2007-05

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3641

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Sergei Ivanov was Defense Minister for almost six years, from March 2001 to February 2007 - the longest serving Defense Minister since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Ivanov is President Vladimir Putin’s close personal and political friend and is today considered in Moscow to be Putin’s probable successor. In a year, Ivanov may be selected and officially elected to take over the Kremlin.

In October 2004, Putin’s former chief of staff (until October 2003), Aleksander Voloshin, told me that of all his cohorts Putin trusts Sergei Ivanov most. As Voloshin put it: “Ivanov is the only intimate of Putin, who never lied to him.” Ivanov is so special, apparently, because of all the rest that are close to Putin, he is the only one not fully corrupt. Voloshin said that top Russian officials supply the president with false information to lobby special interests and to collect bribes. Putin, according to Voloshin, accepts as inevitable this corruption of his associates, but this sets Ivanov apart from the others even more. Ivanov was, together with Putin, a student in St. Petersburg in the 1970s, when they were both recruited by the KGB.

Ivanov was appointed Defense Minister in 2001 with a very special task to reconstruct Russia’s Armed Forces. The state of the military was dismal, and Putin believed that speedy reform was essential to national survival.
In May 2006, in his annual national address to parliament, Putin recalled the shock he experienced in the fall of 1999, while Prime Minister, as he planned the invasion of Chechnya: “The Chief of General Staff reported that the Army could field only 55,000 men and even they had to be scraped up from all over the country. We had an armed force of 1,400,000 men, but there was no one ready to fight. We sent untrained boys to battle. I'll never forget it. We must ensure this will never be repeated.” (1)

Former Duma deputy from the liberal Yabloko party and well-known defense researcher, Aleksei Arbatov, insists that the ineffectiveness of the present military “was demonstrated by the tragic experience of two wars in Chechnya, in which altogether more than 50,000 soldiers were killed and wounded.” Hazing, crime, suicide and fatal accidents cause approximately one thousand fatalities annually among the military personnel of the Defense Ministry. Arbatov believes that only the abolition of conscription may significantly increase the level of professionalism and revamp the military. (2)

As Defense Minister, Ivanov initiated a program of increasing the number of contract soldiers, of creating so-called permanent readiness units, manned exclusively by volunteers, and of reducing conscript service to one year by 2008. However, conscription has not been abolished and the official position of the Defense Ministry and the Kremlin is that conscription in Russia will continue indefinitely.

According to General Vladimir Konstantinov of the Organizational-Mobilization Main Directorate of the General Staff, in 1994 the government allocated sufficient budget funds to recruit 280,000 contract soldiers. Later, the number of “contractniki” decreased substantially and, at present, the Defense Ministry hopes only to reach the 1994 figure. Konstantinov told reporters at a briefing in the Defense Ministry on April 27, that, in the 1990s, more than half of the conscript soldiers were female, serving in combat positions as, for example, machinegun operators along with men. According to Konstantinov, in 1999 all female contract soldiers of the Leningrad Military District 138th and 200th permanent readiness motor-rifle brigades refused to go to fight with their units in the
second Chechen campaign, causing immense problems in refitting the units with men. At present, the share of female contract soldiers in Russia has been reduced to 24 percent and the Defense Ministry plans that, in the future, females will not occupy combat positions.

By the end of this year, the Defense Ministry is to have 72 permanent readiness all-volunteer units with some 130,000-contract soldiers. An additional 130,000 contract soldiers will be serving in other units together with conscripts. By the end of 2007, the Defense Ministry plans to have 94,200 places in military barracks specifically designated for accommodating contract soldiers.

In November 2006, during a nationally televised phone-in, Putin announced that “from 2000 to 2005” defense spending had increased three and a half times, that, between 1991 and 2006, the number of military personnel under the Defense Ministry had been reduced almost to one-third and that today the number stands at 1,131,000. Putin has announced that the military today is smaller, better equipped and more effective. When relieving Ivanov of the post of Defense Minister on February 15, Putin thanked him for fulfilling his mission of stopping the degradation of the military, of revamping contract service and solving the social woes of servicemen. Ivanov was promoted to the rank of first deputy premier in charge of Russian industry, including the defense industry. (3)

In fact, the true picture is not that rosy. Contract soldiers are unprofessional and often leave units at will – male soldiers as well as female. The number of personnel in Russia’s so-called “power structure” or “siloviki” ministries and services is a state secret and is not regularly published. However, in December 2003, during a national phone-in, Putin announced, “The number of military personnel in Russia and those of the same legal status is 4 million.” Since then, there have been no further drastic cuts. This accurate number of soldiers is huge and such an inflated force cannot possibly be “efficient.”
While actively creating all-volunteer units, the Defense Ministry has not established any professional recruiting service and does not seem to have any plans to do so. Most of the contract soldiers are recruited by the unit commanders from conscripts who often are forced by longer-serving soldiers to sign contracts while undergoing hazing. A recent report describes three young soldiers in an elite ranger GRU “spetsnaz” unit near Yekaterinburg in the Urals region, who were forced to sign three-year contracts after only three months of conscript service. Sergeants serving under contract also forced the novice soldiers to hand over all their contract pay as soon as they received it.

Such problems are widespread. General Konstantinov agrees that most contract soldiers do not fulfill their standard three-year contract, but leave after serving only two years. At best, a conscript soldier who was forced to sign a contract tends to leave his unit as soon as his time of conscript service is up. To force the soldiers and sergeants to keep their contracts, the Defense Ministry has introduced a regulation that one day of service as a conscript is equal to two days as a volunteer. This means that after only serving two years as a contract soldier, a conscript officially will have completed also his one-year compulsory service and is free to go.

This contract system, which Ivanov is credited with creating, is in essence just another version of a regular Soviet Gulag. According to Konstantinov, contract soldiers today in Chechnya get 20,000 Rubles ($770) a month. In the regions directly surrounding Chechnya they are paid 15,000 Rubles ($577) and in all other Russian regions they receive roughly 8,700 Rubles ($335). The pay is not particularly attractive, the service conditions are harsh, and the soldiers are not truly motivated.

The drastic increase in defense spending during Ivanov’s term as Defense Minister did not provide our military with new, modern weapons, did not increase substantially the professionalism of the rank and file, and did not remove poverty and social stress. Painful cuts in personnel levels that could have allowed increased spending per soldier to provide better equipment, pay, and training did not take place.
The main reason our military chiefs are so stubbornly resisting the abolition of conscription is the desire to retain the capability to raise multimillion soldier armies to fight major regional or even global non-nuclear wars, while also sustaining the capability to fight nuclear wars. The idea to create a relatively small, effective, well-trained and equipped force to fight in local and regional conflicts, while countering all other threats with nuclear deterrence, has been rejected time and again by the Russian military establishment. The Russian military doctrine adopted in April 2000 insists that Russia should continue to maintain the capability to mobilize millions of reservists, as well as a massive industrial mobilization potential to enhance defense production many-fold in times of crisis.

The expansion of NATO to the east, the revolutionary transformation of the US military after 9/11 and its redeployment to forward positions, including former Warsaw Pact nations and some bases in former Soviet republics, have created deep splits within Russia’s ruling bureaucracy. Of course, all uniformly oppose what is happening, it’s the mode of response that is causing controversy.

In many public speeches Putin and Ivanov have called for the creation of a more compact, well-armed, modern military. At the same time Russia’s 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 would drastically 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 US-led NATO invasion.

Russia is trying to have a Soviet-type mass army of conscripts and reservists to counter NATO and at the same time is assembling many contract soldiers to form better-trained professional units. The result is a strategic compromise that merges irreconcilable patterns of military planning and development.
Any mass mobilization in Russia today is a dream, since its reservists are not trained and the mobilization stockpiles of tens of thousands of heavy weapons in the storage bases are old and mostly non-operational. The newly-formed permanent readiness units manned by contract soldiers, formed to fight low-intensity local wars and conduct peacekeeping operations, are equipped with old weapons leftover from a conscript Soviet force and are inadequately trained.

In November 2004, at a meeting of the top brass in the Defense Ministry and in the presence of Putin, Ivanov announced that only 64 percent of the “permanent readiness units” were ready for action in 2004 (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,” Ivanov reported. (4) Today, officially, the situation with battle readiness has improved, but did it really?

In January and April 2000, Putin signed a National Security Concept and a Military Doctrine. (5) Putin authorized both documents, but the texts were prepared during the Yel’tsin administration. Since then, the Putin administration has failed to produce any new comprehensive defense or national security policy document.

The present Military Doctrine and Security Concept stipulate that Russia does not have enemies, but faces threats that may be coming from all directions and in many forms. The United States, NATO, Japan, China, and Iran are named “partners,” but also are seen as potential adversaries. Internal and international terrorism poses an additional military/security threat. Such an opaque concept of defending against all possible threats does not provide any clear guidelines on what military force the nation needs and against whom.

Since 2001, Moscow has announced many times that new official defense/national security documents are being prepared and will soon be approved. In 2004, the Secretary of the Security Council Igor Ivanov (the former Foreign Minister) announced
that “a new National Security Concept is being developed.” Ivanov implied that the new Concept is needed “to meet 21st century challenges.” (6) The concept was never developed.

In October 2003, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov presented a half-baked prototype Military Doctrine known in the West as the White Paper. This Paper did not expand into anything.

In recent months, the worsening relations with the West and constant talk of a new Cold War have intensified discussions about rewriting the Military Doctrine. In January 2007, a special meeting of Russia’s Academy of Military Sciences discussed a new Military Doctrine. Legally, the Academy is an independent think-tank, but its connections with the Defense Ministry are strong, and Russia’s military chiefs attended the meeting to make keynote speeches.

The President of the Academy General Makhmut Gareyev, who, as a four-star general was considered in the 1980s to be the leading Soviet military strategist, announced that, “All nukes of all other nations in the world are in essence aimed at Russia.” General Aleksandr Rukshin, Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff, called for the “creation of self-sufficient military groupings on all strategic directions.” All of the military chiefs demanded major increases in defense spending for all the services, to meet all the threats. Gareyev called for a major concentration of national resources, comparable with the Soviet nuclear arms program under Josef Stalin, to create modern weapons in order to rearm our military.

In 2007, the Russian defense budget increased by 23% and reached 860 billion Rubles ($35 billion). Russia’s top brass wants much more. The generals, led by Gareyev’s Academy, want to rewrite the Military Doctrine to eradicate its ambivalence, to name clearly the US and NATO as the number one enemy, and to mobilize the nation and its present oil wealth to begin a genuine arms race and Cold War.
After January, it seemed that the Military Doctrine indeed would be rewritten soon. In March 2007, the Security Council announced that it was working on the text of a new Military Doctrine. However, there is substantial opposition to rewriting the Doctrine. On February 7, 2007, answering questions in the Duma, Ivanov announced that Russia does not need a new Military Doctrine, because “one already exists, it is fairly new, it contains some fundamental things, including terrorism, the threat of the spread of WMD and internal conflicts.” Ivanov added, “The world has not changed all that much since then,” and if we indeed will need a new Doctrine, the Security Concept must be first rewritten. (7)

One week after that statement, Ivanov left the post of Defense Minister, but was promoted and seems now more powerful. The fray surrounding the Doctrine reflects the dualism of Russia’s present leadership that wishes to be against the West and part of the Western establishment at the same time. Others in the ruling elite do not want to give away Russia’s oil wealth to generals. The constant inconsistency of Russian statements and political moves will continue.

Source Notes:
(1) Vladimir Putin’s Address to the Federal Assembly, 10 May 06 via www.kremlin.ru
(3) Vladimir Putin’s Address, Ibid and Meeting on Economic Issues with Government Members, 15 Feb 07 via www.kremlin.ru
(4) Strana.ru, 17 Nov 04.
(5) Nezavisimoye noyennoye obozreniye, 14 Jan 00; 28 Apr 00.
(6) Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye, 1 Oct 04.
(7) www.fednews.ru

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