

Russia as a military opponent in 2050 – four possible pathways

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The future of Russia's military capability is difficult to assess. The country is undergoing rapid changes due to its ongoing invasion of Ukraine. While the future is uncertain, Russia is likely to be a critical aspect of Swedish security policy for years to come. Therefore, it is vital to explore decisive factors and early indicators of future Russian developments. Focusing on political will and military capabilities, the report, *Russia as a military opponent in 2050 — Four possible pathways*, presents four scenarios of Russia as a military adversary to Sweden. This paper offers a summary of the report, which is in Swedish.

GROUNDED IN STRATEGIC foresight methods, the report is based on the assumption that it is impossible to predict the future. Instead, the explorative aim is to provide the reader with multiple thought-provoking futures. The scenarios that are the focus of this paper seek to expand the reader's perspective and create a basis for discussion about what to expect in the future. While the report presents a more extensive elaboration of its methodology than is presented here, it is worth mentioning that the factors and indicators it works with were identified through interviews and a workshop with Russian studies experts at the Swedish defence research agency.

This memo begins with a short description of the analytical framework used to explore Russia's future political will, security policy objectives, and military capabilities. Table 1 summarises possible Russian future economic, political, societal, and technological developments, which serve as building blocks for the scenarios. Four scenarios are then presented and analysed, followed by a short concluding discussion of Russia as a military adversary in 2050.

Political will and security-policy objectives

When exploring Russia as Sweden's military adversary in 2050, it is critical to consider the regime's willingness to use its military capabilities.¹ The use of military power is dependent on political decisions and the development of military capabilities is subject to political priorities. If military capability is prioritised, the political leadership will likely facilitate the development of the required military resources.² The regime's security policy goals over the next 26 years will have significant impact on the extent and type of threat Russia poses for Sweden in 2050.

Today, Russia perceives the future as holding a long-term confrontation with the West. This worldview is not limited to President Vladimir Putin, so without major changes in Russia, this view is likely to persist.³ As long as this worldview prevails, the development and orientation of Russian military capability will to some extent be directed towards confronting the West and NATO.

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- 1 Kjellén, Jonas and Johan Norberg, 2024, "And Now What? Reflections on Assessing Russia's Future Military Capability," in Russian Military Capabilities at War: Reflections on Methodology and Sources Post-2022, FOI-R--5502--SE, FOI, p. 10–19.
 - 2 Wannheden, Emil, 2024, "Assessing Russian Military Expenditure in Times of War," in Russian Military Capabilities at War: Reflections on Methodology and Sources Post-2022, FOI-R--5502--SE, FOI, p. 37.
 - 3 Engqvist, Maria and Vendil Pallin, Carolina, 2024, "Russian military capability at war" in Russian Military Capabilities at War: Reflections on Methodology and Sources Post-2022, FOI-R--5502--SE, FOI, p. 65.

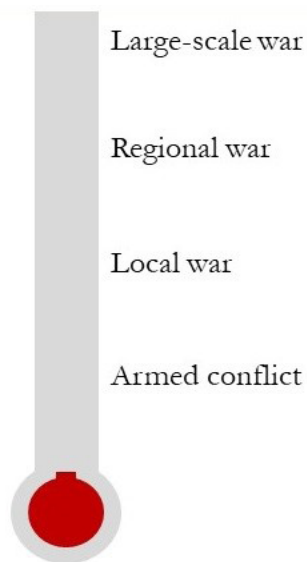


Figure 1. Levels of military capability

Military capability

Military capability is the collective ability to wage war or carry out military operations. The Swedish armed forces defines military warfighting capability as a combination of conceptual, physical and moral factors. Conceptual factors include ways of thinking and prescribing action, for example, doctrine. Physical factors consist of physical assets, such as personnel, equipment and infrastructure. Moral factors include human qualities such as will, courage, endurance, leadership and education.⁴

The report primarily concentrates on physical factors, with the scenarios addressing certain aspects of moral and conceptual factors. Military capability is also always relative and dependent on “the mission, the adversary, and the context”.⁵

The report relates military capability to the levels of conflict found in Russian Military Doctrine 2014 (see Figure 1): armed conflict and local, regional and large-scale war.⁶ According to the doctrine, an armed conflict is defined as one that takes place between or within states on a limited scale, for example, the war in Chechnya

during the 1990s. Local war occurs between two states, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Regional wars are geographically confined to a continent and are fought between several states with their own or a coalition of forces. Russia’s current war against Ukraine can be classified on this level. Large-scale war takes place between coalitions of states or great powers where these mobilise all their resources.⁷

The above description of military capability is relied on in the report, but not without the recognition that it is an analytical simplification of reality. To some extent, different types and levels of conflict place different demands on military capability, while the levels are not as neatly scalable as described in the Russian doctrine. The capability to conduct large-scale conventional warfare, for example, may not be applicable in low-intensity conflicts or military operations in other parts of the world far beyond Russia’s immediate neighbourhood.

IMPORTANT FACTORS FOR RUSSIA’S FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Table 1 briefly presents the factors within society, economy and technology that are identified as important for Russia’s future development. The table also exemplifies possible developments of these factors. The factors and their developments are used as building blocks for the four scenarios that are presented in the next section.

The next section presents the four scenarios, which are all based on Table 1. Each of the scenarios, all of which take place in 2050, begins with a bulletpoint summary. Next, a narrative presentation of the scenario unfolds, culminating in a presentation of potential indicators for the emergence of the scenario and possible game-changers. A game-changer is an event or development that radically changes the scenario’s conditions and playing field. All the game-changers in the report pertain to alterations in the conditions that influence Russia as a military opponent. Finally, an analysis of Russia as a military adversary is presented based on the scenario.

4 Swedish Armed Forces, 2022, *Militärstrategisk doktrin — MSD 22*, Swedish Armed Forces, p. 16, <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/siteassets/2-om-forsvarsmakten/dokument/doktriner/msd-22.pdf>.

5 Ibid p. 18,

6 Oxenstierna, Susanne et al., 2019, *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective — 2019*, FOI-R--4758--SE, FOI, p. 63; Russian Security Council, 2014, “*Voennaia Doktrin Rossiiskoi Federatsii*” Russia Security Council. Access at: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/military/document129/>

7 Oxenstierna, Susanne et al., 2019, *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective — 2019*, FOI-R--4758--SE, FOI, p. 63,

Table 1. Factors and their possible outcomes, sorted by analytical category.

Analytical category	Factor	Examples of possible outcomes
Societal development	Demography	Extensive brain drain
		Aging population
		Declining population
		Successful government initiatives to improve population growth
		Refugee flows
	The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state	The church is an instrument of the state
		The church is losing influence in society
		State and church separation
		The church becomes a major power factor
		The church is being radicalised
	Cohesion within the elite	Fragmentation
		Coup attempt
		Strong ruling elite
		Purge of opponents
		Elite consensus and democracy
	Societal cohesion	Political apathy
		Socio-economic inequality (geographical and ethnic) and fragmentation
		Increased polarisation
		Strong cohesion fostered by the state
	Russia's position in its immediate neighbourhood	Reduced aggressive influence
Increased aggressive influence		
Ongoing war with one or more neighbouring countries		
Cooperation and friendly neighbourhood relations		
State control over information flows	A sovereign internet	
	The state controls and owns all media outlets	
	Private companies own and control the media	
	Oligarchs own and control the media	
	Greater or lesser control of social media	
Economic development	Russian energy and commodity exports	Reduced demand
		Exports to a few oil-dependent states
		Export of 'new' raw materials is important for the green transition
	Russia's relation to China	Chinese dominance
		Russia is in an increased power position vis-à-vis China
		Deteriorated relationship

	Russia's relations to the West	Sanctions and reduced financial ties
		Good relations, Western investment
		Improved relations and a balance against China
		War or conflict
	Political economy	Reinforced feudal-like economic system
		Militarisation of the economy
		Liberalisation of the economy
		Colonisation economy
		Technocracy
	Technological development	Technology and research policy
Import substitution		
Access to Chinese technology		
A restrictive research environment consisting of government actors		
An open research environment		
Government focus on niched technology		
Investment in education		
Cooperation with globally like-minded states		
Stalled technological development		
An international market for Russian technology		Arms exports to Africa
		Limited market for Russian innovation
		Subsidised arms exports
		Large market for Russian innovation

SCENARIO 1: RUSSIA AS AN EXPANSIVE GREAT POWER

- Russia is an authoritarian state.
- Expansive foreign policy.
- Russia emerged victorious from the Ukraine war and has control over several areas in present-day eastern and southern Ukraine.
- The Russian economy is dependent on oil and gas exports.
- Fragmented West.
- Strong China.

As divisions in the West led to a withdrawal of support for Ukraine, Russia emerged victorious from the war before the 2030s and gained control over large parts of eastern and southern Ukraine. Driven by the idea of uniting the ‘Russian world’ (*Russkiy Mir*), in 2050

Russia’s aggressive expansion, which includes fuelling ethnic conflicts as a means to extend regional influence, continues. While states such as Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Moldova have been key targets of Russian foreign and security policies, Belarus has been fully incorporated into Russia. Russian influence has also expanded into Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Similar to the 2020s, Russo-Sino relations are still experiencing an asymmetry in favour of the latter. The Russian political system remains deeply corrupt, with economic power concentrated in the hands of a small elite group. The regime exerts strict control over Russian society, including over both traditional and digital media.

Sophisticated propaganda and historical revisionism have targeted the Russian population and those in occupied territories. For example, the regime has created an alternative version of the Soviet Union’s collapse.

Narratives portraying the war in Ukraine as a rightful reclamation of Russian territory are widespread. There is no tolerance for dissenting views.

The Russian research sector is tightly controlled and heavily focused on technology and other STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Targeted state investments have led to significant breakthroughs in niched areas, but in fields beyond these priorities, Russia lags behind other major powers.

The Russian economy is heavily reliant on energy exports, particularly oil and gas, which are sold to countries in the Middle East and Africa as well as to China and India. These export revenues help to fund Russia's continued aggressive Russian foreign and security policies. Since 2024, the economy is also increasingly militarised. For instance, the Russian states are seizing businesses in occupied territories and distributing them to regime loyalists.

Despite the population decline since 2024, factors such as the acquisition of new territories, immigration from eastern states and incentivising family policies offering financial assistance to boost birth rates have stabilised the decline over the past decade. However, the population is expected to shrink further due to a shortage of young people in their 20s and 30s, partly due to losses in the Ukraine war. Climate change has seen the relocation of people from vulnerable areas in Russia to newly occupied territories, which has helped stabilise these regions.

Indicators

- Divisions between and within the US and the EU.
- Failing support to Ukraine.
- Decreased democracy in the West.

Game-changers

- Russia starts a war against the West early in its military buildup.
- Collapse of Russian energy exports due to, for instance, sharply reduced demand or a transition to a green economy.

Adversary description

Political will and security-policy aims

In this scenario, strong nationalist sentiments drive Russia's expansionist ambitions. Security policy is centred on territorial expansion. The focus on security policy is based on the belief that Russian borders are not

fixed but rather determined by the military's ability to conquer land. In 2050, the primary political goal is to increase Russian territory and global influence, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood. The regime shows a strong willingness to use military means to achieve its political objectives, including frequent and aggressive use of force.

The political willingness of the Russian regime to use military capabilities is assessed as high.

Military capability

Since the end of the Ukrainian war, the Russian military has advanced its capabilities and, in 2050, has the capacity to conduct large-scale warfare (see Figure 2). The victory in Ukraine reinforced Russian confidence in its military strategy, leading to extensive rearmament. Russia's industrial base has aided the military buildup, at the same time as it remains partly dependent on Chinese resources. This dependency potentially limits Russia's strategic freedom.

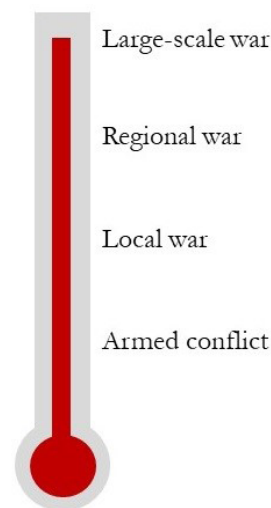


Figure 2. Scenario 1, military capability

Population growth is another limiting factor for Russia's military expansion. Even though the population decline has been stabilised by 2050, Russia is set to face major demographic challenges that could hamper its military buildup.

Russia's military capability is greater in 2050 than it was before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. During the years of rebuilding, the immediate threat to Sweden and its allies comes not from conventional warfare but hybrid operations, such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and sabotage.

SCENARIO 2: THE (THIRD) TIME OF TROUBLES

- Regional ethnic fragmentation of Russia.
- Economic collapse.
- The Russian state's monopoly on violence is being challenged, creating great uncertainty within society.
- An aggressive and threatened regime.

After Putin's death and a devastating defeat in the war against Ukraine, Russia disintegrated as the outer regions broke away. The war in Ukraine inflicted immense suffering, which disproportionately affected the different Russian regions. This unequal distribution led to widespread public discontent with the regime. By 2050, the remnants of a fractured Russian regime are struggling to maintain control over a limited Russian territory.

In the context of rampant corruption and escalating repression, the public started questioning the national narrative of Russia's greatness and the portrayal of the West as an external threat. The Russian government failed to control fully the digital flow of information, allowing the true state of Russia's war against Ukraine and its consequences to become widely known.

To manage the growing unrest and waning support for the war, the state relied on private military companies, deploying them alongside a limited number of regular Russian troops. Many veterans returning from the frontline found employment in the national guard.

The war further militarised the economy, with an increase in arms exports to Africa and the Middle East. However, the Russian state's heavy dependence on energy exports, coupled with declining global demand and the prolonged war, led to a deep economic crisis.

By 2050, the Russian regime has lost control over the periphery, holding only the central Russian heartland. The regime, still in command of nuclear weapons, has warned of severe retaliation against any Western interference in Russian affairs. The regime is fragile and exhibits little restraint. Economic collapse, reduced international trade and internal unrest have severely damaged Russia's industrial base and technological development.

Various militant groups have emerged, demanding regional ethnic autonomy and challenging the regime's monopoly on violence. These groups are often funded through illegal trade, integrating them into transnational criminal networks. Media reporting suggests that foreign actors financially support some of the militant groups. A few groups are inspired by extremist religious agendas. Violent clashes between the groups occur as they

compete for access to financial support and weapons. Vast numbers of Russians have fled the ongoing conflict, both within the country and abroad.

Indicators

- Regional unrest and antagonism along regional or ethnic lines.
- Demands for increased regional independence.
- Increased regional demands for recognition of their cultural distinctiveness.
- Spread of radical Islam.
- Failed veterans-affairs policies.
- A 'messy' loss in the war in Ukraine.

Game-changers

- Peaceful disintegration leading to the formation of new, internationally recognised states.
- Democratic mobilisation and a reckoning with history lead to Russian democratisation.

Adversary description

Political will and security-policy aims

In this scenario, as the Russian state has fragmented, the regime is focused on survival, trying to maintain control over the core heartland. While there is still a strong desire to reunify the state, the regime has limited capacity and faces severe domestic threats. The regime seeks to prevent foreign interference by threatening nuclear retaliation. Most of the threats are directed towards states that previously belonged to Russia. The regime's desperation could make it more willing to use nuclear weapons, especially in regions where the perceived risk of escalation is low. Meanwhile, various non-state actors are actively seeking external support, including from foreign governments and criminal networks.

The political willingness of the Russian regime to use military capabilities is assessed as moderate.

Military capability

The Russian regime is severely weakened and poses no conventional military threat to Sweden or its allies. Most of Russia's military resources are consumed by internal conflicts and the struggle to maintain order. Consequently, the armed forces suffer from a lack of personnel and equipment. Another barrier to building long-term capability is the ongoing low-intensity conflicts that drain resources. However, with Russia retaining its nuclear arsenal, it remains the primary deterrent. In this scenario, Russia's military capability is considered to be sufficient capacity to conduct armed conflict (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Scenario 2, military capability

Due to its limited military capability, the regime uses hybrid warfare, sabotage, disinformation, and refugee crises as military means. Russia's military involvement, including via Russian private military companies in regions such as Africa, may be an even more important instrument.

SCENARIO 3: A THEOCRATIC ELITE WITH HOLY WARHEADS

- The church is an instrument of the state
- Increased religiosity and a high level of state control over society.
- Militarised economy.
- Technological development is limited to specific technologies.

After Putin's death, a power struggle ensued within the Russian elite. By 2050, the Russian Orthodox Church, in collaboration with remnants of the political establishment, has consolidated power. The church is now deeply intertwined with the state and serves as a vehicle for the regime's political agenda. In the West, there is confusion over whether the church controls the state or acts as an instrument of the government.

The merger of the church and state has amplified the role of the Orthodox Church, contributing to a rise in religious devotion across Russian society. In 2050, the church, which since the 2030s has played a key role in education, operates several military training centres. As all religious organisations are under state control, religious minorities have seen their rights increasingly restricted. The state and minority groups have a strategic

agreement that limits aggressive state conversion efforts in exchange for the minority groups' acceptance of the authoritarian regime.

The nearly 30-year-long war in Ukraine, fluctuating in intensity, has almost entirely militarised the Russian economy. Russia's financial and political systems resemble a theocratic oligarchy infused with corruption. The political elite and church leaders profit from the system, with several priests running key state-controlled businesses. Many veterans have turned to the church and occupy high-ranking positions within the regime.

Russia has experienced a profound existential crisis, driven by the lack of a decisive victory in Ukraine and increasing climate threats. Large-scale wildfires, floods, droughts, and the collapse of infrastructure due to melting permafrost have fuelled a sense of impending doom.

To justify the ongoing war, the regime promotes a narrative that frames the Russian people as chosen by God, and the conflict as a holy war. This narrative, often transmitted through state-controlled media and via the internet, has given much of the population solace and amassed public support for the church. The state severely punishes and portrays any public opinions that contradict it as defiance against God.

Russian technological development has been directed towards achieving sovereign self-sufficiency. The state tightly controls the research sector and efforts are directed towards niched technologies. Despite the restrictive environment, Russian research has made significant breakthroughs in certain areas, particularly in nuclear technology. Western powers fear that Russia may develop revolutionary advances in nuclear energy or weaponry that could shift the global balance of power. The church portrays both civilian and military nuclear capabilities as divine and blessed solutions to the threats posed by climate change and foreign adversaries.

Indicators

- Increase in religious upbringing and teaching in schools.
- Increase in political statements that refer to religion.
- Greater role for the Orthodox Church.

Game-changers

- A shattering event that severely undermines confidence in the Russian Orthodox Church (especially early in the time period).

Adversary description

Political will and security-policy aims

In this scenario, the Russian regime's political and security decisions are deeply intertwined with religious motivations. Under the auspices of a divine mission and heavily influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church, the regime seeks to unite the church's community under the country's leadership. The regime perceives wars as holy duties. Violations of other states' sovereign rights are justified as means of securing the transcendence of Russian souls to heaven. This religious zeal makes Russia's actions difficult to predict, complicating the West's efforts to assess the regime's true intentions.

The political willingness of the Russian regime to use military capabilities is assessed as high.

Military capability

While the ongoing low-intensity warfare restricts attempts to fully rebuild the military, nuclear weapons remain central to the regime's security strategy. Religious narratives bolster recruitment efforts, allowing Russia to maintain a surprisingly large military despite demographic challenges and ongoing warfare. The regime's control over technological development has resulted in advances in areas such as nuclear weapons and malign influence campaigns. Focusing on disinformation campaigns and cyber operations that target both domestic and foreign adversaries, hybrid warfare is also highly sophisticated. Due to a lack of insight into Russian society, the West finds it extremely difficult to assess the

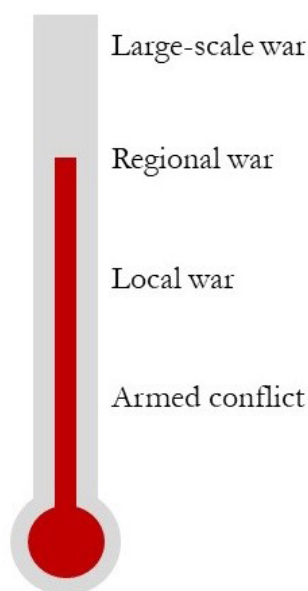


Figure 4. Scenario 3, military capability

country's military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear, which gives the regime a strategic advantage.

The religious narrative raises questions about how far those who sympathise with the Russian state are willing to go in supporting security policy goals that are framed as God's will. Rewards in the form of high status linked to the church and economic incentives, along with the narrative of a holy war, contribute to the mobilisation of resources and people. This scenario deems the Russian military capability sufficient to conduct a regional war (see Figure 4).

SCENARIO 4: THE GREEN THREAT

- An authoritarian Russia with global economic and political influence
- Successful technological development strengthens Russia's global power position.
- A fragmented world dependent on Russian nuclear power and green energy exports.
- The US and China are greatly weakened, economically and politically.

By 2050, Russia is a global economic powerhouse, largely due to its dominance in nuclear and green technologies. As Russia's war against Ukraine ended by the 2030s, its relations with the West improved slightly, allowing it to continue with an export-driven economy. The regime invested heavily in the development of nuclear energy and green technologies. Russia discovered and extracted key metals and resources critical to the green transition.

By 2050, Russia's export strategy will have paid off. Rising global demand for nuclear energy and green technologies has dramatically transformed Russia's position on the world stage. With both China and the US facing significant economic and political challenges, Russia now stands as a competitive 'green superpower'. Russia's strengthened global position has allowed the regime to achieve its security objectives. It skilfully balances relations with a weakened US and China, both eager to collaborate with Moscow. In its immediate neighbourhood, Russia continues to use force and coercion to pursue its political interests.

Russia's relationship with the EU is complicated. Since the 2020s, several European states have seen a democratic decline. The older generations remember the consequences of Europe's dependence on Russian energy before the war in Ukraine. However, the pressing need for Russia's green technologies and energy has forced many European countries to continue relying on

Russia, increasing Moscow's influence. The EU's internal divisions over how to engage with Russia have widened. Rising living standards and the successful spread of state propaganda, which promotes the idea of Russian superiority, have led to domestic acceptance of the regime's tight control over the population. The government maintains strict oversight over research and technological development, focusing exclusively on green technologies and military advancements. Outside of these areas, research and innovation are limited, and there is little investment in education or international collaboration.

Indicators

- Russia increases investments in its nuclear power and in research related to green energy.
- The US and China are challenged to maintain their global power positions.
- Growing European dependence on imports of energy or raw materials.

Game-changers

- Military confrontation between the US and China, with Russian involvement.

Adversary description

Political will and security-policy aims

In this scenario, Russia is a global power because of its dominance in nuclear and green technologies. The regime's main objective is to maintain its influence as a global player while expanding control over areas considered part of the 'Russian world'. However, Russia is cautious about using military force to avoid disrupting its financial influence and economic relations with the West. The regime prefers to apply political and economic pressure to achieve its goals, though it is willing to resort to limited military actions when its interests are directly threatened.

The political willingness of the Russian regime to utilise its military capabilities is assessed as moderate.

Military capability

In this scenario, the Russian regime's strong economic position allows it to invest in military technology and maintain a well-equipped, technologically advanced military. The regime uses exports as a means for global political power, which has increased Russian influence in several states that depend on its energy, raw materials or technology. The regime's focus is on using military power selectively, either to pressure smaller states in Russia's immediate neighbourhood or to support its broader economic and political goals.

At the same time, a weakened US and China have reduced Russia's threat perception. This enables the regime to direct military attention towards limited conflicts or operations in the Russian immediate vicinity (including in Sweden or other Nordic countries) that pertain to Russian economic interests. Hybrid warfare, particularly in the form of energy dependence and cyber operations, remains a key element of the Russian strategy. The regime is also increasingly focusing on the use of military force outside of the immediate Russian neighbourhood, as the US and China are no longer able

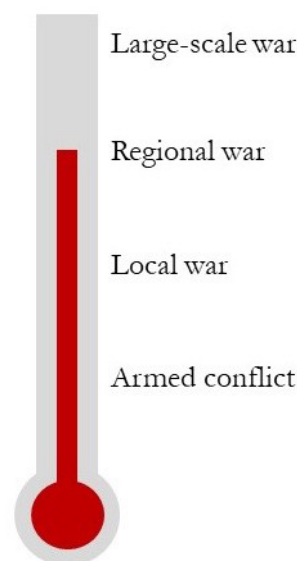


Figure 5. Scenario 4, military capability

Table 2. Overview and summary of scenarios.

Scenario	Level of political will to use military force	Military capability
Russia as an Expansive Great Power	High	Large-scale war
The (Third) Time of Troubles	Medium	Armed conflict
A Theocratic Elite with Holy Warheads	High	Regional war
The Green Threat	Medium	Regional war

to maintain a global military presence. Given Russia's strong economic position, it is assessed that the country will possess the capability to conduct regional war by 2050 (see Figure 5).

RUSSIA AS A FUTURE MILITARY OPPONENT

A crucial question raised by the report is how quickly and willingly Russia will seek to build up its military capabilities following its war against Ukraine. Factors that may influence its military buildup include how it is conducted, against which imagined adversary and for what type of conflict. Decisive factors for the speed of the military buildup include, among other things, the state of Russia's armed forces, the timing of the war's conclusion, and the

condition of the Russian economy and defence industry. A Russia that wants to rebuild its military capability as quickly as possible will likely be largely dependent on its existing industrial base. Close cooperation with China, given its large industrial capacity, could significantly alter both the pace and direction of a Russian military rebuild.

Russia's future developments will shape Swedish security policies and military threat perception, which makes it even more crucial to explore possible futures Russia is a military adversary. While the specific threat Russia will pose to Sweden differs between the scenarios, the report highlights the need for Swedish capacity and flexibility to deal with a range of developments in a potentially disruptive future. ■

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