



Russia's military is less than meets the eye

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For many years now, officials in Moscow have extolled the virtues of Russia's "wonder weapons," military breakthroughs and technological advances (such as fifth generation fighter jets, autonomous battle tanks, and mechanized combat walkers) that they maintained were nothing short of game-changers in modern warfare. For most of that time, officials in Washington and European capitals believed them, and tempered a great many of their policies so as not to antagonize the Kremlin.

But the war in Ukraine has changed all that. Nearly a year-and-a-half into Russia's "special military operation" against its western neighbor, its next-generation arms have failed to materialize in any meaningful way. While the offensive has seen Moscow field a broad range of conventional weaponry, those next-generation technologies haven't yet made a meaningful appearance. To the contrary, as the conflict has dragged on, Russia has been forced to rely more and more on foreign military supplies and old Soviet-era hardware to shore up its badly depleted forces.

An exception in this regard has been the *Kinzhal*, Russia's most high profile — and supposedly formidable — hypersonic missile. The *Kinzhal* ("dagger" in Russian), has been billed by Russian president Vladimir Putin as an unstoppable super-weapon for the past half-decade. But it has proved distinctly underwhelming in practice. Last week, for instance, half a dozen of the advanced missiles were neutralized by Ukraine using American-provided defenses.

Russia's high-tech military, in other words, is turning out to be much more modest than advertised. Nor is this state of affairs likely to change any time soon, for at least two reasons.

The first is the widening array of Western sanctions levied on Russia for its ongoing aggression against Ukraine. Contrary to Kremlin claims, those measures appear to be having a real impact on the health of the national economy and manufacturing. Yet the impact on Russia's future warfighting potential — including its development of next-generation weapons — is likely to be even more pronounced.

A recent study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a prominent DC think tank, noted that sanctions "create shortages of higher-end foreign components and force Moscow to substitute them with lower-quality alternatives," and that "[f]or now, Moscow's efforts at state-backed import substitution remain largely unsuccessful."

"This ultimately impacts Russia's ability to manufacture, sustain, and deliver advanced weapons and technology to the battlefield in Ukraine," the report notes. "Therefore, while the quality of the military equipment used by the Ukrainian army continues to improve thanks to the Western aid, the quality of Russia's weapons continues to degrade."

The second factor affecting Russia's deteriorating military potential is its deepening "brain drain." For years, the country's best and brightest engineers, scientists and innovators have been abandoning Putin's increasingly authoritarian regime in droves, deepening Russia's larger trajectory of demographic decline. This trendline has accelerated dramatically since the start of the war in Ukraine, as Russians have voted with their feet to protest the conflict or simply to avoid conscription. Perhaps as many as 1,000,000 Russians are estimated to have left the country since the invasion began, representing the largest such exodus in over a century.

The results have been truly ruinous both for the long-term health of Russia's population and for its innovative capacity. This was recently made clear by Valentin Parmon, the Vice President of the prestigious Russian Academy of Scientists. In a recent interview with the Interfax news agency, Parmon explained that "no other countries have lost so many workers in the scientific field" as Russia over the past half-decade, numbering a staggering 50,000 people. "[T]he future depends on knowledge-intensive technologies," said Parmon, "[and] Russia as a state has let those who can do [these specialties] go."

All of which has helped deal a decisive blow to Russia's image of military invincibility. At the outset of the Ukraine war, Moscow was widely believed to possess the second-strongest army in Europe. Today, because of assorted battlefield missteps and tactical blunders, as well as the aid being provided to Ukraine by the West, it can't even be said to be fielding the most advanced military in Ukraine itself. The U.S., and everyone else for that matter, is revising its estimates of Russian power accordingly.

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