VAE VICTORS

THE RUSSIAN ARMY PAYS FOR THE LESSONS OF THE GEORGIAN WAR

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The dust of the five-day August war between Russia and Georgia was partly settled by the end of the year – and was partly blown away by the hurricane winds of the global economic crisis. The picture that has emerged out of the incomplete collection of hard facts (themselves distorted by massive propaganda campaigns) bears little resemblance to the initial impression of a colossal Russian military machine pulverizing a hapless Georgia. While Putin's loud accusations of "genocide" have proven false, it has become difficult to sustain the proposition that the operation was carefully planned by the Russian General Staff, which managed to catch Georgia's impulsive President Mikheil Saakashvili in a trap through a series of provocations. There are still many pieces absent from this puzzle of the "peace-enforcement"/"integrity-restoring" battle, but those party to the conflict have already drawn their conclusions and begun to implement lessons. It is therefore possible to make some preliminary assessments regarding the next round of escalating tensions in the summer of 2009, after the usual winter break.

Moscow Does Not Believe in (Generals') Tears

The question of "lessons learned" is typically raised with greater urgency after a defeat than a victory and might be dropped altogether after a victory that turns

out to be so easy and complete. It is, nonetheless, looming very large in Moscow despite the triumphalism that continues even in the wake of the financial crisis. Significantly, it is not the motley crew of armchair strategists that is asking this question but the top leadership —and with uncharacteristic persistency. The issue of who is actually learning these lessons, however, is directly related to another question : who was actually in charge of the war? In the rigidly over-centralized system of power built and still effectively controlled by Vladimir Putin, the answer should be self-evident. In reality, it is not.

Part of the confusion stems from the fact that, at the dramatic start of hostilities, Prime Minister Putin was in Beijing attending the Olympic opening ceremonies, while President Dmitry Medvedev had departed from Moscow to enjoy his vacation at a Volga retreat. A related fact is the limited responsibility granted to Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov (appointed in February 2007 and re-appointed in September 2007 and May 2008), who was instructed to focus on the defense budget and not interfere in operations. The main part of the problem, however, is the thorough reshuffling of the top brass, perhaps better described as a purge, during the summer of 2008:

- Experienced and outspoken Yuri Baluyevsky was replaced as Chief of the General Staff by Nikolai Makarov (former Deputy Defense Minister and Commander of the Siberian MD [Military District]) in June 2008;
- Aleksandr Rukshin was fired from his position as Chief of the Main Operational Department of the General Staff in July 2008 with no replacement; the Department was ordered to temporarily relocate due to repairs;
- Aleksei Maslov (seasoned in the North Caucasus MD) was replaced as Commander of the Ground Forces by Vladimir Boldyrev, former Commander of the Siberian and Volga-Urals MDs, on August 5, 2008.
- Aleksandr Morozov was replaced as the Chief of Main Staff of the Ground Forces a bit earlier, in January 2008, by Nikolai Bogdanovsky (former deputy Commander of the Far Eastern MD).

Due to these replacements, the whole upper echelon of the High Command, from the Commander-in-Chief to the top figures in the Defense Ministry, General Staff, and Command of the Ground Forces, was completely disorganized. On August 9, Boldyrev was assigned the task of organizing a temporary headquarters for combat operations in Vladikavkaz, from where he had few control means to direct the battle around Tskhinvali and was definitely out of the picture in Abkhazia. Anatoly Nogovitsyn, who was the primary "talking head" of the war, was neither qualified nor well-positioned for the job (he was appointed head of the Military-Scientific Committee of the General Staff in July

2008 after six years as a deputy commander of the Air Force).

The key decisions in the crucial first hours of the war were apparently made at a remarkably low level in the military hierarchy. It is possible to assume that a key role was played by Vladimir Shamanov, the Chief of the Main Directorate for Combat Training of the Ministry of Defense, who was returned to active service in October 2007 and who in July organized the "Caucasus-2008" exercises (which were not attended by the High Command). The two main figures responsible for issuing orders for combat deployment likely were Sergei Makarov, Commander of the North Caucasus MD, and Anatoly Khrulev, Commander of the 58th Army, both of whom served under Shamanov in the second Chechen War. Their key contacts in Moscow were presumably Aleksandr Kolmakov, First Deputy Defense Minister (appointed in September 2007, former commander of the airborne troops), and Aleksandr Moltenskoi, Deputy Commander of the Ground Forces (appointed in September 2002, former commander of the federal forces in Chechnya). The main responsibility, however, was placed on Khrulev, who led the troops in the field and went into South Ossetia with the first column ambushed outside Tskhinvali.

Medvedev (who claims that he can "remember by the minute" that "most difficult day" of his life) and Putin (who found himself formally out of the chain of command) could hardly have been pleased with the independent decisionmaking of a gang of "Chechen warriors." Claiming authorship of the victory, they have to suppress the lesson that local wars can be fought and won without orders from the High Command. No one from the group of "suspects," not even Khrulev (who was wounded in action), was promoted or rewarded. The main conclusion was that the officer corps, first of all in the Ground Forces, had to be brought under control by means of further purges.

A Khrushchevian Cut with a Rumsfeldian Twist

Medvedev's postwar statements about "modern organizational structures" for the Armed Forces initially seemed to be just a variation on the meaningless "innovative army" theme—until Serdyukov suddenly presented a narrow but detailed set of guidelines for real reform, which had long been declared unwarranted. The decision to shift from a traditional regiment-division structure to a more flexible battalion-brigade model is based on the experience of many local wars but implies that the army is now preparing to fight only those. The decision to disband the "cadre" (or reduced strength) units and upgrade the "permanent readiness" units would help in rectifying the misbalance between officers, NCOs, and soldiers; currently the share of officers is above 30 percent. These decisions amount to abandoning the Soviet pattern of preparing for "total war" by massive mobilization and need to be elaborated in clearly formulated concepts, but they also make good sense.

The rational content of these reforms, however, is undermined by the

uncharacteristic radicalism of the proposed cuts, which resemble the reductions ordered by Khrushchev back in 1961. Serdyukov's plan prescribes the reduction of the officer corps from 350,000 to 150,000, and it is detailed according to particular ranks: the number of generals would go down from 1,107 to 886; colonels, from 25,665 to 9,114; and majors, from 99,500 to 25,000. In contrast, the number of lieutenants will increase from 50,000 to 60,000. The structures of the Ministry of Defense apparatus would also shrink, from 22,000 to 8,500. Finally, the plan envisages replacing 140,000 NCOs with professional sergeants. The timetable for these massive "early retirements," particularly in the Ground Forces, where the total number of units would drop from 1,890 to 172, is as short as three years; the "rejuvenation" of the 1,000,000-strong Armed Forces must be completed by 2012.

This extraordinary rush stands in contrast to plans for rearmament that generally aim toward 2020, with the main deliveries scheduled, very preliminarily, for the second half of the next decade. The costs of retiring some 100,000 officers early are quite high, the promised retraining will also be expensive, and the increase in production (and retention) of lieutenants is going to be very costly. All these added expenditures are not included in the recently approved defense budget, which is one area over which Serdyukov is supposed to have full control. In an act of arrogance that recalls former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, authorities did not take into consideration the opinions of military experts regarding these radical but incoherent ideas, which emerged somewhere in the Kremlin. The planned reforms go very much against the cautious approach maintained by Putin during his presidency, stand in sharp contrast with recently aggressive anti-U.S. rhetoric, and clash with the logic of crisis-mode political behavior, which would prescribe keeping the "power structures" content. Medvedev was expected to deliver a doctrinal address to the annual gathering of the High Command and justify the aims of the reform, but he did not show up.

Missiles of Choice and Gunboats of Last Resort

The postwar months saw an increase in the activity of Russian strategic forces and the Navy, which added to rising international concerns about the progressive (or regressive) militarization of Russia's foreign policy. The large-scale exercises *Stability-2008* in September-October featured a series of intercontinental missile launches (both land and submarine-based) and staff games involving all elements of strategic forces; Medvedev observed them in the Northern Fleet and in the Volga-Urals MD. Besides the exercises, two tests of the *Bulava* SLBM (one successful) and one test of the RS-24 ICBM were conducted during the autumn. Seeking to reinforce this nuclear momentum, Medvedev announced a plan for deploying new tactical missiles *Iskander* in the Kaliningrad oblast (in order to target American ballistic missile interceptors in Poland), but

the negative reaction in Europe and the "think-again" signals from U.S. president-elect Barack Obama's team led to some awkward backpedaling.

Strategic demonstrations were complemented by the visit of two Tu-160 bombers to Venezuela, followed by the transatlantic cruise of nuclear cruiser *Petr Velikii*, which also arrived in Venezuela in November after detouring to Libya. The destroyer *Admiral Chabanenko* visited Cuba in December. Aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* performed a Mediterranean cruise also in December, while destroyer *Admiral Vinogradov* from the Pacific Fleet paid a visit to India in order to participate (together with *Petr Velikii*) in joint Russian-Indian naval exercises in January. These unprecedented efforts at demonstrating the global reach of the Russian Air Force and Navy (which also included an anti-pirate deployment of frigate *Neustrashimy* to the Gulf of Aden) were not that convincing since no new strategic bombers or major surface combatants were added to the arsenal (or would be in the near future). They were also compromised by the accident on board the new nuclear submarine *Nerpa* that claimed 20 lives, as well as by a chain of accidents in the Air Force that prompted consideration of the heavy loss of planes in the Georgian war.

One important context for Russian naval hyperactivity of autumn 2008 was the Black Sea Fleet's efficient and rapid deployment in the course of the Georgian war. Unlike the chaotic fighting around Tskhinvali, this operation was duly controlled from naval headquarters. Its outcome convinced the Kremlin that the Black Sea Fleet a) was quite important in local wars in the Caucasus; b) badly needed modernization but could not be reinforced; and c) could not, under any circumstances, be withdrawn from its main base in Sevastopol and relocated to Novorossiisk. The fast-deepening economic crisis upsets efforts aimed at squaring this naval circle. However, at least one positive factor for Russia has been a permanent crisis of governance in Kyiv, which has made it all but impossible for Ukraine to formulate a definite position on the Sevastopol issue.

Conclusions

Moscow's pronounced reliance on military demonstrations might be driven by a psychological need to secure a new status quo after a risky outburst of "revisionism." The motivations behind the decision to launch a breathtakingly radical military reform, however, are hard to locate within the realm of rational explanation. While the Byzantine court in the Kremlin has never been guided by Aristotelian logic, decisionmaking has further been twisted by depression and panic among its courtiers. Even accounting for this, however, it is difficult to establish how the draconian cut in the officer corps can address the main problems facing the Armed Forces (including progressive contraction of the draft pool, shrinking numbers of professional sergeants and contract soldiers, and obsolescence of the bulk of weapon systems). Neither can it be linked to the key lessons from the Georgian war (the need to strengthen rapid deployment forces,

upgrade communication systems and intelligence, and restore the capacity for troop support by combat and transport helicopters). The proposed reform is also out of character for the existing bureaucratic regime and goes against Putin's style of leadership, always attentive to the needs of *siloviki*. It is also not advanced by any committed team of reformers and does not fit the pattern of political behavior in this period of unfolding crisis.

The sum total of these contradictions is tall enough to predict that current military policy will undergo significant change in the near future; at the same time, the uncertain environment of a massive economic crisis makes it impossible to establish in what direction the changes will go. One option involves restoring the integrity of the chain of command by returning Putin to the position of president and commander-in-chief, which would make it possible to calm down the top brass by reversing some painful decisions while maintaining a certain momentum in military reform. A more worrisome perspective is that growing tensions inside Putin's system of power, thrown into disarray by the crisis, might create the need for a new "victory," while the military would be eager to reverse reforms by means of a new war. In this case, Georgia would again present itself as the most attractive target.

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