

President Putin and His Generals

Bureaucratic Control and War-Fighting Culture

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Since the attacks on the United States on September 11, Russian president Vladimir Putin has moved Russia decisively toward the West, staking out a prominent place in the U.S.-led antiterrorist coalition. He has also redefined the war in Chechnya as just another theatre in this global campaign, thereby hoping to reduce the level and intensity of Western criticism. Putin quickly allied with the West diplomatically and politically in antiterrorist efforts, but the ability of the Russian military to be a useful partner in this campaign may inhibit Russia's desire/efforts to be a useful contributor to the joint efforts in combating terrorism. Will Putin be able to transform the Russian military into a reliable partner with the West and, perhaps down the road, for NATO? Although the answer involves a host of issues, from resources available to the military to hunger and violence in the barracks, the key to successful military reform will be whether or not the military leadership accepts Putin's authority. The president has shown skill and firmness in consolidating his control, but his relations with the top brass are far from being problem-free and hidden tensions might be building.

Cadre Reshuffling

Putin's uncertain control over the military leadership manifested itself most obviously in July 2000 when Defense Minister Igor Sergeev and Chief of the General Staff Anatoli Kvashnin clashed head-to-head over priorities in resource allocation. Putin rightly saw more to that public scandal than just personal animosity and did not rush with disciplinary actions. Only in late March 2001 was Sergeev quietly removed (and made a presidential adviser) and replaced by Sergei Ivanov, former Secretary of the Security Council and Putin's most trusted lieutenant. This appointment of a civilian (if a recently retired general from the Foreign Intelligence Service [SVR] can be counted as one) to the top position in the military hierarchy was presented as a major step in military reform. The move, however, was primarily aimed at strengthening presidential control over the Armed Forces.

Indeed, Ivanov to this day can claim few achievements in reforming military structures. His main occupation apparently has been revamping personnel policy. His first step was to take under control the notoriously (and, perhaps, deliberately) twisted military finances, and for that purpose bring in Lyobov Kudelina from the Ministry of Finance as a new deputy minister. Then, in July 2001, two familiar figures—General Valeri

Manilov, Deputy Chief of the General Staff and General Leonid Ivashov, Deputy Defense Minister—were kicked into retirement. This pair had been speaking for the Russian military since the mid-1990s, delivering a rich stream of assertive statements, but Ivanov apparently decided that he could handle PR himself. Then Ivanov's former colleagues from the SVR replaced several key figures in the military's Main Intelligence Administration (GRU), clearly bumping up against the traditional rivalry between these services.

What is striking in this reshuffling is that not a single officer with experience in Chechnya has climbed up the ladder. This runs contrary to Putin's promise from November 2000 to promote troop commanders and not "parquet generals." In fact, none of the eight deputy defense ministers has seen action in Chechnya. Chief of the General Staff Kvashnin is widely recognized as the leader of the "Chechen party," but even in his domain the Moscow cadre have received all key new appointments. When the Ground Forces Command was reinstated in March 2001 (after being disbanded in late 1997), its commander-in-chief General Nikolai Kormiltsev was brought to Moscow from the Siberian Military District (MD).

The commanders who led the army back into Chechnya in autumn 1999 and were in charge of combat operations for the last two years are either kept in the theatre (like General Gennadi Troshev, commander of the North Caucasus MD), or carefully steered by the presidential administration into regional politics (like General Konstantin Pulikovskiy, presidential representative in the Far Eastern federal district; or General Vladimir Shamanov, governor of the Ulyanovsk oblast), or both (like General Viktor Kazantsev, presidential representative in the Southern federal district). Noticeably, while plenty of high-ranking officers are brought into various political structures in Moscow (for example, General Manilov was appointed to the Federation Council), those with Chechen experience are kept in the provinces. It appears that the Kremlin has learned a lesson from late General Lev Rokhlin, who was perhaps the only "hero" of the first Chechen war. Rokhlin was made a State Duma deputy in December 1995, but in mid-1997 launched a fierce campaign against President Boris Yeltsin for his neglect of the military.

Questionable Loyalty and Cultural Incompatibility

Rokhlin's odyssey (which ended in late 1997 with his mysterious murder) highlights the question of just how loyal the "Chechen generals" are to Putin, their commander-in-chief.

In autumn 1999 when Putin launched the second Chechen war as the springboard for his presidential campaign, the generals embraced him wholeheartedly as their ideal candidate. Even then, however, a tepid (and, as it turned out, entirely false) signal on possible talks with the Chechens provoked a harsh rebuttal from the headquarters of the operation, which issued an ultimatum of sorts to Putin: full-scale war or mutiny. There were no repercussions or follow-up, primarily because Putin in fact did not need further encouragement to pursue victory in Chechnya. Each time, however, that the Kremlin

came up with a statement on “winning the hearts and minds” of the Chechens as a means of arriving at a political solution, yet another brutal military search operation (the term *zachistka* has enriched the military discourse) undermined Putin’s political message.

Putin is fully aware that the first loyalty of his field generals is to winning the war. The recently published memoirs of General Troshev give ample evidence of that, economical as they are with praise for the political leadership. For the time being, this commitment to victory suits Putin’s “antiterrorist” course just fine, but—being a quick learner in politics—Putin understands that finding a way out of the present deadlock might require more flexibility. Lacking the self-confidence of a natural leader (hence the deep dependency on the unnaturally high approval ratings), Putin seeks real personal devotion, not just conditional loyalty. The battlefield camaraderie of Chechen veterans, however, remains alien to the servility of those from the special services who now crowd the Kremlin corridors.

Lying not far beneath the loyalty question is the alarming growth of a war-fighting culture in the Russian military, which is a relatively new phenomenon. In the 1970s and 1980s the predominant trait in the military culture was bureaucratic, and the impact from Afghanistan was deliberately minimized. In the 1990s, the experience from various small wars and peacekeeping interventions (the Russian Army had performed more of those than all the NATO armies taken together) spread through the ranks and accumulated in the General Staff. The result is a peculiar blend of the old bureaucratic and new war-fighting cultures, which combines warrior ethos and survival skills in deadly intrigues, high respect for paperwork and low respect for human life. As more officers get first-hand combat experience in Chechnya, the war culture becomes dominant, despite all efforts to contain it.

Putin, himself a product of the rigidly hierarchical bureaucratic culture of the KGB, finds it much easier to relate to the huge military bureaucracy than to handle the warriors and the war culture. He eagerly supervised the formulation of the new military doctrine (along with several other “conceptual” guidelines)—a document of remarkable irrelevance that does not contain a single mention of military reform. It is also apparent that bureaucratic elements of the military culture are closely connected with nuclear-strategic theory and practice, which—esoteric as they are—have always been about rules and procedures, and never about combat use. Putin, therefore, has entered into the world of nuclear gambits with natural ease and, perhaps, even regrets that the antiterrorist efforts overtook the exciting trade-offs around the National Missile Defense (NMD). When it comes to real fighting, the job goes to the soldiers, who are bad at drawing squares and taking notes—and do not quite fit into the president’s entourage.

Keeping the “Chechen Generals” in Check

The escalation of the U.S.-led campaign against terrorism has presented Russia with many unexpected opportunities, but it has also created a difficult dilemma. Moscow may have to fight simultaneously on two fronts: in the Caucasus, where Chechnya is the main

theatre, and in Central Asia, where the aim is not necessarily to defeat the Taliban but to strengthen Russia's positions across the region. In order to achieve success in the Central Asian front, Russia would have to deploy considerable combat-worthy forces, but those are mostly tied up in Chechnya. Indeed, even after the merger of the Volga and Urals MDs (completed September 1, 2001), the new district, which is now primarily responsible for Russian security interests in Central Asia, has only two divisions, one of which (the 201st Motor-Rifle Division) is permanently based in Tajikistan. Responsibility for Chechnya specifically and the Caucasus in general falls to the North Caucasus MD. The few high-readiness divisions in the Russian Army either rotate their units between Chechnya and the Balkans, or remain near Moscow—and can hardly spare anything for Central Asia. This new front, however, requires not fresh draftees but seasoned veterans and experienced commanders for high-risk missions. The Commander of the Volga-Urals MD, General Aleksandr Baranov, and his deputy, General Alexei Verbitsky, have indeed both served in Chechnya and they would not want to repeat the mistake of leading ramshackle composite units into battle, as in the first Chechen war.

The deadlocked Chechen war thus becomes not only a political irritant and a burden for society, but also a major obstacle for advancing Russia's goals in Central Asia. Putin urgently needs a solution for Chechnya and he has transferred the responsibility for 'managing' this conflict to the FSB, which enjoys his trust, but the military commanders are still able to ensure that no other options but decisive military victory are pursued. The 'Chechen generals' insist that their only option is indeed feasible but requires significant escalation of the intensity of the warfare, including carpet bombing and pursuit of rebels into Georgian territory. Putin, despite his anger at this stubborn and politically useless war, remains reluctant to order a complete devastation of southern Chechnya. He cannot rule it out, however, either; military force remains his instrument of choice—and that is why General Kvashnin, despite his history of insubordination, remains in charge of the General Staff.

Putin's indecision about Chechnya is caused not by worries about international sanctions (those can be ruled out now that Russia is such a valuable member of the antiterrorist coalition), and not by fears about increased opposition from society (the Kremlin 'technologists' can handle shifts in public opinion). Putin has every reason to assume that granting the 'Chechen generals' a chance to go for their victory would result in a sharp increase in their influence, not just in the Armed Forces but in the political arena as well. The war-fighting culture would then engulf the power structures—and Putin would be able to control those only insofar as he follows their agenda. Putin, exploiting wars as political opportunities, has to walk a thin line between delegating too much power to the generals and emphasizing bureaucratic control. The global war against terrorism might appear to some politicians in Moscow to be a "win-win" situation, but in fact the choice in Chechnya is rather of the "damned if you do—damned if you don't" kind. The rot in the Russian Army guarantees that this choice cannot be postponed indefinitely.