

Facts: Russia's Massive Artillery Outmatches the U.S. Army's Big Guns



How worried should we be?

Here's What You Need to Know: While Russia's military is smaller than during the Cold War, it still fields a powerful force of howitzers, multiple rocket launchers, and ballistic missiles.

The U.S. Army's big guns have problems.

The Army's field artillery is outgunned by Russian weapons. And, it would face difficulties in knocking out entrenched North Korean artillery or mobile Iranian weapons.

That's the conclusion of a report on U.S. Army artillery—or ground fires—capabilities by the think tank RAND Corporation, which examined an Army artillery arm that has suffered two decades of neglect since the Pentagon began

focusing on counterinsurgency in the early 2000s. During that time, aircraft and helicopters replaced artillery as the main source for fire support during small-unit operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, while highly trained gunners were relegated to infantry duties such as manning checkpoints.

This has resulted in the Army's artillery arm "having far less experience and capability compared with their predecessors of the pre-9/11 era," RAND concluded.

The problem is what American artillery has atrophied, Russia's has not. "During the long years of counterinsurgency the two U.S. Army branches that suffered particularly larger reductions were field artillery and air defense," John Gordon, a RAND researcher who worked on the study, told the *National Interest*. "Given the threats in Iraq and Afghanistan that is understandable. Today, however, those two branches are critically important given the major opponents we are now refocusing on."

While Russia's military is smaller than during the Cold War, it still fields a powerful force of howitzers, multiple rocket launchers, and ballistic missiles. Russia can project long-range firepower via weapons such as the BM-30 Smerch multiple rocket launcher, with a range of 60 miles, or the SS-26 Iskander ballistic missile with a range of 250 miles. In contrast, the U.S. Army's M109A7 Paladin 155-mm self-propelled howitzer has a range of about 15 miles with regular shells and 20 miles with rocket-assisted projectiles.

Interestingly, the RAND report echoes a recent British report that warns that if Russia invaded the Baltic States, British ground troops would be so outgunned by Russian artillery that Britain might need to bring back cluster bombs that have been banned by many nations. Both America and Britain have made aircraft, armed with laser- and GPS-guided bombs, as their primary means of long-range fire. But while that strategy worked in the First Gulf War, it may not work today. Sophisticated Russian air defenses, such as S-400 anti-aircraft missiles, may be able to keep NATO aircraft from striking Russian armored columns and supply routes. In addition, even U.S. government watchdogs worry that America neither has enough smart bombs stockpiled, nor the industrial capacity to suddenly build more if needed.

This has stoked fears that long-range Russian artillery and missiles could

devastate NATO airfields, ports, and supply bases. Ground troops attempting to maneuver would be pinned by artillery barrages. If NATO airpower can't knock out the Russian guns, then it's up to the field artillery to do the job. And U.S. and British artillery may not be up to the task.

Nor is Russia the only problem. In the event of another Korean conflict, U.S. Army artillery would also have trouble taking out North Korea's huge arsenal of heavily-fortified guns along the DMZ. "U.S. artillery may not be prepared for the levels of ammunition expenditure that may be required when fighting a near-peer conventional opponent," according to RAND. "U.S. artillery effectiveness may be reduced by the need to avoid/ defend against attacks by North Korean SOF [special operations forces] in rear areas."

Iranian commando attacks would also threaten U.S. artillery in the event of a Persian Gulf conflict. In addition, American artillery would have to respond quickly to catch fleeting targets such as mobile missile launchers.

Fortunately, American troops would not rely on Army artillery alone. The Air Force and Navy would be there to provide air- and ship-launched missiles and naval gunfire. Still, with the proliferation of anti-aircraft and anti-ship weapons, that support cannot be guaranteed.

One solution is to increase the number of Army field artillery units, especially those that can be quickly deployed to places like Eastern Europe and the Persian Gulf, according to RAND. The Army also needs more and better artillery detection systems than the current TPQ-53 radar, to spot Russian artillery and enable counterfire.

The Army should also be concentrating more on improving its howitzers rather than multiple rocket launchers. "Rocket launchers such as MLRS and HIMARS are very important field artillery systems, but cannons are more appropriate for providing timely and continuous support to troops in contact," RAND says. "While range and rate of fire are important considerations for the Army's cannon systems, improvements should also include lethality, system survivability, and mobility. For example, the cannon system employed in the Army's SBCTs [Stryker Brigade Combat Team] is the M777 155-mm, a towed system that lacks an auto-loading capability and protection for the gun crews."

One option is to buy foreign-made howitzers like Germany's PzH-2000 155-mm

weapon. The Army also needs a long-range missile, like the Precision Strike Missile project, to replace dwindling stocks of the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) needed in case hostile air defenses block air support. Developing a long-range surface-to-surface missile, with a range of at least 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) would enable the Army to play a role in a naval and air clash between America and China in the vast expanses of the Pacific.

Significantly, RAND warns that U.S. gunners will have to do something they haven't done for a while: practice defending themselves against attack. American artillery batteries will be stalked by armed drones, attack helicopters, and strike aircraft. Russian tank crews are even practicing "carousel" tactics to break through enemy lines and hunt down hostile artillery.

"Today, few field artillery units have camouflage systems to conceal their weapons—this equipment was turned in during 2008-2009 because it was deemed unnecessary in Iraq and Afghanistan.," the study urged. "Against a powerful opponent such as Russia, cover, concealment, and deception will be essential. Field artillery units must train that way."

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