Degradation of the Russian Military: General Anatoli Kvashnin

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By Pavel Felgenhauer

Four star general Anatoli Kvashnin, 58, was dismissed last July as Chief of Russia's all-powerful General Staff after 7 years of holding the job – one of the longest tenures in Russian military history. In our military hierarchy, the Chief of the General Staff is number two after the Defense Minister. For many years Kvashnin was considered the true number one.

There was no official explanation of his ouster. Since it was announced at the same time as the dismissal of high-ranking Interior Ministry and FSB security service generals for failing to resist a raid by separatist rebels in Ingushetia, sources in the Kremlin unofficially recommended that journalists should connect Kvashnin's ouster with the rebel attack. But insiders know well that the raid, at best, was only a pretext, and Kvashnin's story actually is indeed much more complex.

Kvashnin graduated in 1969 from a civilian university, was mustered in to serve two years as a reserve lieutenant and then stayed to make a military career. The military professionals always despised him as an outcast, a "civilian" who sneaked in by mistake. In December 1994 Kvashnin was not a widely known two star general when he lead the Russian army into the disastrous New Year's Eve attack on Grozny that disintegrated into a bloody failure with hundreds of tanks and other armor burnt, and thousands of men massacred by the lightly armed rebels.
Kvashnin accused others for the failure of his “wonderful New Year attack plan” – as he described it to me at the time. With great losses the Russian forces eventually managed to capture Grozny in February 1995, and Kvashnin received virtually all the credit: He was awarded the highest military decoration – Hero of Russia, became a three star general and commander-in-chief of the North Caucasian Military District – today our most important “fighting” Military District in Russia.

In April 1995, General Kvashnin told me in Grozny: “We will beat the Chechens to pulp, so that the present generation will be too terrified to fight Russia again. Let Western observers come to Grozny and see what we have done to our own city, so that they shall know what may happen to their towns if they get rough with Russia. But you know, Pavel, in 20-30 years a new generation of Chechens that did not see the Russian army in action will grow up and they will again rebel, so we will have to smash them down all over again.”

In 1996, the Russians were defeated by the rebels and withdrew from Chechnya. Kvashnin, as overall military commander in the North Caucasus was directly responsible for the debacle, but this did not affect his career. In 1997, Kvashnin was promoted by President Boris Yeltsin to become Chief of the General Staff. At the same time Yeltsin appointed General Igor Sergeyev – the commander of the Strategic Rocket Force (SRF) since 1992 – to be Defense Minister. Kvashnin and Sergeyev soon locked horns in a bitter conflict which ended only in 2001 with Sergeyev’s ouster. Most of the time the two were barely on speaking terms.

Once he became Defense Minister, Sergeyev did his best to channel all available resources into his beloved SRF. From 1997 to 2000, up to 80 percent of Defense Ministry (MOD) procurement money was spent on SRF-related R&D projects and to buy new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). In 1998-2000, Russia was procuring 20 to 30 new ICBMs a year – the most modern SS-27 (Topol-M) and also the Soviet-designed SS-25 (Topol). Russia was building more ICBMs per year than all other world nuclear powers put together, but not buying any new conventional weapons.
Sergeyev also promoted a focused military reform plan, mainly aimed at enhancing the SRF. By 1998, the Space Forces that conduct space launches were merged with the SRF. By manning commercial launches of satellites, the Space Forces were earning millions of extra-budgetary dollars. The main idea of the merger with the SRF was to put Sergeyev and his cronies in control of that money. Several years later, after Sergeyev was ousted, the merger was called off and the Space Forces were reinstated.

In November 1998, Sergeyev urged Yeltsin to sign a decree to create a Joint Main Command of the Strategic Deterrence Forces, which would enhance the SRF by transferring command of the entire Russian nuclear triad: Land, Naval, Air (strategic bombers) from the General Staff. This ukaz was never enacted and the United Command was not formed. Kvashnin mobilized anti-SRF forces in the Defense Ministry, outplayed Sergeyev in Kremlin intrigues and prevented the formation of this Joint Main Command that could have seriously diluted the power of the General Staff.

Kvashnin, in turn, dissolved the Ground Forces (Army) High Command to subordinate all army units directly to the General Staff. Several years later, the measure was recognized to have been a serious mistake and the Army High Command was recreated.

Kvashnin began creating “permanent readiness units,” trying to increase the battle readiness of at least some army brigades and divisions to fight a new war in Chechnya in order to avenge the humiliation of our military and of Kvashnin, personally, by the separatist rebels in 1996. In 1999, the new Chechen campaign began. The General Staff amassed over 120,000 servicemen from the MOD and other parallel armies (Interior Ministry, Border Guards, FSB, Justice Ministry, and others).

The lightly armed rebels (without tanks, guns, any air power, air defenses or other heavy equipment) were outnumbered 1 to 10 and pounded with totally superior firepower. Still it took 6 months and tens of thousands of servicemen killed and
wounded to move 40 km from the border to Grozny, capture the city and occupy all of Chechnya – a small province 160 km long and 80 km wide.

The Russian military entered Chechnya without night/fog capable attack helicopters or fixed-wing airplanes, and without modern communication equipment. Even the best Special Forces solders were equipped with outdated Soviet gear that did not give them an edge in encounters with rebels. Kvashnin was quick to lay the blame for high casualties and sluggish performance on Sergeyev, and his policy of siphoning scarce resources into the SRF.

In 2000, Kvashnin presented a plan to cut the SRF drastically in size and to spend more on conventional arms. Kvashnin also proposed that in the future the down-sized SRF should be eliminated as a separate branch of the military and made a division of the Air Force. Sergeyev returned fire, publicly accusing Kvashnin of “criminal stupidity” and “an attempt to harm Russia’s national interests.”

But the battle was already lost. Sergeyev, while still the Defense Minister until 2001, was, in fact, a lame duck. In 2000, Kvashnin was appointed a full member of the Russian Security Council (a position no previous Chief of General Staff had occupied). Putin also gave Kvashnin the right of official access to the Kremlin, bypassing the Defense Minister.

Thus, in June 1999, Kvashnin had already successfully bypassed Sergeyev and after getting a nod from Yeltsin, marched a column of Russian paratroopers through Serbia into the Kosovor’s capital Pristina to overtake advancing Western peacekeepers. At the time, this move was extremely popular in Russia: Many believed that the West was snubbed and Russian influence in the Balkans enhanced.

Today, we know that only by chance did advancing, heavily armed British troops fail to obey an order by NATO’s supreme commander U.S. General Wesley Clark, to attack the small Russian contingent and oust them from Pristina’s airport. A British general
saved Russia’s dignity, but our influence in the Balkans soon decreased to zero and several years later, in acknowledgment of strategic defeat, all Russian peacekeepers were withdrawn from the former Yugoslavia – a decision also made by Kvashnin.

During the 1990s, the Russian military was an unhappy and disillusioned force. Russian solders were almost starving, surviving on a diet of bread, potatoes and cabbage. Officers’ pay was low and irregular, they had to endure bad housing and poor career prospects in the face of defense cuts. With Sergeyev and Kvashnin pulling the Russian military in different directions, creating havoc and internal strife, meaningful reform was impossible.

In 2000, Putin declared military reform a national priority. Putin’s close associate Sergei Ivanov – a former FSB general – was given the task to make things right. In 2000, as secretary of the Security Council, Ivanov prepared a draft plan to cut the size of the Russian military. After the plan was approved, Ivanov was abruptly retired from active service as a two star general, and in 2001 moved from the Security Council to become a “civilian” Defense Minister.

After defeating Sergeyev and drastically increasing the power of the General Staff, Kvashnin almost immediately began to intrigue actively against Ivanov. Of course, Ivanov had the unequivocal support of the President. But it was widely rumored in Moscow that for Ivanov the MOD is only a way station, he is Putin’s chosen successor in the Kremlin and will soon move up to become, say, Prime Minister. Kvashnin, meanwhile, was maneuvering to succeed Ivanov as Defense Minister and achieve his ultimate lifetime personal goal – to advance to the rank of Marshal of Russia.

But Ivanov’s stay in the MOD dragged on, and the bizarre public row with Kvashnin continued unabated, producing administrative stalemate. Ivanov’s plans to cut drastically the manpower of MOD and other parallel armies (there was even talk of cutting MOD personnel to 850,000) were put to rest. In 2003, Ivanov and Putin announced that “military reform is over,” with all in main aims achieved. In December
2003, Putin publicly admitted that Russia had “4 million military personnel and those of the same legal status.” Of that number, the Defense Ministry has over 2 million. Obviously, with such numbers it is impossible to increase the quality and readiness of personnel significantly or provide the men with adequate pay and to give them modern weaponry.

After 2000, world oil prices skyrocketed and Russia was saturated with billions of petrodollars. Since 2000, the defense budget, in terms of U.S. dollars, increased threefold. Government propaganda insists that the condition of our military has drastically improved also. But despite some $15 billion spent since 2000 on procurement, practically no new weapons were acquired and conditions of service also have not improved significantly.

Social tension and discontent are growing within the ranks. Most middle-ranking officers believe the high brass to be a band of thieves, who will steal anything they can put their hands on. Inside the closed military professional community it is impossible to hide one’s expenses and lifestyle from subordinates and colleagues, especially if someone’s spending is tens or hundreds of times in excess of official pay.

Kvashnin became the focus of discontent. Over the years retired and active service officers have told me endless anecdotes about Kvashnin’s utter stupidity and ignorance, and his inability to perform command functions. Many also have accused him of participation in graft. So why did Kvashnin stay so long, at so high a position, and why was his acute unprofessionalism allowed to corrupt and destroy our military?

Kvashnin, as many other incompetent Russian military chiefs before him, performed an essential role of giving the appearance of “civilian control of the military.” Elements of this system can be traced to Soviet times. Yeltsin, who in 1991 and in 1993 had seen his power hang in the balance at the whim of generals, did not trust his military, and when appointing top brass, he was seeking “reliable people” to put in command, in many cases totally disregarding their professional capabilities. Yeltsin
also constantly maintained a system of “checks and balances,” deliberately creating rivalries within the MOD and enhancing the strength of “parallel armies” to counter the MOD. Putin, who trusts only a tiny circle of subordinates, advanced Yeltsin’s practice of divide and rule.

It was rumored in the Russian press that the fight between Kvashnin and Ivanov was a direct conflict for power between the MOD and the General Staff. Of course, this is not true: The General Staff is the true nerve center of the MOD. With or without Kvashnin, the role of the General Staff cannot seriously be altered without the entire structure of the MOD first being drastically changed.

Kvashnin was replaced by his first deputy, General Yuri Baluyevsky -- a competent staff general, who for many years, due to Kvashnin’s incompetence, was running the General Staff on a day-to-day basis. The personality clash between Ivanov and Kvashnin has been resolved, and as so often happens when a longtime deputy takes over, nothing much changed in the way the MOD or the General Staff function. Kvashnin, in turn, was appointed to be Putin’s official representative in Siberia.

Putin’s promises, as Yeltsin’s before him, to improve the plight of our military have failed to materialize year after year. But despite massive discontent within the rank and file, the possibility of any coup or other political move by the military is close to zero. The soldiers are mostly conscripts or volunteers on short-term contracts, hating or disliking their officers, who in turn hate the corrupt top brass. Totally divided within itself, cut up into parallel armies, with leaders it constantly despises, our military can only grumble, no matter what the Kremlin does. That is “civilian control” – Russian style.

Kvashnin has been moved out, as other hated generals -- Pavel Grachev, Sergeyev -- before him. Now maybe it is Ivanov’s turn to be the most hated one, to keep the military disunited, dysfunctional, and under control.