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Medvedev Overplays the “Military Card” in Trying to Impress Obama

by [Dale Herspring](#) and [Roger N. McDermott](#)

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Introduction

In his March 17, 2009 speech to Russia's top military brass, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev raised the specter of a strong and robust Russian military.[1] The fact is that while Russia is undergoing a major reform of its armed forces, and beginning to pump money into it, it will be several years, 2020 according to many Russian officers, before the Russian armed forces will be equipped with modern weapons. The reality is that the Russian military is in no position to threaten anyone. By their own admission, Russian generals view the war in Georgia as a “disaster.” Russia won, but only by using outdated weapons and equipment and the kind of frontal military attack that was more reminiscent of World War II, than of the modern (non-contact) type of warfare. In short, Medvedev's effort to play the military card was nothing more than an effort to gain a diplomatic advantage by pulling the wool over the West's eyes.

Russia Launches Major Military Reform

All indications are that Moscow has launched a major shake-up of its military establishment, quite unlike any previous attempts at reform since 1945. In fact, we would argue that if carried through to its completion, it will be the structural equivalent of the late Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov's “revolution in military affairs.” Indeed, based on the direction it appears to be taking, the future Russian military could well be unrecognizable to those who have watched the evolution of the Soviet or the current Russian armed forces.

Consider the changes underway at present. First, plans for personnel numbers: Much to the chagrin and in some cases opposition (by serving officers), the officer corps is being cut from 355,000 (there are 400,000 slots but only 355,000 are filled at present) to 150,000.[2] Following NATO's example, Moscow has decided to cut the ratio of officers to enlisted from the current 2-2.5 ratio to one for every fifteen enlisted personnel.[3] The numbers involved are staggering. For example, the number of generals on active duty will be cut from 1,107 to 886 (primarily in logistics since much of it will be civilianized), and colonels from 25,665 to 9,114. Majors will be cut from 99,550 to 25,000, while captains will go from 90,000 to 40,000. The only officer rank to gain will be lieutenants and they will go up by 10,000.[4] No sector is being spared. There are currently 140,000 warrant officers on active duty. By the end of 2009 all but 20,000 (primarily in the Navy) will be gone.[5] They will be given the option of becoming non-commissioned officers or—if they are currently filling an officer's billet—they have the possibility of lateraling into the officer corps. Otherwise, they will be civilianized.

Even the medical staff is being hit hard. The current staff of 7,967 physicians will be cut to 2,200. In most cases, medical care will be contracted out to civilian institutions and physicians. As a consequence, a number of military hospitals are being closed. Civilian and enlisted personnel dealing with medical affairs also will be cut—civilian posts will be cut by 31,889, while enlisted personnel will be cut by 6,508. In addition, 80 percent of all lawyers are being shown the door.^[6] Furthermore, all but 20 officers' positions in military media organizations will be closed—except for those for the *Krasnaya zvezda* newspaper.^[7]

Equally surprising to those of us who have followed the development of the Soviet and then the Russian military is the assault on the General Staff, the structure that the legendary Marshal Boris Shaposhnikov called the “brain of the army.” The Kremlin has decided that there are too many uniforms in Moscow. Accordingly, officers in the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the General Staff will be reduced by a factor of 2.5 over a four year period. This means going from a total of 27,873 to a total of 8,500 officers.^[8]

Changing the Military Culture

So how does one go about filling this gap? After many years of refusing to deal with the problem, the Russians have bitten the bullet and decided that it is time to follow the Western model and introduce a meaningful non-commissioned officer's (NCO) corps. Creating an NCO corps will not be easy. It goes to the heart of one of the Russian military's biggest problems; its refusal to delegate authority. Yet, within Western militaries it is the NCOs who run the organization, as anyone who has served in a NATO military is well aware. NCOs are only effective if they are permitted and encouraged to show initiative.

Moscow has also decided to cut the number of educational institutions from 65 to three military and educational centers, six academies and one military university. This also marks a major change—the Russian military has long boasted of one of the most extensive military educational structures in the world. Now, however, the Kremlin has decided that many of these schools are moribund. Why not send army and navy personnel to the same school to learn the basics of electronics, leaving an advanced course to teach them the factors specific to the individual service? The result is that many teaching personnel will be getting their walking papers.

Another change that few who followed the Soviet and then the Russian military would have anticipated is the introduction of physical fitness tests. For years, it seemed that there was a correlation between girth and the number of stars a general carried on his shoulders. Now, however, much to the unhappiness of Moscow's overweight officers, all personnel will be required to pass an annual physical fitness exam—in the first part of 2008, 26 percent of all young officers tested failed.^[9]

One of the major impetuses behind the introduction of the current reform plan was deep concern over corruption inside the military. In 2007 former Minister of Defense, Sergei Ivanov commissioned an audit of the military budget. What he discovered was that corruption was even more extensive than he had anticipated. On April 3, the Audit Chamber announced that more than 164.1 million rubles had been stolen from the ministry through fraud and outright theft. According to another report, the MoD “accounts for 70 percent of the budgetary resources used for purposes other than those officials confirmed.”^[10] Previously, Ivanov had reduced the number of agencies within the MoD that could make purchases for the military. Then he set up a new Arms Procurement Agency—that was staffed entirely by civilians. The result was that the officers were moved back a step from being in a position to make purchases.

Structural Changes

Russia also plans to make major structural modifications. For example, instead of four levels of command (military district, army, division, and regiment), the Russians have moved to three (military district, operational command, and brigade). This restructuring is already in place and the Russians are beginning to test it out in their exercises.[\[11\]](#)

The biggest shock for the military was then Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to move Ivanov up to the position of First Deputy Prime Minister on February 15, 2007, and appoint in his place, the hitherto unknown Anatoliy Serdyukov. From the perspective of the armed forces, this was nothing less than an insult. Appointing a man whose military service lasted all of two years as a junior lieutenant, and who had worked most of his life in furniture business, made a mockery of the position (his nickname is "bughalter" a derisive term denoting someone whose only job is to shuffle papers around). To make matters even worse, Serdyukov came from the Tax Service, and brought with him 20 civilian auditors to find out where the money was being mis-spent in the armed forces. Serdyukov soon made it clear that he meant business. During a trip to St. Petersburg in March 2007, he went to the Navy's Nakhimov School unannounced. Furthermore, rather than entering through the front door, he came in through the back, where he discovered horrible, inadequate sanitary arrangements, damp college cadets' rooms, water in the basement, fungi on the walls, and crumbling plaster. As a result, the chief of the college, Rear Admiral Alexandr Bukin, was promptly fired and dismissed from the service. It was not long before almost all of the country's senior officers had resigned—led by General Yuri Balyuevskiy, the Chief of the General Staff.[\[12\]](#)

Serdyukov is determined to create a 100 percent professional army backed up by a reserve force of conscripts who serve for one year before being transferred to the reserves. He is not concerned with a major war with NATO—but instead is determined to create a highly trained, flexible and mobile military able to respond to problems in a timely and forceful manner. That is the theory. The problem, however, is that Moscow is not likely to have such a military for many years to come. The problems appear omnipotent.

Obstacles to Reform

First, and not surprising, there are clear indications of unhappiness inside the officer corps. Those being told to leave are being given three options: those with less than ten years service will be given severance pay. Those with between ten and twenty years will be given severance pay as well as an apartment. Finally, those with twenty or more years will be given severance pay, an apartment and a retirement package.[\[13\]](#) Moscow also claims that retraining programs are being made available. After all, one thing it does not want to face is massive unemployment on the part of these former officers. Yet, there are many in the Russian military who question the sincerity of the government's supposed largesse. Retraining is questionable—e.g., for someone who served in submarines, or who spent eight to nine years in an airborne regiment. Housing may be located out in the country in rural areas. There are also reports that some senior officers are "selling" letters of recommendation that will permit an officer to stay on active duty. In short, morale in the military is very low at present.

Serdyukov claims that the money saved by cutting the officer corps as well as the funds available from the sale of military assets will be used to rebuild infrastructure—housing, schools, hospitals, etc. But what guarantee is there that it will be possible, for example, to lure competent civilian physicians to leave a big city and set-up shop near a military base? What guarantee is there that competent school teachers will want to serve in a remote garrison to teach the soldiers' children?

It is clear that Serdyukov wants to take power from the uniformed military and put it in the hands of civilians—as evident from his effort to cut the number of officers serving in the General Staff or MoD (almost all senior officers were replaced). To this point, the idea that Moscow could go to war without the involvement of the General Staff is ludicrous. For example, one of the reasons the

generals were surprised by the events in Georgia, is that the General Staff was moving from its building to the old Warsaw Pact building. Communications were down and for a time, Moscow was blind. It became necessary to for the troops in the field to work through the Kremlin.

So far, Moscow's efforts to develop a NCO corps have failed miserably. To begin with, despite the Kremlin's efforts, pay remains low. It is certainly not enough to convince the average Russian male to join up or even more important to convince those who do join, to stay for their entire enlistment or re-enlist if they do complete their time in uniform. One indication of this problem is that the Kremlin went to the effort to set-up special schools to provide future NCOs with the kind of specialized training they will need to function effectively. Unfortunately, this experiment has failed for the present. The first class was supposed to have begun early this year, but the military could not attract sufficient numbers of qualified candidates and so put the first class off until late summer.^[14] To make matters worse, the crime rate among these "professionals," or (*kontrakniki*) is very high.^[15]

Anyone who has dealt with NCOs in the West knows that developing such a person is a long and often laborious undertaking. The Russian opposition to delegating authority is one thing, but even if this were not a problem, training young men and women so that they can become effective NCOs—in the Western sense—takes time. It is not something that can be done over night. Assuming Russian officers learn to delegate authority, it is hard to imagine an efficient, well trained military, led by competent NCOs being developed in less than ten years.

Beyond the problem of NCOs, there is a severe shortage of competent officers. From 1990 to 2000 there were almost no training exercises, certainly involving large units. Training, in fact, was a disaster. Consequently, when Moscow looked around for officers to send to Georgia, it discovered how few officers had the requisite experience. Many of the air force pilots, for example, were either test pilots or training officers. There were just not enough well trained officers around. This was publicly confirmed after the Georgia war by Russian Generals.^[16] Needless to say, it will take time to find and properly train not only NCOs but officers as well.

Failings in the Georgia War

Despite the best efforts of the Russian government to present the Five Day War with Georgia in August 2008 as a military success, the "victory" proved pyrrhic. In the aftermath, the "lessons learned" from the Five Day War were so shocking and had such serious implications for the state, that the reinterpretation of the conflict from a Russian military perspective became the *casus belli* to announce the most radical and sweeping changes in the Russian conventional armed forces since World War II. Overall, the conflict highlighted the shortcomings, failings and decrepit condition of its armed forces. During the fall of 2008, the Russian General Staff, MoD and other government agencies came to understand that the forces currently at the disposal of the state were in no condition to fight a modern war. In essence, the Five Day War represented for Russia the last war of the 20th century, fought exclusively with dated tactics, equipment, weapons and structures more suited to waging large-scale conventional warfare than being deployed in a local, non-contact conflict.^[17]

In terms of the equipment and weapons used and their operational performance, the aged equipment, hardware and weaponry, dangerously coupled with ineffective command and control agencies and systems, poor communication and inter-service coordination, as well as intelligence support failings, failure of the GLONASS navigational system and higher numbers of Russian casualties than expected owing partly to problems over adequate Identification of Friend or Foe (IFF) equipment, were amongst the numerous issues exposing the limited combat capabilities of the post-Soviet legacy force. In August 2008, *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (NVO) pointed out that 60-75 percent of 58th Army tanks deployed in the theater of operations were in

fact the older T-62, T-72m and T-72BM none of which could withstand Georgian antitank warheads.[18]

Consequently, a feature of official statements on military reform and modernization since the Five Day War has heralded a new era in which the conventional forces will be re-equipped with modern equipment and weaponry. It is planned by 2012 to pursue 1,500 research and experimental design efforts, which will see 487 models of arms and military equipment presented for state trials, the state trials of almost 600 will be completed, and approximately 400 will be taken into service. More than 70 strategic nuclear missiles, more than 30 Iskander operational-tactical missile systems, 48 combat aircraft, more than 60 helicopters, 14 ships of various classes, approximately 300 tanks, and more than 2,000 motor-transport facilities are planned to be purchased and delivered. Russia's MoD believes this will make it possible to rearm more than 40 force groupings and units of the Armed Forces. By 2020 a modernized Russian military, if the reforms succeed, will see new project-955 Borey-type submarines, armed with the Bulava sea-launched ballistic missile, ground-based modernized Topol-M ballistic missiles will have completely replaced conventional Topols. Ground forces will have modern tanks (for instance, the T-80 Chernyy Orel (Black Eagle)); more T-90 Main Battle Tanks (MBTs) and the procurement of the rumored new MBT, the T-95; modernized air defense systems (the S-400 surface-to-air missile system); and there will be sufficient numbers of the fifth-generation Russian fighter (series deliveries of the state-of-the-art multi-role Su-35 fighter are due to begin in 2011). The aims and image presented in this list seems like a military equivalent of Potemkin's village.[19]

However, despite the presentation of a reforming and modernizing agenda, no doubt popular with Admirals and Generals that may harbor misgivings over the drastic officer cuts or recalibration of the force structure from a mass mobilization principle to permanent readiness formations, there are underlying challenges and obstacles to such plans that go much deeper than Russia's experience of the global financial crisis and collapse in oil revenues since mid 2008.[20] Some of these are evident in specific design problems and procurement issues relating to its defense industries, which call into question both the timescale for modernizing the conventional forces as well Russia's potential to finance such ambitions.

The T-90 MBT: Symbol of Progress or Stagnation?

Russia is the only country in the world whose army uses two types of MBT: T-80 (T-80U) and the T-90 (T-90S). Both have the same weight, size and combat characteristics. Older types in service include the T-62, T-64, T-72 and their various versions, or even the T-55. This presents an added burden on providing fuel, spare parts and equipment required for their maintenance. Moreover, large numbers of tanks demand adequate servicing, which has never been met with sufficient state funding. Effectively the tank building policy in Russia has remained largely unchanged since the 1960s, while more recently gradual change has seen some improvement but not on a large enough scale to make an impact.

In July 2008 Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces, Army General Alexei Maslov, admitted that Russian tanks are lagging behind other countries in using modern electronics. He said, "although work to develop a tank battlefield information management system (BIMS) is already underway, its installation on outdated models is too costly and therefore not recommended. The new equipment is planned to be mounted on newly designed armored vehicles." The T-90, considered as a "modern" MBT being introduced into service within the elite Kantemirovskaya and Tamanskaya tank divisions and originally planned to be fully equipped by 2010, remains outdated. Significantly, it has no BIMS installed on it, rendering it effectively firing blind in battlefield conditions.[21]

Russian MBTs also lack modern reconnaissance and observation systems (aerial, never mind space-based ones). Consequently, the line of sight and fire are set so low that it is practically

impossible to identify or aim at a target from the tank. These MBTs also lack high-quality communications which reduces control over tank units. Even in the T-90S MBTs introduced in the elite tank divisions, there is currently no GPS or equivalent system, raising questions over their battle worthiness. The T-90S has reportedly suffered serious setbacks within the Indian army, calling into question its performance in desert conditions.[22]

The solution, according to the leadership of the Russian MoD lies in the new T-95—far superior to existing models. A new Russian MBT, but not yet in series production, it claims to boast new running gear, armaments, fire control, reconnaissance and target identification features. Nevertheless, this concept of a new MBT has been talked about for fifteen years, with no firm date set for introduction. As this process has stalled, many countries have been active in research and development of anti-tank missiles, since the tank remains the main offensive factor for ground forces. These anti-tank missiles are equipped with non-contact fuses and are capable of penetrating all types of explosive reactive armor (ERA). R&D projects are also examining the potential to disable the engine fuel system, rendering tanks immobile. In fact, this underscores what will be a recurring theme in the challenge of Russia's military modernization, namely a sense in which they may be playing catch up for many years, while other nation's militaries acquire more advanced technologies.[23]

A set of circumstances within Russia's defense industry, worsened by the financial crisis, militates against series production and procurement into the ground forces of large numbers of MBTs, certainly in the timescales advocated by the government. These stem from personnel to equipment issues within the defense industries. Highly qualified personnel within the defense industries are becoming scarce. Many of these skilled workers are reaching or passing retirement age, with a shortage of young engineering graduates unwilling to seek employment in the defense sector due to low wages.

Aging equipment exacerbates an already difficult task. Production lines and machine tools have passed their thirty-year limit, which reduces the capacity of the state to fulfill lavish procurement packages.[24] Many of the factories involved in the modernizing of MBTs require massive economic regeneration and retooling. As a result of the severance of co-production links, numerous key technologies have been lost. In short, the defense industry was already predisposed towards struggling to meet the government defense order in terms of both the range and quality of products, even before the financial crisis hit Russia.

Weak Defense Industry and the Global Financial Crisis

Such problems also impinge on the state's ambitions in other areas of what President Medvedev described on March 17, 2008 at a presidium of the Defense Ministry in Moscow as rearmament plans. Failures at the design stage of the new Bulava SLBM have resulted in delays to its planned introduction. The ongoing saga over fifth generation fighters for the Russian air forces is further compounded by the woeful condition of its fleet of MiG-29 fighters, grounded after an investigation into a December 2008 air crash pinpointed its cause as corrosion in the load bearing section of the aircraft, as well as in the tail. Initial safety checks on the 200 MiG-29s resulted in only one third being cleared to fly. This was also a setback to the export of MiG-29s, since it came shortly after problems reported in the platforms led to their rejection by Algeria's Air Force.[25]

Major-General Anatoliy Kraylyuk, chairman of the military-technical committee of the Main Directorate for Armaments of the General Staff, designated 2009 as a critical year in developing the state armaments program until 2020. Adjustments are being made to it in line with the presidential decision following the Georgia war to increase defense spending in 2009 by 28 percent. However, as these issues are being assessed and delineated by Russia's MoD General Kraylyuk has already specified additional areas that will become the future focus of Russia's

military-technical research: developing information software, intelligence assets, information countermeasures and weapons. Nonetheless, General Kraylyuk considers this will occur only over a thirty-year period, indicating that at least some senior Russian officers recognize that the military modernization program will take a much longer period to achieve its aims.[\[26\]](#)

On December 30, 2008 Prime Minister Putin said that the government intends to disburse 50 billion rubles (\$1.7 billion) in emergency financial aid to enterprises of the defense-industrial complex—70 per cent of which will be invested in the fixed assets of strategic enterprises within the defense industry. This initially targets companies within the defense industry nearing to bankruptcy, and it will follow up with state guarantees on bank loans to 100 billion rubles (\$3.4 billion). Additional support was offered involving subsidies for interest rates on loans, allocating subsidies, tax credits and capital subscription. By contrast, Putin announced that 32 billion rubles were earmarked to support aviation companies and 39 billion rubles to help the automobile industry.[\[27\]](#)

Despite these measures, real systemic challenges are being exposed as a result of the current financial crisis, which Russia will need to address if its modernization program is to succeed. Unless these emergency measures are also complemented by an intensification of competitive principles, the risk is that inefficient manufacturing processes may seriously hamper the development of the Russian economy following its emergence from the crisis. Colonel-General Vladimir Popovkin, chief of armament of the Armed Forces and deputy defense minister, sees devaluation of the currency compounding the problems stemming from rising costs for goods needed by the defense industry. “It is essential to devise a mechanism of compensation for the growth in the price of raw materials, intermediate products, whereby it is possible for the Ministry of Defense to purchase the requisite quantity of products, and the enterprises, to ensure profitable production,” General Popovkin remarked. Emergency aid measures, as currently outlined, could provide more opportunities to conclude lengthy contracts—for three years and more—as part of the national arms program. This may ease pressures on the defense industry by allowing companies to order and purchase raw materials and other products in advance and respond flexibly to fluctuations in prices; but it is equally reasonable to expect setbacks, delays and an elongation of the entire process.[\[28\]](#)

Based on everything we have seen, corruption remains a very serious problem. The military’s Prosecutor General is constantly complaining about it not only among enlisted men, but among officers as well.[\[29\]](#) Serdyukov has tried to deal with it by making important changes, first, in the draft boards, and second in military representatives at factories. In the first case, the numbers of military personnel have been cut and will be rotated more frequently.[\[30\]](#)

Conclusion

We have no doubt that Serdyukov is serious about reforming the Russian military. Furthermore, while we are aware of the unhappiness of Russian officers vis-a-vis many of his actions, there is no sign to date that there is much the officer corps can do to stop him from making changes. Besides, it is clear to most outside observers, that while one many decry Serdyukov’s personality in dealing with military officers, the changes he is making are badly needed but will be years in making an impact on the army’s combat efficiency.

From a policy standpoint, the foregoing suggests that Medvedev’s references to a military build-up are a bluff, used to convince the West that it is in its interest to make a deal with the Russians. While we take no position on policy, we think it is important to emphasize that the Russian military build-up should not be seen as a major factor in negotiating with the Russians.

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