [Известия]. <https://iz.ru/989474/dmitrii-boltenkov/v-tikhom-gavan-kak-izmenitsia-rossiiskii-podvodnyi-flot>.

²³ Pickrell, Ryan. (2019, August 9). "Here's why the Russian military has so many serious accidents." *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-the-russian-military-has-so-many-serious-accidents-2019-8>.

²⁴ *IISS Military Balance 2007* (London, Routledge), p. 200.

²⁵ Newdick, Thomas. (2022, January 12). "Russia's First New Production Tu-160 Blackjack In Decades Makes Its Maiden Flight." *The Drive*. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/43852/russias-first-new-production-tu-160-blackjack-in-decades-makes-its-maiden-flight>.

²⁶ Kessler, Ethen Kim. (2021, July 21). "Russia's New Stealth Fighter Has the Same Big Problem as Its First Stealth Fighter." *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-likely-cant-afford-development-of-new-stealth-fighter-2021-7>.

²⁷ See, for example, "Norway Receives First F-35 Jet" *Reuters*. (2017, November 10). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-norway-lockheed-f35/norway-receives-first-f-35-fighter-jet-idUSKBN1DA26A>.

the-board U.S. military superiority over Russia concerns the numerical advantage of Russia in main battle tanks. Yet, this number is misleading as it mostly represents legacy Soviet systems that are over 30 years old, rather than new, modern tanks. Indeed, the Russian Army has utterly failed to deploy its revolutionary *Armata* tank, and even the relatively modern T-90 is only available in very limited quantities due to budgetary constraints.²⁸

True, the Russian military does maintain the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weaponry. That is paradoxically another major reason for Russia's conventional military weakness. The Kremlin has long prioritized nuclear weapons, modernizing every aspect of the traditional triad and also developing new and "exotic" nuclear weapons in recent years. A brief catalogue of these new nuclear systems would include: *Sarmat* (heavy ICBM), *Avangard* (hypersonic glide vehicle), *Petrel* (nuclear-powered cruise missile), *Poseidon* (nuclear-powered undersea vehicle with thermonuclear warhead), *Kinzhal* (hypersonic missile), *Iskander* (tactical ballistic missile), as well as the *Borey*-class (strategic missile launching nuclear submarine). A major reason that Moscow has prioritized nuclear weapons modernization has been the Russian perception of vast U.S. conventional military superiority, and the fear that U.S. missile defenses combined with high-precision conventional and nuclear weapons, could undermine the Russian nuclear deterrent. As Elbridge Colby explains: "Moscow is seeking to build and deploy a strategic nuclear force that is able to demonstrate clearly to Washington that ... a first-strike capability is out of reach and that U.S. attempts to use force to disarm Russia of its strategic deterrent would result in devastating retaliation."²⁹

Some will inevitably argue that Russian advances in nuclear weaponry must be met with a parallel U.S. nuclear buildup – system for system, but a far more effective way to stabilize U.S.-Russian relations in the strategic realm will be to reinvigorate arms control negotiations.³⁰ A U.S. nuclear build up would, however be unnecessary since the U.S. nuclear deterrent is not put at risk by Russian nuclear forces: the U.S. nuclear deterrent remains fully secure. There is no evidence that Russia is seeking a first-strike capability against U.S. nuclear forces and there is no rationale for matching Russia system for system. If the U.S. does increase its own nuclear forces, this is likely to foster a new nuclear arms race. That argument is beyond the scope of the present paper, but here it is simply imperative to grasp that Moscow's priority on nuclear weapons has meant less capable Russian conventional forces and this also partly explains Russia's military weakness in the war against Ukraine.

As explained in the section that follows, all branches of the Russian Armed Forces appear to have performed poorly in the 2022 Ukraine War, but this should not be terribly surprising given the enormous country's comparatively paltry defense spending. Fig. 1

²⁸ <https://interestingengineering.com/russia-lost-most-advanced-tank>; <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/22600/russia-cant-afford-its-new-t-14-armata-tanks-turns-to-updated-older-designs-instead>.

²⁹ Colby, Elbridge. (2016, January 12). "Russia's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine and Its Implications." *Notes of the Foundation for Strategic Research*. <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/russias-evolving-nuclear-doctrine-implications-2016>.

³⁰ On the decline of nuclear arms control, see for example Goldstein, Lyle. (2019, May 14). "Trump Should Uphold Arms Control, Not Destroy It." *National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-should-uphold-arms-control-not-destroy-it-57597>.

shows just how wide the gap is between U.S. and Russian defense spending. Moreover, compared to the U.S. figure, which has generally demonstrated a steep, upward tendency, the Russian figure is relatively flat and has been mostly declining since 2013. These figures give ample cause for suspicion that threat inflation has been at work in common U.S. discourses about Russia. After all, if Putin had been plotting the conquest of Eastern Europe over the last decade, it stands to reason that Russia would have been steadily increasing its defense budget. Indeed, Russia's mediocre economic performance and low military spending imply that Russia might threaten its immediate neighbors, but is no threat to the security of the U.S.

RUSSIAN MILITARY WEAKNESS ON DISPLAY IN ITS WAR IN UKRAINE

Partly as a result of this low level of investment, Russia doesn't seem to have a military that is capable of protracted, large-scale offensive action, let alone expeditionary operations, that could threaten U.S. national security. Russia's war against Ukraine is still underway and the results are uncertain.³¹ Most recently, Russian forces have succeeded in making limited gains in the Donbas region. Yet, it can already be surmised that Russian military power has fallen far short of pre-war appraisals.³²

Ground Forces. Russian ground forces were defeated or driven back from both Kyiv and Kharkiv. Even in the Donbas region, their progress has been plodding and uncertain, marked occasionally by grave and costly tactical errors.³³

Why did the Russian military perform below expectations? First and foremost, there appears to have been major failures of intelligence and planning. Russian military analysts themselves openly admit these grave miscalculations: "an ... important reason for our troubles ... was the senseless belief ... that the 'fraternal people' of Ukraine ... will meet our troops in the same way as the Crimeans in 2014 year."³⁴ Other Russian sources register

³¹ A rather comprehensive assessment of Russia's fighting effectiveness in the Ukraine War is Dalsjö, Robert; Jonsson, Michael; Norberg, Johan. (2022, May 30). "A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War." *Survival*, 64(3), pp. 7-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2078044>. That article presents a rather typical view. For a useful critique of the conventional wisdom, see also Johnson, David. (2022, May 31). "Would We Do Better: Hubris and Validation in Ukraine." *War on the Rocks*.

<https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/would-we-do-better-hubris-and-validation-in-ukraine/>.

³² See, for example, Jones, Seth. (2022, January 13). "Russia's Possible Invasion of Ukraine." *CSIS*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-possible-invasion-ukraine>.

³³ Baker, Sinead. (2022, May 13). "Russia Suffered 'Significant' Equipment Losses Trying to Cross a Key Bridge in a Sign of the Pressure on Its Troops, UK Intelligence Says." *Business Insider*. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/russia-suffered-significant-equipment-losses-trying-to-cross-a-key-bridge-in-a-sign-of-the-pressure-on-its-troops-uk-intelligence-says/ar-AAXeum7?ocid=msedgntp&cvid=6d755bfc7d904e1fb77f244485423726>.

³⁴ Chramshykin, Alexander [Александр Храмчихин]. (2022, March 3). "Advance onto Thin Ice: Reasons for the Extreme Aggravation of the Situation in Ukraine" [Наступление по тонкому льду: Причины крайнего обострения ситуации на Украине]. *Independent Military Review* [Независимое Военное Обозрение]. https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2022-03-10/3_1180_ukraine.html; See also Marzhetsky, Sergei [Маржецкий, Сергей]. (2022, March 1). "The Military Operation in Ukraine: Working from the Initial Mistakes" [Военная операция на Украине: Работа над первыми ошибками]. *Reportyor* [Репортёр]. <https://topcor.ru/24281-voennaja-operacija-na-ukraine-rabota-nad-pervymi-oshibkami.html>; Shurigin, Vladislav [Владислав

a similar level of shock and disappointment.³⁵ Despite some improvement in battlefield performance during May and June 2022, Russian defense analysts continue to voice frustration and concern regarding Russian military effectiveness.³⁶

Russian armored columns have faced significant difficulties in preventing ambushes. This has occurred in part due to a paucity of tactical drones in front-line Russian units. In theory, drones could provide these units with “eyes in the sky” to prevent such ambushes. Yet, the Russian Army has been quite slow to adapt to new tactics.³⁷ Russian ground forces also seem to lack doctrine and training for urban warfare. Falling back on combat experiences from both the battles of Grozny in Chechnya, as well as Aleppo in Syria, may not have provided applicable lessons.³⁸ Battlefield communications appears to be another major weakness.³⁹ Unquestionably, morale also seems to be a major problem.⁴⁰

The Russian military has struggled to adapt to a battlefield that in some respects resembles counter-insurgency warfare. The Russian High Command appears to have been initially reluctant to use massive firepower, hoping for a rapid victory. However, in the face of major Ukrainian resistance, the Russian forces have resorted to brutal tactics.⁴¹ It must be said that a significant reason for Russia’s failure to secure a quick victory in Ukraine has

Шурыгин]. (2022, March 2). “They Were Thoroughly Prepared” [Готовились Основательно]. *Izvestiya* [Известия]. <https://iz.ru/1299016/vladislav-shurygin/gotovilis-osnovatelno>.

³⁵ Aruchtin, Yuri [Алухтин, Юрий]. (2022, March 22). “Why the Russian Army in Ukraine is Not Met with Flowers” [Почему Росийскую Армию на Украине Не Встречают с Цветами]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. <https://topwar.ru/193769-pochemu-rossijskuju-armiju-na-ukraine-ne-vstrechajut-s-cvetami.html>.

³⁶ See, for example, Biryukov, Viktor [Бирюков, Виктор]. (2022, July 21). “Magic Numbers: How Much Equipment of the Ukraine Armed Forces Has Been Destroyed” [Магия Чисел. Сколько Техники ВСУ Было Уничтожено]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. <https://topwar.ru/199233-magija-chisel-skolko-tehniki-vsu-bylo-unichtozheno.html?ysclid=l6jfk3adeo505357944>.

³⁷ Dixon, Robyn. (2020, November 11). “Azerbaijan's drones owned the battlefield in Nagorno-Karabakh.” *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-drones-azerbaijan-aremenia/2020/11/11/441bcbd2-193d-11eb-8bda-814ca56e138b_story.html; See also Vorontsov, Alexander [Воронцов, Александр]. (2022, March 31). “Strike UAV: How Could the Special Operation Have Occurred” [Ударный БПЛА: Какой Могла Быть Эта Спецоперация]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. <https://topwar.ru/194007-kakoj-mogla-byt-jeta-vojna.html>

³⁸ Kuznetsov, Alexei [Кузнецов, Алексей]. (2022, March 10). “Ukraine: Fights in the Cities” [Украина. Бой в Городах]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. <https://topwar.ru/193275-ukraina-boi-v-gorodah.html>;

Bowen, Jeremy. (2022, March 5). “From Grozny to Aleppo to Ukraine, Russia meets resistance with more firepower.” *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60631433>.

³⁹ Detsch, Jack. (2022, March 22). “The Ukrainians Are Listening’: Russia’s Military Radios are Getting Owned.” *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/22/ukraine-russia-military-radio/>.

⁴⁰ Harding, Luke. (2022, March 4). “Demoralised Russian soldiers tell of anger at being ‘duped’ into war.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/russian-soldiers-ukraine-anger-duped-into-war>.

⁴¹ Boulègue, Mathieu. (2022, March 2). “As his attack falters, Putin could become more brutal – and even more irrational.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/02/ukraine-attack-falters-putin-brutal-irrational-russia-chechnya-syria>.

also been the preparation provided to Ukraine's forces by NATO members in the years prior to the conflict.⁴²

Finally, it seems quite plausible to also conclude that the Russian armed forces have lacked requisite manpower. The estimated 180,000-200,000 troops that began the campaign in a three-pronged attack now seems inadequate.⁴³ Manpower problems in the Russian ground forces may well reflect the larger Russian demographic crisis.⁴⁴

Aerial Forces. The Russian Air Force has not given the Kremlin the decisive blow that many had predicted prior to the war. Specifically, while 11 airfields and 50 additional air defense locations in Ukraine, including 18 major radar sites, were struck by Russian air and missile forces on the first night of the attack, the Russians were not able to achieve air superiority.⁴⁵ Yet, the Ukrainian air defense system continues to operate, and Ukrainian aircraft are still flying, at least to some extent. Out of approximately 300 Russian aircraft deployed near to Ukraine at the start of the operation, as many as 95 may have been shot down or lost for technical reasons, at least according to Ukrainian claims.⁴⁶ That number probably represents a significant exaggeration, but perhaps most revealing of Russian airpower weakness has been the low rate of sortie generation. Thus, the Russian Air Force flew fewer sorties in the first 24 days of combat in Ukraine than the U.S. flew in the first 24 hours of combat in the 2003 Iraq War.⁴⁷ From a humanitarian standpoint, it is reassuring that Russia does not wield equivalent aerospace power, to be sure, but this also is further evidence of Russian military weakness.

Another quite detailed study also examined the evident failure of Russian airpower to deliver a decisive blow during the early days of Russia's invasion.⁴⁸ That study posited that the failure of Russian airpower "has contributed to the significant lack of success and heavy losses" for Russian forces during the critical opening phase of the attack. The author suggests several explanations for Russian airpower weakness, including: a paucity of precision-guided munitions, insufficient training for Russian pilots and aircrews, as well as poor inter-service coordination, so that the Russian Air Force was evidently "not confident in their capacity to safely deconflict large-scale sorties with the activity" of the Russian

⁴² Watson, Ben. (2017, October 5). "In Ukraine, the US Trains an Army in the West to Fight in the East." *Defense One*. <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2017/10/ukraine-us-trains-army-west-fight-east/141577/>.

⁴³ A manpower shortage is strongly hinted at in this candid discussion of Russian ground forces organization: Kuznetsov, Alexei [Кузнецов, Алексей]. (2022, March 30). "Battalion Tactical Groups in the Special Military Operation" [Батальонные Тактические Группы в Специальной Операции]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. <https://topwar.ru/194054-ukraina-batalonnye-takticheskie-gruppy.html>.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Sauer, Piotr. (2021, October 13). "Russian Population Undergoes Largest Ever Peacetime Decline, Analysis Shows." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/13/russias-population-undergoes-largest-ever-peacetime-decline>.

⁴⁵ Arkin, William. (2022, March 22). "Putin's Bombers Could Devastate Ukraine But He's Holding Back. Here's Why." *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/putins-bombers-could-devastate-ukraine-hes-holding-back-heres-why-1690494>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Bronk, Justin. (2022, February 28). "The Mysterious Case of Russia's Missing Air Force." *RUSI Commentary*, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mysterious-case-missing-russian-air-force>.

ground forces.⁴⁹ Recently, there is some evidence that the Russian armed forces are improving their use of airpower, for example in limiting Ukraine's ability to launch an offensive against Kherson in the south.⁵⁰

Naval Forces. The Russian Navy has been active during the war but has also underperformed. The Black Sea Fleet made an early foray to capture Snake Island. To be sure, the Russian Navy has launched long-range *Kalibr* cruise-missiles at targets in Ukraine. It has also been used in a limited fashion to deliver artillery strikes against shore targets. There even appears to have been a limited landing of naval infantry near to Berdyansk. It should also be noted that ships of the Russian Navy have been active in the Mediterranean.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the much-anticipated Russian naval move against the city of Odesa, Ukraine's largest port, has not occurred and likely reflects the limits of Russian military power. There is little doubt that Odesa has been a primary objective in the original Kremlin war plan. President Vladimir Putin actually named the city in his speech of 21 February, 2022 that informally served as a declaration of war.⁵² Moreover, the Russian Navy blatantly reinforced its amphibious warfare potential in the Black Sea prior to the war. Strong ground movements against Kherson and then later Mikolaiv also seemed to indicate an intention to attack Odesa.⁵³ But the attack never came. That is likely in part due to frustrations on the ground, since the Russian Army faced greater than expected resistance in both Mikolaiv and in Mariupol. Still, another major explanation seems to be the Ukrainian Navy's use of Soviet-era sea mines off the Odesa coast. For instance, a Russian military expert explains that hundreds of such mines provided a cheap and effective deterrent.⁵⁴ This example rather starkly illustrates the weakness of Russian naval power, even when it comes to undertaking major operations in its own backyard.

The point has been underlined by the sinking of the Russian missile cruiser *Moskva* on 14 April, 2022. That ship was operating in the northern Black Sea proximate to the port of Odesa when it was struck by two Ukrainian *Neptune* anti-ship cruise missiles. Most likely, the Ukrainians received timely targeting data from U.S. intelligence or military sources.⁵⁵ Earlier in the conflict, Ukrainian forces also succeeded in sinking another Russian Navy ship, the *Saratov*. That ship was carrying munitions into the Azov Sea port of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See, for example, (2022, July 26). "The Russian Air Force Destroyed an Artillery Division in Mikolaiv" [Российские ВКС Уничтожили Артиллерийский Дивизион в Николаеве]. *Izvestiya* [Известия]. https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2022-07-21/1_1198_donbass.html?ysclid=l6jkcyqrc877921723.

⁵¹ (2022, March 15). "Largest Concentration of NATO and Russian Warships in the N. Aegean Sea." *Keep Talking Greece*. <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2022/03/15/aegean-sea-navalforces-nato-russia/>.

⁵² Russian President Statement on Ukraine (2022, February 21) <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5002651/user-clip-putin-speech-21-feb-2022>.

⁵³ (2022, March 4). "Not Just for the Military Significance: Why It's Important for Russia to Liberate Odesa" [Не Только Военное Значение: Почему России Важно Освободить Одессу]. *Reportyor* [Репортёр]. <https://warfiles.ru/237721-ne-tolko-voennoe-znachenie-pochemu-rossii-vazhno-osvobodit-odessu.html>

⁵⁴ Boltenkov, Dmitri [Болтенков, Дмитрий]. (2022, March 29). "Mining Negotiations" [Минные Переговоры]. *Izvestiya* [Известия]. <https://iz.ru/1311972/dmitrii-boltenkov/minnye-peregovory>.

⁵⁵ Bertrand, Natasha and Lillis, Katie Bo. (2022, May 7). "US Provided Intelligence that Helped Ukraine Target Russian Warship." *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/05/politics/us-intelligence-russian-moskva-warship-ukraine-target/index.html>.

Berdiansk. It is not clear what kind of attack, whether a drone or a missile, caused a fire on board, but the crew intentionally sank the ship to prevent a massive explosion of the ordnance.⁵⁶

Space/Missile/Cyber Forces. Despite some concerns that space could become a further domain for warfare resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that has not occurred. One concern was a Russian threat against the U.S.-licensed *Starlink* satellite constellation supporting the Ukrainians that would cause widespread internet outages.⁵⁷ Similarly, concerns about Russian disruptions of space cooperation aboard the International Space Station, have also not borne out.⁵⁸ Undoubtedly, Russian space satellites give Moscow ample resources for developing targeting. This has probably allowed Russian missile forces to score some notably deadly long-range strikes, for example when eight *Kalibr* missiles hit the west Ukrainian town of Yavoriv, just 20km from the border with Poland.⁵⁹ Russia has made other strikes with its missile forces, including with the hypersonic missile *Kinzhal*.⁶⁰

There have been some reports of high fail rates on Russian missile systems, however.⁶¹ A preliminary assessment would be that Russian missile systems have not stopped shipments of military aid flowing into western Ukraine. In the cyber realm, the paucity of Russian strikes seems even more surprising, but here the question is, "... why did Russia not use its vaunted cyberattack capabilities against Ukraine and its Western backers?"⁶² Other than a brief and unsophisticated denial of service attack that hit at some Ukrainian banks in the opening phase of the war, there seems to be little or no result from Russia's much-discussed cyberwarfare capabilities.⁶³

⁵⁶ Sutton, H I. (2022, March 25). "Satellite Images Confirm Russian Navy Landing Ship Was Sunk at Berdiansk." *USNI News*. <https://news.usni.org/2022/03/25/satellite-images-confirm-russian-navy-landing-ship-was-sunk-at-berdiansk>.

⁵⁷ Goines, Timothy; Biller, Jeffrey; Grunert, Jeremy. (2022, March 14). "The Russia-Ukraine War and the Space Domain." *Articles of War*. <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/russia-ukraine-war-space-domain/>.

⁵⁸ Chang, Kenneth. (2022, March 31). "On Space Station, Astronauts Avoided Discussing the War." *New York Times*. A15.

⁵⁹ Raevsky, Andrei [Раевский, Андрей]. (2022, March 16). "Three Important Missile Strikes" [Три Ваших Ракетных Удара]. *The Free Press* [Свободная Пресса]. <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/328196/>.

⁶⁰ Ellyatt, Holly. (2022, March 22). "Russia says it fired hypersonic missiles in Ukraine. What are they and why would Moscow use them?" *CNBC*. <https://www.cbc.com/2022/03/22/hypersonic-missiles-why-would-russia-use-the-kinzhal-in-ukraine.html>.

⁶¹ Stewart, Phil. (2022, March 25). "Exclusive: U.S. assesses up to 60% failure rate for some Russian missiles, officials say." *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/exclusive-us-assesses-up-60-failure-rate-some-russian-missiles-officials-say-2022-03-24/>

⁶² Erickson, Matt; Whiton, Christian. (2022, March 28). "Is Russia Just Not That Good at Cyberwar?" *National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-just-not-good-cyberwar-201465>. Other articles noting the same paucity of Russian cyber attacks, include: Ishak, Natasha. (2022, March 19). "Is Russia Holding Back from Cyberwar?" *VOX*. <https://www.vox.com/2022/3/19/22986316/russia-ukraine-cyber-attacks-holding-back>; Marks, Joseph. (2022, March 3). "11 Reasons We Haven't Seen Big Russian Cyber Attacks Yet" *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/03/11-reasons-we-havent-seen-big-russian-cyberattacks-yet/>; and Wolff, Josephine. (2022, March 3). "Why Russia Hasn't Launched Major Cyber Attacks Since the Invasion of Ukraine." *Time*. <https://time.com/6153902/russia-major-cyber-attacks-invasion-ukraine/>.

⁶³ Ibid.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIAN CONVENTIONAL MILITARY WEAKNESS

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated overall that Russian conventional military power lags very substantially behind the U.S. Before the war, the stark budget imbalance already implied significant overmatch in favor of the U.S. However, the progress of the war, including especially Russia's failure to conquer its neighbor, provides robust evidence that the Russian military is even weaker than many had supposed. The aerospace and naval forces of Russia are outclassed by the U.S. in both quantity and also quality. While the ground forces comparison remains somewhat more complicated, at least with respect to numbers, the Ukraine War has powerfully illustrated that with respect to Russia's "armored legions," the "emperor has no clothes." An appraisal of Russian conventional military capabilities, proficiency, and objectives, therefore, yields that Moscow does not actually represent a significant threat to the U.S. **For that reason, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however tragic from a humanitarian point of view, does not justify the massive increase in U.S. defense spending that is currently being contemplated.** Two more implications are also discussed below.

U.S. Must Be Cautious in Light of the Nuclear Paradox: Weak Conventional Forces Cause Russia to Rely More Heavily on Nuclear Weaponry

The Kremlin has leaned heavily on its nuclear forces in the past few decades and has also done so in the present circumstances. Over the last decade, the Russian military has rolled out new ICBMs, upgraded strategic bombers, and new strategic submarines. These developments have occurred gradually, but also rather steadily with each of these new systems entering the active force in recent years. The Russian military has also sought to actively demonstrate its nuclear prowess with brazen and expensive demonstrations, such as multiple salvo launches from the new *Borey*-class SSBNs.⁶⁴ Examples of Russian exotic nuclear weaponry, moreover, include not only new hypersonic weapons, but also nuclear-powered cruise missiles that fly to unlimited range, as well as nuclear-powered underwater vehicles that are designed to use thermonuclear underwater blasts to trigger a deadly tsunami wave against an adversary's coastal cities.⁶⁵

Even more troubling, however, have been the nuclear shadows that have been all too apparent during the current Russian war against Ukraine. Putin exercised his nuclear forces just prior to the war and then put these forces on "high alert" on 27 February, a couple of days after the start of the invasion.⁶⁶ Not coincidentally, *The New York Times* ran a

⁶⁴ Stefan-Gady, Franz. (2018, May 4). "Russia's Borei-Class Test Fires 4 Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles." *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/russias-borei-class-test-fires-4-submarine-launched-ballistic-missiles/>.

⁶⁵ Mizokami, Kyle. (2018, July 24). "Russia's Nuclear Tsunami Apocalypse Torpedo is Named 'Poseidon'." *Popular Mechanics*. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/weapons/a22537135/russias-nuclear-tsunami-apocalypse-torpedo-is-named-poseidon/>.

See also: Sutton, H.I. (2022, March 3). "Russia's New 'Poseidon' Super-Weapon: What You Need To Know." *NavalNews.com*. <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/03/russias-new-poseidon-super-weapon-what-you-need-to-know/>

⁶⁶ "Putin Signals Escalation as He Puts Russia's Nuclear Force on High Alert" (2022, February 27). *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/27/vladimir-putin-puts-russia-nuclear-deterrence-forces-on-high-alert-ukraine>.

story on its front page in mid-March that observed: “Bunkers, survival guides, and iodine pills are flying off the shelves,” at least in Europe.⁶⁷ Fortunately, President Joseph Biden has chosen not to answer Putin’s nuclear saber-rattling, declining to put US nuclear forces on a parallel alert.⁶⁸ Yet, a series of increasingly common Russian precision strikes disturbingly close to the Ukraine-Polish border by nuclear-capable missiles, such as *Kalibr*, *Iskander*, and *Kinzhal* serve as a reminder of Russia’s powerful arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW).⁶⁹ Indeed, as recently as January 2022, a Russian military newspaper noted: “Russia is many times superior to the U.S. in terms of tactical nuclear weapons. According to expert estimates, there are about 1,900 tactical warheads in Russia.”⁷⁰ Western assessments confirm these estimates.⁷¹

To understand the nuclear dangers of the current situation in Ukraine, it is useful to review an unclassified report from the Naval War College on “nuclear use”: “Moscow is unlikely to use nuclear weapons ... unless the Putin regime judged that an impending defeat during conflict would undercut the government’s legitimacy and create an existential threat via domestic upheaval (through loss of territorial integrity or other pivotal wartime event).”⁷² Thus, the paradox of Russia’s conventional weakness is fully revealed in the above prediction. Russia’s conventional weakness in the past few decades helped to fuel the Kremlin’s long-term prioritization of nuclear striking power. But when confronted with the reality of Russian conventional military weakness, the whole world faces the problem that Moscow is far more likely to reach for the nuclear cudgel in circumstances of military defeat. One Russian defense analyst explained as follows in April 2022 regarding certain Nordic countries joining NATO: “The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO will increase the already existing imbalance of forces in favor of the alliance. This will inevitably force Russia to consider the possibility of using nuclear weapons in such a collision as a

⁶⁷ Horowitz, Jason. (2022, March 12). “Pandemic Fears Give Way to a Rush for Bomb Shelters.” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/12/world/europe/ukraine-europe-nuclear-war-anxiety.html>.

⁶⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/us/politics/putin-nuclear-alert-biden-deescalation.html>.

⁶⁹ “Russian Defense Ministry Reported the Destruction of the Mercenary Training Base in Ukraine” [МО РФ Сообщило об Уничтожении Базы Подготовки Наемников на Украине]. (2022, March 25). *Izvestiya* [Известия]. <https://iz.ru/1310435/2022-03-25/mo-rf-soobshchilo-ob-unichtozhenii-bazy-podgotovki-naemnikov-na-ukraine>.

⁷⁰ Linnik, Sergei [Линник, Сергей]. (2022, January 19). “The U.S. Is Lagging Behind in Tactical Nuclear Weapons” [Отставание США в Тактическом Ядерном Оружии]. *Military Review* [Военное Обозрение]. <https://topwar.ru/191256-otstavanie-ssha-v-takticheskom-jadernom-oruzhii.html>; Kristensen, Hans M. and Korda, Matt. (2022). Russian nuclear weapons. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. 78:2, 98-121.

⁷¹ See, for example, Corera, Gordon. (2022, April 26). “Could Russia Use Tactical Nuclear Weapons.” *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60664169>, which says Russia has about 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons. On the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons arsenal, see *Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons* (Washington DC, Congressional Research Service. (2022, March 7). Report No. RL32572, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/RL32572.pdf>. According to this report, the U.S. possesses approximately 230 non-strategic warheads with about 100 based in Europe and the remainder in the U.S. homeland.

⁷² Schneider, Jacquelyn and Shaffer, Rachael. (2019, January 12). “Nuclear Stability with Russia and North Korea.” Newport, RI. *U.S. Naval War College*. <https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/Nuclear%20Stability%20with%20Russia%20and%20North%20Korea%20Write-Up.pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=mUMYoXKKFMCj80aDzuI7Uw95ELhAzsXfKAPA5mXfrs%3D>.

means to compensate for the gap in conventional weapons.”⁷³ Moreover, a Russian defense expert explicitly stated in mid-June 2022 on Russia’s *Channel 1* newscast that a direct military conflict between Russia and NATO would “inevitably” involve tactical nuclear weapons.⁷⁴ This paradoxical interaction between conventional military weakness and nuclear forces, somewhat familiar from the long-simmering situation in North Korea, implies that the U.S. should not press its evident military advantages in Eastern Europe.

U.S. Able to Focus on Restraint, as European States Take on More of Their Own Defense

Aside from the nuclear risks outlined above that must be managed with the utmost care, Russia’s faulty military performance may allow the U.S. to further reform away from excessive military spending and costly interventions abroad, since Russia’s conventional military threat is not nearly as fearsome as once imagined. Russian armies are completely unable to march on Paris or Berlin, let alone Warsaw or Bucharest now or in the foreseeable future. It is plain enough that they could not even conquer Kyiv. Yet, the horrors of Kremlin aggression, which cannot be minimized, have also galvanized a new effort by Europeans to take their security into their own hands. This has not just meant punishing the Kremlin with economic sanctions but has also entailed efforts to delink European energy policy from dependence on Russian oil and gas – no small ambition.

At least as important has been a new European commitment to defense. Some Europeans have evidently realized the pitfalls of relying almost entirely on Washington for Europe’s defense. Berlin, in particular, has promised to substantially increase its defense outlays, after years of lagging well behind the NATO-agreed standard of spending 2% of GDP on defense. Perhaps inspired by the Ukrainian’s brave defense, such reforms appear also to take advantage of new strategic trends that may suggest “defense dominance” in the current era of military technological development will enable small countries to provide adequately for their own defense.⁷⁵ The contours of the new era seem to have been powerfully demonstrated in Ukraine when heavy infantry weapons and drones have seemingly halted armored columns and truck-mounted missiles have sunk major warships. Such changes may reflect improved sensors, smaller and longer-ranged weapons, as well as vastly improved battlefield communications and intelligence. In such an era, it may be reasonable for countries like Finland, now on the cusp of joining NATO, or even the tiny Baltic states to arm themselves sufficiently to provide a credible defense against external attack. It could be natural and wholly reasonable for states along Russia’s periphery to feel

⁷³ Poplavskaya, Olga [Поплавская, Ольга]. (2022, April 29). “Northern Flank: What Might Be the Consequences of Sweden and Finland Joining NATO” [Северный Фланг: Каковы Могут Быть Последствия Вступления в НАТО Швеции и Финляндии]. *Izvestiya* [Известия]. <https://iz.ru/1327533/olga-poplavskaja/severnyi-flang-kakovy-mogut-byt-posledstviia-vstupleniia-v-nato-shvetsii-i-finliandii>.

⁷⁴ Muchin, Alexei [Мухин, Алексей]. (2022, June 15). Director for the Center for Political Information [Генеральный Директор Центра Политической Информации]. “Time Will Tell” [Время Покажет]. *Channel 1*.

https://twitter.com/lylegoldstein/status/1537468637547831297?s=20&t=JjgL8791A0U4A2yp_lp9CA.

⁷⁵ On the new era of “defense dominance,” see for example Hammes, T.X. (2021). “The Tactical Defense Becomes Dominant Again” *Joint Force Quarterly* (103) pp. 10-17.

a need for enhanced armament, but this does not mean the U.S. is similarly threatened. Proximity plays a role in threat perceptions.

For many European countries, radically increased defense expenditures, in light of Russia's military difficulties in Ukraine, would seem to be unjustified from a purely military point of view, but are likely inevitable from a political standpoint and could ultimately serve the wider cause of peace and stability, by enabling greater European strategic autonomy, that could in turn lead to more diplomatic compromises that favor peace. Indeed, the asymmetry in defense outlays, wherein the U.S. has long guaranteed European security while Europeans themselves became "onlookers" or even "cheerleaders" for the most part, could be partly at the root of the generally failed system of European security in the post-Cold War era. This is not the place to adjudicate the role of NATO in the conflict in Ukraine and the alliance's possible culpability in triggering the present war, though many Western strategists have drawn attention to this issue.⁷⁶ However, it does seem plausible to assert that Washington has been rather negligent when it comes to both Russia and Ukraine policy over the last decade. It has at various points encouraged escalation, and also seemingly been tone-deaf to the various risks of doing so or the possibilities for diplomatic compromise.⁷⁷ The European failure to "share the burden" of defense, moreover, has also cost the U.S. dearly, since Americans generally have a considerably lower standard of living than most Europeans, in part due to that unfair burden.⁷⁸ In previous decades, Europeans have traditionally had much lower defense expenditures than in the U.S. and these societies have seemingly benefited in terms of quality of life indicators. The presently developing situation, in which Europeans spend more on defense, may reflect a more rational re-balancing of defense burdens, enabling the U.S. to demilitarize, at least in some degree. It has also been asserted, moreover, that the Europeans had a tendency to "cheer on" American military activism, even, for example, in the Afghanistan quagmire, with deleterious effects across the board.

Still, it is worth mentioning that the most promising negotiations on Ukraine prior to the war were spearheaded by European leaders, for example in the so-called "Normandy Format." This was a negotiation format that was intended to showcase European leadership. As part of the on-going peace process, this format involved a meeting on 9 December, 2019 of the leaders of France and Germany, together with the leaders of Russia and Ukraine. While not successful ultimately, the format had very substantial promise to

⁷⁶ "John Mearsheimer on Why the West is Principally Responsible for the Ukraine Crisis: The Political Scientist Believes the Reckless Expansion of NATO Provoked Russia." (2022, May 19). *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>.

⁷⁷ Goldstein, Lyle. (2020, January 1). "America Must Do More to Support Peace in Ukraine" *National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-must-do-more-support-peace-ukraine-109971>.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Shedrovsky, Karina. (2016, July 22). "Report: U.S. Lagging Well Behind in Child Well Being." *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/07/22/report-us-lagging-child-well-being/87394286/> On the link between high U.S. defense spending and America's comparatively weak social safety net, see Stein, Jeff. (2018, July 12). "What America Could Do With European Levels of Military Spending" *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/07/12/what-america-could-do-with-european-levels-military-spending/>.

make a breakthrough.⁷⁹ Thus, an energized European defense will hopefully herald more fair Trans-Atlantic burden-sharing, but may also hopefully usher in an era of more responsible, mature, realistic, and inclusive policies for European security. In that way, the militarized approach to Russia, inevitable in the short term, can gradually give way to a return to diplomacy and peace over time. By increasing the European content of European security, better outcomes may result, since the U.S.-and-NATO-dominant architecture has generally failed to produce a lasting peace in contemporary Eastern Europe.

THREAT INFLATION AND TODAY'S "GREAT POWER COMPETITION"

Not only has Russia failed to administer a knock-out blow to Ukraine, but its military forces have shown themselves to be significantly weaker and less disciplined than expected, giving the world myriad examples of military failure. The terrible destruction tragically wrought upon many Ukrainians does not constitute a victory for the Kremlin, but rather an embarrassment and humiliation for the Russian armed forces. The Russian military has adopted new tactics for the campaign in Donbas, favoring artillery for example, and is making some inroads there.⁸⁰ However, all signs suggest that there will be no total Russian conquest of Ukraine, as the Kremlin seems to have originally aimed for.

In analyzing the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, this paper has made four contributions. First, it has documented that “threat inflation” has been an endemic part of the American discourse on national security affairs and that this phenomenon has been a particular problem in dilemmas related to Russia policy. Second, the paper has suggested that poor Russian military performance should not actually be surprising since the Kremlin’s annual defense outlays constitute less than one-tenth of U.S. outlays and one twentieth of NATO’s aggregate total. To underline this point, a third part of the paper made a survey of Russian military performance in the 2022 war in Ukraine to reveal Russian military weakness across all domains.

The image and reality of Russia’s military power is now much deflated. Inspired by the Ukrainian example, many of the states of Europe and around the world may grasp for new, defensive technologies and doctrines that enable them to more fully take responsibility for their own security. In turn, this may allow the U.S. to adopt a more cautious and less aggressive stance vis-à-vis other great powers – easing the “security dilemma” and related escalation spirals that have been triggered recently by American fears associated with “great power competition.” The easing of such security dilemmas, heading off related escalation, and restraining interventionist impulses, should in turn allow for decreased U.S. defense spending. The U.S. has been and remains utterly secure from any notional Russian national security threat. The runaway Pentagon budget that has

⁷⁹ Goldstein, Lyle. (2020, January 1). “America Must Do More to Support Peace in Ukraine.” *National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-must-do-more-support-peace-ukraine-109971>.

⁸⁰ For a glimpse at the relatively recent optimism among Russian defense analysts, see for example, Karnozov, Vladimir. [Карнозов, Владимир]. (2022, July 14). “Special Operation: A Time to Collect Trophies” [Спецоперация: Время Собирать Трофеи]. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* [Независимая Газета]. https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2022-07-14/1_1197_armament.html?ysclid=16jkiks6u529345321.

profited from recent global instability must be brought back under rational control and limitations based on the objective reality of Russian weakness.

Nevertheless, the paper also concludes that a considerable problem is that Russia's conventional military weakness could lead the Kremlin to lean ever more perilously on its nuclear arsenal. These findings are a reminder that the greatest threat of nuclear war could lie in the West's overreaction to Russia's aggression. Indeed, major and costly U.S. policy errors in the past have resulted from threat inflation.