

Russian Military *Perestroika*

Pavel K. Baev

Is a massive economic crisis a good time to launch a thorough military reform? Given the economic uncertainties, most experts would recommend delaying the overhaul, even if it is long-overdue.¹ Russia, however, is not known for adhering to conventional wisdom. As a consequence, Russia is now in the middle of a profound, if poorly conceptualized and under-financed, transformation of its Armed Forces. The official evaluation of the provisional results is as upbeat as *Enron's* annual report for the year 2000; the immediate prospects for success look as uncertain as California's solvency.

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¹ This analysis draws on my chapter, "Military reform struggles against heavy odds," in Andrew Kuchins & Anders Åslund (Eds.) *Russia after the Crisis*. Washington DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2010 (forthcoming).

The Surprise Attack

The race towards a "new look" for the Armed Forces (the term "reform" is never officially used) started in autumn 2008, when the Russian military was expecting rich rewards for its "spectacular" victory against Georgia. Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who had kept a low profile since his appointment by Putin in February 2007, identified three key directions of transformation: cutting down the officer corps by more than a half; eliminating "reduced strength" units; and reshaping the system of military education. For obvious reasons, it was the first direction that instantly attracted attention, particularly since the timeframe for carrying out the officer reductions by 2012 was extremely tight. The second direction of eliminating entire units, however, has potentially more far-reaching consequences. The third direction has resulted in the merger and re-location of military colleges and academies creating such disorganization in the short to mid-term that benefits are still unclear.

The non-voluntary retirement of tens of thousands of mid-career officers was complicated by a legal provision stipulating the state provide the officers with housing. Funding for this provision was not budgeted correctly; and, even though President

Medvedev has paid personal attention to the issue, the housing provision will probably continue to demand extra funding up until 2015, especially as Ministry of Defense has fallen far behind the construction deadlines for the new apartments.²

Russian Armed Forces Reduction		
Type of position	2008	2012
Total officer corps	335,000	150,000
Generals	1,107	886
Colonels	25,665	9,114
Majors	99,550	25,000
Captains	90,000	40,000
Lieutenants	50,000	60,000
Officer positions in the High Command	27,873	8,500

It is also not evident, in budgetary and practical terms, how separate sets of targets established at the beginning of the reform in 2008 for increasing the number of junior officers (Lieutenants in the chart above) can be achieved. In contrast to these difficulties, however, disbanding hundreds of “reduced strength” units has proven relatively unproblematic, beyond the dilemmas of disposing of the tens of thousands of old weapons in these units’ stockpiles.

The swift cuts in Ground Forces have resulted in only 172 units in place of the previous 1,890 units, which has also meant abandoning the old Soviet military model of preparing for mass

² Medvedev emphasized this priority again in his speech at the Defense Ministry Board on 5 March 2010 (official translation can be found at http://eng.kremlin.ru/speeches/2010/03/05/2058_typ_e82913_224669.shtml).

mobilization to fight a protracted conventional war. Although it has become technically impossible to call up and deploy the millions of men, still formally listed as reservists, in a matter of a few weeks, it is unclear if the Russian High Command has fully internalized the fact that Russia can no longer engage in higher intensity hostilities than local wars.

The Inescapable Issues

One interesting feature of the on-going reforms is they were designed to circumvent the single most difficult problem in the military system: the failure of conscription as a staffing mechanism. In the final quarter of his presidential term, Vladimir Putin issued a decree reducing the draft from 24 to 12 months. Shortening what was seen as an extremely harsh “patriotic duty” was popular with the Russian public, but it has aggravated the existing shortage of manpower resulting from Russia’s demographic decline. The cohort available for draft is shrinking, while a new plan to supplement the military’s ranks with graduate students has prompted a higher rate of emigration from Russia among young professionals.

Additional initiatives to channel extra funds into paying for officers’ early retirement have reduced funds for military programs to hire soldiers on a contractual basis—effectively ending the Armed Force’s experiment to professionalize its “permanent readiness” units (especially the airborne troops). An associated proposal to build a corps of professional sergeants has also run into organizational difficulties. Only one experimental sergeant school has been established. As a result, the atmosphere in the barracks remains grim and training and readiness levels in basic units have fallen to new lows.³ In sum, the military’s attempts to move to a more “progressive” organizational structure, from the traditional

³ Roger N. McDermott, “The restructuring of the modern Russian army,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, October 2009, pp. 485-501.

battalion-regiment-division to a battalion-brigade configuration, have not had the desired effect of improving the flexibility of deployment.

The 2008 war with Georgia revealed additional problems in the technical equipment of the Russian Ground Forces and the Air Force (which suffered shockingly high losses, including from friendly fire). Only 10% of weapons in the current inventory are defined as “modern,” although the military’s goal is to increase this share to 30% by 2015. This can only be achieved by scrapping old weapon systems and replacing them with new weapons. The tank fleet of 20,000, for example, is supposed to be cut by half in this timeframe.

The need for high-tech equipment to support Russia’s command-control-communication-intelligence (C³I) systems is particularly acute, and President Medvedev has emphasized this in his modernization plans. The government, however, has also issued an avalanche of pledges to strengthen the Armed Forces with a variety of “super-weapons,” including a new generation of strategic submarines and a new “stealth” bomber, twenty An-124 heavy transport planes, and four new aircraft carrier groups.⁴ The embarrassing test failures of the new submarine-launched *Bulava* missile indicate, however, that it will require extraordinary technical achievements to fulfill this “wish list.”

The Impossible Imperative

Two remarkable features of the hard-driven Russian military reforms have been the absence of any politically-meaningful debates about the guidelines for reform, and the lack of a strategic “big picture” to give these guidelines broader context.

⁴ For Putin’s recent promises to deploy the “fifth-generation” fighter, see <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/9557/>.

The first feature, the absence of serious debate, seems rooted in a lack of confidence in the nature and goals of the reforms among the micro-team of reformers surrounding Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. The team has proven incapable of formulating solid positions and justifications for the reforms that hold up to even the most minimally-competent outside questioning. President Medvedev as Commander-in-Chief has also distanced himself from the implementation of the reforms’ draconian cuts and has instead expressed his concern about the “social issues” resulting from the cuts. This lack of leadership has left those leading the reforms vulnerable to criticism, and with mounting opposition in the military’s ranks, Serdyukov has had to undertake consecutive rounds of purges in the high command to push things through.

The second feature of the “big picture” was supposed to be addressed by the release of the new Russian military doctrine. This, however, was postponed several times—until its final approval in February 2010 when the reforms were already underway.⁵ Instead of identifying new goals for the Armed Forces to deal with specific security threats and setting clear priorities for resource allocation, the doctrine is extremely vague—declaring the military must be ready for every possible confrontation and all necessary resources should be provided. NATO enlargement and NATO’s “global ambitions” are described as sources of “danger,” but it is clear from a close analysis of both the doctrine and the reforms that the Armed Forces newly-created brigades are not capable of undertaking military operations in the Western/European theater. Furthermore, the doctrine lays out quite restrictive criteria for the use of nuclear weapons (contrary to some earlier suggestions that the doctrine would authorize the possible use of

⁵ There is no official English translation of the doctrine. The original text is available at the Security Council website <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/33.html>.

"preventive/preemptive nuclear strikes"), and simply confirms the continued validity of traditional strategic deterrence.

The Net Assessment

In spite of all these issues, the decision to initiate the far-reaching reform of the Russian Armed Forces by concentrating on a few narrow targets appears to have been the only feasible approach. Resistance in the military bureaucracy has been successfully overcome and the transformations now seem to have passed the proverbial "point of no return."⁶ The further success of the Russian military reform project now depends on expanding out from the initial breakthrough to tackle the more difficult tasks—including moving away from the conscription system. Without a renewed emphasis on professionalism the combat worthiness of the military's reorganized units will take a nosedive, while many logistic and support structures will ultimately become dysfunctional. A new reform effort, however, will require both political will and an increase in resource allocation. The latter is dependent on further improvements in Russia's economic performance after a sluggish recovery from the economic crisis. The former requires greater expenditure of political capital than President Medvedev seems prepared to contemplate.

The official (and entirely artificial) target figure of 1,000,000 for the total strength of the Armed Forces will most probably have to be revised downwards. Furthermore, the ongoing deep cuts in Russia's conventional forces (first of all in the Russian Ground Troops) can only be justified by simultaneously strengthening the nuclear "shield." The commitment to strengthen Russia's strategic nuclear forces, while frequently stressed, stands in direct contradiction to sustained reductions in the existing strategic forces as well as Russia's

⁶ A particularly good assessment of the reforms is Vitaly Shlykov, "Secrets of Serdyukov's blitzkrieg," *Russia in Global Affairs*, November-December 2009 (in Russian).

commitment to its new arms control treaty with the United States.

To push everything through, President Medvedev will have to take responsibility for difficult decisions with consequences he cannot fully comprehend. This inevitably puts him in a vulnerable position as discontent grows in the military ranks and the 2012 Russian presidential elections loom on the horizon. As Mikhail Gorbachev learned in the 1990s *Perestroika* has an unfortunate tendency to discredit its initiators, even if it does not devour them.

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