

Russia's Military Strategy: Preparing for the Wrong War?

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Russia recently invited the Palestinian organization Hamas to Moscow and, at the same time, is involved in negotiating with Iran regarding its nuclear program. These two recent developments, tied with Russia's recent use of its energy weapon Gazprom against Ukraine, makes clear that Russia is returning to the international arena. In light of these developments, does Russia's return as a major power in international security coincide with the standing and conceptual thinking of Russia's armed forces?

In order to understand Russia's current military policy, it is necessary to examine its arms and equipment, human resources, military reforms and military strategy. Just as the United States has been criticized for its strategy and policy voids inherent in the Quadrennial Defense Review and the 2006 National Security Strategy, Russia's military leadership may be preparing for the wrong war. [See: "Washington's 2006 National Security Strategy Confirms a Policy Void" and "U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review Reveals a Strategy Void"]

Although President Vladimir Putin, Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov, parliamentarians and academics regularly state that radical modernization of the armed forces is necessary to cope with modern warfare and current threats, corresponding plans and measures cannot be found. Descriptions of the current status of materiel and personnel, as well as plans for the future, provides evidence of the fact that these statements do not coincide with actual steps.

Arms and Equipment

A large part of Russia's weaponry is becoming obsolete. Furthermore, the level of investment earmarked for purchasing new hardware is too low. The amount of arms and equipment becoming obsolete is growing faster than the number of arms and equipment purchased to replace them. The share of modern military hardware is allegedly only 10-20 percent of the total. From 2000-2004, the army added only 15 new tanks to a total of 23,000. Similar numbers apply to other conventional weapon systems utilized in ground, air and naval forces.

A number of reasons are likely behind this lack of investment in conventional arms. The first reason is the upkeep of the Military Industrial Complex (M.I.C.). The inefficient M.I.C. forms a burden for the military budget. For reasons of employment, however, the M.I.C. must be sustained. Secondly, the size of the armed forces -- more than one million -- demands a lot of funds, not only for (low level) salaries but also for other facilities to keep the forces active. Thirdly, a large share of actual investment is not going to conventional forces but to nuclear forces. Nuclear forces are a vital reason for the lack of investment in conventional forces, also from a conceptual point of view.

Apparently, the political leadership cannot or will not decide in which way military reforms should move, either toward smaller, conventional, professional, high-tech, expeditionary forces -- the direction Western armed forces are moving -- or to continue with large but old-fashioned conventional forces combined with modernized nuclear strategic-deterrent forces to emphasize Russia's vital status in the international arena.

A recent example of this ambiguity in deciding the way forward was demonstrated by Putin and Ivanov. In March 2006, Putin underlined the nuclear deterrent and corresponding

investments, whereas Ivanov two months earlier had argued that greater priority should be given to high-tech conventional arms, instead of the nuclear deterrent which -- according to him -- receives more than 50 percent of the defense spending budget. Interestingly, the chief of the Russian general staff, Army General Yuri Baluyevsky, supported Putin's view when he stated in April that Russia has sufficient strategic deterrent forces to defy any opposing force.

Personnel

The social circumstances of military personnel remain poor. Even Ivanov admitted that salaries and pensions make living conditions hard and cause an increase in suicides among the military. In addition, Russia's military suffers from severe conscript desertion, mainly due to hazing -- a traditional problem that recently has become public on a large scale -- a shortage of qualified officers, low levels of motivation, corruption, and a lack of training, resulting in insufficient combat readiness.

A shift toward modern warfare and thus to conventional, high-tech, expeditionary forces would also demand a change from the traditional large-sized conscript army to a small-sized professional army. The period of conscription service will be gradually reduced from the current two years to one year of service as of January 1, 2008. This might be a sound reform - - certainly with respect to achieving a lower degree of hazing -- but would also demand many more eligible young men out of a population that is rapidly decreasing. Last March, Ivanov mentioned that by 2008 the Russian military will consist of 70 percent professional soldiers. This is doubtful.

First of all, in other statements Ivanov has made clear that the total size of the armed forces -- around one million soldiers -- will not be subject to radical cuts. Although military salaries are rather low, paying such a number of professional soldiers would demand much of the defense budget, whereas a Russian conscript currently receives only 100 rubles (US\$3) per month. Secondly, due to the bad reputation of the army (hazing, Caucasian conflicts, low salaries) and a declining population, chances are not high that Ivanov will be able to find the required amount of contract soldiers.

If anything is clear from these human resource plans, it is the fact that -- similar to the arms investment plans -- the Kremlin is not making a move toward genuine military reforms aimed at preparing the forces for current threats and modern warfare.

More Attention for Asymmetric Warfare

In October 2003, Sergei Ivanov published a security document called "The Priority Tasks of the Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation," which, due to its contents, rightly may be called a Defense White Paper (D.W.P.). Among other things, this D.W.P. deals with characteristics of current wars and armed conflicts. An analysis of conflicts from the 1970s until 2003 leads the Russian military-political establishment to the following conclusions:

A significant part of all conflicts has an asymmetrical nature. They demonstrate fierce fighting and in a number of cases result in total destruction of a state system;

- The outcome of conflicts is more and more determined in its initial phase. The party that takes the initiative has the advantage;

- Targets are no longer confined to military forces, but consist of political and military command and control systems, economic infrastructure, and civilians;
- Information and electronic warfare now have a great impact in conflicts;
- The use of airborne, air mobile and special forces has increased;
- Unified command and control, joint warfare and thorough cooperation between ground and air forces in particular has become essential;
- A prominent role in modern warfare, as demonstrated in conflicts such as those in the former Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2002) and Iraq (2003), is taken by long-range precision guided munitions in combination with airpower once air superiority has been established;
- Massive use of tanks and infantry has, to a large extent, been replaced by long-range guided weapon systems and massive air raids, although the role of these conventional forces is still important after the initial stages of a conflict;
- The dominating role of airpower in modern warfare requires a well-equipped and electronic warfare resistant anti-aircraft defense system.

Reviewing the military-strategic and operational aspects of the D.W.P., the first and foremost conclusion can be described in one word: realism. This document correctly focuses on asymmetric conflicts as being at the forefront, rather than large-scale conventional wars. Clearly, the analysis of recent Western-led conflicts and of Russia's own experiences in Chechnya convinced at least some of the Russian security elite to concentrate on irregular warfare.

Carrying out this realistic approach toward modern warfare will be challenging. The observation that modern, specifically irregular, warfare can only be fought with sophisticated weapon systems, such as precision guided munitions and avionics that provide all-weather capability, and by improving the training level of personnel, requires financial means. So far, reform plans have not aimed at fulfilling this requirement.

Ambivalent Threat Conception

In dealing with the West and N.A.T.O., the D.W.P. offers a split vision. On the one hand, entries show concern toward the enlargement of N.A.T.O. and the possible deployment of N.A.T.O. forces on the territory of new N.A.T.O. members. It also mentions, however, that the N.A.T.O.-Russia partnership will be further deepened in spite of these major differences. Furthermore, it states that nuclear and large-scale wars with N.A.T.O. or other U.S.-led coalitions are no longer probable armed conflicts and that Russia expects cooperation with the U.S. and other industrialized countries to grow in ensuring stability.

On the other hand, elsewhere in the 2003 D.W.P. this appealing tone is set aside and replaced by an antagonistic approach, underlining that Russia demands that anti-Russian entries be removed from N.A.T.O.'s military planning and political declarations. Even stronger, the document states that if N.A.T.O. is preserved as a military alliance with an offensive doctrine, cardinal changes will be undertaken in Russia's military planning and development of the armed forces, including its nuclear strategy.

The contrasting entries of the D.W.P. have made it more difficult to acquire a clear picture of Russia's intentions in the field of security. However, this ambiguity in Russia's threat perception -- emphasis on large-scale warfare vs. irregular conflicts -- remains. On January 25, 2006, Chief of the Russian General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky, in the Russian Ministry of

Defense's Red Star newspaper, correctly mentioned modern day threats such as organized crime, drugs and arms trafficking, illegal immigration, extremism, separatism and terrorism. However, at the same time, he repeated the traditional Cold War vestiges of threat perception, such as: the expansion of military blocs, military presence in regions traditionally of Russian interest, ignoring Russia in international security politics, and moves against the strengthening of Russia as one of the influential centers in the world.

Decentralized Military Organization

Since the end of 2005, Russian officials have made public a change in thinking toward the organization of the armed forces. Until recently, Russia's military was administratively organized in military districts, for instance those of Moscow, the North Caucasus and the Far East. New Russian military thinking argues that an international development consisting of a large-scale conflict is highly unlikely, and, therefore, centralized command and control should be changed. Aiming at decentralization, from this year until 2010 the organizational structure should be changed from military districts into inter-departmental and inter-service or joint regional operational groupings and strategic directions.

In the 1990s, another attempt -- though in vain -- was made to restructure the military districts system into operational-strategic commands. Because of the Chechen conflict in the North Caucasus, for a few years now a joint and inter-departmental command exists there, comprising the different services of the armed forces, as well as the so-called other troops consisting of military formations of the other power ministries, such as the F.S.B., and the Ministry for Internal Affairs. Allegedly, Russia would currently be constructing a second command of defense forces and internal and security troops in its Far East region. This reform of the administrative military organization would be aimed at changing all military districts into operational strategic commands.

Joint control and command of defense and other security forces is a correct initiative, considering that Russia has to cope with internal unrest and conflicts. However, along with the construction of regional military groupings and strategic directions, Russia's General Staff has also announced that as part of the decentralization process, responsibilities will be re-subordinated from the services to the newly regional and strategic structures. According to the General Staff, this change coincides with international military developments. Western states also demonstrate a withdrawal of responsibilities from service commands. Conversely, these responsibilities are not transferred to decentralized military structures but instead to a higher joint level. According to current Western military thinking, operations are more and more joint and therefore all services should preferably be directed at a joint level, for instance by the chief of defense.

Western Military Thinking

Contemporary Western military thinking points toward the following. In the present order, military operations abroad comprise a complex nature: operations can no longer be divided into peacekeeping, humanitarian and other specifically-tasks activities. Operations are all-compassing; every aspect of warfare at all levels of the spectrum of violence, from evacuation of non-combatants to full-scale war, has to be covered within one single operation. This concept is often referred to as a "three-block war." These comprehensive operations demand specific doctrines and a military force that can cope with any task at the same time; examples of this concept can be seen in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Furthermore, Western military forces have an expeditionary capability and can be deployed far away from the homeland at short notice. This requires highly skilled, permanent forces -- strategic air and sea lift -- as well as high-tech equipment for communications, command and control and intelligence. At the same time -- as a result of 9/11 -- Western armed forces also have to deal with national tasks for homeland security against such threats as international terrorism. To do so, close cooperation with police and other non-military security agencies and departments is necessary in addition to coordination and centralized command at a national level. The described aspects of current military thinking have completely rearranged Western military power from that during the Cold War.

Russian Military Thinking

In the D.W.P. of 2003, Russia focuses on modern high-tech warfare and on asymmetric conflicts, instead of large-scale conventional wars. However, unless the current large-scale structure of the armed forces is changed, the adaptation of the armed forces to modern warfare is likely to be obstructed. In comparison with the described demands to Western military forces, the following can be said about Russian military power. As was shown by the explanation of the future structure and personnel strength of the armed forces, there are, as yet, no indications that Russia is moving toward a concept of forces that Western armies developed in the 1990s. According to the future plans, a large military force will be maintained which, for a considerable part, will consist of conscripts. Russian military reforms until now have mainly been limited to reduction of manpower and an organizational change from five (strategic missile and air defense forces) into a three services structure (air, ground and naval forces).

Military exercises -- such as the Sino-Russian military maneuvers of August 2005 -- demonstrate that Russia is capable of handling modern conventional warfare. However, this applies to deploying forces in a traditional way. Moreover, there are no indications that the armed forces are trained and equipped for wide-ranging, complex military operations abroad, which these days is the core business of Western military power. Apart from its 15 Mechanized Brigade -- which is dedicated for peace support operations, for instance together with N.A.T.O. -- the Russian armed forces will not be reformed into one capable of executing expeditionary tasking. [See: "The Significance of Sino-Russian Military Exercises"]

Homeland security as a task of modern armies is another important topic. This seems to be a subject that Russia is working on effectively. The experience of the Chechen conflicts -- and especially the many blue-on-blue attacks in the first conflict from 1994-1996 -- have apparently convinced the leadership of Russia's defense forces that conducting joint and well-coordinated internal operations is essential. This has resulted in a joint operational command of the area around Chechnya and has led to an overall reform plan to install joint and inter-departmental regional/strategic commands. However, the corresponding decentralization of authority from the command of individual armed forces to regional commands might affect the effective use of military force. As discussed, in the West, conversely, often a chief of defense has joint and centralized command over the armed forces in order to successfully conduct (inter)national complex operations.

Russian Military Power and Security Policy

The Kremlin still refrains from radically changing the structure of the armed forces toward one which is capable of addressing the challenges of modern warfare and current threats. Russia's global ambitions demand the capability of power projection by highly skilled, modern-equipped, expeditionary military forces that can be deployed at short notice anywhere in the world. At the same time, protracted conflicts in the North Caucasus demand an armed forces capable of conducting asymmetric warfare against an irregular opponent. The present conditions of Russia's military and its future reform plans do not live up to these two demands for the armed forces.

As long as conservative circles within the security elite prevent this move toward modern warfare, the structure and capabilities of the armed forces will not be in line with the apparent aspired comeback of Russia as a superpower. When military power does not coincide with a country's security policy, it inevitably leads to the hampering of this policy.

However, if Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov succeeds Vladimir Putin as president in 2008, then circumstances might possibly turn favorable for a right combination of military power and security policy. With his career in security and intelligence forces and his experience as minister of defense forces, as well as his frequent outspoken statements on security policy, Ivanov might well be the man to bring these two aspects together in order to achieve a successful return of Russia as a superpower.