

## **Russian Military Reform: Balancing reality and doctrine**

Russia has seen a number of military reforms, adjustments and new doctrines since 1992. However, most of them were primarily focused on the reduction of armed forces, nuclear warheads and units, creating in essence a smaller version of the Soviet army, lacking structural and managerial reforms as they also did not tackle long-established deficiencies and way of thinking. The new, politically-driven, brave (at least in theory) plans aim at bringing multi dimensional reforms of Russia's armed forces as well as altering Moscow's view on future military objectives. Obstacles however remain: a conscript-based army, a doctrine-driven defence policy, pressure from military circles and external factors such as the regional geopolitical realities. How far the Russian leadership is willing to go this time remains to be seen. This analysis will be focusing mainly on Russian army while tackling larger issues within the country's military and defence establishment.

It was not until 2008 and the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian conflict when the Russian leadership including the president realised the need for speedy and deep structural reforms within the military establishment. One of the major aspects of the latest reforms, initiated after the autumn of 2008 by Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov is the political support-rarely seen to this extent in Russia. The decisive factor was Russian forces' poor performance during the 2008 conflict. Lack of state-of-the-art equipment, inability to operate during the night, poor or non-existent computer systems to enhance command and control, less flexible deployment too many loses especially of airborne units. The situation made the Russian leadership to move forward with much needed reforms amid fierce resistance from the military establishment which, this time, the Kremlin was not willing to please. However, despite the relatively fast implementation of many of the new reforms burdens remain. The Russian leadership must move forward altering many long-established practices and logics behind Russian military and defence planning including the philosophy of a doctrine-driven policy and a conscript army, military-industrial complex pressure on politics and politicians including the president and most importantly the relations between the public and the military in general.

The main rationale behind the framework of the suggested and under execution reforms is that Russia needs a modern and professional army. Though understanding for altering the character of the armed forces dates as back as 1992, fundamental transformation never took place due to a number of factors as will see later on.

The main reforms are largely divided into those of structural nature including education and central command and control, those of financial nature and cost effectiveness and of course the need for modernisation in general, especially in hardware/equipment.

The *structural adjustments* are most of them well under way. These aim at a more efficient and effective, flexible modern units and forces. The main change (which will take years however to fully materialise) is that the Russian army will *abandon* the principle of mass mobilisation. This is a key change that will take multiple, almost painful efforts though to be seen through. Also, the abandonment of the mass-mobilisation logic clearly indicates that Moscow is changing its traditional threat perceptions such as an all-out NATO or Sino-Russian war or old-style regional conflicts. The case of Chechnya indicated that while Russia's enemies have adopted to new style guerilla warfare Russian units remained inflexible and most of the key objectives of the operation were achieved by special forces not without losses. The case of the Georgian conflict in 2008 on the other hand that spawned the 'go ahead' for these reforms illustrated how a much more powerful and large army can suffer relatively severe losses while revealing a number of smaller yet key operational deficiencies such as inability to conduct night operations. It is interesting that so far only 17% of military units around the country were permanently staffed and ready for deployment. The reforms call for *cuts* in military units instead of smaller, in reality deficient units as we will see, a way to never repeat the mistakes of these conflicts.

Another crucial reform is that officers will be *reduced* from around 355000 today to 150000 by 2012-16 depending on the financial conditions. Also many officers to retire will not be replaced. *Recruitment* of full-time soldiers is also a major objective. New, *non-commissioned* officer corps of contracted sergeants -the first time NCOs are introduced in Russia- will be created, trained in new educational establishments.

Reforms call for *reorganisation* of four-tier chain (district-army-division-regiment) to three-tier one (district-command-brigades). The creation of brigades is clearly the centrepiece of this much-delayed and awaited reform. According to the MoD Serdyukov this was already completed by the end of 2009. The aim is ultimately the simplification of the chain of command and better coordination between the different arms of service in operations. However it must be noted that the backbone of Russian deterrence remain the Strategic Missile Forces around which the new reform must evolve and adapt.

The *modernisation* of equipment is also a crucial objective if the reforms are to have any effectiveness in the long-run. According to Serdyukov only 10% of the equipment 'can be called

*modern*'. This percentage will rise to 30% by 2015 and 70% by 2020 should everything goes according to plan. The Georgian conflict again illustrated *inability* for night operations, *lack* of computer systems to enhance command and control as well as *lack* of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Recently Russia has come close to Israeli-manufactured UAVs within the framework, as we will see further on, to prompt the respective Russian industry.

*Increasing cost effectiveness* is one of the most important objectives, indeed a pillar for much of the reforms planned and the one with potentially severe social consequences. The Serdyukov reforms see to decrease and better manage Russia's defence finances in a number of ways. First, through *consolidating* central command and control bodies and the system of military *education*. Staff at central command will be reduced to 8500 from currently 23000 by 2016. Sixty-five educational establishments will be reduced to ten larger institutions throughout the federation.

Within the above framework, Russia is to join the club of countries which outsource a number of military and defence, usually non-combat functions. *Logistics and combat service support* will be largely outsourced. The logic behind that, officials indicate, is that the competition among competing contractors will lower the prices whilst bettering the services. Money will also be saved by "civilianising" many of the military's functions as civilians will not be able to claim military benefits and pensions. What is interesting to be seen is what kind of private paramilitary industry Russia will develop, how will it be shaped and under what legal framework. All these are issues still debated in the West after decades of similar experience which of course excelled dramatically after 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Functions that will be filled with civilians include (but are not limited to) military news service, medical support, catering, judge advocates and others possibly including security of military units, installations and infrastructure. Serdyukov also hopes to reduce *corruption* by implementing the above reforms, a chronic problem among Soviet and especially Russian military.

Serious *limitations and deficiencies* however remain even within the proposed package of reforms posing a series of possible obstacles.

First are the *financial* considerations. Although the nominal budget increased for this year to 2.9% from 2.6% last year in real terms available funding decreased by approximately 140 billion roubles from the original sum of 1,336.4 billion roubles. Other dangers lie behind the financial downturn that has affected Russia. In particular the retired personnel will face a shortage of available housing of around 18,000 houses for officers to retire after 2009. The cuts in officers may create literally an

army of ex officers looking for new jobs-not a very encouraging prospect bearing in mind the current financial constraints Russia is facing. This will create reactions from the military establishment already at an uneasy situation due to the proposed reforms and the wide political support they enjoy.

Another limitation is linked to development of cutting-edge military technology and hardware. Russia lacks an extensive private military industrial complex capable of designing and producing such hardware and excelling in innovative technologies.

The State's *grip* on the defence industry means that the the latest financial developments have hit particularly hard Russian companies, used to state subsidies for years which lack the funds to become competitive in terms of new technologies as well as compete in the international markets, particularly with the western companies (hence the consolidation of Russian arms exports by Rosoboronexport). This situation will eventually lead the Russian military to find, at least for the time being, *foreign* companies which can supply the necessary equipment to gradually equip the new units. This is an uneasy matter however for both the military establishment as well as the government. Russia rarely trusted external parties playing a role in the country's defence. Political circles however believe that by forcing external cooperation Russian industry will ultimately be forced to adjust and become more competitive. This latest adjustment however will not be 'bloodless' in terms of political lobbying and pressure or social consequences (unemployment).

Another major issue Moscow is and will be facing is the fact that most of the planned or already under-way reforms rely on a more-or-less new professionally-driven army. Yet, although provisions for new training, outsourced personnel and the hiring of career soldiers have been initiated there is no clear indication the *conscription* logic will be abandoned any time soon. Recent changes include the reduction of the army service to 12 from 24 months however the moral within the army remains pretty low. Conditions are lacking seriously behind compared to the West and the willingness of young men to serve their army service remains very weak. Even after the current reforms the Russian army will be by around 80% a conscript army. This is a major future deficiency and a vicious circle in the sense that new career soldiers appointments must take place gradually and very good conditions must develop as the army will be getting smaller and professional-driven. Fundamental changes must take place in this field if Moscow wants seriously to push through reforming throughout its army for the challenges ahead. The February 2010 Defence Doctrine does not indicate thoughts for abandoning conscription.

Within the above framework mainly the political (as well as the military) establishment must start to seriously engage the society. If the current changes do not meet the agreement of the society at large then the pillars for future success will remain weak and morale will continue to be poor. The state should start engaging with NGOs and think tanks, grasp the opportunity to push forward with the reforms having achieved some agreement with social partners like the Committee for Soldiers' Mothers. NGOs and think tanks must become part of the solution.

The aspects of the reforms more likely to succeed are primarily of structural nature. As illustrated above several objectives of the reforms are steadily being met in particular the consolidation of the central command and control, the shift from a four-tier to three-tier system and efficiency and consolidation of the military education. Much will depend on the willingness by all parts involved to see these changes through. An important factor is and will be the change, if any, to Russian leadership after 2012 regarding both the presidency as well as the government. Also, and this may prove important, Russia must be cautious not to make these reforms turn against its *long-term* national security, foreign and defence objectives. As we have seen, some of the reforms proposed (outsourcing and the formation of brigades to name a couple) are mirroring western armies and in particular the US army structure. We should underline the dangers that can result from mirror-imaging especially when national security and defence are concerned.

Much of the changes the US, UK and other western armed and especially security and special forces have seen since the end of the Cold War were shaped by these countries' objectives around the world and key developments (9/11) that prompted these countries to take necessary steps. Moscow must make sure that any changes and reforms must meet the country's real objectives, answer to its current and future trends and above all take into account Russia's special characteristics. Also the interests of Russia do not necessarily mirror those of the US and/or NATO. Russia is not isolated like the United States. Has no immediate plans to deploy forces *overseas* per se for instance or indeed has not identify vital interests in far away places, like Latin America, SE Asia or Africa. Russia is a country with vast borders, unlike the US or the UK (both in 'isolation') and any regional or peripheral conflict around its borders can well evolve inside its borders or have any kinds of consequences inside Russia proper. Russia's borders are vast, mostly badly managed and close to many potentially troublesome regions. Aggressive elements may not originate from China or Kazakhstan but Central Asian trans-border control in particular can be highly problematic.

Finally the doctrine-driven philosophy of the country must be tackled. The latest February 2010 Doctrine has not made the realisations it should about the current situation in Russia's near abroad

or the world at large. Many in Moscow still think within a cold-war framework, a slowly evolving world. Changes do not tend to happen frequently and sudden changes can be proved to have negative long-term effects, much like the economic *shock therapy* of mid-1990s. Moscow must make clear to itself what its foreign, security and defence priorities and objectives are. Russia has been reluctant for example to actively contribute in Afghanistan for a number of reasons but also because the leadership is aware its forces, especially ground forces are not capable of dealing with this kind of warfare for an extended period of time. Clear objectives prompt correct actions and the great challenge for Mr Serdyukov and the Kremlin will be to move fast with the reforms, without damaging the country's neither social nor military integrity. All this amid a quite negative financial environment and an ever-changing security landscape across Eurasia. Patience, belief and continuation (under future leaderships) are the key elements which will bring those reforms to fruition and take Russia further on the global stage. All possible, all finely balanced.

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