

Russia's New Model Army

The Ongoing Radical Reform of the Russian Military

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Dmitry Gorenburg

American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies

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Last August, the Russian army undertook its first offensive action on foreign soil since the end of the Afghanistan war in 1989. After the initial outburst of patriotic fervor faded, the Russian military did not have long to bask in the glory of its first definitive military victory in many years. In early October, the civilian leadership of the Ministry of Defense announced a radical restructuring of the armed forces, one that, if enacted in full measure, would completely change the military's structure and mission capabilities for the foreseeable future. More than nine months have passed since the initial outlines of this reform were announced. This memo will describe the reform's main goals, the military's reaction to it, and the extent to which it has been implemented. It concludes with a discussion of the likely trajectory of the reform process.

A Radical Break

On October 14, 2008, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov announced that, over the next four years, the Russian military would undergo a radical restructuring. The main elements of the reform were to include the following:

- A cut in the total number of military personnel from 1,130,000 to one million, including a cut in the total number of officers from 355,000 to just 150,000. The General Staff would be particularly affected, with 13,500 of its 22,000 personnel positions slated for elimination;
- Remaining officers and contract soldiers will see a significant pay increase over the next four years. The hope is that this will help retain officers, aid in recruiting contract soldiers, and reduce incentives for corruption;

- Henceforth, all military units will be considered permanent readiness units and be fully staffed with both officers and enlisted soldiers. The previous practice of maintaining numerous units staffed only by officers will be eliminated. Prior to the reform, only 17 percent of all units were fully staffed.
- The existing 140,000 non-commissioned officers (NCOs) will be replaced by 85,000 professional sergeants trained over the next three years;
- The four-tiered command structure will be replaced with a three-tiered structure, with the brigade serving as the basic unit;
- The military's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) will be cut in size and subordinated directly to the civilian defense minister (it was previously under the control of the chief of the general staff);
- Numerous overlapping military institutes and medical facilities will be consolidated.

This reform was made possible, as Pavel Baev has described, by the removal of many top military commanders at General Staff headquarters, including Chief of the General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky in the summer and early fall of 2008. These commanders were replaced by generals sympathetic to Serdyukov's reform agenda or beholden directly to the defense minister for their careers.

These reforms amount to the complete destruction of Russia's mass-mobilization military, a legacy of the Soviet army. Such a change was completely anathema to the previous generation of Russian generals, who continued to believe that the Russian military had to be configured to protect the country from a massive invasion from either Europe or China. This perception explains the military leaders' reluctance, for two decades, to dismantle key aspects of the old Soviet army and, most especially, its vast caches of outdated and unneeded weapons overseen by an equally vast number of officers with very little battlefield training and no combat experience. These officers and weapons are the remains of an army designed to fight NATO on the European plains and have served no functional purpose since the end of the Cold War.

However, this reality contradicts the culture and interests of Russia's military elite, who were educated to regard the Soviet army as a world-class military that could match any adversary, including (and especially) the United States. For them, the transformation of the Russian military to a smaller and more mobile force, equipped to fight local and regional conflicts, primarily against insurgents and other irregular forces, is damaging to morale, prestige, and future funding. It was thus inevitable that they would resist these reform efforts at all costs.

Past reform efforts have foundered because they were opposed by the military's top leadership. As president, Vladimir Putin understood that military reform could not succeed unless the power of the generals was taken away first. He did this gradually, putting civilians in charge of the Defense Ministry and then breaking the power of the General Staff. Once Baluyevsky and his immediate subordinates were replaced with Serdyukov's supporters, the plan could proceed. But the intensity of resistance to reform among top generals was such that, even then, Serdyukov felt he could not announce the ultimate goal of the reform: the elimination of the mass mobilization army left over from the Soviet Union.

The Counterattack

Immediately after the announcement of the reform program and in the months that followed, traditionalist figures in the military and analytic community did their best to derail the reform. They were helped in this effort by the Defense Ministry's poor handling of the rollout of the reform package. Rather than putting out a complete reform package, various aspects of the reform were announced piecemeal over a period of two months. These announcements usually did not take the form of official documents; reform measures were simply mentioned in speeches and interviews by top civilian and military officials such as Serdyukov and the new chief of the general staff, Nikolai Makarov. Many of the details mentioned in the various speeches contradicted each other, and the extent and sources of financing for the reform were left unclear.

As a result, reform opponents did not have to focus on the substance of the reform and were initially content to criticize the various inconsistencies of and secrecy surrounding the program. The majority of the substantive criticisms focused on fears that the government would not be able to provide officers forced to retire with the apartments that were legally guaranteed to them. This became a focus of reporting on the reform efforts, especially in the aftermath of the serious downturn in the Russian economy after the collapse of oil and stock prices in the late fall of 2008. Analysts repeatedly stated that given the country's budget deficit, it seemed virtually impossible for the government to build or buy the tens of thousands of apartments necessary to fulfill the obligations to retiring officers.

At the same time, some critics argued that, if implemented, the planned reforms would destroy the Russian army as a functioning military force. They argued that only a mass mobilization army would be able to withstand an attack by China in the Russian Far East. In their analyses and interviews, these experts calculated the necessary size of the Russian military based on either the area of the Russian Federation or the length of its border. Given Russia's size, this method allowed them to justify a numerically large army, though they never questioned why Russia would need to defend its land border with Kazakhstan or what role the military would play in protecting its vast interior land area.

Staying the Course

Despite this criticism, the Defense Ministry's civilian leadership has pressed ahead with their reform plans. Furthermore, both President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin have expressed their support for Serdyukov and his reform plans on several occasions in the last six months. In the first round of personnel cuts, several hundred generals and other senior officers were dismissed in the first months of 2009. The transition to a brigade-based structure commenced on schedule, with 46 of the 90 new brigades formed by the end of June. The rest are expected to be formed by December 1. This means that, as far as retaining the mass mobilization army is concerned, the point of no return has already been reached.

Serdyukov has continued to systematically remove opponents of the reform from their positions, including the heads of the medical service, the military housing agency, and the Navy's chief of staff. The removal in April of Valentin Korabelnikov, the head

of military intelligence, was particularly critical, as the GRU was traditionally independent of the Defense Ministry and was seen as the last bastion of opposition to Serdyukov's reform program.

At the same time, Russia's financial troubles have had an impact on the implementation of reforms. In April, the relocation of the naval headquarters from Moscow to St. Petersburg was postponed. The deadline for reducing the number of officers was extended from 2012 to 2016, giving the government more time to arrange for apartments and to finance pensions for thousands of retirees. The two-year program for professional sergeants, which had been planned to start in February, was delayed until September, likely because there was not enough time to recruit the requisite personnel or develop a training program in time for a February start. This delay will inevitably result in more time passing before the transition from NCOs to professional sergeants can be completed.

These delays, however, appear to be mere bumps in the road for the military reform juggernaut. After almost two decades of false starts and unfulfilled promises, the current iteration of military reforms seems destined to fundamentally change the Russian military.

The Future of the “New Model Army”

Given recent developments, it appears that, sometime in the next 3 to 5 years, Russia will have a more or less functional modern professional army, one that is able to fight effectively in the kinds of conflict in which Russia has actually engaged over the last twenty years. The new structure will allow the military to be more effective in fighting small wars on difficult terrain against adversaries that are likely to combine traditional military tactics with irregular warfare. This is the main, if unstated, goal of the reform. It is thus not surprising that the reforms have left the paratroopers largely untouched; they are a force that is already effective at the tasks for which the new military will be designed.

Largely missing from the discussion among either proponents or detractors of the reform effort has been the question of how to make this “new model army” more effective. While the elimination of the mass mobilization model and the move to professionalization are excellent first steps, there has been very little discussion of the extent to which the new Russian military will still be equipped with old Soviet weapons. The various rearmament programs promulgated by the government in the last ten years have all shared one feature: none has come close to even partial implementation.

Once the initial conflicts surrounding the personnel reforms are resolved, the Russian military will have to deal with the fact that the country's military industrial complex is no longer capable of producing modern weaponry in the quantities necessary to reequip the Russian military in a timely manner. In the short term, it will have to shed its insistence on buying only domestic military hardware and make more purchases from abroad, such as the unmanned drone aircraft it recently purchased from Israel. In the long term, it will have to reform and modernize its defense industry, a project that may also require foreign assistance.

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