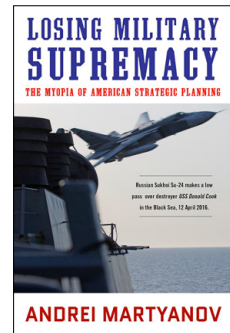


Book Review

Losing Military Supremacy: The Myopia of American Strategic Planning



By Andrei Martyanov

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Reviewed by Paul Stoddart

Biography: Paul Stoddart served in the RAF from 1983 to 1991 as an aerosystems engineer officer and, following a short stint as a journalist on a car magazine, has worked in MOD since 1993. He worked on the Tornado successor study at Farnborough, managed the Harrier and Sea Harrier trials programmes at Boscombe Down and attended the Advanced Command & Staff Course at the Joint Services Command & Staff College. He is currently a scientific adviser at the Air Warfare Centre. He is a Fellow of the RAeS and a member of the RAeS Air Power Group committee.

Introduction

Andrei Martyanov was born in 1963 in the USSR in Baku (now the capital of Azerbaijan). He graduated from the Kirov Naval Red Banner Academy and served in the Soviet Coast Guard until 1990, before moving to the USA in the mid-1990s. Martyanov does not adopt a diplomatic tone or pull his punches in expressing his views; nor does he flatter his adopted country with lavish praise. On the contrary, he is highly critical of many aspects of American outlook and behaviour while claiming a greater degree of realism by Russia (and Russians) especially on the realities of war. For example, on the second page, he claims that 'American vaingloriousness ... has today become a clear and present danger to the world and it is, in the end, a direct threat to what's left of America's democratic institutions and processes'. Whether he makes the case for this claim is debatable. He goes on to state that the USA devises excessive assessments both of its own capabilities and of the dangers it faces. The former condition stems from America's sense of its own 'exceptionalism' dating

from the 19th century (with reference to Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 work *Democracy in America*). The latter appears to be a product of the 'military-industrial complex' exaggerating the threat to justify higher defence spending. Allowing that this will always be the case to an extent, Martyanov then emphasises the fact that Russia is one of the few other nations able to develop, build and field advanced military systems. He also frequently mentions the quality of Russian weapons and hence the threat they pose to American forces, e.g. the development of long-range anti-ship missiles rewriting the book on naval warfare having 'made large surface fleets and combatants obsolete' (p. 222). This is not the only instance where Martyanov contradicts himself or, at least, seems to apply the same argument in opposite directions according to his aim.

The publisher's synopsis makes the theme and tone of the book very clear: 'Starting from the Korean War the United States hasn't won a single war against a technologically inferior, but mentally tough enemy'. It is somewhat reminiscent of Dr Sean McFate's recent work 'Goliath. Why the West doesn't win wars and what we need to do about it.'¹ Martyanov is even more critical than McFate of the American approach to the various challenging events of the past and present but though he makes some reasonable points, overall he is less convincing. He is, however, unequivocal in his views. For example, he sees America's future as one of decline paraphrasing the British historian, Corelli Barnett's conclusion on the decline of UK power to describe his view of the US equivalent in current times 'US Power had quietly vanished amid stupendous events of the 21st Century, like a ship-of-the-line going down unperceived in the smoke and confusion of battle' (p. 177). Even plainer is his opinion of Boris Yeltsin during his time as President: 'largely incapacitated and despicable' (p. 156) though he does not explain his view.

A major element of Martyanov's beliefs is that there has been a significant change in Russia's view of the West – and that this is the fault of the West, especially America. He characterises the Russian elite as regarding NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe, including the Baltic States that were previously part of the Soviet Union, as a breaking of an explicit promise to Russia not to enlarge its influence and presence (pp. 154-5). He emphasises that Russia is essentially a European nation and culture (albeit with a foundation in Orthodox Christianity) yet feels rejected and alienated by the West. 'Russia's Europeanism was to a very large degree contingent upon the West's **behavior** towards her. ... While there were serious economic interests linking Russia to Western Europe, the Western aggression against Serbia began the contemporary process of alienation. It was just a matter of time before a final cultural break with West [sic] in general and Europe in particular would happen' (p. 156). Martyanov implicitly admits that this break took some time to come about owing to a core of pro-Western senior politicians. For example, 'the 1999 NATO aggression against Serbia would sober Russia dramatically with regard to the combined West's intentions' and 'The rejection [by the Russian people of "imported globalist values"] was wrongly interpreted by Western observers as Russians hating their inability to deter NATO's destroying Russia's historic Orthodox brethren in Serbia. ... even in 1999 Russia still had the resources to influence the outcome of NATO's

¹ Reviewed in ASPR Volume 22 Number 3

campaign over Serbia. But at that time the extremely pro-Western political elites in Russia had sabotaged any serious attempt to offer military help to Serbia' (pp. 152-3). Unfortunately, he gives no further information on or evidence of this claim in what remains the still debated reasons for Slobodan Milosevic's capitulation. There is the interesting, and plausible, claim that initially Russia and Russians were largely sympathetic towards America regarding the 9/11 attacks yet a survey in 2017 found that more than 80% of Russians wanted to have neutral or even hostile relations with the US. Martyanov lays the blame for this negative change squarely on America foreign policy and expeditionary action.

His charge of arrogance among the American policy makers can bear some scrutiny. He offers the example of Karl Rove, Deputy Chief of Staff to George W. Bush: 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. ... We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do' (pp. 150-1). Martyanov responds that 'In some sense it was a very contemporary American statement insofar as it was offered by a man who had no background, skills, education or life experience whatsoever in the fields which define real national power, a pattern which today defines US decision making. It was offered by a political operative with a major in political science, a discipline which hasn't fared that well as a "science" and has a rather startling record of failures in its forecasts'. He goes on to criticise (those probably self-proclaimed) experts on military matters who have no real knowledge or understanding: '...millions of people have gotten most of what they know about warfare and the US military from an ex-insurance agent who never served a day on active duty' in a reference to the apparent significant influence of the writings of Tom Clancy (p. 147).

As for other contradictions, Martyanov describes the Iraqi Army of 1990/1 as a 'grossly incompetent adversary' and as 'demoralized, corrupt and underequipped' (p. 151). At the time, the Iraqis had the world's fourth largest army and sixth largest air force; if the weapons were not state of the art, neither were they obsolete. Martyanov points out that Iraq's 1990 GDP was nineteen times smaller than that of New York City (p. 32) - though presumably this was a result of the city being a leading financial centre which is arguably not an entirely fair comparison. His point is that Iraq stood no chance against the economic and military might of the USA. However, shortly after that (p. 39) he criticises those who judge Russia on the size of its economy rather than the size of its armed forces and the quality of its equipment. On page 204, he then describes Iran as having a 'more or less competent and battle seasoned military'. This was the nation that fought Iraq to a standstill through a bitter and bloody war from 1980 to 1988 so casting into doubt his assessment of the 1991 Iraqi military. Martyanov is very critical of the effectiveness of various US weapons, for example, comparing the range of the TLAM unfavourably with that of more recent Russian systems. He can be overly selective in his examples, and miss the context, in one case claiming the F-35 to be ineffective on the basis of its performance as a dogfighter against the F-16. Martyanov does not make any comment on the fact that the F-35 is designed to fight other aircraft at range where its low radar signature and powerful sensors will offer a significant advantage.

Fluently written but more often strident than measured, *Losing Military Supremacy* is readable and informative but it lacks the balance and detail to be fully convincing. In some ways, it seems closer to a collection of essays than a cohesive book given the range of topics addressed – though that variety has an appeal. Indeed, a longer review is justified to cover some of the chapter subjects in more detail. By all means read this book, but I would recommend that you read Sean McFate's *Goliath* first.

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