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Russia on the March: The Return of the Red Square Parades

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

As Yogi Berra once said, “This is déjà vu all over again.” On May 9, heavy military equipment will once again roll down Moscow’s Red Square for the Victory Day military parade. Tanks, missiles, and 6,000 troops will be joined overhead by Su-27 and MiG-29 fighter aircraft and military helicopters. The last time Moscow saw such a display of military hardware on Red Square was in November 1990, before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The world should take notice of Russia’s increasing militarism. The parade is designed to generate nostalgia among the Russian people and to signal to the U.S., NATO, and Russia’s neighbors that Russia’s power is back. Most importantly, it illustrates President Vladimir Putin’s emphasis on the military and security services at the expense of modern, democratic institutions.

Putin justified Russia’s revived military muscle in his recent speech to the State Council, claiming that the new arms race has been triggered “by the world’s most developed countries”—a clear reference to the U.S. and the West. Russia’s rearmament, said Putin, is not caused by Russia but forced upon it by its adversaries. In response to this alleged challenge to Russia’s security, the Kremlin plans to produce and deploy in the next years new weapons claimed to match or best their Western equivalents. Russia will continue to research and develop revolutionary biological, nano, and information technologies with military applications. Putin also wants a new defense strategy for the Russian Armed Forces and the formation of an “innovative army” based on more professional and better trained servicemen.

What the Parade Means. President Vladimir Putin’s government is reaffirming the central role that the military and the security services play in the Russian state. This is yet another indication from the Kremlin that the so-called “power” ministries and agencies are the bedrocks of the Russian Federation—not democracy, open society, a multiparty system, free media, fair elections, constitutional liberties, and the separation of powers.

The parade is a signal to the world and to the Russian people that the armed forces matter again, after a decade or so of decay following the collapse of the Soviet state. Strategically, the display of newly-built weapon systems—like the road-mobile Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), S-300 mobile long-range surface-to-air missile (SAMs), bombers, and fighters—is intended to show that the Russian military is resurging with modern arms. This is a hallmark of Putin’s new Russia and a revival of the Soviet and czarist tradition of showing off the country’s military prowess.

To the Russian people, the parade will convey a sense of national pride and security in the face of external threats. First, it will mark the USSR’s heroic moment: victory in “The Great Patriotic War” (1941–1945), in which more than 25 million Soviet

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citizens died, millions of them brutally murdered by the Nazis. Second, the Kremlin wants to resurrect the popular belief that Russia is a great power, which lost credence after the demise of the Soviet Union.

In essence, the parade is another sign that the Russian government is going “back to the future.” It wants to return the military—as well as other instruments of state power, from oil and gas exports to the secret police and a subservient judiciary—to the forefront in 21st century Russian policy. In this, Russia is disregarding modern means of governance: popular participation, democratic politics, a free press, the rule of law, and an independent judiciary.

Putin’s Nostalgia. Almost three years ago, Putin said, “We should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century.” Clearly, the USSR was Putin’s country. During his career as a KGB officer, he cultivated a sense of duty and loyalty to the state (and to the “guild” of espionage officers).

Since becoming president, his nostalgia for the Soviet past has been manifested in the re-adoption of symbols from the Communist period. When that period ended, President Boris Yeltsin resurrected national symbols from the czarist pre-revolutionary period, including the tricolor Russian national flag, the imperial double-headed eagle on the state coat of arms and the hats of military officers, the 19th century-style gala uniforms of the Kremlin guard, and the adoption of patron saints by the armed forces and security services.

Under Putin, these symbols have been complemented by the communist Red Star, which appears on military hardware such as tanks and aircraft; the re-adoption of Stalin’s Soviet anthem tune as the music for the Russia’s national anthem; the use of “comrade” as a form of address within the military and security services; and the placement of a bronze bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky in the courtyard of the Internal Affairs Ministry in Moscow. (Dzerzhinsky was the founder of Lenin’s dreaded secret police, the Cheka, and was responsible for arresting, exiling, torturing, and executing countless victims.) Moreover, Putin appears to be particularly fond of commemorating every December 20 as Security Services Workers’ Day, or Chekist Day, recalling the day in 1917 when “Iron Felix” founded the Cheka,

the predecessor of Stalin’s NKVD, the KGB, and today’s FSB.

Allegedly, the coexistence of czarist and Soviet symbols is a way to connect Russia’s present and past. According to a spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchate, the use of both periods’ symbols means that “the continuity of all Russian history is restored and demonstrated.” Of course, the actions of Putin’s government show that this continuity is not limited to symbols. Putin also demonstrates his intent to restore the state’s historically central role in managing politics, the media, and the economy.

Russia’s Military Resurgence. The public display of Russia’s military might reaffirms the power of that centuries-old Eurasian Leviathan, the Russian state. Russia’s resurgence is not limited to military parades, but also includes military deployments and maneuvers, as well as the procurement of weapon systems. Last year, Putin ordered a resumption strategic bomber patrols deep into Atlantic and Pacific airspace, where they can launch cruise missiles against the United States. Already frequent ballistic missile test launches are set to double in the years ahead. The Strategic Missile Forces are deploying silo-based, mobile, and ship-based Topol-M, Bulava, and RSM-54 Sineva ICBMs, and the Russian Navy is scheduled to commission the first of a new class of ballistic missile submarines this year. Moreover, on January 21–23, the Russian Navy staged a large-scale exercise in the Bay of Biscay for the first time in 15 years. The exercise included the Admiral Kuznetsov (Russia’s sole aircraft carrier), a guided missile cruiser, and strategic bombers, together with air-refueling tankers and airborne early-warning aircraft.

Conclusion. Russia’s rearmament, the parade, its global maneuvers, and its new weapon systems are designed to make others respect Russia as well as deter NATO and the U.S., which Putin sees as a hegemonic superpower seeking to harm Russia. Russia wants to signal that it again has the military means to counter both perceived strategic threats, such as the U.S. missile defense system, and conventional military challenges, such as NATO expansion and the West’s superior air power. Fanfare communicates Russia’s intentions to tilt the global “correlation of forces” in Moscow’s favor and

encourages Russia's neighbors to do its bidding and not to challenge its security or its interests.

Russia is back on the world stage with all the attributes of power, including wealth and military might, for all to see. The next U.S. administration will have its hands full dealing with a resurgent Moscow.

—Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation. Lajos Szaszdi, Ph.D., contributed to the production of this paper.