

Yeltsin's Latest Military Reform Initiative: Operational-Strategic Commands

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This fall the Yeltsin administration announced a new military reform initiative: the transformation of existing military districts into operational strategic commands. While the proposed system has been adopted in order to strengthen the ability of the armed forces to maintain order on the territory and the borders of the Russian federation, the new system is likely to hinder state consolidation and undermine democratic governance.

Background

Russia inherited a system of military-administrative units from the Soviet Union. Until recently the country was divided into eight military districts and one special region. Each district was made up of units of the ground troops, special troops, district rear services, military educational institutions and local military command and control bodies. Air Force and Air Defense Troops units deployed in the region were often also subordinated to the district administration. The district administration was charged with carrying out operational, military-administrative, and mobilizational tasks. It was to supply logistics support to the units on its territory and to provide territorial defense.

In the last five years the number of separately functioning military structures has proliferated more than 30 state military organizations are believed to exist). Some have created their own separate district organizational structure. For example, today there are seven districts of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Interior, nine Federal Border Service districts, and nine regional centers of the Russian Ministry for Civil Defense, Emergencies and the Elimination of the Effects of Natural Disasters.

According to members of the Russian General Staff, there have been no documents regulating the functioning of these various districts or specifying measures for inter-force coordination. As a consequence, joint actions have been negotiated on an ad hoc basis by unit commanders of the various forces.

The New System of Operational-Strategic Commands

The legal infrastructure for the new system is provided by 3 key documents:

- The Fundamentals: Concept of Russian Federation State Policy for Military Development Until the Year 2005 (signed August 1, 1998)
- Edict no. 900 on Military-Administrative Zones of the Russian Federation (signed July 30, 1998)
- Edict no. 901 on the regulations for a Russian Federation Armed Forces Military District (signed July 27, 1998)

The system introduces a number of important changes:

- *Existing military districts will be reduced in number from eight to six.* The Moscow Military District will become the Moscow Zone; the Leningrad Military District will become the Northwest Zone; the North Caucasus Military District will become the Southwest Zone; the Trans-Volga Military District and the Urals Military District will be merged to form the Central Asia Zone; the Trans-Baikal Military District will be merged with the Siberian Military District to form the Far East Zone.
- *All armed units located in a specific zone will be fully integrated.* This will be achieved through the creation of a centralized command system, a single infrastructure, an integrated technical procurement system for ordering weapons and military equipment, and an integrated logistical support system.
- *Existing military structures will be reorganized and reduced.* Initial targets for deep reform are the Federal Border Guard and the Interior Troops. The Federal Border Guard troops will be severely reduced and most borders in the future will be protected by mobile frontier guards. There will be increased reliance on communication technologies for monitoring border violations. Interior troops will be halved by the year 2001 and will be reorganized into a federal guard (federal internal security policy). By January 1, 1999, 54,000 servicemen will be discharged. The number of state facilities guarded by interior troops will be reduced.
- *The authority of the district (operational-strategic) commander will increase.* The commander will organize and coordinate all units on his territory. He will be responsible for their training. He will oversee and coordinate representatives of other force structures who will sit with him on the district military council. The commander will have the authority to make independent decisions when a regional or border conflict occurs (e.g., he does not need a central directive before putting his units on alert).

Rationale for the System Change

Russian policymakers and military analysts have given several justifications for the proposed reforms.

- *To achieve cost-reduction through the rationalization and reduction of personnel and services.* In the old system the services provided parallel depots, hospitals, consumer service combines and transport. These services are to be amalgamated and costs will be reduced by developing a single rear support system with a centralized purchase system and budget. Savings will also be provided by reducing the number of military districts, e.g., the General Staff estimates that the merger of the Trans-Baikal and Siberian Military District will lead to 30 million rubles in savings.
- *To ensure better troop coordination.* The losses suffered by the Russian forces at the beginning of the Chechen war and during the Kizlyar and Pervomayskaya incidents were in large part blamed on the weaknesses of the existing Russian system, which lacked an infrastructure for coordination and communication between the various Russian troops involved in the assaults. The new system will improve coordination by placing the district commander in charge of all units located in his territory.
- *To meet new security challenges.* The key security threats facing the Russian state today have been identified as border conflicts, domestic disturbances, and terrorist activities. According to Interior Minister Stepashin, these are most successfully countered by abandoning traditional methods of warfare and combining the fighting skills and technologies of different force types in highly mobile interservice groups.
- *To Improve Central Command.* In the old system the troops of the Federal Border Guard, Internal Troops, Emergency Ministry, Railroad Troops, etc., were omitted from the command structure. Only the troop commanders of the military districts were in direct command. This gave rise to problems in maintaining centralized control over armed force activity--particularly in "hot spots."

Consequences for the Russian State and Democratic Development

While the adoption of a system of operational-strategic commands is likely to lead to cost reductions, provide better troop coordination, and counter some of the new security challenges, it is also likely to have several unforeseen consequences. These include:

- *Strengthening the autonomy of the armed forces and reducing central civilian control.* Since the creation of the Russian state, Yeltsin has employed a strategy of divide and conquer to maintain control and oversight of the armed forces. Specifically, he built up and encouraged the development of autonomous state troops which could counter-balance each other, rather than relying on an infrastructure of legal institutions and democratic processes. Through this policy,

- he hoped to ensure that no single military formation would become a dominant threat to his power. The proposed coordination of the various forces located on a territory under a single district commander will undermine this strategy and leave the center with one less lever of control over the armed forces.
- *Strengthening the power of the regional authorities vis-à-vis the center.* The diffusion of power from the center to the regions has been underway for some time. Increasingly we are hearing of instances where regional authorities are feeding, clothing, housing and providing power on credit to armed force units who are not receiving budget allocations from federal authorities. These units are reliant on the goodwill of regional leaders for their day to day survival and not surprisingly new regional civil-military alliances are being formed. Regional civilian authorities, particularly those belonging to the interregional associations (e.g., the Siberian agreement, the Greater Volga, the Greater Urals groupings), are likely to find that the new system of operational-strategic commands increases their power vis-à-vis the center. This results from the possibility that their increasing economic autonomy will be supported by regional (independently functioning) force structures. To date, evidence of regional armed units allying with regional leaders against the center is hard to find. Nevertheless, the behavior of the Ussuriisk Cossack Army on the Chinese border suggests possible future scenarios. With budget funds provided by Governor Yevgeny Nazdratenko, in the summer of 1997 Cossack army units set up tents on the Russo-Chinese border in order to thwart Moscow's agreement to give the Chinese 2.7 square kilometers of land near Khasan Lake and access to the Sea of Japan via the Tuman River.
 - *Reducing the distinction between policing and war-fighting.* One of the norms associated with the organization of armed forces in democratic states has been the separation of policing from war-fighting functions. In democratic countries where military units are used internally, they are subject to much more stringent rules of engagement and oversight procedures than they would be if they were defending the state from external aggression. These measures are adopted in order to provide at least partial human rights protection to the democratic state's citizens. There is no evidence that such precautions are being taken in the Russian case. The principles of the new system blur the distinction between the various types of troops: internal troops are to serve as a reserve for military units, and military units will supplement the activities of internal troops--or alternatively, border troops--in the event of domestic disturbances or border skirmishes. Historically, the absence of an explicit division of labor among different force structures has coincided with various forms of authoritarian rule.
 - *Increasing the labor supply to non-state security structures.* The reduction in personnel resulting from the accelerated cutbacks in various state military structures, particularly those of the interior forces and border guards, will provide an immediate supply of well-trained individuals whose current skills are best adapted to employment in non-state security structures. The rapid growth of non-state security structures has been linked to the rise in violence and crime which is gradually eroding the stability of the Russian state and the integrity of its existing

political system. A new injection of workers into this labor market is likely to give rise to an immediate increase in these destructive trends.

Policy Options for the US

- US policymakers should encourage the Russians to adopt a comprehensive set of national and regional legislative mechanisms for civilian control and oversight to monitor the activities of the operational-strategic commands. Inclusion of civilian legislative and executive representatives in the district military council would be a good first step.
- They should caution Russian policymakers against blurring policing and military roles and urge the adoption of explicit guidelines regarding rules of engagement for different force types in crisis situations. US officials should make available to the Russians information on the procedural guidelines adopted by democratic states that have used military forces in domestic crises, such as Ireland and the United States.
- US officials should promote Russian retraining programs for newly demobilized servicemen to provide them with employment options outside the security field. This might mean actually setting up a retraining program in cooperation with Russian authorities.
- Russian authorities should be warned against letting demobilized soldiers keep their weapons. Instead, these should be returned to well-guarded district facilities.