The Duma and Military Reform

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Military reform is on the agenda again in Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin--despite his pro-army and "Great Russia" rhetoric--seems to have recognized that the army and the other power ministries have to experience further reform and cuts to allow him to pursue other important economic goals. He noted in September 2000 that 35% of the state budget goes to military, security, and law enforcement structures, concluding that this amount is "far too much."

The Duma was not a serious player in military policy during the Yeltsin era. Boris Yeltsin jealously guarded his control over the power ministries, and the Duma leadership followed an incoherent two-track policy of loudly demanding more money for the armed forces while quietly voting for the government's miserly budgets.

Will the current Duma play a greater role in military reform than it has in the past? Such a change seems plausible, with a less ideological president and a more centrist Duma friendly to the Kremlin. However, a major change in the role of the legislative branch in the conduct of military reform is unlikely. Although some Duma members may play an important role in the process due to their individual standing and expertise, there is little reason to expect a more profound change in the role of the Duma as an institution. The Duma will not be a more effective participant in military affairs without institutional reform, and Putin has no interest in strengthening democratic and civilian control in this way.

Military Reform in the 1990s

Military reform has been frequently discussed over the last decade in Russia, with decidedly mixed results. In practice, reform has primarily meant further cuts in the size of the armed forces, with some moderate organizational changes.

Reform under Pavel Grachev (1992-96) basically amounted to a gradual hollowing out of the military structure inherited from the Soviet Union. Grachev's much-derided tenure was not without successes--most importantly the withdrawal of more than one million military personnel and their dependents from Central and Eastern Europe--but his public claims about the building of high-quality, mobile forces were primarily bluster. The army was cut, but not reformed. The slog and humiliation of the first Chechen war ruined any chances for more serious reform efforts.

Igor Rodionov's tenure (1996-97) was marked mainly by his increasingly strident complaints about the meager finances available to the army. His highly public conflict with Yeltsin's Defense Council chief, Yuri Baturin, for control over the military reform process culminated in the only possible outcome--Rodionov's dismissal.

The most significant steps toward not just a smaller, but also restructured, military have taken place under Igor Sergeyev's leadership, which began in 1997. Further cuts were enacted in a more logical fashion, with the elimination of many hollow "cadre" divisions and creation of a small number of "permanent readiness" divisions. Moderate structural reforms, such as the merger of the air defense and air forces and a reduction in the number of military educational institutions, were also pushed through. However, the resumption of the Chechen war, a shortage of money, and the increasingly bitter disagreements between Sergeyev and his Chief of Staff, Anatoly Kvashnin, have undermined more far-reaching reforms. It will take a shake-up in the Ministry of Defense leadership to give another impulse to further change.

Given the economic difficulties and political disarray of much of the Yeltsin era, it was probably unrealistic to expect more significant reform. Indeed, were it not for the waste and demoralization of the Chechen wars, the armed forces would certainly be better off. As things now stand, however, the military is inadequately paid and housed, short of qualified junior officers, corrupt, and struggling to maintain a large and outdated technological infrastructure and equipment base.

The Duma and the Military

Yeltsin never had an interest in having a parliament that shared equally in governance, particularly in the area of defense and security policy. Civilian control of the armed forces for Yeltsin meant his personal control, assisted by the presidential administration and, at times, the Defense and Security Councils.

Civilian control beyond the presidency is not non-existent. The Government, particularly the Administrative Department and the Ministry of Finance, play important roles in working out laws and decrees that apply to the armed forces and in formulating the budget. Perhaps equally important is the role played by non-governmental institutions such as the press and organizations like the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy in shining a spotlight on military affairs.

Despite some progress, though, the degree of institutionalization of robust civilian control mechanisms is clearly disappointing. Perhaps the biggest failure in this regard is the limited role the Duma plays in civilian oversight.

Why has the Duma's influence on military affairs been circumscribed? There are institutional, political, and personal reasons for the parliament's limited influence.

The institutional limits on its power are perhaps the most important barrier to greater Duma participation in military affairs. The Duma plays no role in confirming the minister of defense or the other heads of the power ministries. Indeed, the constitution does not grant the Duma oversight authority over executive branch structures. Thus, the very notion of parliamentary control of the military is arguably unconstitutional.

The Duma also has no mechanisms to compel the government to provide more details about the military budget. Given that the budget is the best lever available for the parliament to influence government policy, this lack of information is a huge obstacle. Despite persistent efforts by reformist deputies such as Aleksei Arbatov and Sergei Yushenkov to increase the number of open lines in the military budget, thereby providing more details about how the military budget is allocated, their efforts have not been successful. From 1995 to 1998 the trend was toward greater openness, with up to 19 open articles and sub-articles listed in the military budget. But in the last several years the situation has regressed substantially. Now there are only 3 open lines in the military budget, with one (open) line accounting for 90% of the budget. Unfortunately, these three lines are so general that they provide no sense to Duma members, or society, of how the armed forces is actually allocating its budget. The closed nature of the military budget actually violates the 1998 Law on Budget Classification, but the Ministry of Finance simply ignores the law, motivated by the desire to maintain the freedom to shift funds as it sees fit.

The Duma does play a role in passing legislation and amendments that apply to the armed forces, such as the Law on Defense and the Law on the Status of Service Personnel. Currently there are efforts underway to pass a law on civilian or parliamentary control of the armed forces. There are also proposals to establish a Duma representative responsible for monitoring military service questions, a position analogous to the Duma's human rights representative. Such efforts have been stymied in the past, however, both by divisions within the Duma itself and by opposition from the executive branch. Moreover, without greater access to the budget, these legislative reform efforts are unlikely to have important effects.

Political considerations have also limited the Duma's influence over military affairs under Yeltsin. Given the antipathy between Yeltsin and the Communists, the largest party in the Duma after 1995, the prospect of Yeltsin willingly ceding authority to the parliament was nil. Yeltsin's reluctance was perhaps understandable given the demagogic approach to military issues adopted by hard-line Communist deputies such as Albert Makashov and Viktor Ilyukhin. The government's refusal to share information with the Duma and the public about the power ministries, however, actually played into the hands of Ilyukhin, who used his control of the Duma's Security Committee from 1994 to 1999 to manipulate information on the activity of these structures and increase his own influence.

If these obstacles were not enough, poor personal relations among key figures on opposite sides of the legislative-executive divide made things worse. Yushenkov, the chair of the Defense Committee from 1994 to the end of 1995, had horrible relations with Grachev, who once called Yushenkov a "vile toad." Duma relations with the government

became positively pathological during Lev Rokhlin's stint as chair of the Defense Committee between 1996 and 1998. To have a serving general chairing the committee, while simultaneously leading a public movement (The Movement in Support of the Army) whose professed goal was the unseating of the president, is hardly a recipe for amicable relations between the Duma and the executive branch.

A New Reform Agenda?

The military reform debate has been reinvigorated by Putin's arrival. The Security Council, under his close ally Sergei Ivanov, has been busy developing proposals for more far-reaching change. So far the centerpiece of this reform effort seems little changed from the Yeltsin era--deep cuts in the armed forces, with the other power ministries largely exempt from major cuts. Although this discrepancy has been rightly criticized, it still remains the case that by far the largest power ministry in terms of both budget and personnel is the Ministry of Defense. It thus by necessity will be the key target for officials motivated by the desire to economize.

There are some hopeful signs, however, at least on the rhetorical level, that reforms of a more fundamental nature may be on the agenda. Possible steps gaining renewed attention include an end to conscription, the appointment of a civilian defense minister, and the separation of Ministry of Defense and General Staff functions. All of these changes would attract significant opposition from the high command, and may not come to pass. But the window for reforms going beyond downsizing is more open than at any time since the early 1990s.

The Duma's Possible Role

What role will the Duma play in any reform decisions? And will it be able to carve out for itself a more substantial oversight role?

On the surface, the prospects for expanded Duma participation in defense policymaking have substantially improved. Putin's non-ideological approach to policymaking, and the majority support he has in the Duma, have removed several of the most important sources of conflict between the two branches on military issues. Moreover, the personality clashes of the past have also disappeared. The current chairs of the Defense and Security Committees, Andrei Nikolayev and Aleksandr Gurov, have good relations with the executive branch. Indeed, Nikolayev, a retired general and former commander of the Border Troops, is widely considered a possible candidate for Minister of Defense.

It would be a mistake, however, to overestimate the positive influence that Nikolayev and Gurov will have on pushing for greater openness and civilian control in the military reform process. Although in some respects they are obvious improvements over Ilyukhin and Rokhlin, neither has shown themselves to be particularly progressive in this respect. Gurov, for example, has opposed attempts by Duma deputies Arbatov and Eduard

Vorobyov to change the Law on State Secrets to open up the budgets of the power ministries to greater parliamentary scrutiny. Nikolayev has devoted most of his energy to complaining about the size of the military budget, rather than advancing more systemic reform initiatives.

More important, the problems standing in the way of expanded Duma influence on military reform are not personal but institutional. Putin is highly unlikely to seek to reform the constitution in a way that would strengthen parliamentary control over the government, such as by moving toward a semi-presidential system like in France, in which the government is formed on the basis of a parliamentary majority.

Moreover, Putin is unlikely to compel the Ministry of Finance to be more open about the military budget. The military budget is worked out largely by the Ministry of Finance in negotiation with the Ministry of Defense. Although the Ministry of Defense is often blamed for keeping the budget closed to Duma scrutiny, members of the Duma Defense Committee maintain that it is Lyubov Kudelina, Deputy Minister of Finance responsible for the power ministries, who has been the main obstacle to a more transparent budget. Indeed, the army has started to figure out how to use the Duma as an ally in budget fights, sending service chiefs to testify in front of the Defense Committee. However, in the absence of strong pressure for a more open military budget from a civilian minister of defense--an uncertain prospect at best--this policy of budget secrecy is likely to remain in place. Greater glasnost is hardly the watchword under Putin.

Putin also has shown no interest in restricting the ability of active-duty officers to seek public office. Indeed, the opposite has been the case, with officers from the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Ministry of Defense being actively courted by the government to run for governor in several oblasts.

The power ministries have not yet learned that military deputies are actually not effective lobbyists for their interests. The military assumes that officer-deputies will be recognized as experts and thus be persuasive advocates, but in fact their uniforms deprive them of the appearance of impartiality that civilian advocates possess. Civilian advocates of military interests are therefore actually more effective. It is an irony of defense politics in Russia that Arbatov and Andrei Kokoshin--current Duma deputies who got their start as civilian academics and were despised by the military in the late-Soviet period and denounced as "incompetent"--have become two of the best spokesmen for military interests in the Duma and society.

To the extent that the Duma can influence military reform policy, it is due to the influence of some of its members, rather than a more fundamental shift towards institutionalized legislative control over the power ministries. Duma members such as Nikolayev, Arbatov, and Kokoshin will certainly play a role in the revived military reform debates, but their influence will remain secondary until the institutional system of civilian control is changed. The presidency, the Ministry of Defense, and the Security Council (at least under Putin) continue to hold the most important cards.

Conclusions and Implications

The generally gloomy picture sketched above should not blind us to the fact that there has been real progress in the last ten years. The very notion of civilian control, as the term is understood in Western liberal democracies, was at best exotic and in some quarters treasonous a decade ago. Now even many Communist deputies support efforts to pass a law on civilian control of the armed forces.

Of course, if our model for legislative branch participation in military affairs is the United States, then we will always be disappointed. The US is unique, even among developed democracies, in the degree to which the Congress influences defense policy. We should not expect major reform, comparable to the US Goldwater-Nichols Act, to come out of the Russian Duma.

Moreover, many of the changes needed--such as a change in the relationship of senior officers to junior officers, and the officer corps in general to enlisted personnel--are beyond Duma control. And an expanded Duma role needs to go along with much greater civilianization of the Ministry of Defense (currently Deputy Minister of Defense Nikolai Mikhailov is the only important civilian official). Both of these changes will be slow and difficult, but are ultimately necessary if civilian control is to become more robust and well-institutionalized.

The United States is unlikely to influence either the Russian military reform debate, or the development of more robust institutional mechanisms for civilian control of defense, in all but the most tangential ways. However, even small but important truths--such as why non-military legislators are the most effective advocates of military interests or the advantages of a more transparent budget to the army itself--if communicated well in Congress-Duma exchanges or military-military programs, may help to push things in the right direction.