

Chechnya: the Military's Golden Opportunity to Emerge as an Important Political Player in Russia

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The convergence of a number of factors--both domestic and foreign--has provided the Russian military with a golden opportunity to increase its power in Russian politics. The conduct of the Russian intervention in Chechnya provides ample evidence that the military is taking advantage of this chance. Increased military involvement in policymaking is likely to be both dangerous to future democratic development and may lead to Russia's further alienation from the international community.

Factors that Increase the Russian Military's Influence in the Russian Political Arena

The convergence of three domestic and three international factors has created an environment conducive to expansion of the Russian military's role.

- *The absence of civilian oversight due to a vacuum of power at the top*

A vacuum of power exists at the pinnacle of the Russian state and provides an opportunity for the military to expand its power. Oversight of the military rests primarily in the hands of the president, who in the past has used informal levers--such as establishing patronage networks within the Ministry of Defense and General Staff and counterbalancing military forces with various security forces--to exercise control. These are ineffective tools for managing a military and ensuring that officers do not question civilian authority. It is a particularly ineffective strategy when the architect of the policy, President Yeltsin, is sick and for the most part politically incapacitated.

- *Overwhelming public support for the Chechen invasion*

In contrast to the 1994-1996 Chechen war, the majority of the public is behind the current action in Chechnya. The alleged Chechen-instigated bombings of apartment buildings in Moscow, Buynakask, and Volgodonsk in conjunction with the armed incursions into Dagestan by militants stationed in Chechnya have inflamed the Russian population, who now seek revenge against the "terrorists." Russians see a victory in Chechnya as providing a means to redeem lost Russian pride and reassert Russia's importance both regionally and globally. The

popularity of the war has enhanced the public's perception of the military and has made them less critical of military intervention in politics.

- *Upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections*

With the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, the Kremlin has been eager to find a way to reassert its waning power. Public opinion polls demonstrate that the formula of an external enemy and an assertive government figurehead who promises to protect Russia and restore order and stability is magic for mobilizing public support. As a consequence, Putin's fate has become tied with the success of the Chechen military campaign and, at least for now, has made him captive to military demands. Such leverage reinforces the ability of the military to expand their power.

- *Changes in Russia's perception of threat and its attitude toward the West*

Three developments in the international arena have fed the Russian perception that its military and security interests are increasingly being threatened by the West: 1) the perceived abandonment of a pure political mission by NATO and its increased involvement in out-of-area conflicts like Kosovo; 2) the expansion of NATO to the Visegrad three and perhaps beyond; and 3) US-led changes in the international arms control regime starting with the US Senate's refusal to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the government's movement toward abandoning certain core principles of the ABM treaty. As a consequence, Russian policymakers are concluding that military force and not political diplomacy is the key to securing Russia's national interests. This world-view justifies giving the Russian military greater influence in directing and executing policy.

- *Implications of Political Assertiveness by the Military for the Conduct of the Chechen War*

Over the last month, the Russians have sent a federal force estimated to total 90,000-100,000 to fight "Chechen bandits." They are facing an estimated rebel force of about 40,000. In order to assemble its force, Moscow has had to retract a promise made earlier this year that inexperienced recruits would not be sent into war zones against their expressed wish.

According to Russian analysts, more than 90 percent of the rank-and-file soldiers and sergeants in Chechnya are conscripts. The basic strategy of the General Staff seems to be to rely on numerical superiority and the superior firepower of their artillery, tanks, missiles and warplanes.

Taking a page out of the book of NATO's strategy in Kosovo, the Russian military has been relying on heavy bombing. However, contrary to the NATO strategy, not much attempt seems to be made to avoid unnecessary civilian deaths. One of the incidents that gained a great deal of public attention was the October

21st bombing of a Grozny public market by 10 missiles, which led to the death of at least 118 people, and the injury of 400.

An immediate consequence of the widespread shelling is that it has given rise to a huge exodus of refugees. Current estimates are that more than 200,000 Chechens have fled to Ingushetia. At the time of the writing of this piece, the Russian military was engaged in fierce ground fighting around Urus-Martan and Argun, and was preparing to storm Grozny.

The Consequences of Increased Military Influence

Increased military influence in recent Russian policy towards Chechnya has had two effects: it has led to the expansion of Russia's military mission, and it is preventing a rapid political settlement of the conflict.

- *The Military has driven the expansion of the original mission in Chechnya*

The initial mission of the Chechen intervention, as explained by Russian civilian policymakers, was to use air strikes to destroy military bases in Chechnya used by "Islamic guerrillas" to launch their terrorist attacks on Russia. The mission was then extended to a military operation aimed at getting rid of terrorists on the left banks of the Terek river. However, due to pressure from officers in the General Staff, this limited engagement was expanded to--in the words of Col. General Kazantsev--eliminating bandit formations south of the Terek River. While publicly Russian civilian policymakers are still saying that the aim of the mission is to eliminate terrorists from Russian territory, high-ranking officers are characterizing the mission as one of reasserting Russian sovereignty over the independence-seeking republic.

- *The military is thwarting an early political settlement of the crisis*

Increasing civilian casualties compounded by the growing humanitarian crisis have given rise to accusations that the military has gone too far. These complaints have been made by the international community, and increasingly by groups within Russia. The head of the parliamentary group Yabloko, Grigory Yavlinsky, has been the first political leader to indicate some discomfort with the way in which the Chechen campaign is being waged, and has urged that the Russian government enact a one-month cease-fire and try to negotiate with Chechen President Maskhadov. One Moscow military analyst, Pavel Felgenhauer, has admitted that the Russian bombings of residential areas and the recent attack on a Red Cross refugee convoy are "flagrant violations" of the Geneva Convention and its protocols. He writes: "Present tactics in Chechnya imply that war crimes are committed on a daily basis."

The military is resisting any consideration of negotiating a cease-fire. In late October, Defense Minister Igor Sergeev said that troops would never leave Chechnya. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported that Alexander Voloshin, presidential chief of staff, told military commanders to prepare for negotiations with Maskhadov. It then reported that General Anatoly Kvashnin called Yeltsin in Sochi warning him that it would be a serious

mistake if he decided to forge peace talks with Maskhadov. The head of the General Staff then threatened to resign in protest. This phone call apparently made Yeltsin decide to return to Moscow to prevent a public altercation. Following Yeltsin's return to the capital, high-ranking officers made a number of public statements opposing negotiations.

Komsomolskaya Pravda reported that Major General Vladimir Shamanov, commander of the Western Federal Forces in Chechnya, told *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* that he would quit if there was a cease-fire and said that "we are sick of seeing Russia humiliated." He further said that if Yeltsin decided to halt the Chechen offensive, it might drive the country to the brink of war. Other military commanders who have been vocal in support of Shamanov's position include North Caucasus Military District Commander Col. Gen Viktor Kazantsev, Lt. General Gennady Troshev (a commander in Chechnya), and deputy chief of the General Staff Valery Manilov, who recently asserted that the Russian government has no choice but to carry out counter-terrorist operations in Chechnya.

There has been a noticeable change in Russian civilian attitudes since these warnings were issued by the military. According to Kremlin sources, President Yeltsin denied Voloshin's statement and reportedly tried to diffuse tensions and ward off any overt threats to his authority by awarding Russia's highest medal "The Hero of Russia" to key figures in the power ministries who are currently involved in the Chechen campaign. Yeltsin has not only praised Prime Minister Putin's policy choices, he has indicated that Putin is his favored candidate for next year's presidential elections. Meanwhile, Yavlinsky's attempt to urge a Russian-Chechen reconciliation has gained little support from other members of the Duma. The dramatic shift in attitudes towards the Chechen engagement is reflected in the statements of former liberal politician and darling of the West, Anatoly Chubais, who has gone so far as to call Yavlinsky a traitor for criticizing the military campaign.

Military Role Expansion, Russian Democracy, and US-Russia Relations

The expanded role of the military in politics is detrimental to Russia's democratic development and to international stability. If a state is to foster democratic evolution, it has to ensure that it is civilians and not the military who dictate the direction of both domestic and foreign policy. The Russian military's surprise march on Pristina airport this summer should have served as a warning signal to Russian civilians of the military's new political aspirations--yet neither the Kremlin nor the Duma have moved to take measures to strengthen civilian oversight or circumscribe military role expansion. Instead they seem happy to cede control of Russia's Chechen policy to their military.

Independent military participation in international diplomacy hampers the ability of the state to articulate and follow a unified foreign policy. Military officers, in contrast to seasoned professional diplomats, are more likely to make incendiary statements and pursue rash, destabilizing initiatives that can lead to dangerous escalation of international crises. As we are seeing in Chechnya, the military's uncompromising stance is preventing rapid resolution of the conflict and is augmenting tensions between Russia and the West. Accusations like those recently made by Defense Minister Sergeev--who stated that the

US wanted to weaken Russia and assert its own control over the Caspian Sea basin--do little to enhance bilateral understanding and cooperation.

Unfortunately, as the Istanbul Summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has shown, there is little that the US or the West can do to pressure Russia to halt the campaign in Chechnya. Any attempt to pressure the Russians by threatening to withhold IMF funding or calling a halt to international cooperative negotiations or ventures is likely to backfire by fueling anti-American sentiment and justifying further militarization of the Russian state. Change in policy is only likely to occur if Russian casualties begin to mount and the Russian public reacts by reversing its support for the war. The most that US policymakers can do at this time is:

- warn the Kremlin of the dangers of allowing its military to lead policy;
- urge civilian policymakers to put into place robust mechanisms of civilian control;
- try to avoid undertaking international initiatives that are seen as threatening to Russia's core national interests, such as abrogating the ABM treaty;
- remind the Russians of their moral obligation as a member of the international community to adhere to international norms regarding the protection of human rights and specifically civilians in wartime; and
- continue to try to integrate Russia into the international community--both economically and militarily--through bilateral and multilateral arrangements.