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Kremlin-Military Relations in Transition

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Russia has been a militarized empire for centuries with defense spending the most important item of its state budget. A Russian leader must be seen to be strong on defense, whether or not he personally likes the military. Our first post-Soviet president, the late Boris Yel'tsin, did not serve as a conscript, did not like anything militaristic and distrusted his top brass, particularly after unsuccessful coups in 1991 and 1993. Still, when Yel'tsin badly needed to boost faltering public support, he went out to visit units, donned military camouflage, and promised the soldiers more pay and benefits. In August 1991, Yel'tsin climbed atop a tank in Moscow to declare his resistance to a pro-Communist coup. A couple of years later at the base of the Tamanskaya motor-rifle division near Moscow, I observed Yel'tsin's attempt to actually get inside a tank. The effort failed miserably, as our tanks have extremely cramped personnel compartments, and Yel'tsin was a huge man. He got utterly stuck in the hatch and was extracted by his bodyguards.

President Vladimir Putin clearly likes the military and military dress, especially the navy. Putin has gone underwater on nuclear submarines, flown on a Su-27 jet fighter, and on a strategic supersonic Tu-160 bomber. Maybe as a boy in St. Petersburg—Russia's traditional naval capital—Putin dreamt of being a naval commander, but became a KGB spook instead. Nevertheless, Putin likes to call himself an “officer” and has been promising, since assuming power in 2000, to rebuild the Russian military after years of

neglect during Yel'tsin's administration. But the real story of the relationships between Putin's Kremlin and the military is more complicated.

In 1991-1993, our military played an essential, though mostly passive, political role. In August 1991, our military chiefs did not actively support the pro-Communist coup, which eventually allowed Yel'tsin to dismantle Communist rule. In December 1991, our top brass turned a deaf ear as Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev pleaded for them to intervene "to save the Union," allowing Yel'tsin to topple Gorbachev and dismantle the USSR. (1)

In September 1993, Yel'tsin dismissed the Supreme Soviet (the parliament). In turn, the Supreme Soviet impeached Yel'tsin and named Vice President General Aleksandr Rutskoi as president. After some initial misgivings, our top brass backed Yel'tsin. On October 4, 1993, army units entered Moscow, tanks, paratroopers and Special Forces attacked the Supreme Soviet. There were up to 200 casualties, almost all civilian. The Supreme Soviet building was gutted by fire caused by tank shells. After that Yel'tsin, though increasingly unpopular, ruled until 2000.

In 1993, our military brass was in a position to decide which of the two presidents—Rutskoi or Yel'tsin—to back and their final choice was decisive. Never since have our generals played the role of tsar-maker. Under Yel'tsin, there was a sort of nonaggression pact between the generals and the Kremlin. The military did not play any significant role in political decision-making, their requests for more money mostly were ignored, but Yel'tsin, in turn, did not intervene (much) in how they ran the armed forces. Ambitious military reform plans were announced during the 1990s, but none were ever implemented, mostly because our top brass did not want to dismantle the Soviet Cold War military machine, expecting that some day new massive injections of capital would revive the old system. There was no civilian control over the armed forces. During most of Yel'tsin's rule from 1991 to 2000, the Defense Minister of Russia was a military serviceperson. The exceptions did not essentially change the overall picture: In the spring of 1992, for several months Yel'tsin was officially Defense Minister, in addition to

being president; in 1996-1997, four-star General Igor Rodionov was Defense Minister, while officially retired from active service.

After coming to power in 2000, Putin not only heightened official militaristic rhetoric about restoring Soviet military power, but also significantly increased defense spending: From 142 billion Rub (\$5 billion, according to the average exchange rate that year), to 870 billion Rub (\$35 billion) in 2007. (2) However, the share of GDP spent on defense did not grow – it fluctuated from 2000 to 2008 between 2.5 and 2.7 percent of GDP. The increase in defense spending did not result in any significant growth of modern military hardware procurement. Military pay continues to be extremely low and the armed forces still cannot compete with private business and the civilian government bureaucracy for the best young Russian men. (3)

The Russian state-run propaganda machine has been projecting an image of a revival of the Russian state and military under the guidance of Putin. In the West, intelligence threat assessments tend to support this picture: It's always safer to overestimate a potential adversary's strength, than to undervalue it, and it helps when lobbying for bigger defense budgets from legislatures. A passage from the recently published Annual Threat Assessment by the Director of National Intelligence, John Michael McConnell, states:

“The Russian military has begun to reverse a long, deep deterioration in its capabilities that started before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although determined that defense spending not harm Russia's economic performance, Putin has been committed to increases for defense commensurate with GDP growth that has averaged just under 7 percent this decade. By 2006 the military had significantly increased the number of high-readiness units from 1999 levels, ramped up ground forces training - including mobilization exercise activity - and begun to man its high-readiness units with longer-term 'contract' personnel rather than conscripts.

Moscow also is making more use of its strengthened armed forces. A growing number of exercises with foreign militaries and an increased operational tempo in the North Caucasus Military District, often focusing on potential Georgian contingencies, are designed primarily to demonstrate regional dominance and discourage outside interference. Russia has used widely publicized missile launches and increased long-range aviation training flights to the Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic Oceans to showcase its continued global reach and military relevance.

The military still faces significant challenges, and recent activity does not approach Soviet-era operations. Demographic, health problems, and conscription deferments erode available manpower. Strategic nuclear forces remain viable, but Russia's defense industry suffers from overcapacity, loss of skilled and experienced personnel, lack of modern machine tools, rising material and labor costs, and dwindling component suppliers." (4)

The citation is long, but highly important. While acknowledging problems within the military and defense industry, US intelligence broadly supports the Kremlin propaganda line. The passage easily could have come from a Kremlin insider. Within Russia one may find different opinions. Increased defense spending during Putin's presidency did not reverse the decline of our military. Our defense industry cannot produce new modern weapons and increasingly is unable to maintain in working order weapons produced in Soviet times, before 1991. The massive increase of defense spending from 2000 to 2007 did not lead to any significant growth in actual weapons procurement compared with the 1990s. Russia's Defense Ministry weapons procurement budget has reached \$12.5 billion in 2007, but most of the money seems to have been either squandered or misappropriated. In addition to the steady decline of our conventional forces that began in essence before 1991, today our strategic nuclear capabilities, which during the 1990s continued to be on par with the US, are deteriorating. After 2017 Russia may become a second-tier nuclear power on par with Britain, France and China, having less than 500 operational strategic warheads. (5)

In February 2007, the chief of our Strategic Rocket Forces, General Nikolai Solovtsov, told journalists that Russia had 542 operational ground-based ICBMs, but 70 percent of them are too old and overdue to be scrapped. In 2007, twenty SS-25 ICBMs (20 warheads) and ten SS-19 ICBMs (60 warheads) were scrapped and the missile regiments that maintained these ICBMs were disbanded. In 2007, only five new SS-27 ICBMs with one warhead each were procured. 80 strategic warheads were removed, while five were deployed. This ratio of disarmament will continue in the future. By 2015, some 62 new SS-27 ICBMs will be procured, but at the same time, some 400 old ICBMs, including all SS-25s, will be eliminated. According to Solovtsov, after 2016 the last heavy SS-18 ICBMs will be withdrawn.

The Russian Navy today has twelve operational strategic nuclear submarines: six Delta-3 and six Delta-4. All of the Delta-3 subs will be retired soon after 2010. The deployment of new Borey class strategic subs has been postponed because their new Bulava ICBM has failed regularly during tests.

According to official START arms limitation treaty data, Russia today has fourteen Tu-160 and 64 Tu-95 strategic (longrange) bombers, but not all of them can fly. The resumed “long-range aviation training flights to the Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic Oceans,” mentioned by McConnell, have put increased strain on this old bomber force. It has been reported that our industry has used up its Soviet-made stockpiles of spares to maintain the Tu-160 jet NK-321 engines and has lost the capability to make new spares or new engines. All Tu-160s may be permanently grounded in two to three months. (6)

The decline of our military, despite constant strong statements on defense coming from the Kremlin, has been causing resentment within the services. There is a widespread misperception in the West that during Putin’s presidency, military and security officials, also known as siloviki, have flourished. In fact, under a spook president it is mostly KGB spooks who have thrived - they are the members of Putin’s siloviki who have massively penetrated the civilian and military hierarchy, as well as major state-connected corporations. (7) In March 2001, our military top brass lost direct control of the Defense

Ministry as Yel'tsin's last Defense Minister Marshal, Igor Sergeyev, was replaced by Putin's close friend and former KGB General, Sergei Ivanov. In turn, Ivanov promoted other former spooks to top Defense Ministry positions. In February 2007, Anatoli Serdyukov, a former furniture salesman and top Tax Policeman, with no military background but with possible security services, connections replaced Ivanov.

In January 2007, at an annual conference of the Academy of Military Sciences (that is legally a nongovernmental think-tank run by retired generals, but which is closely connected to the Defense Ministry), acting military service chiefs publicly demanded a major increase in defense spending to meet the perceived threat coming from the West. The President of the Academy, retired four-star General Makhmut Gareyev, our prominent defense strategist, called for a major concentration of national resources, comparable with the Soviet nuclear arms program under Josef Stalin, to create modern weapons to rearm our military.

In January 2008, at the next Academy conference the same calls were repeated. The First Deputy Defense Minister and Chief of General Staff four-star General Yuri Baluyevsky announced, "We consider it necessary for all our partners in the world community to clearly understand that to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia and its allies, military forces will be used, including preventively, including with the use of nuclear weapons." There was also open criticism of official defense policy decisions. Our naval establishment is bitterly opposed to Kremlin plans to move our Navy headquarters from Moscow to St. Petersburg. Baluyevsky publicly stated that he "sees no need" to go ahead with the transfer. (8)

In a speech on February 8, 2008 to the Russian State Council, outlining national development plans till 2020, Putin agreed with his generals that the US and NATO are major threats. According to Putin, "The world has entered a new spiral in the arms race; NATO is expanding and is bringing its military infrastructure ever closer to our borders." Putin added, "Russia has a response to these new challenges and it always will." According to Putin, "Russia will begin production of new types of weapons over these

coming years, the quality of which is just as good and in some cases even surpasses those of other countries. At the same time, our spending on these projects will be in keeping with our possibilities and will not be to the detriment of our social and economic development priorities.” Putin stressed that Russia “will not be drawn into a costly confrontation or a new arms race that would be destructive for our economy and disastrous for our country’s domestic development.”

Putin’s ruling establishment—the most rich and powerful people of the land who were gathered in the Kremlin to hear his speech on February 8—indeed do want a militarily strong Russia and are genuinely afraid that the West will impose on us its standards of press freedom and democratic and responsible governance, which would surely destroy Putin’s kleptocracy. At the same time, the multi-millionaires and billionaires who today form the top echelon of Putin’s so-called “vertical of power” and who have amassed incredible wealth under him are simultaneously top bureaucrats and businessmen who make fortunes in oil, gas, metals and other trade deals with the West and promote IPO’s and listings of Russian state-controlled corporations on Western stock markets. They do not want to share money and power with army generals. They do not need a showdown with the West or a new Cold War, which would be highly detrimental to their business. Putin addressed both groups - pointing out the West as a threat and at the same time declaring there will be no arms race or drastic increase in defense spending.

This message will not fully satisfy anyone. What’s worse is that there is no clear divide between hawkish siloviki and business-like pragmatists. Often they are the same persons with a split mind like Putin himself, whose hearts may wish that Russia regain Soviet imperial glory and superpower status to challenge the West openly, while their checkbooks call for restraint and business collaboration. This uniform state of split mind may explain the schizophrenic nature of Russia’s defense and foreign policies, which constantly fluctuate from confrontation to cooperation and back again.

End Notes

(1) *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12 Dec 1991.

- (2) *Vedomosti*, 11 Sept 07.
- (3) *Perspective*, Volume XVII, Number 3 May/June 2007.
- (4) Senate Select Committee on Intelligence February 2008 DNI.
- (5) *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye*, 8 Feb 08.
- (6) *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye*, 21 Dec 07.
- (7) The Moscow Times, 8 Feb 08.
- (8) *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye*, 25 Jan 08.

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