

Will Russia Go for a Military Victory in Chechnya?

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Six full weeks after the December 1999 parliamentary elections, Russian troops managed to raise their flags over the familiar ruins of the presidential palace in Grozny. Victory has been proclaimed yet again, but the discrepancy between the slow-moving and highly uncertain military operation and the fast-rolling and "satisfaction guaranteed" political campaigning has also become apparent. During autumn, politics and war had worked in perfect sync, making war-fighting a highly efficient election tool. By late December, however, the contours of an undesirable and unavoidable military deadlock had appeared, and Kremlin policymakers figured out that from then on, time would be working against them. Hence the surprise resignation of President Yeltsin, which not only provided Prime Minister Putin the advantageous position of acting president, but also set a new, shorter timeframe. However, even three months is a long time in politics, particularly with a military disaster in the making on your hands. The "election war" worked just fine for one election campaign, but has become a massive liability for the second one. Putin, who can hardly fool anybody (himself included) with victorious statements, now has more to do than just damage limitation. In order to evaluate his options, we need to take a closer look at the conduct and style of the second Chechen war on its many levels.

The Difference Between the First and Second Chechen Wars

Starting, as military science prescribes, at the tactical level, we immediately see the difference with late 1994. Back then, the Russian Army hardly had a clue about what sort of war it was fighting and how it should perform, mixing up the experience from Afghanistan with some lessons from post-Soviet "peace" operations. In autumn 1999, it had a clear notion and implemented it quite consistently. Some Western experts have concluded that the Russians are following the NATO model from Kosovo, but in fact it is quite difficult to find much similarity between the two operations: NATO used massive airpower with high-precision strikes in order to avoid a ground campaign, while Russia has used limited airpower (with very little precision to speak of) in support of the ground campaign, relying primarily on massive and indiscriminate use of artillery. There is nothing new about this "firewall" Russian tactic, but in the first Chechen war it was just not possible to apply it due to political reservations and public opposition. This tactic has worked reasonably well in lowland Chechnya and provided for the destruction and capture of all major urban centers, except fortified Grozny, with minimal casualties. As federal troops have reached the mountains and surrounded Grozny, the effectiveness of

the "firewall" has gone down. After the Chechen counter-attacks in early January 2000, Russian military commanders promised some tactical changes, but the only real measure has been expanding concentration camps and tougher interrogation of all Chechen males from ages 10 through 60. Russian troops (using the tactic perfected in Berlin in April 1945) took Grozny building by building and are now moving slowly up the mountain valleys, accepting high casualties.

On the operational level, which is traditionally the strong side of Russian military thinking, there are several visible improvements in the conduct of the current campaign. The command and control system functions smoothly, combat units (even the composite ones) appear better prepared, and logistics works despite seasonal hardships. Most importantly, the interaction between different units of the Army, between its branches and the Air Force, and particularly between the military and the Interior Troops is much improved. Of the 100,000-strong federal grouping, the "real" military hardly make up more than a half, but unlike the previous time, they are able to take the lead and organize combat cooperation. As the rotation of personnel began in early December, this cooperation has started to falter. The key problem is how to control the "liberated" cities and villages, and the series of sudden but well-coordinated Chechen attacks in early January (particularly on Argun and Gudermes) showed that the Interior Troops cannot secure the rear for the military. The pro-Moscow Chechen militia effectively controls Urus-Martan (the hometown of its leader Bislan Gantemirov), but in all other towns and villages Russian garrisons could be attacked every night. The Russian command apparently has no operation plan for the combination of mountain and urban guerillas.

On the strategic level, which deals with organization and buildup of the Armed Forces for fighting wars of this type, the picture is somewhat surprising. Logically, the experience of this war (as well as the previous one) should be utilized for reforming and building up the mobile and combat-capable components of the army. The lessons about small-scale but high-intensity wars should be translated into new strategic guidelines. However, nothing resembling this learning process is visible in the General Staff, headed by determined but unimaginative Anatoly Kvashnin. The new draft of the military doctrine barely mentions local conflicts and "peace" operations of various types; the emphasis is more on the threat of confrontation with NATO. There is no effort towards creating any Mobile Forces (perhaps this notion is still too closely associated with Pavel Grachev, the "best Defense Minister of all time," in Yeltsin's words). The natural first step here is perhaps strengthening the Airborne Troops, who took the main burden of the first stage of this war in Dagestan and performed several battalion-size operations in the mountains--but even that step is not taken because of the questionable political loyalty of these troops.

On the level of propaganda battles, the military are praised for doing a much better job than four years ago. Again, some specialists are quick to point out the influence of NATO's spectacular public relations achievements in Kosovo. But on closer examination, Russian military propaganda has hardly advanced very much beyond boring reports and some incredible lies (like the famous "48 snipers" around Pervomayskoe in January 1996) of the First Chechen war. The real difference is that this time the media is eager to reproduce and recycle these lies, and that society is ready to swallow them--and ask for

more. Only in January 2000 the first signs of criticism appeared in "independent" (i.e., not directly controlled by the government or by Boris Berezovsky, the pro-Kremlin oligarch) media. This criticism has significantly increased due to the arrest and improbable "exchange" of Radio Liberty journalist Andrei Babitsky. The shift in public opinion has not happened yet, but Putin is under pressure to preempt it.

On the doctrinal level, which deals with the most fundamental military-political issues, we can find two significant features. The first is further strengthening of the political profile of nuclear weapons. This "nuclearization" of Russia's foreign policy has taken a sharp turn in 1999; if earlier Yeltsin tried to impress his NATO "partners" with spectacular reductions and de-targeting, he later felt the need to threaten them with the "whole arsenal of nuclear weapons." Putin, avoiding Yeltsin's extravagance, has shown few doubts in instrumentalizing Russia's nuclear potential for countering Western pressure. His harsh comments on Chechnya while observing a missile test in early December 1999 were perhaps just an early warning; the revision of the National Security Concept with more emphasis on nuclear instruments probably poses a more credible threat. The test launch of the Topol-M ballistic missile in early February provides yet another signal. The first Chechen war saw one nuclear alert (caused by a Norwegian meteorological missile launch); now we might see something more dramatic.

The second significant feature is the deep split between the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff. Tensions between these two powerful military bureaucracies are quite traditional, but now the split is also functional: the MoD gives priority to nuclear weapons and programs, while the General Staff is handling the war. This brings to the forefront the painful issue of distribution of resources, since the government cannot increase the supply that much; the promised 50% increase in defense procurement in fact does not amount to very much, since the acquisition of major conventional weapons systems has virtually stopped. Defense Minister Sergeyev continues to push hard his beloved ICBM Topol project, while General Staff Chief Kvashnin demands that every military ruble should go to Chechnya--or to the related production and acquisition of conventional hardware. At the moment, General Kvashnin appears to be the winner, and General Sergeyev may well be on his way out. But the political demand for a nuclear "show" continues to be high, so the strategic forces will most likely be able to keep their high share of resources. Further, the General Staff has already shown signs of losing its political influence (the removal of two top generals from the Chechen campaign in early January 2000 is certainly symptomatic), and Kvashnin makes a perfect scapegoat.

Can Russia Win this War?

The overview of the operation takes us to one fairly obvious point: the second Chechen war in its current military setting is not winnable. Destroying Grozny and capturing all other towns by conducting brutal *zachistka* (combing) of the villages and setting blockposts at every crossroads are all familiar settings of the first war, perhaps performed with more determination this time, but still the outcome is very much predetermined. All the improvements in tactics and in organization of the operation do not make a victory

more achievable. But another defeat is unacceptable not only for the General Staff and presidential candidate Putin, but also for the whole of Russian society. What was started in September 1999 as a smart political game to boost Putin's popularity has grown into a matter of national pride and revival, becoming an existential issue for Russia. Squaring the circle of unwinnable war and unacceptable defeat requires some radical political decision-making, which cannot be postponed much further than after the March elections (unless there is a second round in mid-April). Doing nothing and expecting the war to de-escalate to a low-intensity conflict would mean leaving the grouping of federal forces to fall apart and be "privatized" by various regional leaders.

One way to go might be to open serious negotiations (perhaps enjoying the position of strength) with Chechen President Maskhadov, who might be willing to accept certain compromises (like the stationing of Russian troops in northern Chechnya) and to postpone the resolution of the key issue of independence for another 5-10 years. Now that Acting President Putin has such solid support in the State Duma, he may feel secure enough to attempt a compromise solution--unpopular as it might be, particularly with the "top brass." His personal statements about Maskhadov as well as attempts to play up Bislan Gantemirov as an alternative Chechen leader are certainly not very helpful for this strategy, but the really big problem is public opinion. The turn to a strategy of negotiated settlement could cut 15-20% from his ratings (the "if" about him being elected might be bigger than it seems at the moment), and will not necessarily give him a way around the situation when time is working against his presidential campaign. A peaceful settlement might reproduce the situation of uncontrollable and chaotic Chechnya, and that might cause quick erosion of Putin's presidential legitimacy in summer-autumn 2000. This legitimacy is already weakened by manipulating Yeltsin's departure--and by the non-competitive character of the forthcoming elections. The significant (even if slightly diminishing) majority of Russian voters still wants to see a clear victory in the "patriotic war" in Chechnya--and Putin is well aware of that.

The circle of unacceptable defeat, unsustainable deadlock and unachievable victory might be squared from the military side. Victory is not possible in the present military format--but that does not mean that it is entirely impossible. Chechnya is not Vietnam, where millions were able to hide in the jungle; it is also not Afghanistan, with its endless mountains. It is a relatively small piece of land (about the size of Maryland) with mountains only in the south; it had an inter-war population of about half a million (in 1991, up to 1.2 million), of which more than the half has already fled. Stalin crushed the Chechens in a couple of weeks. A "total" victory is just a question of being consistently brutal and sufficiently deadly. This kind of victory might be achieved in a matter of months even without paying a high price in Russian lives. To see how, we need to go again through the spectrum of the war.

On the tactical level, the two highly efficient methods not yet used are "carpet" bombing and massive mining. So far, the use of the Air Force is limited to some 50 sorties on a good day (and there are not many of those in winter), with the frontal Su-25 being the main workhorse and the heavier Su-24 delivering selective strikes. If the long-range all-weather Tu-22M are employed for systematic bombing of the mountain valleys, that

might deny the rebels any "safe areas." Limited mining on the southern outskirts of Grozny cost retreating Chechen fighters heavier casualties than did weeks of street fighting. Multi-layer mining of the openings of Argun and Vedeno valleys into the plains might make the combat maneuvering of the partisan units quite difficult. Conveniently, Russia is not a signatory to the Land Mines Convention, despite some loose promises from President Yeltsin.

On the operational level, the key "winning" idea might be to turn the stretch of land between the River Terek and the mountains into a "burned land." All the main urban centers in Chechnya are located in that area, so they have to be thoroughly destroyed (perhaps, with the use of strategic aviation). A signal for full-scale implementation of this idea might come as early as late February-early March, if the rebels again try to recapture Argun, or Novogroznesky, or even Grozny. In the latter case, a "tactical" nuclear strike appears--at least to a conventional mind--an impossible option, but Russia's political re-nuclearization implicitly puts it on the list. If this "buffer zone" in the middle of Chechnya becomes a strictly "no-go" territory (constantly bombed and massively mined), it would not matter so much if the rebels still control the mountains (under "carpet" bombing), since they would not be able to attack and retreat. Certainly, large-scale expulsion and relocation of the population would be necessary, but the methods are familiar and, in fact, half of this work is already done. Northern Chechnya could then be kept relatively stable by a force of some 20,000 and ruled by local collaborators.

Implications of a Russian Victory

On the theater level, such a "Stalinist" victory would not provide for stabilization of the North Caucasus and would require a permanent presence of a significant combat-capable force. Dagestan, with its ethnic diversity and totally corrupt leadership, would remain prone to internal conflict; Ingushetia, overcrowded with refugees and sympathetic to the Chechens, would become a guerrilla base; North Ossetia, emboldened by the status of Russia's key ally, might demand reunification with South Ossetia, currently part of Georgia; Kabardino-Balkaria is even now ready to fall apart violently; Abkhazia, with its conflict-oriented leadership, will persist in its secession from Georgia and build ties with other trouble-makers. To prevent at least some of this and to contain the rest--and it is Putin's stated intention to preserve the Russian Federation in its present form--would necessitate a long-term deployment of a military grouping of some 250,000--certainly in violation of the newly-revised CFE Treaty.

On the highest level of military-political interaction, this victory would mean that the "Chechen" Army remained a powerful political actor in Moscow. Democracy, which was not at all advanced by the December 1999 parliamentary elections and will hardly blossom in the presidential elections, might be curtailed further. Relations with the West, which finds it difficult now (note the appeal of the Nobel-prize laureates Mèdecins Sans Frontières) and impossible after the "victory" to leave the war crimes committed in Chechnya unnoticed, could deteriorate to open hostility. At the same time, the Russian economy, even if efficiently controlled from the center and supported by high oil prices

(the best possible option), would not be able to generate resources sufficient for a Soviet-style military machine. It probably would be able to sustain the strategic nuclear forces and the military grouping in the North Caucasus--and nothing else. More specifically, it means retreat from Tajikistan, a defenseless border with China, and no Navy (except for a few nuclear submarines).

Will Russia go for this victory and accept these consequences? The results of the parliamentary elections generally point to the affirmative. The pressure of the presidential race definitely pushes Putin in the same direction. The Army leadership shows determination to achieve its victory and forget about reforms. Hopes for a negative answer are pinned to common sense, liberal values and consciousness--commodities that are in very short supply in today's Russia.

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