

Serdyukov Promotes Systemic Russian Military Reform

by Dale R. Herspring and Roger N. McDermott

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***Abstract:** Despite the manifold problems in Russian Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov's radical reform agenda, there is clear evidence that such a program is being implemented regardless of opposition from those in uniform, especially on the General Staff. It is no exaggeration to suggest that depending on how fully it is implemented, this reform could have an impact on the lives of all Russian officers no matter where they serve now. The mass mobilization principle has been abandoned and the transition from a division-based system to the new brigade structure is complete. Meanwhile, despite careful planning by the General Staff, we do not believe the Russian military will emerge as a modern fighting force until 2020, if then. Budget cuts, production inefficiencies, poor maintenance and sloppy work will all inhibit the construction of a modern Russian army.*

This is essentially a totally different army, the foundation of which was laid this year. And this is the country's organizational victory.

(Colonel (retired) Vitaliy Shlykov, Liliya Biryukova, Aleksandr Sargin,
Denis Telmanov, Gazeta, November 20, 2009.)

Enter Serdyukov

A major impetus behind 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. He discovered that corruption was even more extensive than he had expected.

On April 3, 2008, 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 Ministry of Defense (MoD) “accounts for 70 percent of the budgetary resources used for purposes other than those officially designated.”¹ 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 staffed entirely by civilians. The result was that the officers were moved back a step from being in a position to make purchases. Still, that was not enough. It was becoming increasingly clear that major changes were needed in the Russian military.

One of the biggest shocks to the military high command came when then Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to promote Ivanov 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 the furniture business, made a mockery of the position. (His nickname is *bughalter*, a derisive term denouncing someone whose only job is to shuffle paper.) To make matters worse from the military’s standpoint, Serdyukov came from the Tax Service, and brought with him 20 civilian auditors to determine where the money was being misspent by 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 entered through the rear, where he discovered horrible, unsanitary conditions, damp college cadets’ rooms, water in the basement, fungi on the walls, and crumbling plaster. Consequently, the chief of the college, Rear Admiral Aleksandr Bukin, was fired and dismissed from the service.² The message was clear: if you do not measure up, you will pay the consequences.

Massive Changes are Underway

Since Serdyukov took over, massive changes have been initiated within the Russian armed forces. First, the officer corps is being cut from 355,000 to 150,000.³ Following NATO’s example, Moscow has decided to cut the ratio of officers and enlisted personnel from the current 2-2.5 ratio to one

¹ “Defense Ministry Will Shed Excess Equipment,” *RFE/RL Newsline*, April 3, 2008. See also, “Russian Official Says 30 Percent of Military Budget Lost Through Corruption,” *Agentstvo voyennyykh novostey*, July 2, 2008, in *World News Connection*, cited hereafter as wnc.

² “Serdyukov is an Army Outside of a Parade Formation,” *Rossiskaya gazeta*, May 14, 2007 in wnc May 15, 2007.

³ “The Army Needs to be Protected from Dilettantes,” www.utro.ru, October 22, 2008.

for every fifteen enlisted personnel.⁴ The numbers involved are staggering. For example, the number of generals on active duty is being cut from 1,107 to 886 (primarily in logistics or Rear Services since its operations are being centralized and much of it is being civilianized), and colonels from 23,663 to 9,114. Majors will be cut from 99,550 to 25,000, while the number of captains will be reduced from 90,000 to 40,000. The only officer rank to gain will be lieutenants and they will go up by 10,000.⁵ No sector is being spared. There were 140,000 warrant officers on active duty. By the end of 2009 only 20,000 (primarily those in the Navy) remain. They were given the option of becoming non-commissioned officers (NCO's) or – if they were filling an officer's billet – they had the opportunity to receive commissions. Otherwise, they were being civilianized.

Even the medical staff is being hit hard. Major-General Aleksandr Fisum, a deputy head of the Main Military Medical Department, confirmed in May 2009 that as many as 22 military hospitals will be closed and over 10,000 officer positions slashed. "In the course of the medical service reform, which is being pursued to reshape the makeup of the armed forces, 22 military hospitals will be liquidated and the officer staff will be cut to 5,800 from the current 15,953." Fisum further stated that more than 30 percent of the medical officer posts will be replaced with civilians. "We had 145,000 civilian personnel in 2008, and this figure should be cut to 97,000 in 2010. As of December 1, 2009 the Russian medical service includes 13 central and district military hospitals and 101 branches."⁶ In addition, 80 percent of all lawyers are being shown the door.⁷ Furthermore, all but 20 officers' positions in military media organizations will close—except for those working for the *Krasnaya zvezda* military newspaper.⁸ Meanwhile, chaplains and non-party affiliated political officers are being reintroduced.⁹

Equally surprising has been 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

⁴ "Russia to have 1 million Troops by 2016," *ITAR-TASS*, April 3, 2008; "Russia May Introduce More Civilian Posts in Army," *Agentstvo voyennykh novostey*, March 31, 2008 in wnc April 1, 2008. To a large degree, the excessive number of officers came from Moscow's reliance on category 2 and 3 units, which were largely staffed by officers – many of whom had little combat training with regular soldiers.

⁵ "No one needs a war, but Russia is ready," www.utro.ru, November 20, 2008 in wnc November 21, 2008.

⁶ "Russia to Close 22 Military Hospitals, cut over 10,000 Medical Officer Posts," *Interfax*, May 27, 2009.

⁷ "Military Reform 2009-2013," *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye*, January 1, 2009 in wnc January 2, 2009.

⁸ "Defense Ministry to Close Officer Jobs in Military Media," *Interfax-AVN Online* December 3, 2008 in wnc December 4, 2008.

⁹ See Dale Herspring and Roger McDermott, "Chaplains, Political Officers and the Future Russian Armed Forces," forthcoming.

Moscow. Accordingly, officers in the MoD and the General Staff will be reduced over a four year period from a total of 27,873 to 8,500 officers.¹⁰

The military intelligence directorate (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye*—GRU) is also being downsized by more than 40 percent as are the Special Forces units—the *Spetsnaz*. It appears that these changes were strongly opposed by Army-General Valentin Korabelnikov, the former head of the GRU, who resigned in March of 2009. In addition, several *Spetsnaz* units are also being disbanded.¹¹ Also, after opposition from the high command, military police are being created. They “will report to the Deputy Defense Minister Aleksandr Komakov, who oversees combat-training.” Initially, their primary function will be “to maintain law and order in the field and to fight against bullying and harassment.”¹²

Educational institutions are also being affected. Moscow has decided to cut the number of educational institutions from 65 to three military-educational centers, six academies, and one military university (the General Staff Academy). This is a major change. After all, 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 not needed. Why not send army, navy and air force personnel to the same schools to learn the basics of electronics, leaving an advanced course to teach them the elements specific to their individual services? Consequently, many teaching personnel were given their walking papers.

One indication of Serdyukov's sweeping changes is found in the status of the Railroad Troops. They too are being subjected to radical reforms. Although they do not actually conduct combat operations, they will be transformed in the same manner as the other forces and combat arms. By the end of 2009, the Railroad Troops were divided into four territorial commands and separate railroad brigades. The brigades will be included in permanent-combat-readiness units. The bulk of these cuts will fall on the officer corps and warrant officers.

If there is any lesson from the Railroad Troops reforms it is an almost mechanical theme within Serdyukov's reform agenda: a one size fits all approach. The various subunits are being treated as though they are the same, without any reference to doctrines and concepts, threats or even technical requirements and monitoring progress. Controversy erupted in May 2008 after a battalion of Railroad Troops was sent to Abkhazia to restore 50 kilometers of tracks and to repair nine bridges. Many regarded this as an indication of an imminent Russian military operation in the region. However,

¹⁰ “Within the Framework of Reform of the Russian Federation Armed Forces,” *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, October 29, 2008 in wnc November 20, 2009.

¹¹ “GRU Chief Escapes Reform: Army-General Valentin Korabelnikov has been Removed,” *Kommersant*, April 28, 2009 in wnc April 29, 2009.

¹² “The Commandants Will Become Police Officers: Military Police Will be Appearing in the Field Right Now. . .” *Vedomosti*, December 4, 2009 in wnc 12/5/09.

these troops can carry out such work in a cost effective way for the state: dispatching its civilian counterpart would have substantially raised costs.¹³

Meanwhile, Serdyukov, while thus far not substantially modifying his reform agenda, has at least reached out to the officer corps by attempting to show greater sensitivity to their plight. For example, in May 2009 he commented,

I will go even further. Under the crisis conditions we have resolved to approach each officer with even more tact. We are currently undertaking an extensive fitness evaluation of the personnel. We are attempting to find out who wants to serve, who can and should remain in the service. . . . All the generals are being evaluated under my leadership. We will take a look, make an evaluation, and make a decision in regard to each individually.¹⁴

This concern is driven by fears within the Russian government over potential unrest as thousands of unemployed officers attempt to reintegrate to new civilian jobs within the economy. Officers reaching the upper age limit for military service are being encouraged to continue to serve in the army as civilians. In the meantime, those who were forced out were given three options: those with less than 10 years service were given severance pay; those with between 10 and 20 years, received severance pay as well as an apartment; and those with 20 or more years, received severance pay, an apartment and a retirement package.¹⁵ Moscow claims that retraining programs were made available. After all, the one thing it does not want to face is massive unemployment from these former officers. Yet, there are many in the Russian military who question the sincerity of the government's largesse. Retraining is questionable, e.g., for someone who served in submarines or who spent eight or nine years as a tank officer. Housing may be provided, but it could be located out in rural areas. Reports indicate that some senior officers are "selling" letters of recommendation permitting an officer to remain on active duty. In short, morale in the army is very low.¹⁶

What is to be Done?

A key aspect of Serdyukov's reform plan is his effort to introduce a meaningful non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps into the Russian military. Russian officers generally carry out many functions performed in the U.S. military by NCOs. But since there will now be far fewer officers, Moscow has

¹³ "Russian Daily Questions Railway Troops Reform Plan," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 20, 2009.

¹⁴ "Offensive Against the Prescribed Strength Levels: Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov Spoke About the New Look of the Armed Forces in an Exclusive Interview with *Rossiyskaya gazeta*," May 12, 2009.

¹⁵ "Military Reforms, 2009-2012," *Nezavisimaya voyennoye obozreinye*, January 1, 2009 in wnc January 2, 2009.

¹⁶ "Are Personnel Being Given Efficiency Reports for Cash? Officers Believe it is Possible to Avoid Reduction by Bribery," *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, December 6, 2008 in wnc December 7, 2008.

decided to create a professional NCO corps. This will not be easy because the Russian military historically has refused to delegate authority. Yet NCO's are only effective if they are permitted and encouraged to show initiative.

Unfortunately, Moscow has run into major problems in developing NCO's. After much fanfare, a new program was set up to train NCO's in six military higher education facilities under a new ten-month program. One critique of this initiative encapsulated the sheer scale of the challenges involved:

At the military VUZ's in Ryazan and Omsk as many as 60 percent of those tested were incapable of solving quadratic equations, while half of them were unable to do calculations involving simple fractions and decimals. Yet this is eighth or ninth grade standards in high school.¹⁷

So far, Moscow's efforts to develop an NCO corps primarily by relying on the so-called *Kontraktniki*—i.e., those who have volunteered for military service has failed miserably. The original hope was that by reducing the conscription term from two to one year, and pushing the contract system, it would be possible not only to attract some of the conscripts to sign up for a three year term, but to build a professional military with the conscripts serving as a mobilization back-up in the event of a major conflict. In addition to the educational problems noted above, pay is not sufficient to convince the average Russian male to join up or, even more importantly, to convince those who have completed their first enlistment to sign up for a second one. According to the Federal Service for Government Statistics, in 2008 the average salary in Russia was 17,900 rubles, while contract personnel (*kontraktniki*) were offered the starting salary of 8,000 rubles. Overall, MoD statistics show that the average salary for a *kontraktniki* in 2009 was 1.5 times lower than the average salary in Russia as a whole.¹⁸ To make matters worse, the quality of the *kontraktniki* is very low. Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov, former Head of the Main Department for Combat Training and Service of the Russian Armed Forces, noted "The Russian army, plagued by small money allowances is actually 'picking leftovers' on the labor market of law-enforcement bodies. The so-called 'military guest workers'—notorious for poor health and unprofessionalism—are signing up for the army and the navy."¹⁹ Furthermore, the crime rate among these "professionals" is very high.²⁰ Many of them simply have walked off the job. "5,000 contract soldiers willfully left the service and 10,000 tore up their contracts," according to one 2008 source.²¹

¹⁷ "NCO No Comrade for the Cadet: Training of Professional Junior Commanders Has Ground to a Halt," *www.gazeta.ru*, March 27, 2009 in wnc April 29, 2009.

¹⁸ "Army of the Unemployed," *Novyee Izvestiya*, January 15, 2009 in wnc January 16, 2009.

¹⁹ "Russian Army in Need of Professionals," ITAR-TASS, September 23, 2008 in wnc September 24, 2008.

²⁰ "Professionals are Necessary for the Army," *Armeyski Sbornik*, September 2, 2008 in wnc September 3, 2008.

²¹ "Around 2,000 Legal Violations Registered at Draft Offices in 2008," *Interfax*, February 25, 2009 in wnc February 26, 2009.

A revised plan to open an NCO training school within the VDV Academy at Ryazan was announced in September 2009. It sought to attract recruits for a course lasting two years and ten months by offering to pay a salary equivalent to that of a general (35,000 rubles per month). The MoD asserted that 2,000 trainees would enroll annually, with a first batch of 1,700 due to start classes on December 1, 2009. Reportedly, in an effort to raise standards and ensure that candidates could cope with the physical and academic elements of the course and presumably demonstrate some leadership potential the prerequisites included: being under 35, and over 170 centimeters tall, passing a basic fitness test and meeting the level required to pass the academic entrance test. By late November 2009, senior officials were admitting problems existed without specifying their nature. They said that the classes would commence on time with 300 students. Some 100 prospective members of this elite academy, successful in their entrance tests, withdrew their applications, complaining about the disparity between the conditions offered and what they were told during recruitment. On December 1, 2009 the center opened with 254 trainees, underscoring the problem facing the Russian MoD in attracting, training and retaining a new generation of junior commanders who, in September 2012, will become responsible in some units for teaching recruits and ensuring combat capabilities within their units.²²

There is also a severe shortage of competent officers. From 1990 to 2000, there were few training exercises. Training, in fact, was not only inadequate it was a disaster. Consequently, when Moscow looked around for officers to send to Georgia for the conflict in 2008, it discovered how few officers had the requisite experience. According to one source, “We had to search one person at a time for lieutenant-colonels, colonels or generals throughout the armed forces to participate in the combat operations [in Georgia], because the table of organization commanders (paper divisions and regiments) was simply not in a state to solve combat issues.”²³ Many of the air force pilots, for example, were either test pilots or training officers—the lack of fuel made it difficult if not impossible to train pilots.²⁴

Unfortunately, for the Kremlin, the officer problem goes far beyond a lack of training. Crime is also a serious problem. According to the country’s

²² Aleksandr Golts, “Threat to Reform,” *Yezhbednevnyy Zburnal*, December 3, 2009; “Defense Ministry Disrupts Lessons: Contract NCO Training Program Threatened With Failure,” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets Online*, November 3, 2009; Aleksandr Khranchikhin, “Not a ‘Professional Army’ but an Army of Lumpen Individuals,” *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, October 27, 2009; Oleg Pchelov, “Armed Forces and Society: Future NCO’s,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, September 25, 2009; Leonid Khayremdinov, “The Sergeants’ Roads Lead to Ryazan,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, September 9, 2009.

²³ “Officers are Being Retrained as Building Managers,” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, December 23, 2008 in wnc December 24, 2008.

²⁴ See: Stephane Lefebvre & Roger N McDermott, “Air Power and the Russian-Georgian Conflict of 2008: Lessons Learned and Russian Military Reforms,” *RAF Airpower Review*, April 2009.

military prosecutor Sergei Fridinsky, the number of crimes committed by army officers in Russia has reached an all time high over the past five years.²⁵ The Kremlin has made an effort to retain competent officers by increasing pay and by offering monetary rewards for outstanding officers. As one source put it, “A decision was made to reward the individuals responsible for performance capability of the armed forces. In 2009, 34,000 officers will be awarded from 35,000 to 150,000 rubles a month depending on their duty assignment. The number of officers receiving these rewards is to be increased.”²⁶ General Shamanov commented with regard to pay, “In my opinion it must be increased by at least two or three times.”²⁷

Housing and infrastructure are additional problems facing Serdyukov. It is hard to entice young men to join or remain in the armed forces if they are not provided with decent housing, medical care, and schools for their children, etc. In 2009 it was reported that “90,700 military personnel of all ranks and categories need housing.”²⁸ To its credit, the MoD is working hard to address this problem, made easier by the force reduction that is underway. A mortgage system was set-up whereby officers and the military contribute to a fund to help officers buy apartments—although there is never enough money to enable an officer to pay for an apartment in an expensive city like Moscow or St. Petersburg. Furthermore, a part of the money that the MoD is receiving from the sale of properties, equipment and weapons is being used to upgrade infrastructure.

Another change that few, who followed the Soviet and then the Russian military, would have predicted was the introduction of physical fitness tests. For years, it seemed that there was a direct correlation between a general’s girth and the number of stars he carried on his shoulders. Now, all personnel are being required to pass an annual physical fitness exam. In early 2008, 26 percent of all young officers tested failed.²⁹

²⁵ “Crime Growth Among Officers Reaches Maximum over 5 Years—Prosecutor,” ITAR-TASS, February 26, 2009, in wnc February 26, 2009. Another source claims that “Over 1,800 officers were convicted in 2008 . . . and Over 500 officers, including 370 senior officers of which 117 were unit commanders, were held responsible for corruption in 2008.” “Russian Military Prosecutor Concerned about Growing Number of Crimes Among Officers,” Interfax-AVN Online, February 25, 2009 in wnc February 26, 2009. It should also be noted that when Russian officials refer to army officers, they have in mind all of the services that come under the MoD. What is generally referred to as the “army” in the West is called the Ground Forces or Airborne Troops. When they have the ground troops in mind, Russian officers will say so.

²⁶ “On a Par with the World’s Best Armies,” *Krasnaya zvezda*, March 19, 2009 in wnc March 20, 2009.

²⁷ “Focus on Quality,” *Armeysky sbornik*, May 29, 2009, in wnc May 31, 2009.

²⁸ “Politics and Economics: Armed Forces Recruitment and Defense Ministry in Trying to Place Military People being Discharged,” *Vremya novostey*, March 30, 2009 in wnc April 1, 2009.

²⁹ “Russian Military Battles Overweight Soldiers,” *The Times (London)*, April 11, 2008; “Russian Defense Ministry Introduces Stricter Fitness Requirements,” *Agentstvo voyennykh novostey*, June 24, 2008 in wnc, June 25, 2008.

A Push Back by the Military?

Serdyukov is determined to get rid of the old tank-heavy, mass army that the USSR used to win World War II. He wants a military that is prepared to “simultaneously take part in a minimum of three regional and local armed conflicts.” Up to this point, Moscow had focused on winning just one war, but as Georgia demonstrated, a major conflict between Moscow and NATO, for example, may be the least probable form of conflict in the future.³⁰ Toward that end, Serdyukov has made major structural changes in the way the Russian military operates. For example, instead of four levels of command (military district, army, division, and regiment), the Serdyukov administration has moved to three levels (military district, operational command and brigade). Despite considerable opposition from the military top brass, this new structure is already in position and the Russians are beginning to test it in their exercises.³¹ Serdyukov also moved quickly to get rid of the division structure, replacing it with smaller and more mobile brigades.

A bizarre aspect of Serdyukov’s new reform is that it gives the appearance of having been developed “on the fly.” The normal procedure for the Russian military is to await the production of the country’s “National Security Doctrine.” Once that is published, then the General Staff will provide a military doctrine. The latter has normally been the key document for the armed forces. It provides the generals and admirals with a guide to what kinds of weapons the army will buy, as well as what type of wars to prepare for and under what conditions. In this case, Serdyukov reversed the procedure. Throughout 2008-2009, Serdyukov kept promising that the country would have a new military doctrine by the end of 2009.³²

Finally on May 13, 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev signed an executive order approving the country’s National Security Strategy through 2020. It replaces the country’s 1997 National Security Concept. This new document is a hodgepodge of vague, sometimes confusing statements about various threats the country could face in the future.³³ For example, it argues that Moscow’s biggest threat is “the policy of some foreign states aimed at attaining an overwhelming military superiority, particularly in the area of strategic nuclear weapons, through targeted, informational, and other high-technology means of conducting armed conflict, non-nuclear strategic arms, the development of missile defenses, and the militarization of space.” In other words, Moscow faces virtually every kind of threat imaginable. Unfortunately, this document does

³⁰ “War on Three Fronts,” *Vremya Nosostey*, December 28, 2008 in wnc December 29, 2008.

³¹ “General Reducations,” *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, October 18, 2008 in wnc October 19, 2008.

³² See “Russia to Have New Military Doctrine by the End of 2009,” ITAR-TASS, December 15, 2008.

³³ The document is available (in Russian): <http://www.scrf.gov.ru>. The title of one article in the Russian press probably said it best in the title of an article on it, “All is clear with Russia’s security. But nothing is understandable.” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets Online*, May 15, 2009 in wnc May 16, 2009.

little to provide defense planners with clear guidance on what types of military force to develop—probably because Serdyukov and his Chief of the General Staff, Army-General Nikolai Makarov do not know precisely what specific forces they plan to develop. This document indicates that developing military doctrine is a work in progress. On February 5, 2010, President Medvedev finally signed the new military doctrine, which appears to be a balancing act between the hawks and other diverging views. Yet, its elements which refer to military reform do not provide unequivocal support for the process.

Military Resistance

Since Serdyukov became Defense Minister, the generals and admirals have not been happy with him. According to one source:

It is no secret that the absolute majority of the officer corps: which is going to be cut by more than half in the next three years have reacted negatively and in a number of cases with hostility to these reforms. The Kremlin, which is sent monthly data from troop opinion polls, is concerned about this problem. . . . The military in Russia are a unique caste, and wrecking the future of the overwhelming majority of them always turns to human tragedy.³⁴

Serdyukov fired a number of officers shortly after taking office. He then began feuding with Army-General Yuri Baluyevskiy, the Chief of the General Staff. Relations became so strained that Baluyevskiy submitted his resignation three times before then President Vladimir Putin finally accepted it. In the last two years, almost all of the senior officers in the Russian military have either been fired or forced to retire. As a result, one might surmise that anyone currently in uniform is prepared to go out of his way to support Serdyukov's policies.

Until recently this appeared to be the case. However, one of the generals Serdyukov appointed to replace those he was firing, Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov may turn out to be a different type of officer. Shamanov, at age 52, has significant combat experience, especially with the airborne forces. He graduated from Ryazan Airborne Troops School, and is best known for his service in Chechnya, where he was chief of staff of the Novorossiysk 7th Division. He was considered a hard hitting general who was not about to permit matters such as human rights get in his way as he prosecuted the war.³⁵ Subsequently, he commanded the 58th Army which was heavily involved in the war in Chechnya. Shortly after taking over the defense ministry, Serdyukov recalled Shamanov, who had retired, to active duty. Shamanov took over the Training Directorate and quickly began turning

³⁴ "Purge of the General Staff has Begun: Dmitry Medvedev Will Tell Those who Remain About New Benefits," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, November 10, 2008.

³⁵ See, Roger McDermott, "General Shamanov Appointed as Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, Issue 105, June 2, 2009; "A Soldier Does Not Choose the War," *Krasnaya zvezda*, June 2, 2009 in wnc June 2, 2009.

matters upside down. He closed numerous training facilities and developed new ones that relied increasingly on modern technology.

On May 26, 2009 it was announced that Medvedev had appointed General Shamanov to head the country's airborne forces, clearly the most combat ready troops in the army, with the possible exception of the Naval Infantry and the *Spetsnaz*. In one sense, Shamanov's appointment makes sense from Medvedev's point of view—appointing a dynamic officer who is a highly decorated (twice as a “Hero of Russia”) veteran and a dynamic leader to be in charge of those units most likely to see combat in the coming years.

On the other hand, Shamanov's appointment raises questions. For example, one of his successful changes was to keep the division structure for the 106th Airborne Division in Tula. In January 2009, Serdyukov signed an order to disband the Tula division.³⁶ This does not mean that reform is not coming to all of the airborne divisions—it is—but it raises the question as to why the Tula division was not also broken down into brigades, as was planned for the ground forces.³⁷ Only time will tell if this was an aberration or a move to reverse the structural changes Serdyukov introduced. However, Shamanov noted the trend that unfolded since the reforms were first announced, placing this in the context of previous failures. “It is noteworthy here that, it is not the first time that the army reform has had to be put into reverse: the disbandment of a missile division, the move of the Navy Main Staff to St. Petersburg, the formation of NCO departments in service academies, the complete ‘eradication’ of army and navy warrants, and the reduction in a number of hospitals have been halted also,” Shamanov observed.³⁸

Shamanov has also indicated that there will be no “voluntary” dismissals of officers and that the planned reduction of the VDV has been canceled. “Russia's airborne troops will not be transferred from a division basis to a brigade one. In the absence of large-scale clashes between large masses of troops, subunits and units of the Airborne Troops, ranging from a reinforced platoon to a parachute regiment can act independently,” he asserted. Moreover, Shamanov considers the optimum structure for the VDV to be a four-tiered system – airborne troops, division, regiment, and battalion. The boldness of General Shamanov's statements since taking charge of the airborne troops indicates that he has been granted freedom of action. This is the first time since the reform began that such a high ranking officer has publicly admitted that the military department is abandoning some of its early plans to reorganize the troops and is making serious corrections to them.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “The Generals Launched a Counterattack: Military Reform Concept is Undergoing Serious Changes,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 29, 2009 in wnc May 31, 2009.

³⁸ “The New VDV Commander Has Applied the Brakes to Military Reform,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 1, 2009 in wnc June 2, 2009.

³⁹ “Gamble on Landing, General Shamanov Promised to Cancel Reduction of Airborne Troops,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, June 6, 2009 in wnc June 7, 2009.

The War in Georgia

The war in Georgia demonstrated, that under the existing structure, the direct involvement of the General Staff is critical. When the war began, the General Staff was in the process of moving from its building to the old Warsaw Pact headquarters. Communications were down, and for a time, Moscow was blind. As one Russian source put it,

The Main Operations Directorate and the Main Organization Directorate found themselves on August 8, 2008 in the street in the direct sense of the word. On that day the directorates were engaged in carrying out a very strict directive of Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov. Ten KamAZ's were lined up at entrances, and property of the General Staff's two main directorates, packed in boxes and bundles, was being loaded into them.⁴⁰

The result was that “many officers learned the news that Georgia had begun a military operation against South Ossetia from morning news publications.”⁴¹ Miscommunication on this scale was bad enough, but the situation on the ground was even worse—and very embarrassing to the Russian military.

In the aftermath of the war, the “lessons learned” from the Five Day War were so shocking and had such serious implications for the state, that reinterpreting the conflict from a Russian military perspective became the impetus for announcing anew the most radical and sweeping changes in the Russian conventional armed forces since World War II. In general, the conflict highlighted the shortcomings, failings and decrepit condition of the armed forces. During the fall of 2008, the Russian General Staff, the MoD, and other government agencies came to understand that the forces currently at the state's disposal were in no condition to fight a modern war. In an interview in May 2009, one former VDV intelligence chief, Colonel Pavel Popovskikh, underscored the dated condition of combat training within the elite airborne forces, as well as reflecting on the actual situation in the conventional armed forces:

Our army is still being trained based upon regulations, which were written in the 1980s! The regulations, manuals, combat training programmes, and the volumes of standards have become obsolete. An old friend recently sent me the volume of standards that is in force, which we wrote already in 1984, 25 years ago. This volume is a reflection of the operational and combat training of the troops and their operating tactics. If the Airborne Troops have remained at that prehistoric level, then we can confidently say that the General Staff and the rest of the troops continue to train for a past war.⁴²

In essence, the Five Day War was a watershed for Russia; it represented the last war of the twentieth century, fought exclusively with dated tactics,

⁴⁰ “Sword of the Empire,” *Zavtra*, October 5, 2008 in wnc October 6, 2008.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Confusion Reigns in the Russian Troops,” www.utro.ru, May 19, 2009.

equipment, weapons and structures more suited to waging large scale conventional warfare than being deployed in local, non-contact conflict.⁴³

Among the numerous issues exposing the limited capabilities of the post-Soviet legacy forces were: the aged equipment, hardware and weaponry, dangerously coupled with ineffective command and control systems, poor communications and inter-service coordination. In addition, there were 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. In August 2008, the independent Russian military newspaper, *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye* (NVO), noted that 60-75 percent of 58th Army tanks deployed in the theater of operations were in fact the old T-62, T-72M and T72-BM none of which could withstand Georgian anti-tank warheads.⁴⁴

Consequently, a feature of official statements on military reform and modernization since the Five Day War have heralded a new era in which the conventional forces will be reequipped with modern equipment and weaponry. By 2012 plans call for pursuing 1,500 research and experimental design efforts, which will see 487 models of arms and military equipment presented for state trial, the state trials of almost 600 will be completed, and approximately 400 will be taken into service. More than 70 strategic nuclear missiles, 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. The Russian 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-935 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). Plus, there will be sufficient numbers of the fifth-generation Russian fighter (series deliveries of the state-of-the-art multirole Su-35 fighter are due to begin

⁴³ “The Price of Victory: Military Experts on the Mistakes of the Campaign in South Ossetia,” *Trud*, August 18, 2008; Viktor Baranets, “Army Sent to Fight in Old Suit of Armor,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, August 26, 2008; “Interview with Anatoliy Nogovitsyn,” *Rossiskaya gazeta*, September 9, 2009. What was so surprising about the war in Georgia and the performance of the Russian military for those of us who have studied both the Soviet and Russian armies is the open, blunt and very critical comments made not only by civilian defense experts, but by military officers as well—all the way up to the Chief of the General Staff. See, for example, “Russian Army Changing its Image,” www.gazeta.ru/, November 10, 2008 in wnc November 11, 2008.

⁴⁴ “The Lessons Learned of the 5-Day War in the Transcaucasus,” *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye*, August 29, 2008.

in 2011). The aims and image in this list looks like a military equivalent of Potomekin's village.⁴⁵

However, despite the presentation of a reforming and modernization agenda, undoubtedly popular with admirals and generals—who 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 to such plans that go much deeper than Russia's experience of the global financial crisis and collapse in oil revenues since mid-2008.⁴⁶ Some of these are evident in specific design problems and procurement issues related to its defense industries, which call into question both the timeline for modernizing the conventional forces, as well as Russia's potential ambitions.

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

If there is anything that demonstrates just how difficult the road to weapons and equipment modernization is, it is Moscow's problems with its MBT's.⁴⁷ To begin with, 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 places an additional burden on providing training, fuel, spare parts and equipment required for their maintenance. Moreover, large numbers of tanks demand adequate servicing, which has never been properly funded. The tank building policy in Russia has remained largely unchanged since the 1960s; while recent changes have led to some improvement, they have not been on a scale sufficient to make an impact.

In July 2008, the then Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces, Army-General Alexei Maslov, admitted that Russian tanks were lagging behind other countries in the use of modern electronics. He said, "Although work to develop a tank battlefield information management system (BIMS) is already under way, its installation on outdated tank 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 a "modern" MBT is being introduced into service within the elite Kantemirovskaya and Tananskaya tank divisions, and originally planned to be fully equipped by 2010, remains

⁴⁵ See Roger N McDermott, "A Resurgent Russia is Flattering to Deceive," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, December 10, 2008; "Defense Procurement is Securely Protected Against the Crisis," *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, February 26, 2009.

⁴⁶ "The Courageous Accountant: The Experts on Army Reform," *Vremya novostey*, January 15, 2009; "Russian Pundit, Veteran Generals Question, Attack Military Reform," *Interfax*, January 23, 2009.

⁴⁷ Lack of space prohibits us from going into the many—in some cases more difficult—problems facing the Russian military in other areas—with planes, GPS, ships, etc.

outdated. Significantly, it has no BIMS installed on it, which means it is essentially firing blind in battlefield conditions.⁴⁸

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-90 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.⁴⁹

The solution, according to the leadership of the Russian MoD, lies in the new T-95 that Moscow says is far superior to existing models. The new Russian MBT is not yet in production, but the Kremlin claims it is outfitted with new running gear, armaments, fire control, reconnaissance and target identification features. However, in a lengthy article, one Russian specialist cast doubt on the value of the T-95 arguing that “the new tank will add to the line of the old T-72, T-80, and T-90 armored vehicles yet another model whose design carries the philosophy of the wars of the past.”⁵⁰

Regardless of its eventual value in a combat situation, the Russian military has not established a firm date for the introduction of a new MBT. As this process has stalled, many countries have been active in research and development of anti-tank missiles, equipped with non-contact fuses that 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 become a recurring theme in the challenge of Russia’s military modernization; namely, a sense in which they will be playing catch-up for many years, while other nation’s militaries acquire more advanced technologies.⁵¹

Weakened Defense Community and the Global Financial Crisis

Attempts to modernize Russian weapons face problems that go far beyond weapons design. A set of circumstances within Russia’s defense industry, worsened by the current financial crisis, militates against series production and procurement into the ground forces of large numbers of MBT’s—certainly within the timetable advocated by the government. These

⁴⁸ “Russian General Outlines Plan to Supply Army with New Armored Equipment,” *Interfax*, November 13, 2008; “Russian TV Shows Modernized BMPT Tank Support Fighting Vehicle,” *Rossiya TV*, November 14, 2008.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “Vehicle for the Wars of the Past,” *Nezavisimoye voyennoye obozreniye*, May 21, 2009 in wnc May 22, 2009.

⁵¹ “Russia Hit by Tank Crisis,” *RIA Novosti*, March 21, 2008.

stem from personnel to equipment issues within the defense industries. Highly qualified personnel within these industries are becoming increasingly scarce. Many of these skilled workers are reaching retirement age. And there is a shortage of young engineering graduates willing 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.⁵² Many of the factories involved in modernizing of MBT's 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 both the range and quality of products, even before the financial crisis hit Russia.

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 up to 2020. Adjustments were made in line with the presidential decision following the Georgian War that increased defense spending in 2009 by 28 percent. However, as Russia's MoD continues to assess these issues, 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 counter-measures, and weapons. Nonetheless, General Kraylyuk believes this will occur only over a thirty year period, which indicates that at least some senior Russian officers recognize that the military modernization program will take much longer to achieve its aims.⁵³

On December 30, 2008, Prime Minister Putin stated that the government intended to disburse 50 billion Rubles (\$1.7 billion) in emergency financial aid to enterprises of the defense-industrial complex; 70 percent of which would be invested in the fixed assets of strategic enterprises within the defense industry. This initially targeted companies within the defense industry nearing bankruptcy, and it followed up with some 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.⁵⁴

⁵² "Armed Forces and Society," *Krasnaya zvezda*, March 10, 2009.

⁵³ "The Defense Order Can be Refused Nothing: Record Large Sums Allocated for Army Modernization," *Izvestiya*, October 20, 2008; "Russia to Buy Back 24 Fighters Rejected by Algeria for \$690 Million," *Interfax*, February 2, 2009.

⁵⁴ "Army Reform to Proceed Despite Financial Problems: Chief of General Staff," *ITAR-TASS*, December 25, 2008; "Defense Industry: Goals Set," *Krasnaya zvezda*, December 30, 2008; "Putin says Russia Sets Aside R326 to Support Real Economy, Jobs in 2009, *Interfax*, December 30, 2008.

All of the aforementioned efforts to modernize the Russian military were brought into question, when on February 12, 2009 it was announced that “The Russian defense ministry’s 2009 budget [would] be cut by 15 percent because of the economic crisis, but the spending on armaments and social programs [would] be left intact.”⁵⁵ The same source went on to state that the main cuts would come in “capital construction and renovation.”⁵⁶ The blow was softened a month later when officials claimed that the MoD’s budget would only be cut by 8 percent.⁵⁷ However, regardless of how much money is cut or how it was reallocated, it will hurt whether it means fewer housing construction programs or less money for R&D on weapons and equipment.

These serious financial problems have been exacerbated by the current financial crisis, exposing real systemic challenges that Russia will need to address if its modernization program is to succeed. Unless the emergency measures are also accompanied by an intensification of competitive principles, Russia risks inefficient manufacturing processes that could seriously hamper the development of the economy following its emergence from the crisis. Colonel-General Vladimir Popovkin, Chief of Armaments of the Russian 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 MoD 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 pressure 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.⁵⁸

Conclusion

As one Russian commentator observed, “There have not been such radical transformations in our troops for 150 years—since the time of the well-known reforms of Russian Military Minister General-Field Marshal Dmitry Milyutin.”⁵⁹ Undoubtedly, Serdyukov is serious about reforming and moder-

⁵⁵ “Russian Defense Budget to be Cut by 15 Percent in 2009,” *Interfax-AVN Online*, February 12, 2009, in wnc February 13, 2009.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ “At the First Stage – 8 Percent: The MoD is Cutting the Budget 8 Percent,” *Vedomosti*, March 10, 2009 in wnc March 15, 2009.

⁵⁸ “Putin Says Russia Sets Aside R326 Billion,” *Op.Cit.*

⁵⁹ Victor Baranets, *Komsomolskaya pravda*, December 9, 2008.

nizing the Russian military. Furthermore, while we are aware of the unhappiness of Russian officers' vis-à-vis Serdyukov and many of his actions, and while we will have to wait to see what impact Shamanov's elevation to head of the airborne forces has on the reform, there is no sign to date that there is much the officer corps can or will do to stop him from making additional changes. Besides, it is clear to most outside observers, that while one may decry Serdyukov's massive changes, it is obvious that these changes are badly needed. Unfortunately, from the Russian standpoint, given the many obstacles facing Serdyukov—problems ranging from trying to get Russian officers to show initiative and delegate authority to the new NCO's, to its antiquated weapons programs that are many years behind the United States and the West, it will remain an uphill battle.

From a policy standpoint, the foregoing suggests there is no reason at present for the West to be overly concerned with Moscow's "military buildup." It is capable of taking on small countries on its periphery, but its ability to project force remains very limited, and its ability to stand up against Western weapons systems is open to serious question. The Kremlin realizes that military force is an important component of an effective foreign policy. However, it will be several years before it will have the credible armed forces it needs to strengthen its foreign policy.

