

# How Kosovo Empowers the Russian Military

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May 1999

PONARS Policy Memo 61

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory

The Russian military is gaining influence within Russia as a result of NATO involvement in Kosovo. The crisis is providing a pretext for the military to increase its leverage over politicians and successfully lobby for what it wants. If the Kosovo crisis is short-lived, Russia will return to "politics as usual." The longer the war drags on, however, the greater will be the military's leverage, particularly since Russia is now entering an election season (parliamentary elections will be held in December 1999 and Presidential elections in June 2000). Evidence of the military's increased influence can be seen in a number of areas: the call for a more expansive military doctrine, an unusually high number of military exercises, the placement of more forces abroad, and an increased military budget.

## **Kosovo has Galvanized the Political and Military Elite**

The war in Kosovo has reenergized the Russian political scene. All major political candidates and parties have condemned the bombings and have expressed strong anti-NATO sentiments. Even Gregorii Yavlinsky, leader of the liberal Yabloko party, has condemned the NATO bombings as "absolutely illegitimate." The head of the Duma's International Affairs Committee Vladimir Lukin accused NATO and especially the US of "return[ing] to medievalism" in adopting a policy that "the strongest side is always right." Former Prime Minister Gaidar has expressed his concern that "every strike on Yugoslavia is a blow to the prospects of maintaining democracy in Russia."

Anti-western sentiment among the Russian people has peaked at levels not seen since the Cold War. A recent poll conducted by the reputable Public Opinion Foundation showed that 70% of the Russian people view the NATO military campaign in Yugoslavia as a "direct threat to Russian security." Such sentiment is especially strong in the military--although it should be noted that Defense Minister Sergeev has shown greater interest in maintaining bilateral relations with the West, including cooperation with NATO, than has Prime Minister Primakov. More typical, however, was the response of General Leonid Ivashov, chief of international relations for the Ministry of Defense, who concluded that "NATO is a tool of war, not of peace. NATO is a criminal organization which has no right to exist." Chief of the General Staff General Anatolii Kvashnin condemned NATO aggression as a violation of NATO's Founding Act, stating that "Russia will need all the armed forces and all the military structures it has, including strategic nuclear forces, in order to respond to this and protect Russia's territorial integrity and sovereignty."

## **The Importance of Controlling the Military**

While it is difficult to speak of the Russian military as a single entity, its generals are largely united in their opposition to NATO action in Kosovo. Moreover, this opposition is shared by the civilian elite--a consensus rarely seen in the past. A brief look at Russian civil-military relations during Yeltsin's tenure will provide the necessary context in which to place that relationship today.

Yeltsin has proven exceptionally adroit over the past few years at retaining control of the armed forces. Other politicians have been denied access to the military and have had little alternative but to court the military to increase their influence over this important organization.

Retention of power in Russia requires control of the armed forces, now matter how weak those forces may be. The Russian state is based on power, not the rule of law, and constitutional documents that provide the framework for legitimacy in the West have not played a role in Russian history. Aleksandr Gol'ts, a respected journalist for Itogi, underscored this very point in characterizing the government changes after the August 1998 financial collapse. After Yeltsin fired Prime Minister Kirienko, both Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin were considered for the position. Both men had only one demand: to control appointments of the "power ministers." Russia was facing imminent financial collapse, and these gentlemen barely discussed economics! [The power ministries traditionally were comprised of the Ministry of Defense, Border Guards, and Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Under Yeltsin they have proliferated and include about 15 services, such as FAPSI (the communications/eavesdropping service), EMERCOM, the Kremlin Federal Security Service, SVR (foreign successor to the KGB), Railway Troops, Construction Troops, and the domestic KGB successor, the FSB.]

Control over the instruments of force is important because if Russia faces breakdown, it is vital to control the men who control the armaments. Even if the military is not inclined to carry out a coup, its preponderance of power makes it an important actor. Recognizing this, Yeltsin has refused to relinquish the power of appointment over the power ministries, and the Duma does not have the right to approve these appointments, unlike other cabinet positions. The Security Council, Yeltsin's advisory body on national security issues, is comprised of heads of the leading power ministries and is currently led by Vladimir Putin, head of the FSB. To further ensure control over the power ministries, Yeltsin deliberately governs by the traditional divide and rule method by creating rival institutions to ensure loyalty to himself.

Since they cannot control the power ministries, the other members of the government are driven to court the military to gain information about the armed forces and to woo them to their side. All contenders for the upcoming Presidential elections are meeting with top military officials. In response to the Yugoslav crisis, Members of the Duma spent a half day in a closed-door session questioning Chief of the General Staff Anatolii Kvashnin regarding the state of the Russian Armed Forces and the measures needed to increase the

military's combat capabilities. Duma members rarely have this kind of access--even the Duma's Committee on Defense does not have full access to all the budget lines that concern the military. In a show of support, the Duma recently unanimously passed a resolution "On the State of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Primary Measures for Increasing Their Combat Capacities."

### **Recent Gains by the Russian Military**

To what extent do developments in Kosovo allow the military to lobby successfully on its own behalf? Four indicators suggest that the military's lobbying efforts are yielding significant dividends.

- *Military Doctrine: Expanding the Threat*

The crisis in Kosovo has given the military much needed ammunition to force through its view that a large-scale conventional war is not nearly as remote a possibility as stated in the 1997 National Security Concept, which identified internal and local conflicts as the main threats to the state and judged a major ground attack as highly unlikely.

The war combined with NATO's newly stated mission of conducting out-of-area operations has given the Russian military new impetus. Defense Minister Sergeev said that Russia will revise its military doctrine to conform with the threat emanating from NATO's military action in Yugoslavia. General Leontii Kuznetsov, commander of the Moscow military district, publicly criticized "the Main Provisions [of the National Security Concept] where it talks about the low probability of a large-scale war being unleashed within the next few years." According to Kuznetsov, "Our armed forces should be prepared for a large-scale aggression." Kuznetsov recalled how as chief of the Main Operations Directorate, he "personally 'removed' from the draft military doctrine the provision, proposed by the 'democrats,' that the Russian Armed Forces should be ready for conducting only local and regional wars." The "important defense document" was nonetheless adopted by the Kremlin "without his amendments."

To be sure, Russia is currently unprepared to thwart a large-scale conventional attack with conventional weapons. Indeed, the day before NATO attacked Yugoslavia, a Russian general admitted that the military is not only unable to win a large-scale war, but could "hardly even manage a local war." If the conflict in Yugoslavia drags on, however, it is likely that the views of the military will prevail: they will receive sufficient support from lawmakers to develop a new military doctrine that emphasizes preparing the armed forces for large-scale conventional engagements. A prolonged war between NATO and Yugoslavia will bring greater acquiescence to military demands for increased funding.

- *Increased Number of Military Exercises*

In early April, the Russian military simultaneously conducted large-scale exercises in a number of military districts. The quantity and magnitude of the exercises had not been seen in some time. The exercises in the Far East were the largest since the collapse of the

Soviet Union. As the nightly news broadcast Vremya declared: "Nobody believes the statements by the military that this has nothing to do with the war in Yugoslavia." Deputy chairman of the Duma's Defense Committee Aleksei Arbatov concurred that "It is not a coincidence that while NATO is stepping up air attacks against Yugoslavia, the Northern Fleet is holding an exercise on such a large scale." The Northern fleet exercise included 16 ships, 9 submarines, a missile regiment and more than 80 warplanes and helicopters all working together to "attack an enemy." The exercise concluded with the launching of a ballistic missile from a nuclear submarine.

The Far Eastern exercises utilized forces stationed in all 8 regions that constitute the Far Eastern Military District. These forces were all-encompassing and included the Pacific Fleet, Air Force, Air Defense, Interior Troops, the Border Guards, Emergency Situations Ministry Forces, Railroad Troops, paramilitary formations of the Ussuriisk Cossack Army, and even local police forces. The exercises utilized more than 200 armored vehicles, 40 tanks, 75 warplanes and helicopters, 11 warships, and more than 20 air defense installations. This is the first time that a Defense Ministry official has commanded units of other military departments, such as the Border Guards. This suggests that military reforms regarding an integrated command structure are moving forward.

The Baltic air defense fleet also held exercises using the SA-10 surface-to-air missiles. And, a patrol of Black Sea Fleet ships took place that consisted of approximately 30 "combat elements." To be sure, the Northern and Far East Fleet exercises had to have been planned to some extent in advance given the scope of their mission and their size. The Baltic and Black Sea exercises, however, could easily have been decided upon after NATO attacks on Yugoslavia. What is particularly significant is that the rhetoric of all the exercises took on a decidedly anti-NATO tone.

- *Placement of Forces Abroad*

Russian troops will be returning to Belarus, according to Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, who announced on April 27th that Russia and Belarus would create a "regional group of armed forces." According to one report, Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko asserted that Belarus "never laid claim to former Soviet military property in Belarus." The implication is that the bases are in fine condition ready to be inhabited. The two nations also intend to develop a joint procurement plan through the year 2005. As part of this plan, Russia will deliver SA-10 surface-to-air missiles to Belarus. Russia and Belarus had been discussing a possible joint grouping of forces as part of their discussions on political unification. While Sergeev has advocated establishing this military alliance for some time, it is reasonable to assume that the events in Kosovo accelerated military cooperation.

- *The Military Budget*

Only a few months ago, the Russian government's top priority was resolution of the economic situation. Today, the nation's security requirements top the list. The Russian leadership appears to have finally heeded the calls of the military for greater financial support. Foreign Minister Ivanov stated that "it isn't a question of starting an arms race or

militarizing the economy, but of supporting our armed forces on a high, professional combat level." Finance Minister Mikhail Zadornov asserted that funding for the military is of utmost importance and that one-fourth of the government's March spending went to the Defense Ministry. After the crisis broke out in Kosovo, a number of military units received backpay.

The Russian Duma has also supported increased defense spending as it wants to "voice the generals' thoughts." The Duma's Committee on Defense reviewed the 1999 Federal Budget and intends to seek additional resources for defense appropriations. Aleksei Arbatov has recommended using the allocations to purchase equipment, weapons, and for the purposes of "scientific research and experimental design work." In other words, he wants to buttress the military's existing capability and not squander the resources on purchases such as housing for retirees. Whether the military is able to exploit the crisis successfully to obtain a larger share of the budget remains to be seen. But, such a review is part and parcel of the overall attention that the civilian leadership is giving to the military as a result of the Kosovo crisis.

## **Conclusion**

Russia currently feels isolated and impotent. While NATO is expanding both its membership and its mission, Russia could not persuade members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to boycott NATO's 50th Anniversary celebration in Washington, DC in April. Whereas initial Russian press reports claimed that the CIS was united in its opposition to the war, subsequent actions on the part of those states underscored the fallacy of this allegation. In fact, with the exception of Russia and Belarus, CIS members were if anything eager to attend the NATO celebration.

Is Russia likely to become militarily involved in the Yugoslav conflict? The answer is no. However, Russia will not sit idly by and watch the US project its power throughout the world without taking Russia's interests into account. On the contrary, the Russian bear has once again rattled its nuclear cage lest the world forget that Russia is a force with which to be reckoned. At a closed-door meeting of the Security Council on April 29, Yeltsin reiterated that nuclear weapons are a "key element in ensuring the country's national security" and signed two decrees on the development of both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons.

Russia will cause trouble in the international system if this is the only way to make its voice heard. In fact, Russians have a long memory, and if they do not have the capacity to act today, they will take action in the future. We in the West assume that an international system that suits the interests of the West is also in Russia's best interest, but this is not necessarily the case. Even in the short run, Russia can undertake activities that can have destabilizing effects on the international system. In addition to possible redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, Russia is "seriously considering" withdrawing from several agreements with the US and sending military hardware and weapons to Iran and possibly Syria. Despite some differences of opinion among Russia's military leaders, they

are generally supportive of these measures. More arms sales translate into greater wealth for the military and maintenance of the military-industrial complex. The domestic impact of the Kosovo crisis in Russia clearly demonstrates that the Russian military may be down, but it surely should not be counted out.

*The views expressed in this memo are those of the author and not those of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory or the US Government.*

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