

## Opinion The losing strategy of underestimating Russia

Russia remains a formidable power. The West should not assume it is a depleted military force.

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Aboard a NATO surveillance flight above the Norwegian Sea last week, just two of the 19 military personnel were as old as the plane, a 45-year-old modified Boeing 707 jammed with electronics and monitoring devices, its fuselage crowned with an enormous radar dome.

But the young crew on the lumbering AWACS — the acronym stands for Airborne Warning and Control System — was on the lookout for an enduring threat: Russia's Northern Fleet, on maneuvers near Iceland as part of a massive worldwide naval exercise.

That exercise, dubbed Ocean 2024, involved some 400 Russian warships, submarines and support vessels in the North Atlantic and Pacific, as well as the Mediterranean, Caspian and Baltic seas, along with some 90,000 military personnel, according to the Russian Defense Ministry. Chinese vessels also participated.

Even if Russia's figures are inflated, the operation was a muscle-flexing reminder that Moscow remains plenty equipped to project power across the globe.

That sobering fact often gets lost amid China's rising threat and Washington's pivot to the Indo-Pacific. It shouldn't, because it would be a mistake once again to underestimate the Kremlin's resolve to challenge the U.S.-led global order, or Moscow's staying power in Ukraine.

The outset of Vladimir Putin's full-scale war in Ukraine exposed Russia's ground forces as incompetently led and beholden to a tyrant in thrall to his own arrogance and neoimperial ambitions. The ensuing stalemate, now well into its third year, has been a strategic calamity for Moscow.

Yet if Russia is a corrupt, retrograde, nihilistic power, it remains a power. Given the West's pattern of misreading Moscow's resilience, it's worth taking stock of the menace it still poses far beyond Ukrainian borders.

Reminders of that threat have been plentiful in recent months. On the AWACS flights that patrolled the Norwegian Sea east of Iceland last week, Russian ships, presumed to be part of the Ocean 2024 exercise, were detected on nearly every mission, a NATO spokesman said.

On the flight I was on, the tactical director, a French air force major, told me: “We didn’t used to encounter the Russian navy very often. Now we know they are out there.”

That observation was reinforced in a recent paper for Chatham House, a British think tank, by a half-dozen military specialists who surveyed Moscow’s plans for regenerating its military, now the recipient of an eye-watering one-third of all Russian government spending.

Much has been made of Ukraine’s impressive success in sinking or crippling a chunk of Putin’s Black Sea Fleet. But with a couple of exceptions, the Chatham House study said, the ships destroyed or disabled were “very old or limited” vessels. The Russian navy “has lost none of its blue-water combat capability,” the paper concluded, and Moscow’s “global power projection capabilities are undiminished.”

To underline that capability, three Russian warships and a submarine cruised into Cuban waters in June and remained just off Havana for several days. They posed no specific threat to the United States; unlike other ships and submarines in Moscow’s arsenal, they were not equipped with nuclear weapons. But they did carry hypersonic precision missiles with a range of several hundred miles.

It’s also worth remembering that Putin’s nuclear saber-rattling, which has successfully intimidated Western leaders into slowing weapons deliveries to Ukraine, has involved more than rhetoric. On his orders, Russian forces in May rehearsed preparations for launching tactical nuclear weapons.

That is not to say Putin intends to launch a nuclear war, or that he believes Russia’s fleet could go toe-to-toe with the U.S. Navy. But the longer the war in Ukraine grinds on, the more credence the West should give his bedrock assumption — that Moscow can outlast Washington and its allies through the sheer mass of Russian forces and resources, and by keeping the West off balance with threats of escalation.

Putin’s strategy seems increasingly sound, as public support for Ukraine has softened in the United States and parts of Europe. There, hopes have receded that Russia can be defeated on the battlefield, or that its economy will crumble under the weight of U.S.-led sanctions.

The wishful view of Russia as a paper tiger has been discredited by the failure of Ukraine’s counteroffensive last year, and by Putin’s ability to shrug off an attempted mutiny last year and repeated military setbacks.

Granted, Ukraine’s invasion of the Russian region of Kursk this summer was a propaganda triumph. But it has given Kyiv control of just .006 percent of Russia’s landmass. By contrast, Moscow’s forces occupy nearly 20 percent of Ukrainian territory — despite the infusion of \$200 billion of Western military and other aid.

The West has been right to help Kyiv retain its independence. It needs now to formulate a muscular long-term strategy that deters future Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere — without starry-eyed assumptions that Moscow is a depleted force.