

UCRL-JC-128713
PREPRINT

The Pending Crisis in Russian Civil-Military Relations

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This paper was prepared for submittal to the
Program on New Approaches to Russian Security
Washington, D.C.
October 24, 1997

October 1, 1997

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Program on New Approaches to Russian Security

Policy Memo Series No. 4

The Pending Crisis in Russian Civil-Military Relations

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October 1997

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PONARS is funded by the Program on Preventing Deadly Conflict of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in this policy memo are those of the author alone -- publication in this series does not imply endorsement by PONARS, Harvard University, or Carnegie Corporation.

A key issue in the study of civil-military relations has been how to create a military sufficiently strong to ensure security from external threats while simultaneously preventing the military from using its preponderance of power in the domestic arena. This dilemma arises from the fear engendered by a large armed force created to combat foreign threats, but which is also inherently a threat to the society that created it.

In Russia, however, the question is not how the civilian leadership can keep the military out of politics, but how the military can keep the leadership from politicizing the armed forces. The Russian military has no interest in resolving Russia's domestic political problems. It is a professional military that prefers to leave politics to the politicians, and to carry out its mission of defending the nation against external attack. But the lack of responsible central leadership and the poor state of the economy are driving the military toward involvement in domestic politics if for no other reason than to ensure its own survival.

The Professional Outlook of the Russian Military

Data from a survey of 600 field-grade officers indicate that the Russian military is highly professional. One indicator of such professionalism is the officers' views on the missions the Russian military should be expected to undertake. The data show that officers properly perceive that their job is to protect the nation against external attacks. They do not want to become embroiled in domestic disputes, nor do they desire to engage in distracting civilian tasks that detract from the military's war fighting capability. The vast majority of officers believe it is inappropriate to use the military to perform routine civilian tasks. They object to using the military to assist farmers in harvesting crops, or to aid in the construction of roads, railroads, or other public works that are important to the national economy. Over 80% of the officers disapprove of using the military for these purposes--tasks they were routinely called upon to perform in the Soviet period. At the same time, the officers feel a strong obligation to help the nation in times of need: 97% state that the military should provide assistance when a natural disaster such as an earthquake, flood or forest fire occurs. Thus, the military recognizes its obligation to society and is willing to help out in times of need, but it also recognizes that engaging in routine tasks such as road maintenance and railroad construction undermines the professionalism and morale of the military.

The military also objects to helping out in situations where they might be called upon to use force to resolve domestic disputes. Officers (68%) feel it is inappropriate to use the military to prevent Russia's regions from seceding--something they believed even prior to the highly unpopular and poorly managed Chechen war. They also do not view protection of the President and of Parliament as a proper military mission--tasks that are within the purview of other professional forces, such as the presidential guards and the internal troops. And they certainly do not want to be the kingmaker in disputes between the Duma and the President. If the Russian military were decidedly unprofessional, one would have expected the military to willingly adjudicate the dispute between the President and Parliament in October 1993; not only would it have played the role of kingmaker, but according to the traditional literature on civil-military relations, the military would have ended up as the king. A recent USIA poll affirms that the Russian officer corps (78%) does not want to become involved in domestic politics.

The military, however, is keenly aware of its mandate to protect the Russian nation against external threats and is willing to carry out this primary mission. When officers were asked whether they would defend the Kuril Islands if Japan chose to attack them, 98.5% declared they would. In addition, Russian officers are highly loyal to their country: 88% state the interests of the Russian people as their first priority. Unfortunately, only a minority of officers (31%) are satisfied with the support they are receiving from the citizenry. In short, the outlook of the Russian officers corps is that of a professional

military dedicated to the people and nation they serve, and unwilling to become involved in domestic disputes.

Political and Social Factors Undermining Military Professionalism

The above finding is all the more remarkable given the enormous pressures undermining the military's professionalism. First, of course, is pressure from the political leadership. On numerous occasions, the military has been asked to play a key role in domestic disputes. In the coup of 1991, the dispute between the President and Parliament in 1993, but also in the late Gorbachev period in Tblisi, Baku, and Vilnius, it was the military that became embroiled. What further compounded the military's resentment was that when blame was assigned for unpopular actions, it was not to the politicians who ordered these actions, but rather to the military who reluctantly executed the orders. A remarkably candid article recently published in the General Staff journal *Armeiskii sbornik* openly discusses the politicization of the military and the disastrous effects it has had both on society and the combat readiness of the armed forces. "The army's participation did not promote a settlement of the contradictions and conflicts, but exacerbated them." Moreover, these activities, culminating in the "inglorious war in Chechnya...only exacerbated destructive processes in the military [and created] disastrous conditions in the formerly powerful and combat effective army."

The second factor undermining military professionalism is their plummeting standard of living. Officers and conscripts are not receiving enough money to provide for even a minimal standard of living, forcing them to moonlight on the side. Numerous survey questions indicate that the economic situation is the overriding concern of the officer corps. They feel that neither they nor their families are being properly treated. Even the much-vaunted promise this past July to pay salary arrears by September was a sham. Though officers' salaries were paid, usual benefits such as housing allowance, expenses for children, and temporary duty assignments (TDYs) were omitted, reducing their income by approximately 30-40%.

Third, the Russian military has been badly in need of reform. To the surprise of many, on July 16, 1997, Yeltsin issued a decree on military reform. Many were caught off-guard because although the need for military reform had long been discussed, little substantive debate had taken place up to that point. Yeltsin had talked about the need for military reform intermittently for the past five years. He especially emphasized its importance prior to major political events, such as elections, as a means of gaining military support. The military soon realized that "as soon as the election campaign is over" the politicians lose "interest in Army affairs and soldiers' problems."

Yeltsin's July decree on military reform was made with almost no consultation with the very institution to undergo reform. Aware of this, the new Defense Minister, Igor Sergeev, immediately warned that high-ranking officers would try to thwart the reform effort. If the military does attempt to undermine reform, they certainly have good reason: the reforms were motivated by high politics with little consideration given to military doctrine or Russia's geopolitical role, or an assessment of future threats--internal ones in particular. In addition, it is unclear how the reforms will be funded. The Defense Minister acknowledged that the details of the reform plan had not been worked out and would be presented in late September, a presentation the military still awaits. It is difficult for officers to feel valued when an issue as crucial as military reform is treated in such an off-hand manner.

Fourth, the prestige of the military has plummeted both domestically and internationally. Domestically, an institution that was once revered and considered the nation's "gold reserve" [zolotoi zapas], currently feels it has such little respect that soldiers' mothers actually come to the battlefield, as they did in Chechnya, to take their boys home. In short, military service is accorded very little respect--so much so that significant numbers of young men are dodging the draft, numerous officers are seeking early retirement, and junior officers are in short supply.

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There has also been a dramatic change in the military's perception of its international status and prestige. The vast majority (81%) of officers surveyed believe that Russia is no longer a superpower equal to the United States. This loss is significant because it was really only in this area that the Soviet Union was on par with the US. Superpower equality served to legitimize the Soviet regime and the Soviet army. In addition, the officers are pessimistic regarding Russia's ability to regain its superpower status in the near future. One-third believe that Russia will be not a superpower, but a great power within ten years, and just under one-third believe it will achieve neither superpower nor great power status.

Implications of poor civil-military relations for the US

Civil-military relations in Russia may soon reach crisis proportions. This issue is important if for no other reason than Russia is the only country with enough nuclear firepower capable of destroying us. Thus, we must deal with the nuclear legacy of the Cold War, despite the political and economic changes that have taken place.

The officer corps views itself as a professional body and wants to be treated as such, yet the political leadership is neglecting the military's needs and failing to accord it the proper respect. As a result, officers are learning that they must become involved in the political process to ensure their survival, as was demonstrated by the large number of officers who ran for political office in the 1995 Duma elections.

The poor state of conditions in the Russian military raises a host of potential problems. First, there is increasing evidence that the nuclear command and control systems may be unreliable. There are a number of scenarios in which one could imagine how a poor command, control and communications system could lead Russia to launch an attack on the US. Second, because of the lack of funding to properly train and equip the army, Russia's military doctrine has placed an increasing reliance on nuclear weapons to counter a conventional attack. The good news is that Russia is unlikely to be attacked in the near future. The bad news is that many Russian Strategic Rocket Forces Officers have not adjusted to new realities. They are still fixated on the possibility of an American first-strike--at a time when a degraded C3 system exacerbates a situation where Russian forces are still on a hair-trigger posture. Finally, there is increasing evidence that Russia's regions are developing along different economic paths. Should Russia break up in the future, it is unclear where the military's loyalty will lie: with the central government or with regional leaders who are providing food and housing.

What can the US do about this? The short answer is not a whole lot. The longer answer is that the US should do everything possible to encourage democracy to take root in Russia. This includes:

- retraining disgruntled officers for civilian jobs;
- initiating more wide-ranging exchanges with officers from the Strategic Rocket Forces;
- establishing contacts below the upper echelons of power including regional elites;
- continuing to provide funding to Russian scientists through the International Science and Technology Center to enable them conduct meaningful technology-based research in areas other than weapons of mass destruction; and
- continuing to help the Russians better protect, control and account for their nuclear material

This work was performed under the auspices of the U. S. Department of Energy by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory under contract No. W-7405-Eng-48.

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