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Review paper

ARMS RACE – A STRATEGY THAT ALWAYS WORKS?

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Abstract: The present article focuses on the current arms race between the USA and Russia with the aim to investigate if it will lead to a constant increase of the military budget and eventually to the collapse of the Russian economy. Therefore, it briefly mentions the Cold War time arms race and then draws parallels with the present situation. The Russian military budget has been rising since the 2000s; however, dramatic changes have occurred in the military sector since the Munich Speech in 2007. Hence, a correlation between international events and budget is analyzed in the article. In order to approach the research question, it is necessary to discuss two geopolitical crises that both powers are involved in - the Ukrainian crisis and the Syrian Civil War. Here it is important to highlight that Russia did not provoke either one, while the USA could be taken responsible for both.

Key words: arms race, the Cold War, the USA, Russia, the Syrian conflict, the Ukrainian crisis, rivalry.

INTRODUCTION

For a few years now various news channels have been claiming we are in the midst of a new Cold War. However, these claims did not seem as serious and obvious when they started as they seem now in 2018. The seriousness of these

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claims became apparent after Antonio Guterres stated that “The Cold War is back with a vengeance, but with a difference” at the opening of the UN Security Council meeting in April 2018. (BBC, 2018). The new Cold War has inherited many features of the old Cold War; such as the confrontation between East and West, proxy wars and the arms race. However, the question is how much in common do the features of the past and present have? Will the old strategy serve as well as it did before? This article will tackle one of the principal U.S. Cold War strategies: the arms race. The aim of this work is to analyze if an arms race strategy could work in the modern Cold War and result in the instability of Russia’s economy.

In the past, the arms race exhausted the reserves of the Soviet Union and led to her collapse. It has to be mentioned that many various factors such as the command economy, lack of innovations, large military spending and absence of business caused economic collapse. But this article will focus only on one objective, which is military overspending. Analyzing the current Russian economic situation, one may notice that even though it has experienced a period of downfall, its military budget has risen throughout the past decades. As many experts claim, when it comes to international affairs, usually the Russian government strategy is purely responsive. This is exemplified with cases such as the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, the Ukrainian crisis and certain events within the Syrian conflict. A similarity between all of the mentioned examples is that Russia had to increase spending on its military capabilities. Another similarity is how all Russia’s actions were met with sanctions imposed by the western countries (with the exception for the Georgian war). Consequently, the Russian currency crashed, and its economy is still heavily influenced by sanctions that do not allow for a full recovery due to the oil prices dropping in late 2014. So, has Russia learnt its lessons from the past or does the U.S. strategy always work?

OUTLINE

In order to tackle the question of the effectiveness of the arms race strategy, we should examine the American tactic, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and its impact on the Soviet economy and military budget.

To assess the present situation two key events that are the main reasons of sanctions on Russia will be briefly analyzed - namely the Ukrainian crisis and the following annexation of Crimea and Russia’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War. What is important to highlight here is that the chain of events that followed both of these events was not provoked by the Kremlin, but was instead a responsive tactic.

Russia was dragged into the Ukrainian crisis, while the Crimea annexation was a highly controversial political move that Russia attempted to justify via security concerns. By severing relations with Kiev, Moscow lost her strategic partner in commerce and the gas export market as well as access to European market through the Ukrainian territory.

Regarding the Syrian conflict, for a long time, Russia abstained from involvement, although she has always supported Bashar al-Assad. Hence, there is a need to analyze a decision that brought the Russian military forces into Syria. The consequences and cost of this military involvement for Moscow are also worth exploring. These two events brought economic and political consequences, and even to some degree political isolation to Russia.

THE COLD WAR TIME ARMS RACE

The main goal of the Strategic Defense Initiative introduced in 1983, was to reduce the possibility of a nuclear war breaking out between the two super powers. (Holm, 1986). This supposed to be accomplished by improving defense capabilities, thus making the first strike either impossible or not very effective. The SDI was created to prevent possible Soviet aggression since it was irrelevant to conduct an attack when there was a low chance of missiles reaching their strategic targets. This could be seen as leverage over the USSR since, without missile strike superiority, it would not have many leverages left over the USA. Therefore, it would lead to a more stable and strategic relationship between the two blocs.

Another agenda of the SDI was to make the Soviets feel insecure, so they would increase military spending and eventually drag themselves into an arms race aimed at devastating the Soviet economy and resources. In fact, the SDI was another wave of the arms race that had roots in the after-war months. The USA showed its intentions to move the arms race to a different dimension - space, so the Soviets would start pouring finances in R & D. (Polynov, 2005, p.99). It is a well-known fact that both techniques proved to be working well, and the American goals were achieved. The Communist Party was annually raising the military budget and investing more and more in R & D, while often cutting the social budget. However, other spheres such as the automotive industry or innovations also suffered from inadequate funding.

In addition to the aforementioned techniques, Reagan's administration built the arms race as a multi-layered strategy. A threat to militarize the space was not the only trick used by the White House in order to exhaust the Soviet resources. President Reagan had intentions to create other consequences similar to the Vietnam War out of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by financing the

mujahedeen. It started with a relatively modest aid of \$30 million and by the end of the war, it was raised up to \$630 million in annual help. (Goldman, 2016, p. 1). Along with that, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan showed that the USSR was not that militarily powerful when it came to conventional forces. The ten-year-long Afghan War caused exhaustion to the Soviet economy and shook her image of a superpower.

It is hard to find actual numbers that would show the Soviet military budget since every source gives conflicting information due to the Soviet secret policy. However, one thing in common between all the sources is that the budget was rising, especially in the 70s-80s. (Harrison, 2003).

Undoubtedly, there were many other reasons why the Soviet Union collapsed. However, both the Star Wars and the Afghan war destroyed the weak Soviet economy and showed the insufficiency of the communist system. Eventually, it could be considered as the main reason for the fall of the Empire that finished the Cold War.

THE TURNING POINT

There is no smoke without fire. Another arms race would not occur without reason. So, what was the turning point when relations between the USA and Russia deteriorated? For the purpose of this research, this has to be clarified to determine from what point we should start analyzing the Russian military spending. That year will then serve as the starting point for assessing the hard data.

At the beginning of the new millennia, relations between Washington and Moscow seemed promising. Namely, both leaders, President George W. Bush and President Vladimir Putin showed they were eager to cooperate at the Summit in Slovenia. This was well demonstrated by President Bush's famous statement following the meeting: "I looked the man in the eye. I was able to get a sense of his soul." (BBC, 2001). Vladimir Putin also made a move towards strengthening the relations between the two capitals. As he said in the interview to Oliver Stone: "I remember one of our last meetings with President Clinton in Moscow. During this meeting I said, 'we should consider an option that Russia might join NATO.' Clinton replied, 'Why not?'" Putin recalled." (Sputnik, 2017). However, the honeymoon did not last long. The first disagreement occurred after Russia, along with France and Germany, had strongly opposed the American Iraq invasion without further investigation. At the beginning of his presidency, Vladimir Putin could accept that the United States is the sole world hegemony. However, after the invasion of Iraq, he started seeing the US as a threat because of its growing geopolitical ambitions. (Sakwa, 2008, p. 249).

After starting a war in Iraq, the US attempted to expand its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet republics by supporting color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005. The ultimate goal was to have the upper hand in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as to divert the closest (in both meanings of the word) alliance of Russia in Eastern Europe from Moscow sphere of influence. Another concern of the Russian government was a fear that the revolutions in the post-Soviet republics would cause a spillover effect, thus bringing uprisings financially and ideologically supported by the western powers. Along with that, the EU and NATO were expanding eastwards to former zones of the Soviet influence. All together it was interpreted as a threat to Russian political and economic interests. Hence, it resulted in Putin's Munich Speech in 2007.

This was the first time Russia stated that it was not satisfied with its position in the world, accusing the USA of dominating international relations and calling for multipolar world order.

'I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world... It results in the fact that no one feels safe... Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them. Of course, such a policy stimulates an arms race...' (Putin, 2007).

Therefore, the international community together has to change the world order from unipolar to multipolar. This could be interpreted from two different angles: first, Russia sought a fairer international order with no hegemony that checks its power in different regions; second, Russia attempted to secure its place as one of the great powers, thus being able to influence world order and dominate its neighbors.

Nevertheless, the Munich speech could be taken as a starting point of the escalating conflict between the two powers following the New Cold war and the arms race. President Putin openly stated that as a country that had its independent policy for more than a thousand years, Russia would not tolerate other powers dictating how to act on both domestic and international levels. (Putin, 2007) Moreover, Vladimir Putin heavily criticized NATO and the United States by saying:

“an almost uncontained hyper-use of force - military force - in international relations. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations.” (Stent, 2008, p. 1096).

However, in 2007, the Munich speech was not the only signal of Russia's discontentment with the current world order and its desire to change it. The second signal was an introduction of State Armament Plan 2007-2015. (Sakwa,

2008, p. 251). As Sergey Ivanov, then-Defense Minister said the program intended to ‘replace 45% of entire arsenal... procurement of new capabilities and the maintenance of existing assets...’ (Mills, 2017, p. 17). One week-long conflict with Georgia demonstrated that Russian military forces performance was far from the level that the Munich Speech would require from a country with intentions to change the global order. Therefore, it showed a necessity to conduct a military reform that was carried by Medvedev a few months after the conflict. (Mills, 2017, p. 18).

As a result, relations between Moscow and Washington reached its peak of distrust in 2007, which has brought another arms race to international politics. As it was mentioned at the start of this chapter, it is crucial to identify the turning point in order to find the starting year relevant for this research in the analysis of Russia’s military budget.

NEW ARMS RACE

After the fall of the Soviet Union, military forces in the newly emerged Russian Federation were at the lowest level ever. During Yeltsin’s presidency, the military budget was dropping every year. Therefore, when Vladimir Putin took office in 2000, both the army and military equipment were on a high priority agenda, especially due to the fact that the Chechen War was not over. We could then see stable growth in the military budget that eventually brought Russia to become the third top military spender in the world in 2016. (Kottasova, 2017). According to SIPRI, between 2000 and 2007 the budget went up by roughly \$16 billion hitting \$37.698 billion of allocated military spending. (“SIPRI Military Expenditure Database”) To stress the growth, the military budget was only \$15.548 in 1999. (“SIPRI Military Expenditure Database”).

Ukrainian Crisis

For decades, Ukraine was among the most important allies for Russia. Its territory served as a buffer zone, was used as a gas transfer from Russia to Europe, and its southern coast was used as a station for the Russian Navy. Last but not least, Ukraine was a trade partner. However, nowadays President Putin and President Poroshenko can hardly find common ground, and a resolution of the conflict does not seem possible in the immediate future. This situation harms both parties, especially Russia since the Ukrainian conflict served as the main reason for sanctions that are heavily damaging the Russian economy. Hence, one may conclude that severing relations with Kiev was against Moscow’s interests. Therefore, it is necessary to see what factors led to the crisis. This is important for the research in order to show that the Kremlin reacted, i.e. did not initially

act towards Ukraine. The actions taken required large military spending in a hard economic situation.

In late 2013, former Ukrainian President Yanukovich decided not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Instead, he signed an agreement with Russia that it would buy \$15 billion debt and reduce gas prices. (BBC, 2014). This decision brought people to the streets of Kiev and later the protests turned into a revolution that forced Viktor Yanukovich to flee the country in February 2014. It is necessary to point out that these protests had a strong anti-Russian tone. Therefore, the violation of Russian nationals' rights residing in Ukraine was reported by the Kremlin. This served as a justification for organizing a referendum in the Crimean province (mostly populated with Russian ethnic) and its following re-integration with Russia.

As we all know, the annexation or re-integration of the Crimean peninsula (depending on your political stance) and support for the rebellion in Eastern Ukraine made Moscow pay a significant price: sanctions imposed by the Western countries, a certain degree of political isolation and military and financial aid to Donetsk and Luhansk. (Milne, 2014). Therefore, one may conclude that Russia would be better off if the Ukrainian government remained a puppet in the Kremlin's hands. This brings us to the conclusion that Crimea rejoining Russia or the military uprising in the East were not Putin's grand strategy, they were instead responsive actions.

One year after events in Kiev in an interview with CNN, Barack Obama said: 'Mr. Putin made his decision around Crimea and Ukraine not because of his grand strategy. But essentially he was caught off balance by the protests in the Maydan and Yanukovich then fleeing after we brokered a deal to transition power in Ukraine.' (Obama, 2018). This is legitimate proof of the U.S. meddling in Ukraine. This can be interpreted from multiple angles. First, this was an attempt to expand the EU, and later NATO, eastwards towards the border with Russia. Second, it could be a provocation trap that the Kremlin fell into. More precisely, the White House understood that the possibility of Ukraine's membership in the western alliance would not be tolerated or ignored by Moscow. So in response, the American actions actually did create a situation where Russia had to risk her stable position in the international arena and economy in order to secure its borders while dumping money into Crimea, East Ukraine and increasing its military budget. All of these events resulted in an arms race that was similar to that of the previous century (where the USA successfully implemented the SDI strategy). To compare the numbers, Russia's military budget for 2013 was \$57.500 billion; it was increased by almost \$9 billion in 2015. ("SIPRI Military Expenditure Database"). It is crucial to take into account that the Ruble significantly dropped in 2014. While in 2013 average exchange rate was RUB 31,84 for \$1, in 2015 it became RUB 61,29 for \$1.

(“Курс ЦБ- Курс валют ЦБ РФ). If we calculate the military budget in the ruble, we will see that the budget rise was dramatically higher, especially since the economy was experiencing a severe decline.

Based on the conducted research in this sub-chapter, one may conclude that the USA not only played a role in the Ukrainian crisis but also succeeded in dragging Russia into the arms race.

Interference in the Syrian Civil War

There is one major similarity that could be found between the Afghan war and the Syrian conflict, and that is their resemblance to a proxy war. Both conflicts could be considered proxies of the USA and USSR (later Russia). However, a pure proxy war is defined as a conflict where major powers do not participate but only provide a different kind of assistance to warring factions. In the case of the war in Afghanistan, there was direct Soviet involvement; while both the USA and Russia have boots on the ground in Syria. However, both wars are obvious examples of the power struggle in the given regions between the two powers.

One more point to bring up: the White House plotted against Assad from the beginning of the revolution by secretly supporting the rebels and providing them with weapons. (McKernan, 2017). The reason behind that was not only to eliminate Russia’s influence in Syria but also to destroy support for the Palestinian cause, thus guaranteeing safety for its closest friend in the region - Israel. Nevertheless, after the conflict escalated it turned into a situation where the USA and Russia were fighting over influence in Syria and the Middle East. Along with that, it fueled the already ongoing arms race.

President Putin made a decision to send troops into Syria after President Assad had asked for military support in the fall of 2015. It would be naïve to think that behind the Russian military presence is only a noble cause. First, there is a geographical benefit for the Kremlin supporting and winning the Civil war for Bashar al-Assad. Iran is a close and strong ally of Russia, and to some extent, this could be said about Iraq too. By fighting against the Syrian opposition, Moscow would ensure that Syria remains its ally, and Lebanon would come together with Syria. If we look at the map, we will see that these four countries create a corridor with access to both the Caspian and Mediterranean Sea and that they surround Saudi Arabia from one side. Hence, maintaining stability in Syria is an important task for Russia’s strategic interests in the Middle East and the Gulf. On top of this, another strong priority was to keep the existing naval base. In fact, there are a few naval and air bases in the area since the intervention in the conflict. Another benefit is the infrastructure contracts that remain once

the war is over. Last but not least, Moscow comprehends that if the current government falls, Syria will follow the same scenario as Iraq and Libya. This means losing the last alliance on the Mediterranean coast to Washington.

Analyzing the numbers provided by SIPRI, we could see that military budget for 2016 went up roughly by \$4 billion reaching \$70.345 billion. (“SIPRI Military Expenditure Database”). However, the budget increase was not supposed to cover only the expenses from the Syrian conflict. \$1,4 billion should also be spent on the nuclear weapons system. (Sputnik, 2013)

Undoubtedly, Washington sees potential danger to U.S. interests in the scenario of no government change in Syria. This is why Syria has become a battlefield for the USA and Russia, together with Iran. Such confrontation is another reason for the arms race escalation. However, the U.S.’s initial plan of power change in Syria did not predict Russia’s intervention since the previous experience in Iraq and Libya showed lack of actions from Moscow. However, the Syrian conflict has taken a different path and has continued to fuel the arms race.

CONCLUSION

Since 2007 Russia has been actively increasing its military budget and rearming its forces. It proved to be quite successful. Russia’s military should not be underestimated since the conventional forces have undergone reforms and have been rearmed. This raised concerns among the western powers, thus giving a start to the arms race following the new Cold War. At first sight, it reminds us of the events that took place in the 70’s when Ronald Reagan approved the Strategic Defense Initiative in order to undermine the Soviet economy. During that period, the USSR reacted to U.S. provocations and primarily focused on military development while underinvesting in manufactures in order to produce competitive products for both domestic and international markets.

Nowadays, Moscow has reacted to U.S. foreign policy towards Ukraine and Syria, which led to serious economic sanctions. Russia’s economy was heavily influenced by sanctions introduced by the USA and its allies. Along with that, the increased military budget harmed the unstable economy as well.

One would think that Moscow has fallen into the same trap again like during the Cold War. However, it seems that Russia learnt its lessons because, for the first time in this century, the military budget went down from \$70.345 billion to \$65.421 billion in 2017. (Majumdar, et al., 2017). The budget for 2018 was deducted even more to \$ 42.3 billion. (Bershidsky, 2017). This could be viewed from two angles. First, the Kremlin avoided repeating the same mistake that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Secondly, the economic sanctions have

fulfilled their mission and caused an even more severe economic decline that does not allow higher military spending.

As we could see from the research conducted above, the New Cold War bears similar features to the old Cold War: the same blocs and the same tactics. However, one way or another, Putin's decision to reduce the military budget shows that the American strategy does not always prove to be successful and that the arms race shall not destabilize the country from inside like it once did.

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TRKA U NAORUŽANJU- UVEK USPEŠNA STRATEGIJA?

Apstrakt: Predstavljani članak se fokusira na trenutnu trku u naoružanju između Sjedinjenih Američkih Država i Rusije sa ciljem da istraži da li će dotična trka dovesti do kontinuiranog porasta vojnog budžeta i eventualno dovesti do kolapsa Ruske ekonomije. Dakle, članak kratko pominje trku u naoružanju tokom Hladnog rata i potom povlači paralele sa trenutnom situacijom. Ruski vojni budžet je u porastu od dvehiljaditih godina, međutim dramatične promene u vojnom sektoru se dešavaju od Minhenskog govora iz 2007. Otuda, korelacija između međunarodnih događaja i vojnog budžeta je predmet analize članka. Međutim, da bi se prišlo istraživačkom pitanju neophodno je prvo prodiskutovati o dve geopolitičke krize u kojima su obe strane uključene: Ukrajinska kriza i Sirijski građanski rat. Neophodno je ovde istaći da Rusija nije izazvala nijedan od ovih sukoba dok se može uzeti da su Sjedinjene Američke Države odgovorne za oba.

Ključne reči: trka u naoružanju, Hladni rat, Sjedinjene Američke Države, Rusija, Sirijski konflikt, Ukrajinska kriza, rivalitet.

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