

Current Russian Views on US-Russian Security Relations and Military Reform

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I recently returned from a research trip to Moscow and wanted to pass on some impressions. While there, I conducted interviews on two different issues: military reform and political party development. My focus in this report is on military reform. My comments draw on interviews with, among others, General Valery Manilov, First Deputy Chief of the General Staff; retired General Lev Rokhlin, chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee; General Alexander Vladimirov, military consultant to the Defense Council; and Peter Romashkin, staffer for the State Duma Defense Committee.

General Comments

There is much talk in Moscow these days about how US-Russian security relations have not lived up to the expectations for cooperation that many had five years ago. Instead, current US-Russian security relations compare negatively with the formal and informal ties that run through many other aspects of US-Russian relations. In part, this is because some US and Russian security interests appear simply to conflict, for example, in places like the Caspian Sea or Iraq. But it is also due to the fact that the post-Soviet experience of the Russian armed forces has been characterized by extensive corruption, a brutal war in Chechnya and dramatically declining defense budgets. In other words, the armed forces have not benefitted substantially from democratization or economic reform. To date, the Russian military has experienced little of the great transformation that has gone on within Russia and in Russia's relations with the world. As is, this unreformed military poses a threat to the democratization process within Russia, a process which is central to continued preventive defense.

After five years of numerous delays and false starts, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) leadership appears to be poised for a serious attempt in 1998 at military reform. While this window of opportunity exists, US efforts at engagement on reform should be prioritized and pursued with a renewed strategic plan. A reformed Russian military and greater cooperation in US-Russian military relations would enhance the US-Russian security relationship overall and bring it more in line with other aspects of bilateral relations which have moved beyond Cold War boundaries.

Highlights on Military Reform

- According to Moscow's civilian and military experts, US governmental and non-governmental groups have an important role to play in affecting how Russia pursues military reform.
- Various institutions that have a stake in military reform are struggling over the right to set the agenda on whether and how reform takes place. The State Duma, while weak in many organizational and political respects, has say over the budget and will attempt to exert greater influence over the military reform process.
- Little consensus exists on how dire the need for military reform is: at one extreme, Sergei Yushenkov, former chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee and member of the reformist Russia's Choice party said that he and many of his colleagues believe that the accounts of hunger and murder in the army are exaggerated. This view contrasts with Russian NGOs and other Duma deputies who argue that the human rights violations of soldiers are so widespread that conscripts prefer jail to military service.
- Most political analysts say that it is too early to dismiss out of hand the political movement headed by Duma Defense Committee chairman Lev Rokhlin "in defense of the military" and that there may well be support for the movement by officers despite reports to the contrary in the Russian and Western press.

The Potential of US-Russian Military Contacts

Widespread support exists in Russia for programs of engagement with the West on aspects of military reform. Military and civilian experts within the MoD, the Defense Council and the Duma all argued that the US (and European states) have an important role to play in helping the reform process along. Not unlike the logic of the Gorbachev era, a significant way in which the US affects change in Russia is by helping to maintain good relations with Russia; in an atmosphere of calm in the international arena, calls for downsizing in the armed forces make strategic sense.

On a programmatic level, policymakers and experts claimed that there were specific lessons to be learned from the US military experience after Vietnam concerning downsizing, positive changes in military-societal relations and curriculum changes within the service academies. This last issue is particularly important since the academies are populated by teaching staffs that have not incorporated lessons from the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Regardless of whatever resistance one might encounter in pursuing academy-academy links, efforts to place Americans (perhaps done jointly with Europeans) in military academies, or to discuss changes in the US curriculum after Vietnam, should be a priority of governmental and non-governmental programs.

General Valery Manilov of the General Staff talked about the importance of pursuing both US governmental and non-governmental programs on lessons from Vietnam, including the idea of having seminars on a series of issues in Washington and at the Carnegie Moscow Center. He praised Ambassador Blackwill's Executive Program for Russian and US General Officers at Harvard extensively and said there was a need for additional programs as the MoD pursues reform in 1998 and 1999.

In response to my comment (drawing on my experience with US civilian democracy assistance programs in Russia) that additional contacts on joint programs were needed beyond the "drop in" visits that US officials make, General Manilov said that they would welcome an American civilian with Russian expertise based in Moscow to liaison with them and direct programs: a closer working relationship would generate more useful cooperative programs.

Peter Romashkin, an expert on military reform and staffer for the Duma Defense Committee, requested literature on civilian control of the military and congressional relations with the Pentagon. He spoke of the lack of defense budget transparency that continues to be a main block for the Duma on military reform and contributes to poor Duma-MoD relations.

Comments by Romashkin and others in the Duma underscored the importance of US governmental and non-governmental efforts to work with the civilian institutions that have a stake in military reform (e.g., the Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Education) in addition to the Duma. The need to work with these institutions will become more acute as reform is implemented and as the next electoral cycle approaches. From over a dozen interviews on the subject, it seems that Russians continue to want information about the role of the military in a democratic state, as well as advice on how to incorporate retired members of the military (which may number as many as 500,000) in a market-driven economy.

On the possibilities of joint NATO-Russian operations based on the Bosnian model, Russian military and political perceptions clearly diverge from those of US and NATO defense officials. Differences arise around not just symbolic issues, such as the role of Serbia in Russian national thinking, but concrete operational issues. Many Russians I talked with felt that Bosnia had not been a good test of the possibility for cooperation since there had been few casualties and no real "military tests." Some in the Russian military also disagreed with the way in which certain areas in Bosnia were demilitarized. American policymakers need to address these differences of perception head-on or the Russians are unlikely to view these efforts as areas for real cooperation.

Russian Military Reform

The past several months have seen a wide range of discussion in Russia on the course of military reform from Alexander Bessmertnykh's internet group (www.russ.ru/gb), to a series of articles in the scholarly journal published by the Institute on World Economics and International Relations (IMEMO), to the Carnegie Endowment's Russian journal *Yadernoe rasprostranenie* (Nuclear Proliferation), to numerous reports released by Alexei Arbatov's group of experts. As yet, no civilian group seems to be a significant player in military reform, with perhaps the exception of Arbatov's group due to his position on the Duma's Defense Committee. Several deputies and staffers claimed that the Duma was poised to attempt a more active role regarding the issue of reform, but it is unclear how this will play out.

The obstacles to reform of the armed forces are enormous. The two most commonly cited ones are lack of money and lack of political will. Within the Yeltsin administration itself, there continues to be very little interest in matters related to national security, particularly as the

"reformers" move into the next phase of privatization of nation-wide resources. Indeed, many economic reformers think that the reports on conditions within the military are exaggerated. I have heard that some top reformers believe that "smashing the military" is a positive thing for economic reform. On the other hand, those outside the administration who are pushing for reform fear that Defense Minister Sergeev does not have an accurate sense of conscripts' conditions within the different branches and that his Strategic Rocket Forces background is so anomalous to the Russian military experience that he is not widely respected at the troop level.

Members of the nation-wide Russian non-governmental organization "Mothers of Soldiers" (which is a network of regional groups, some working in cooperation with regional branches of the military) showed me photographs of starving soldiers from the elite Dzerzhinsky division and letters from parents whose sons had died in non-combatant circumstances. They fear that if reform does not happen soon in a way that positively affects the quality of life for officers and soldiers, the possibilities for politicization within the armed forces only increase.

One potential vehicle for an increase in politicization is General Lev Rokhlin's movement "in defense of the armed forces" organized in July 1997 and which continues to grow. The founding statement calls for the improvement of life for those in the military and for the removal of Boris Yeltsin as President due to his neglect of the military. Most Russian political analysts I spoke with say that it is too early to dismiss this organization as politically insignificant, although clearly Rokhlin's calls for impeachment are more theatrical than threatening. The dedicated campaign within the Russian media to discredit Rokhlin makes it difficult to get accurate information on the movement. That said, even without this campaign, most analysts agree that Rokhlin does not have the national organization or personality to become a major political figure.

Rokhlin does, however, have a clear message that cuts across the interests of many groups, causing many to align against him and many others--including it seems, some in the military--to align with him. His issue is hot, and he has gathered serious people around him. (Former Defense Minister Igor Rodionov makes his office in the Rokhlin movement's headquarters.) Rokhlin is not a presidential figure, but he conceivably could affect the political environment in Russia by either putting an active movement together or spurring someone else on to do just that.

The Rokhlin movement is bound to have an effect on Alexander Lebed, who continues to be a political figure in Russia although he does not receive a lot of press. Most analysts think that he will lead a faction in the next Duma. He and Rokhlin continue to speak in the clunky political style of former Soviet military officers who have existed for much of their lives outside civilian society. The burden on them is now to build national networks, such as the Communists have, or at least one with the infrastructure of Zhirinovskiy's LDPR with headquarters in every region of Russia. Nevertheless, how military reform is played out in Russia will affect the Duma electoral cycle in 1999, particularly with the expected downsizing in 1998 and 1999 of 500,000 personnel.