

Russia's New Aerospace Forces: Effective at Countering the Kremlin's Key Perceived Threats?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On August 1, 2015 Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decree No. 394. The document authorised the creation of a new branch of the Russian military - the Aerospace Forces (AF). The reformed structure is unlikely to deter threats to which the Kremlin thinks it is most vulnerable - hypersonic missile attacks and potential NATO airstrikes on Russian territory. However, its creation in part has spurred Washington to undertake a space resilience initiative. Both Russia and the U.S. could benefit from cooperation to counter a jointly perceived threat of Chinese ASAT weapons. However, such collaboration is likely to be stymied by Russo-phobic factors fuelling Washington's space resilience effort.

ANALYSIS

Introduction

The Soviet Union historically treated air and space as separate theatres of war, and delineated command authority for the Air Force, air defence, and space assets among different command structures with limited, if any, overlap (Bodner). Worried that such division was “absolutely obsolete,” and increasingly concerned about countering the U.S. Prompt Global Strike Program (PGSP), new Chinese anti-satellite weaponry (ASAT) and, to a lesser degree, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces, Russian military planners decided to streamline the country’s air defence and space forces (Bodner; Bodner; Unattributed).

In 2011 the two entities were combined to form a new branch of the military, the Aerospace Defence Forces (ADF). The ADF was tasked with “defending Russian airspace from airborne and space-borne attacks” (Bodner). Further consolidation occurred on August 1, 2015 when Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decree No. 394. The document authorised the creation of a new branch of the Russian military - the Aerospace Forces (AF). The newly-created AF will be responsible for “commanding the hundreds of planes in the air force arsenal and managing air and missile defences [as well as have] complete responsibility for all aspects of Russia’s military

space operations” (Bodner). In part the move has resonated in Washington. The U.S., alarmed by China’s 2010 anti-satellite weapons test, has committed to increasing space resilience (Clark). The two countries’ similar responses to homologous perceived threats suggests a possible area of cooperation.

Divergent Threats as Viewed from the Kremlin

The creation of the AF entails the consolidation of the air force, air defence, anti-missile, and space forces under a single command. In explaining the reorganisation Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu cited the need to enhance coordination and efficiency in countering emerging and novel threats (Unattributed). While some analysts concur with the official logic, others, such as military expert Aleksandr Golts, argue that the main “advance” of the development rests in the “generals receiving posts in the new structure” (McDermott). The truth likely is somewhere in the middle.

Although the reformed structure may be less cumbersome than its predecessor, it is unlikely to deter threats to which the Kremlin thinks it is most vulnerable. These include hypersonic missile attacks, a capability the U.S. is developing under its Prompt Global Strike

Program. Hypersonic missile attacks could render obsolete Russian air defence systems, because the latter are “deterrent against long-range bombers armed with conventional weapons traveling at supersonic and subsonic speeds” (Beckhusen). By contrast, hypersonic missiles - launched at distances that exceed Russia’s ability to shoot back - could “smash radars, air bases... and nuclear weapons before they ever leave their silos” (Beckhusen). Although Moscow is developing its equivalent of the PGSP, a dearth of funding and technical expertise may yet hobble the effort. The AF also is intended to counter the “perceived increased risk of NATO air and missile attacks on Russian soil” (Gady).

Regardless of whether Russia is correct to perceive a threat from NATO, the purpose of the newly-created AF is not offensive in nature. Rather, the exclusion of Russia’s Strategic Rocket Forces - the entity which controls all of the country’s land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles - “suggests a defensive orientation to the new force” (Bodner; Gady). Despite not being best suited to repel the key perceived threats facing the country, the creation of the AF in Russia has not gone unnoticed by Washington.

Common Threats: Moscow and Washington

Washington has appreciated Moscow’s attempt to streamline its space-oriented forces under a single command. Similarly, seeking to ensure space resilience, the U.S. defence community has embarked on a lengthy project to establish a back-up - the Joint Interagency & Coalition Space Operations Centre (JICSPOC) - to the

existing Joint Space Operations Centre (JSOC) located at Vandenberg Air Force base in

California (Clark). Like their Russian counterparts, American defence planners fear that China’s growing ASAT capabilities could threaten U.S. satellites and space-based systems (Freedberg Jr).

There is cause for concern. Beijing has conducted a series of tests in space of at least one, and possibly two, of their own ASAT systems. At least three of these tests included the destruction of a target (Weeden). Most significantly, the January 2010 ASAT test, “went nearly to [geostationary Earth orbit] GEO,” the location of many U.S. national security satellites (Clark). Appreciating a common threat in China’s developing ASAT capabilities could offer an area of cooperation to Moscow and Washington. However, measures would need to be taken to foster collaboration on such a sensitive security issue. These could include; bilateral information sharing within defined parameters and technical specialists’ exchanges. The cooperation could be further hindered by the other factors driving the U.S. effort to enhance space resiliency.

Divergent Threats as Viewed from Washington

Despite the common threat of Chinese ASAT capabilities, bilateral cooperation on the issue between Moscow and Washington may encounter additional hurdles. Namely, in addition to fearing Chinese ASAT capabilities, Washington also is worried by “rising Russian threats to U.S. space-based [assets]” (Freedberg

Jr). Moreover, U.S. officials are concerned by "Russia's recent use of 'hybrid warfare' to annex Crimea and undermine Ukraine, and otherwise antagonise NATO" (Clark; Zolotukhina). Although there is ample evidence to back the latter worry, support for the former is less evident. Moscow, which is reportedly developing ASAT capabilities, has recently "launched an undeclared object into space which [the U.S.] military now believes to be some sort of microsatellite" (Lamborn). It is important to ascertain Russia's intentions as such an object could be used to jam or directly attack U.S. satellites. Certainly, unlike Beijing, Moscow has not yet tested ASAT weapons. Nevertheless, however well-founded, these additional concerns fuelling the U.S. effort to augment space resilience may undermine potential Russian-American cooperation to counter the jointly perceived threat of Chinese space-based weapons.

Conclusion

Russian defence planners had hoped that the creation of the AF earlier this month would foster enhanced coordination and efficiency in countering key perceived threats. These aims have been dashed. The AF likely would be ineffective against a hypersonic missile attack. Such capability currently is being developed in the U.S. PGSPS initiative - a key perceived

threat by the Kremlin. Similarly, the AF is not intended as an offensive force, one which could counter potential NATO airstrikes, another critical perceived threat by Russian officials. However, its creation in part prompted U.S. authorities to enhance space resilience. In this sphere, both Moscow and Washington share a common threat - vulnerability to increasingly sophisticated Chinese ASAT weapons which could target space-based assets. Cooperation in countering the mutual threat would be advisable. However, such a course of action is likely to be stymied by other factors fuelling Washington's initiative.

CONCLUSIONS FOR POLICY

The newly-formed Russian Aerospace Forces are not intended as an offensive force to counter NATO. Instead, the exclusion of the Strategic Rocket Forces from the AF suggests a defensive posture for the force.

Washington and Moscow could benefit from collaborating on the mutually perceived threat posed by Chinese ASAT weapons. Confidence-building measures and additional information regarding Russia's development of its own ASAT capabilities could ease cooperation.

However, such cooperation is likely to be impeded by the Russo-phobic factors fueling Washington's space resilience initiative.

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