

## Analysis

### Russian Military Reform

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#### Abstract

Until recently, the Russian military has focused on the threat of terrorism and the drug trade, emphasizing plans to reduce the number of troops to build a smaller, more professional army. In the last few months, however, the generals have come to see their main threat as being NATO and the US. The result has been a shift in priorities to concentrate on building a more powerful military to deal with states, rather than non-state actors.

#### Evolving Goals

Reform of the Russian military has been ongoing for several years now. The emphasis, in moving from the massive number of troops of the Soviet era, has been on downsizing to create a smaller, more professional force geared to dealing more adroitly with the perceived threats that Russia faces. These threats, until very recently, have been related to counter-terrorist and counter-narcotics operations. At the higher, strategic level, the threat from other states was considered to be minimal for most of the post-Cold War period. Deterrence was thus concentrated on developing a sufficiency of nuclear potential through the fielding of the new Topol-M missile.

This reform agenda has changed over the last few months. These changes will be discussed later in this article. First, however, some detail needs to be provided as to the reforms of the past few years.

#### Professionalization

The main driver of reform has been the need to lower the burden of conscription on Russian society and to reduce the size of the military (i.e. the armed forces which excludes troop bodies such as the Interior Ministry, the FSB, Border Guards, etc). Conscription is gradually being phased out with the idea being to have smaller, better-trained and motivated troops who are paid a decent salary. Such contract-based forces (*kontraktniki*) are becoming more and more evident. This move towards "professionalization" began in the 1990s under Yeltsin, but continued more determinedly under Putin. During Putin's tenure, this process began with the Airborne Forces (specifically, with the 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne – now Air Assault – Division based in Pskov), which is now fully manned by contract troops.

More and more professional units are being formed and are seeing service in places such as Chechnya and abroad on peacekeeping operations. These contract troops, while described as "professional" have often proved to be less than professional; occasionally worse,

indeed – on several levels – than conscript units. The main reason for these failings is that individuals who join the army on a contract basis tend to be those who cannot get jobs in civilian life for a variety of reasons. Contract service has meant that, in many ways, the army has become a "dumping ground" for social misfits. Given their low caliber, many of these *kontraktniki* are dismissed before they complete their full terms of service. Some of those who leave, though, are actually quite capable personnel who have become disenchanted with the failure of the authorities to provide the promised standards of pay and accommodation – both for single soldiers and for married men and their families. In 2005, 12.9 per cent of *kontraktniki* broke their contracts and left the armed services.

The gradual process of reducing overall numbers and professionalization has meant that, as of January 2007, the armed forces' strength was officially 1,130,900 (in 1994 it was 3.5m). Of these, some 78,100 are on contracts. Numbers will fall even further in January 2008 when the term of conscript service drops from two years to one. The quid pro quo here, though, is that nine types of recruitment deferment – such as studying in university – will be removed. This reduction in the number of deferments will lead to an extra 90,000 conscripts per year. Nevertheless, in the years ahead there will be an overall shortfall of conscripts. At the moment, 350,000 are needed every year to maintain the armed forces at 1.1m. When the length of service is cut in half, 700,000 will be required. However, the current birth rate in Russia cannot support such a figure: the expectation is that after 2010 the annual available pool of young men will only total 600,000. Thus even if every young man is called up – a patent impossibility given medical reasons alone – the armed forces would still be shrinking.

The hope of the authorities is that the armed forces – and especially the army – can be filled out with the *kontraktniki*. Those conscripts who have served their one year can take advantage of the possibility of stay-

ing on and becoming full-time soldiers. The Defense Ministry expects many conscripts to do this and thus numbers in the armed forces can be maintained. Such expectations may not be realized, however, as service in the armed forces is a far from popular career choice. In a recent survey, 59 percent of conscripts said that they did not want to serve in the army.

The lack of men taking up *kontraktniki* posts is bound to affect standards within the military. Even the most optimistic of reports sees only half of the 109,000 non-commissioned officer (NCO) posts in the military being taken up by *kontraktniki* in the next few years. And, if the conscript term of service is to be reduced to one year, then the shortfall cannot be made up from the conscript ranks. Whereas with a two-year conscript term, soldiers can become NCOs for their final year or six months; with the one-year term, the levels of experience will be insufficient for conscripts to become NCOs.

As things stand in Chechnya – the only Russian “combat zone” – the sole Defense Ministry troops stationed there are in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. This unit is filled out entirely with *kontraktniki*. No military conscripts serve in Chechnya.

Thus, the year 2008 will be a crucial one for the armed services when the conscript term is reduced to one year. In that year the demographic shortfall will begin to bite in terms of bringing in new conscripts. It is also the year in which most of the *kontraktniki* currently serving are due for release after their three-year contract is up. The majority are expected to leave. The fear is that many military units will then become mere cadre or “ghost” units: manned only by officers and some NCOs but without any personnel below them to fill out the ranks.

### Nuclear Forces

When the idea of reducing the size of the Russian military first began to be mooted in the early 1990s, many analysts, who feared that the country would be left weaker, took comfort in the argument that Russia’s nuclear deterrent capability would be upgraded, principally by fielding the new Topol-M missile. Again, though, Russia’s nuclear arsenal has been very much reduced over the last few years. There appears to have been an inability to maintain the triad of nuclear systems –air-delivered, submarine-based and ground-based – which has seemingly left Russia in a parlous state in terms of being able to provide reliable strategic defense. Russian aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons rarely get off the ground these days. The submarine force is poorly maintained and only three new missile boats are currently being built.

With so few replacement boats, Russia cannot hope to maintain the most effective deterrence – the submarine-based capability – that it once had. Even the new Topol-M missile carries only a single warhead and the numbers of actual missiles is limited. The other main missile (with 10 warheads each) – the SS-18 – is old and servicing regimes have not been maintained. These missiles were originally built in Ukraine and engineers from the production plants do not cross the border to carry out the necessary checks. Overall, the pressure is now building for Russia to overhaul its nuclear capabilities.

### Military Doctrine

Many are seeking to adjust and refine Russian military doctrine, which was first established in 1993 and revised in 2000. This doctrine is similar to the US National Security Strategy, but the Russian version is just as much a military doctrinal statement as it is a strategic scene-setter. The main driver for change in doctrine is the growing perception that NATO, and, in particular, the United States, represents a threat. NATO has not withered and died, as many in Russia had hoped. Indeed, it has expanded and drawn closer to Russia’s borders. There is a sense that Russia, to use former Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov’s words, has been “simply cheated” over original post-Cold War agreements on the expansion of NATO. To add to such negative impressions of the West, there have been the pro-Western “color revolutions” in the former Soviet space, the sense of Western “intrigue” in Central Asia and the presence of US troops in places like Georgia. In view of the latter, in the words of the Russian Chief of the General Staff, General Yuri Baluyevski, the US is trying “to entrench itself in the regions of Russia’s traditional presence.” President Vladimir Putin, in recent speeches, has also painted the US in a very negative light, saying “we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force [by the US] ... that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.”

To add to this turn for the worse in terms of relations with the West, in early March, Russia’s Security Council posted on its website a statement saying that it no longer looked upon the threat of global terrorism as being the chief danger to Russia. The threat, it said, now came from rival alliance structures that were becoming stronger, “especially NATO”. Additionally, tensions have been heightened by the emergence of US plans which envisage the setting up of missile interceptor facilities in both Poland and the Czech Republic. These would be part of the US National Missile Defense Shield. While US rhetoric fixes on the

need to set up such bases in order to bring down missiles fired from “rogue” states, there are many Russian officers and defense analysts who do not accept this rationale. These are systems, they assume, aimed at intercepting Russian missiles and thus designed to negate Russian deterrence capabilities.

All these moves provide ammunition to hardliners within Russia who are keen on developing a new military doctrine that takes into account these perceived threats. The dynamic would then be away from the development of small, flexible, professional forces designed to deal with sub-state actors, such as terrorists or insurgents, towards the shaping of grander, more powerful forces formulated to deal with strong state adversaries.

### Modernization

There are thus demands from within the armed forces that, if numbers are to be reduced so substantially, then defense spending should increase to procure more and better technological systems. The generals want to increase the present level of 2.5 percent of GDP spent on defense to 3.5 percent. However, given that the Russian GDP is already growing commensurate with the rise in world oil prices, defense spending has been rising recently by about one third each year anyway. This increase is thus now enabling the modernization of much of the military equipment within all the armed services.

The current re-equipping program, scheduled for the period 2007–2015, sees the introduction of 50 Topol missiles, 50 bombers, 100,000 vehicles and 31 ships (both surface and sub-surface). The numbers

could be increased in scope if the new doctrine deems it necessary.

### Conclusion

The new Defense Minister, Anatolii Serdyukov, is, as in the case of his predecessor Ivanov, a civilian. Whereas Ivanov had a power ministry background (FSB), Serdyukov merely used to manage a furniture store. It seems unlikely that Serdyukov will have the necessary leverage to oversee radical change within the military. While the movement of recent years away from conscription and towards professional forces has been broadly welcomed in Russian society, the generals are less than happy. They want more of everything, not less. What undermines Serdyukov most specifically is the fact that the Russian Defense Ministry lacks a corps of civil servants that he can work with. Serdyukov is virtually on his own as a civilian figurehead. The military officers within the Ministry are probably powerful enough to ensure that they will get their particular way in terms of the direction in which the Russian armed forces develop over the next few years – particularly if they get doctrinal changes that suit their purposes; changes that stress NATO and the US as the “enemy” and which therefore demand more and better equipment as the root to a better military. For these officers the only aspect of reform that really appeals to them is to have more and more up-to-date technical assets. It remains to be seen whether they will also seek to change the terms of conscription so that there will be enough experienced personnel to man the equipment.

### *About the author*

Rod Thornton is a lecturer at King’s College London and at the UK’s Joint Services Command and Staff College. He also lectures at the NATO Defence College in Rome. His research interests are in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, particularly in regard to Russia. He has published widely, including the book, *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Polity Press), and an article in the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* entitled, “Military Organizations and Change: The Case of the Russian 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division,” 17/3 (Sept 2004).