

Putin and the Military: How Long will the Honeymoon Last?

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Russian President Vladimir Putin aggressively wooed the man in uniform during his victorious campaign for the Kremlin, from the time of his appointment as prime minister in August 1999 until his election in March 2000. Putin stressed the need to restore Russian pride and power, promised to make good on past debts to officers, pushed for an increase in military spending, and restored military training courses to the schools. Most prominently, he gave the high command free rein in Chechnya, and has made military victory there a fundamental goal of his early rule.

Putin's love was more than requited by the army. Leading officers were not shy in expressing their support for Putin prior to the elections. For example, Colonel-General Igor Puzanov, the commander of the Moscow Military District, stated in February 2000, "we understand his position, and we support his actions. In particular, the absolutely consistent line being carried out in the North Caucasus elicits every possible support and respect for the acting president from military people." Many in the army give Putin credit for their renewed sense of prestige and importance.

In this policy memo I argue that the Putin-military honeymoon is just that, a honeymoon. Although the marriage is currently based both on strong emotions and considerations of convenience, there are important challenges ahead that will strain the relationship. It is likely to end badly, if not in a nasty divorce, then at least in mutual disappointment and heartbreak. The US need not fear a resurgent Russian military; Russian weakness is still the more serious danger.

The Courtship

There are three fundamental reasons for the current honeymoon: the Chechen war, promises of material support for the army, and restored feelings of military pride and self-worth.

The war in Chechnya is the most obvious component of the Putin-military relationship. By the fall of 1999, when the second round of the war began, a "stab in the back" theory about the defeat in Chechnya in 1994-1996 had become widely believed in the military, and among influential civilian elites. According to this (in my view mistaken) argument, the army would have won the first war if not for civilian meddling and Aleksandr Lebed's

grand-standing peace initiative in August 1996. This time, the argument continues, Putin has let the military fight the war its own way, and this explains the army's alleged success.

There's nothing like some extra cash to encourage warm feelings on the part of the army. In late 1999 the defense budget for 2000 was increased from 119 to 141 billion rubles. In January 2000 Putin stated that the government would increase spending on military equipment by 50% this year. Then in February he ordered the Finance Ministry to pay off, over the course of the year, debts from 1997-1999 for food deliveries to the army. Putin has also pledged to help with the severe housing problem in the armed forces.

Perhaps the most important step taken by Putin is the most intangible one: through his expressions of strong support for military needs, his patriotic rhetoric, and his energetic, can-do profile, he has made the military feel important again. At a Kremlin event marking Defender of the Fatherland Day in February, Putin remarked that "the army has regained trust in itself and society believes in and trusts its army." Although Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin were not always nor consistently unpopular with the officer corps, in general the last 15 years have been a catastrophe for the Russian army, and many in uniform blamed the civilian leadership for their plight. Putin holds out the promise of better days ahead, both in terms of officers' standing in society, and Russia's international position.

The Inevitable Falling-Out

Putin will be able to maintain his positive image among the officer corps in the short run. But his military policy initiatives face severe difficulties in the years ahead. The war in Chechnya is not likely to be "won" in any meaningful sense, and Putin will not be able to overcome the serious financial difficulties that the army faces. Finally, his take-charge image is likely to suffer as a consequence of his inability to solve the military's deeply-rooted problems.

Chechnya

In some respects the Russian military's performance in the second Chechen war has clearly been superior to its showing in the 1994-1996 conflict. But it would be a mistake to overstate these differences. The army is still plagued by poor training and discipline, equipment shortcomings, an indifferent (if not openly hostile) local population, and the absence of a long-term political strategy for the region.

There were periods in 1995 and 1996 when the Russian army occupied most of Chechen territory and seemed on the brink of victory over the rebels. But ultimate victory was impossible due to both the serious deficiencies of the Russian army and the tenacity of the Chechens.

As the Russian expression goes, "the army has stepped on the same rake it did in the last war." So far there is little evidence that the Russian military can subdue Chechnya and

restore any semblance of normality. The only "victory" in sight would be if Putin and the army made a calculated decision to depopulate most of Chechnya, by razing settlements to the ground and forcing civilians to flee (to an even greater extent than has occurred already). Even under these conditions, Russia would likely still face a protracted guerilla war.

Finances

Politicians from across the political spectrum in Russia have grumbled for years about the deleterious financial situation of the armed forces. Yet until last year the Duma had always approved the Finance Ministry's miserly defense budget, and even then the government never met its obligations to the armed forces in full. An improved economic situation, due to increased oil revenues and ruble devaluation, made it possible for the government to do more for the army this year.

Happy days are hardly here again, though. The 2000 budget for national defense still amounts to only 2.63% of GDP, well below Yeltsin's officially mandated target of 3.5%. It would take an additional 45 billion rubles, or a 32% increase in the military budget, to reach that target this year. Military budget increases of this magnitude would place great strain on the federal budget.

Spending on other military and security bodies is also a burden on the budget. General Aleksandr Piskunov, a Duma deputy with many years of experience within the government apparatus, notes that all direct and indirect budget expenditures on military and security matters equal 5.3% of GDP. In contrast, spending on the "entire social-economic sphere" is only 3.7% of GDP. With such defense and security spending, Piskunov maintains, "our state does not have and cannot have a future, let alone a relatively radiant one."

Cutting back the other power ministries--such as the Federal Security Service (FSB), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and the Federal Border Service (FPS)--is not a solution. The extent to which these ministries have been feeding off the army has been greatly overstated anyway, and was confined mainly to a brief period in the mid-1990s. Given Putin's background, and his law and order platform, the FSB and the MVD are unlikely to sustain significant further cuts. The FPS is overwhelmed and underfunded. Perhaps the one power ministry that could be downsized is the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS). But the MChS is headed by Sergei Shoygu, Putin's ally from the Unity bloc, and the MChS's positive public image makes it an unlikely target for substantial reductions.

The fundamental problem is that the Russian armed forces insist on maintaining a first-world military on a third-world budget. Russia has more people in uniform (counting all power ministries) than the United States, despite an economy 1/20th the size. Aleksei Arbatov and Pyotr Romashkin recently noted that the US spends 180,000 dollars a year per soldier, Germany 100,000, Turkey 15,000, and Russia 4,000 (calculated by dividing the military budget by the size of the armed forces). To attain even the level of Turkey,

Russia would either have to cut its armed forces from 1.2 million to 800,000 or increase its defense budget to 500 billion rubles, which would be 60% of the federal budget.

The war in Chechnya makes it unlikely that a serious military reform effort will be undertaken any time soon. Such a reform would entail, at a minimum, sharp personnel cuts, salary increases, additional money for military housing (currently there are 134,000 homeless military families across the different power ministries), an increase in the number of professional (contract) soldiers, and greater spending on procurement and new technology. All of these steps would cost significant sums--money the state does not have. And fundamental reform is unlikely to take place while the army is waging a guerilla war inside the country.

The Military, Society, and Putin

Putin can, in the short run, raise military morale by infusing some cash, saying the right things, and projecting a forceful image. But ultimately a significant improvement in the military's situation is dependent upon larger economic and social changes.

Indeed, many of the problems plaguing the army are simply reflections of broader social phenomena, such as poor health, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and corruption. Additional resources can help attack these problems, but they will not be overcome quickly or easily.

In the face of a protracted internal war and continuing financial difficulties for the armed forces, mutual disillusionment is likely to grow. Putin will find out that the military cannot solve the Chechen and North Caucasus problem simply by hunting down a few thousand "bandits." He also will have to figure out how to juggle the multiple financial pressures on the Russian state, and turn his attention to economic reform. Society's rallying behind the war and the army may fade, or give way to indifference.

The armed forces, similarly, will find out that Putin is no miracle worker. As long as the military leadership insists upon maintaining a massive army schooled in the lessons of World War II and directed both towards Chechnya and countering the West, hard choices are likely to be deferred. As General Piskunov noted, "if we arm ourselves without taking into account the cost, our army will destroy us--economically."

Mutual disappointment, then, will not be the product of deliberate slights, but an inevitable consequence of the constraints facing both Putin and the armed forces. So far neither party has been willing to acknowledge that tough and painful decisions are ahead. When that time comes, the greater influence the military now is alleged to possess in Russian politics will quickly evaporate.

On the positive side, Putin's natural inclination is to be interested in and concerned with military affairs, so personal feelings between the military leadership and Putin are likely to be better than they were under either Gorbachev or Yeltsin. This greater attention should also bring an end to the periods of drift and inactivity that were one of the hallmarks of civil-military relations under Yeltsin.

Conclusions and Implications

In this policy memo I have argued that, despite the current honeymoon, Putin and the Russian military are unlikely to have a completely harmonious relationship in the long run. Their mutual commitment to military victory in Chechnya and the restoration of Russia's military might and international standing will founder over the difficulties of the war and a lack of economic resources.

What does this mean for US policy? First, and most important, is the need to resist warnings that Putin is a new Stalin or a Russian Milosevic. The Russian bear is not making a comeback, at least in the sense of threatening the US or the West. Russian weakness, not Russian strength, still remains the more serious threat to US security.

Second, the US needs to be more cognizant of the impact of its foreign policy choices on Russian military transformation. US policies on expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Kosovo, and national missile defense have undermined voices in Russia calling for significant military reform. Yes, Russia does not have a "veto" on US policy, but we need to pay more attention to Russian "voices" warning the US of unintended and indirect consequences of our choices. Congressional efforts to pursue dialogue with the new Duma would be a good place to start.

Finally, in terms of military-military contacts, the US should be guided by low expectations and considerable patience, but not resignation. These contacts still play a positive role in several respects. Military-military contacts, if properly conceived and implemented, can give Russian officers a sense of professional accomplishment and pride. They can help overcome mutual misconceptions and unwarranted hostility. Most important, they can, in a subtle way, demonstrate some of the virtues of the US military system at the micro-level (the role of noncommissioned officers (NCOs), relations between officers and enlisted personnel, etc.).

In the final analysis, of course, the US has little direct influence over the fate of Russian military reform. US-Russian policy differences over NATO, Kosovo, arms control, and Chechnya will make sustaining even the existing programs difficult. US policy in this sphere should start with the recognition that the Putin-military honeymoon is likely to be short-lived, and that the multiple and severe obstacles to Russian military resurgence have not disappeared.