

Medvedev and the Military

Reshuffling as a Preamble for Reform?

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Pavel K. Baev

International Peace Research Institute (PRIO) (Oslo)

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Russian President Dmitry Medvedev insists that the somewhat softer style of his foreign and security policy makes no difference in their substance. Key policy guidelines continue to support the goals previously set by Vladimir Putin, who has kept a demonstratively low profile in these matters in his current position as prime minister. Explaining this steadfastness, Medvedev emphasizes his adherence to “national interests stripped bare of any distorting ideological motivations.” As far as the pivotal role of energy interests and the centrality of Gazprom in Russia’s foreign policy are concerned, the continuity from the Putin era to the current period of “tandemocracy” is indeed seamless. In “hard security” matters, however, small stylistic changes have already added up to a visible deviation that may or may not signify a change of course.

While Medvedev refrained from any populist exploitation of security themes during the election campaign, once he became president he rushed to confirm Russia’s unwavering opposition to two potential developments in European security: the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to Ukraine and Georgia and the deployment of the so-called “third echelon” of the U.S. strategic defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. Gone, however, were the threats to target Ukraine with missiles and the invective about the “colonial provisions” of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) (even if promises of “military-technical responses” still appear in Foreign Ministry statements). It was not only the tone of his debut speech in Berlin on June 5, 2008, that differed strikingly from Putin’s famous Munich speech of February 2007. Medvedev also spelled out a proposition that appeared to come straight from the

notes of the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev: "In my view, the main thing is that unless we cut back on military spending we will not be able to find the resources needed to respond to the real challenges we face."

These words barely registered in Russian domestic debates that focused on the probability of a liberal "thaw" and the stability of the duumvirate; there are hardly any expectations that Medvedev is a "closet" military reformer. Nevertheless, there is both a great necessity and significant opportunity to transform the core structures of the Russian armed forces. As paradoxical as it may seem, such reform might involve fewer political risks than, for instance, strengthening the independence of the courts to reinvigorate the judicial system, Medvedev's declared priority.

Innovations and Military Hardware

In contrast to the symbolism of the military parade that occurred right after his inauguration, Medvedev has shown little interest in the "heavy metal" that makes up the vast Russian arsenal. This indifference might reflect his senior partner's disappointment in the usefulness of these assets. During his presidency, Putin developed a pronounced fondness for a number of extra-powerful arms, but all of his "pet projects," without exception, encountered setbacks and delays, and he had nothing to show for them by the conclusion of his term. The Bulava missile for the new generation of strategic submarines has failed several test launches, the hypersonic maneuverable warhead has shown poor accuracy, the Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) has turned out to be too unreliable and expensive to compete with the U.S.-controlled Global Positioning System (GPS), and the "fifth generation" fighter is still not ready for deployment.

These embarrassing reality checks did not prevent Putin from announcing a plan to build an "innovative army" in his non-farewell speech. This plan generally fits nicely into the theme of "innovations" that Medvedev has chosen as his trademark discourse (perhaps because the term "modernization" has already been badly abused). The new commander-in-chief, who happens to be computer literate, probably understands that the only piece of modern equipment that a soldier in a Russian combat unit can rely upon in the battlefield is his privately-owned mobile phone. Insofar as Medvedev's early rhetoric provides clues about the administration's priorities in resource allocation, however, it seems that he has no intention of cutting down on funding for much-advertised "national projects" in such socially-sensitive areas as health care, education, and communal housing. At the same time, in the government's economic "wing," there is increasing recognition of the risks and limits of growth driven by expanding state expenditures. Thus, in the near term, a significant increase in budget allocations for the defense sector appears rather improbable.

Blind to these political imperatives and economic realities, generals keep

fantasizing about dozens of Iskander tactical missiles (that slip just below the range limit set by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) and hundreds of new tanks, while admirals talk about the “blue water” navy with at least six aircraft carriers. It is possible to continue making sweeping promises for a while, but in his first year Medvedev will have to make some choices that will inevitably be unpopular among the top brass. Too many components of the old Soviet arsenal are simultaneously coming to the end of their lifecycle, so these choices might involve the complete loss of certain military capabilities. Industrial lobbies organized by state corporations are poised to fight for their bloated programs; only direct and determined support from Putin can provide Medvedev with sufficient leverage to resist this pressure. The appointment of Viktor Popovkin, former commander of the Space Forces, to the position of deputy defense minister and chief of armament might indicate that the main priority in acquisitions will be strategic weapons. Meanwhile, the massive rearmament of conventional forces could be postponed until the middle of the next decade, even if some weapon systems, such as the fleet of attack and transport helicopters, are seriously worn out. One important possible change would be an end to the old Soviet taboo on importing military equipment; only large-scale purchases on the international market could help in upgrading command, control, and communication systems that are still based on outdated technologies.

The Top Brass and the Rank-and-File

For all the money and prestige involved in major weapon projects, the key problem for the Russian armed forces, and the main motivation for their reform, is a lack of manpower, which essentially makes it impossible to maintain the old Soviet model on a smaller scale. The demographic crisis in the country is worsening despite efforts at stimulating fertility; that pulls the plug on the well-developed theory (if rather nasty practice) of a large conscript army. Always attuned to social protest, Putin ordered a reduction in the length of the draft period. In spring 2008, some 130,000 young men were drafted into the army for only twelve months. These conscripts will be discharged in spring 2009 together with those drafted in spring 2007 and in autumn 2007, which inevitably will lead to a sharp decline in number of soldiers.

During the politically delicate electoral period, it was possible to deny this problem and to pretend that tightening draft legislation would secure a greater number of conscripts, but some meaningful decisions on the realistic numerical strength of the armed forces must occur before the end of 2008. The Ministry of Defense has announced a plan to decrease the total number of military personnel from 1,135,000 to exactly one million by 2013, but this appears to be more of a trial balloon, since any realistic cuts will need to be more drastic and occur sooner. A lot of attention is currently focused on an arrangement to draft more

graduates from colleges and universities, but that would only go into effect by 2012 and is certain to generate social tension. The only real solution to the manpower problem is to increase the number of contract service members, but here achievements fall far short of the goals: the total number of contracts for rank-and-file positions is currently below 100,000, and less than 20 percent of servicemen opt for a second contract, which means that real professionalization remains elusive, particularly in the sergeant corps. The budget of the program for expanding contract service will need to increase by more than 30 percent per year just to keep numbers at their present-day level, since the armed forces have to compete for recruits in a very tight labor market.

Similar problems affect the officer corps, where salary increases lag behind inflation and a lack of housing remains a permanent problem. Seeking to reduce the unnaturally high officer-to-soldier ratio (currently close to 1:1), the Ministry of Defense proposed to fill a few thousand officer positions (like journalists and lawyers) with civilians but this provoked discontent among the top brass. Anatoly Serdyukov, appointed minister of defense in February 2007 and re-confirmed by Putin in the new cabinet, has scored some success in regulating financial flows within the huge bureaucracy. However, the tasks ahead are far more difficult and will require a team of loyalists, something Serdyukov's predecessor Sergei Ivanov never attempted. The replacement of Chief of the General Staff Yuri Baluevsky and two of his key deputies might signify the beginning of this team building, but it remains to be seen whether his successor, Nikolai Makarov, can gear the general staff toward planning for far-reaching reform. As for the Ministry of Defense, its structure is being transformed in two different ways: the administrative part is becoming more civilian (including the appointment of deputy ministers Lyubov Kudelina and Oleg Eskin), while the command part is being strengthened with senior officers who have significant combat experience (such as First Deputy Defense Minister General Aleksandr Kolpakov and head of the General Directorate on Combat Training General Vladimir Shamanov). Swift reshuffling of the top brass during the spring and summer of 2008 has changed the configuration of clans and lobbies. However, Medvedev's authority as commander-in-chief has hardly strengthened while Putin's role still remains crucial if diminished (as he is absent from formal command structures).

Assessing Risks and Threats

The Russian military might take pride in the estimate of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence that it "has begun to reverse a long, deep deterioration in its capabilities," but the high command can hardly comprehend the fact that the "sharp rise in Russia's investment abroad" generates more concerns in the U.S. intelligence community than its strategic muscle-building. Since mid-2007, the armed forces have gone to great lengths to demonstrate their political usefulness:

strategic bombers patrol the North Atlantic and Pacific Oceans on a monthly basis; the aircraft carrier *Kuznetsov* performed a Mediterranean cruise; and joint military exercises with China were followed by several high-intensity unilateral exercises in the North Caucasus. However, a realistic assessment of these deployments and exercises reveals only an incremental increase in power projection capacity.

Medvedev has yet to discover any real returns on the steadily growing investments in modernizing the armed forces. That the Foreign Policy Concept approved in July 2008 does not mention military might as a useful instrument of policy may not be that significant (it does not mention energy either, despite the centrality of energy in Russia's external relations). What is significant, however, is that even the most optimistic plan for building up Russia's own defensive (or, perhaps, offensive) capabilities does not provide any extra leverage for resolving key current foreign policy problems that include bitter quarrels with the Baltic states, polite bargaining with China, dissuading Ukraine from embracing NATO, and convincing Turkmenistan to export all of its gas to Russia. Military activity hardly adds any persuasive power to Russia's claim for extending control over the Arctic sea shelf, while the increasingly obvious impossibility of withdrawing its naval base from Sevastopol adds a major complication to already-strained relations with Ukraine. Sustained de-escalation of tensions in the North Caucasus leaves idle the newly-strengthened forces in this region, which in turn adds a dangerous dimension to the oscillating Russian-Georgian conflict, something that might become the first security test of Medvedev's presidency.

The likely choice of advancing several programs in the strategic forces would not reverse the trend of their reduction but merely preserve key elements from disintegration. At the same time, such a priority would seriously exacerbate the long accumulated imbalances in the conventional forces, of which the sheer lack of soldiers is the most significant. As long as the Medvedev-Putin "tandem" prevails, this structural crisis can be transformed into an opportunity for enforcing a military reform project which might be welcomed by the public. It is not enough, however, to catch the top brass off-guard and to make sure they remain isolated in the Kremlin clan wars. The project needs careful preparation, sufficient funding, and a team of committed reformers that, so far, are not in sight.

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