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Russia's Imperial General Staff

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In July 2004, General Anatoly Kvashnin - number two in the Russian military hierarchy - was dismissed as Chief of Russia's all-powerful General Staff after seven years of holding the job. The ouster ended a public brawl between Kvashnin and his immediate superior Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, appointed by President Vladimir Putin in 2001.

Before taking on Ivanov, Kvashnin publicly locked horns with the previous Defense Minister (1997-2001) Marshal Igor Sergeyev and eventually succeeded in ousting him. During his tenure, Kvashnin often made reckless public statements. In June 2003, Kvashnin surprised the nation by announcing publicly that the Russian military was in a "post-critical state" and had degraded into a rabble of thieves and crooks.

Constant infighting between Kvashnin and two successive Defense Ministers from 1997 to 2004 virtually paralyzed the Defense Ministry. Administrative reforms were announced and executed only to be redone later. In 1998, the Space Forces that conduct space launches were merged with the Strategic Rocket Forces. Several years later, after Sergeyev was ousted, the merger was called off and the Space Forces were reinstated. Kvashnin in turn dissolved the Ground Forces (Army) High Command to subordinate all army units directly to the General Staff. In several years the measure was recognized as a serious mistake and the Army High Command was recreated.

In 2000, Putin appointed Kvashnin a full member of the Russian Security Council (a position no previous Chief of the General Staff ever occupied). However, the concentration of power in the hands of the Chief of the General Staff and the favors heaped on him, created a serious opposition within Putin's inner circle, of whom Ivanov
was a member and Kvashnin was not. The fracas between the supreme chiefs of our military also facilitated a public debate about the organizational composition of our Defense Ministry and possible future changes in the line of command and the distribution of responsibilities.

In June 2004, the Russian Duma passed changes to the Law on Defense that the Kremlin had introduced in April 2004. The bill sailed though without any serious debate, was approved by the upper house - the Federation Council - and signed into law by Putin.

On paper, the bill profoundly changed the organization of the Russian military. In the new version of the Law on Defense, all references were removed about the role of the General Staff. The Defense Minister and the Defense Ministry, according to the law, were in command of the Armed Forces, without the General Staff being singled out as "the main operational executive body" in military matters.

At the time, many observers interpreted the change of text as an indicator that the long personal feud between Ivanov and Kvashnin had ended with Ivanov's victory, which was an accurate assessment. Kvashnin was soon ousted and sent to Siberia, as Putin's official representative in the region. The revision of the law was also seen as a decisive break with the past, as the beginning of a genuine pro-Western transformation of the Russian military.

There was much talk of a profound contraction of responsibilities of the General Staff after Kvashnin's ouster and of a "strengthening" of the role of the Defense Ministry. On June 19, commenting on the dismissal of Kvashnin and the appointment of his successor - General Yuri Baluyevsky - as Chief of the General Staff, Ivanov told journalists: "Putin and I believe that the General Staff must concentrate on long-term planning of the future development of the Armed Forces and the modeling of the wars of the future, while working less on current matters in the units and crisis managing."
In May 2004, in the annual address to a joint session of both chambers of parliament, Putin not only talked of "modernization of the army" being a national priority, but also specifically mentioned "civil control" of defense spending as essential to reform. Putin's pronouncements strongly indicated a serious change in our military, since meaningful "civil control" is surely impossible, while an omnipotent General Staff continues to be in charge.

Were Putin and Ivanov serious, when calling for reform? Today, over a year later in October 2005, it's clear that it was all just talk, that a personality clash between Ivanov and Kvashnin masqueraded as something more serious.

Since Kvashnin's ouster, there have been no genuine changes within the Defense Ministry or in the way it and other so-called "power structures" or militarized government agencies do their business. On the day of Kvashnin's ouster (July 19, 2004) at a session of the Security Council, Putin announced publicly: "We have made a serious decision to create a joint logistic support system." Ivanov replied to the President that the implementation of this reform is fully underway. More than a year passed, but the much talked about joint system of logistic support (tylovoye obespechenye) to serve all Russia's parallel armies and "power" agencies have not been created.

General Baluyevsky has been in charge of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff since 1996. (Baluyevsky was moved to Moscow from Tbilisi in 1996 from the position of chief of staff of our troops in Transcaucasia.) The Main Operational Directorate is the core structure of the General Staff that is in direct on line command of the strategic nuclear deterrent and operationally controls the entire Armed Forces of Russia. During a crisis, the President, the Defense Minister, and the Chief of the General Staff may connect to the Central Command Post of the Main Operational Directorate to pass on orders, using their nuclear footballs or "nuclear briefcases," as they are known in Russia. But it's the Main Operational Directorate and its chief that formulate the scope and direction of any nuclear launch. The Main Operational
Directorate and its Central Command Post can authorize a nuclear launch if any or all of the three nuclear football keepers are unavailable.

In 2001, Baluyevsky became Kvashnin's deputy, while retaining control of the Main Operational Directorate. Baluyevsky is a much less ambitious person than Kvashnin and at the same time, a much better military top staff professional. During the years that Baluyevsky was Kvashnin's number two in the General Staff, he was running the entire outfit, while Kvashnin was involved in intrigue, in personal showoffs and occasional binge drinking. (Baluyevsky, as well as Ivanov, according to overall Russian standards of general officer alcohol consumption, may be called teetotalers).

Baluyevsky's lack of ambition has made his relations with Ivanov much smoother than Kvashnin could ever manage. For more than a year there have been no public spats between the General Staff and the Minister. At the same time, Baluyevsky's professional and organizational capabilities have in fact accelerated the role of the General Staff in decision-making. For example, during the arduous negotiations with the Chinese military over joint exercises that eventually took place in Aug. 2005 on the shore of Tsingtao peninsula south-west of Beijing, and during the actual execution of the maneuvers, Baluyevsky was visibly at the helm, while Ivanov appeared on the scene briefly as the blabbing figurehead - that in fact he is.

Since Baluyevsky was in fact running the General Staff under Kvashnin, it would be unreasonable to expect that policies and procedure would change dramatically, when after many years of working the show behind the scenes, a person finally becomes number one and officially in charge. The Law on Defense was rewritten and direct references depicting the role of the General Staff were dropped, but in real life, this did not change much. In Russia, laws passed by parliament are never of much importance. The ruling bureaucracy interprets the laws and issues its own executive ordinances on how they should be implemented. Parliament does not have any power to control how laws are interpreted or implemented, it cannot censure any minister, and it does not have the power to subpoena any executive official to give evidence under oath.
As for the General Staff, the powers that were presumably withdrawn from it by the change or law, in real life have been fully retained: The General Staff is still officially - "the central body of military command and the main body of operational command of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation." The General Staff prepares and constantly modifies our true military doctrine - the Operational Plan (Plan Primenenya) of the Armed Forces, including the forces of the parallel armies. The General Staff commands all of the Armed Forces in time of war. Instead of a law, all these functions are legalized by presidential decree (ukaz).

Talk of military reform began in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, but before the demise of the U.S.S.R no comprehensive reform plans were adapted. Despite overwhelming global changes, the Soviet (Russian) military chiefs were only reacting to events—withdrawning weapons and troops—as first the Warsaw pact and then the Soviet Union fell apart.

In Soviet times, the Communist Party controlled the military politically, through political officers and KGB agents that infested the ranks to see that no armed revolt happened. At the same time, the Defense Ministry was a uniform military organization, autonomous in most internal matters, without any civilians or "civil control."

In September 1991, Chief of the General Staff General Vladimir Lobov proposed to split the Defense Ministry into civilian and military organizations, but Defense Minister Air Marshal Evgeni Shaposhnikov squashed the idea and Lobov was ousted. After the demise of the Soviet Union, President Boris Yel'tsin was pressed to appoint a genuine civilian as Defense Minister, but balked at the idea to have a fellow politician with political ambitions in charge of the Russian (Soviet) military machine. General Igor Rodionov was retired in 1996 to pose for several months as a "civilian Defense Minister," former KGB General Ivanov is today playing the same role, but the Soviet structure of the Defense Ministry, and General Staff have been preserved since 1991 without much change.
Russia has a Prussian-style all-powerful General Staff that controls all the different armed services and is more or less independent of outside political constraints. Russian military intelligence - GRU, as big in size as the former KGB and spread over all continents - is an integral part of the General Staff. Through GRU, the General Staff controls the supply of vital information to all other decision-makers in all matters concerning defense procurement planning, threat assessment and so on. High-ranking former GRU officers have told me that in Soviet times the General Staff used the GRU to grossly, deliberately and constantly mislead the Kremlin about the magnitude and gravity of the military threat posed by the West in order to help inflate military expenditure. There are serious indications that at present the same foul practice is continuing.

Before the grip of the General Staff can be removed, an alternative system of command and control should be established. For the "Defense Ministry" to be in charge without the General Staff, one first needs to have a ministry. At present, the Russian Defense Ministry is a typical military hierarchical command structure with all lines of command going through the General Staff.

I spent lots of time within the lobbies and top offices of our General Staff and Defense Ministry in the first half of the 1990s and could see the internal operations at first hand. To begin with, the Russian Defense Ministry, which today has over 2 million people on its payroll, does not have a separate office building of its own. The Defense Minister, his deputy and their personal staffs occupy relatively small offices on the fifth flour of the main building of the General Staff complex. Our "Defense Ministry" is, in essence, the board of directors of a great corporation and its brand name - while the General Staff is the true corporate headquarters with the Chief of the General Staff playing the role of chief executive vice president.

The Russian/Soviet top military administration has demonstrated remarkable consistency in structure, procedure and strategic intentions during periods of unusual change in Russia, and the total dominance of the General Staff in decision making has
been preserved the whole time. This has provided stability and continuity of command within our military. All major players seem, at present, to be content to keep it as it is: The military chiefs mind their own affairs without much control and do not in any way threaten the Kremlin, while staying busy misappropriating tens of billions of petrodollars that are being pumped into the defense budget.

In many public speeches Putin and Ivanov called for the creation of a more compact, well-armed, modern military. At the same time, our high brass still insists upon sustaining a mass mobilization armed force with relatively cheap, mass-produced tanks and guns. The legacy of World War II is still considered, in our military academies, as the finest of modern military tactics, operational art and strategy. Suggestions that drastically would cut numbers in exchange for increasing quality are dismissed as pro-Western diversions that are intended to "disarm Russia" in the event of an imminent U.S.-lead NATO invasion.

The end result is a "strategic compromise" that merges irreconcilable patterns of military planning and development. Russia is trying at the same time to have a Soviet-type mass army of conscripts and reservists, while at the same time attempting to assemble hundreds of contract soldiers to form new professional units. As a result, Putin and Ivanov get the worst of both: An old Soviet-type armed force with a Soviet command structure that is continuing to decompose, and in essence, has lost the ability to fight the "big wars" it was built to fight. Any mass mobilization is now a dream, since the reservists are not trained and the heavy weapons in the storage bases are old and mostly dysfunctional. The "permanent readiness" units are also equipped with the same old weapons and inadequately trained.

Deputy Defense Minister General Alexander Belousov told journalists in September 2005 that 70 percent of contract soldiers recruited today are in fact conscripts that sign on after half a year of conscript service. The forced redressing of conscripts into "volunteer contract soldiers and sergeants" is a typical Putinite Potemkin village-style reform that will cost the budget billions, while not solving any real problems. In
November 2004, Ivanov announced at a meeting of our top brass that in 2004 only 64 percent of the "permanent readiness units" were ready for action (in 2003 the figure was 62 percent). "The fighting potential of our permanent readiness units does not allow them to act rapidly to contain any local conflict or emergency situation in any potential strategic theater," reported Ivanov.

Attempts at military reform from 1991 until 2005 did not produce tangible results. After the collapse of Communism, the General Staff did its best to keep as much of the Soviet structures and armaments alive as possible, waiting for an obvious strategic enemy to appear that would unite the nation, increase defense spending and social support for the military. The Soviet principle of perimeter defense against all the rest of the world survived, while Russia's foreign policy and defense aspirations continued to be out of line with available resources. Within the Russian military something is constantly changing, but the basics do not seem to change at all.