THE RUSSIAN MILITARY IN THE 21st CENTURY

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PART I

Russia's New Security Environment.

At least through the next 10-15 years, Russia's external security concerns, interests, and requirements will be determined by the monumental changes in the inter- national situation since 1989. In all their variety, the frame of reference for Moscow's security policy is comprised of three main realities or axes.

The first reality is that the Soviet empire has disintegrated. Russia has lost its near and far allies and its fourteen subjects of the old Soviet Union. Even the Russian nucleus has started to split as evidenced in the recent bloody fighting in Chechnya. The Russian Federation comprises about 60 percent of the population and economy of the old USSR, and occupies 76 percent of its territory. Its present frontiers are, for long stretches, purely symbolic. Russian national values, ideology, and security perceptions have been deeply split by disputes between many different and sometimes diametrically opposed political groups.

Not only the geopolitical parameters of Russia have been reduced, but the nation finds itself in an entirely new international environment. In the past, the geopolitical space controlled by Moscow directly bordered on the territories controlled or protected by China and the United States. Political and military juxtaposition along those frontiers was sometimes dangerous, but usually quite stable, clear and predictable. Now, to Russia's west and to the south there are former Soviet republics within which there is a high degree political, economic, and social instability. Many are open to outside influences like radical Islamic fundamentalism. Some exist in a state of internal tension and even open armed conflict with various seces- sionist factions. Some have bitter controversies among themselves and with Russia.

The second reality is that the Russian Federation is passing through a deep and protracted economic and social crisis, the end of which is far from sight. An unprecedented decline in production, a financial crisis, the growth of foreign debt, and the heavy loss of gold reserves have made Russia depend on the Big Seven financial powers, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. At the same time, Russia remains a great power. Its immense natural and human resources, huge and established industrial base, its military assets, and the historical legacy of great power status attained during the Soviet era--all assure its status at a much higher level than its present economic position would warrant.

Russia remains one of the world's leading military powers. Russian forces have been reduced as part of the partition of the armed forces among the republics of the former Soviet Union. Certainly there have been reductions in the numbers of troops and weapons due to unilateral cutbacks and in accordance with treaties signed between Russia, the United States, and NATO; i.e., INF-SRF, CFE, and START I. But Russia is still formidable in its military might. It is second only to the United States in nuclear weapons, and Russia remains the strongest power in Europe and Asia in terms of its conventional ground, air, and naval forces.

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At present, the number of troops on active duty number about 1.7 million. By the end of 1997, this number will have been reduced to 1.5 million military (and 800,000 civilians). This makes the Russian armed forces comparable in size to that of the United States and several times larger than even the biggest of the European armies.

It goes without saying that the military balance in Europe has changed dramatically during the last few years. But even at that, Russia will have 1.5-2 times as many tanks and 4-5 times as many combat aircraft as Germany or as the United States has stationed in Europe. Furthermore, beyond the Urals, Russia has up to 5,000 tanks and more than 2,000 combat aircraft. Russian strategic nuclear forces presently consist of about 6,000 warheads. By the year 2006, depending upon whether or not the START II treaty is ratified and implemented, that number will be somewhere between 2,000 and 4,000. Even at 2,000 warheads, Russia's strategic nuclear forces will be 2-3 times larger than those of Britain, France, and China combined, even if their planned modernization programs are fully implemented.

The third reality is the character of the changes in the world at large. The bipolarity of the Cold War most probably is being replaced not by American hegemony but by genuine multipolarity. The time of global superpowers, in itself a historical rarity, has come to an end. The primary players, apart from the United States, will now be Western Europe, China, Japan, a number of strong subregional states, and associations of states. Russia, if it manages to halt its internal disintegration and correctly defines its place in the new system of international relationships, will remain in the ranks of the world players.

It is at least conceivable that in 10-15 years new alliances could lead to a new world bipolarity. For instance, the United States and China and the Pacific rim might supersede Europe as the primary zone of confrontation. In that case, Europe and Russia might be moved to the periphery of world politics.

However, this does not seem very likely. It is more probable that a truly multipolar world will remain for a long time. This period of multilateral diplomacy, a complicated pattern of conflicts, and overlapping interests of states will continue. In the midst of this international environment, coalitions will shift in some regions of the world while multilateral and supra-governmental institutions emerge in others.

Beyond the "near abroad," Russia will be facing a number of states or alliances with considerable armed forces. In the West, NATO will probably enlarge and, with the acceptance of new member states, bring its armed forces closer to the border of Russia. In addition to possessing a 3:1 or 4:1 superiority in conventional weapons, NATO will have a clear-cut nuclear superiority over Russia in both tactical and strategic nuclear forces.

At the southern rim, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan may present a security problem for Russia individually or in some combination. Most probably this threat would be indirect-- manifesting itself through their support of regimes, movements, or policies in the Transcaucasus and in Central Asia which are directed against Russia or its allies. Another possibility is that these states will support secessionist activities against the federal government of Russia, as was the case in Chechnya.

Russia, however, will be able to retain a clear-cut conventional military superiority over all these potential opponents. If this superiority is not effective in achieving Russian goals, that would signify wrong policy goals or misapplication of military power. As for Turkey, if it acts independently of NATO, it will not represent much of a challenge for Russia, especially if Moscow allies itself with other states in the region, like Armenia, and relies on them to provide the bulk of the ground forces. If, on the other hand, Turkey is supported by NATO, then the conflict might escalate to challenge Russia's military power on a global scale.

In the Far East, two powers, Japan and China, theoret-ically could present a threat to Russia. However, Japan's offensive conventional capabilities against Russia will be quite limited for at least the next decade. Any unilateral attempt by Japan to take the Kurile Islands or Sakhalin Island by force is inconceivable, and it is highly unlikely that Washington would agree to support Japan in such an endeavor.

China is a special case. Its geostrategic location, long history of territorial disputes with Russia, and its current military build-up might encourage Beijing to adopt expansionist policies toward Siberia and the Russian Far East or against Kazakhstan and Moscow's other central Asian allies. In 10-15 years, China may achieve conven- tional offensive superiority along the border of the Transbaikal and maritime provinces. Chinese forces would have the shorter lines of communications, making it difficult for Russian forces to interdict them. In contrast, Russian forces would have to travel from their European bases and would be susceptible to Chinese interdiction. On the other hand, Russia will retain its tactical and strategic nuclear advantage. Moscow's credible nuclear deterrent will ensure escalation dominance over China well into the 21st century. Furthermore, China's conventional arms build-up depends on massive importation of weapons and military technology from Russia. Moscow, therefore, has effective means of restraining, or at least constraining, the emergence of this hypothetical threat.

Current Paradoxes in Russian Defense Posture.

The first and fundamental deficiency in the current military policy and reform program is a great relaxation in civilian control of the military. This has left the armed forces virtually on their own during these times of profound change within the armed forces and in their political, ideological, strategic, economic, and demographic environments. The current disorganized condition of the administrative structures in the Russian government and the growing autonomy of bureaucracies have combined to have a tremendous negative effect on the defense establishment. This is an especially dangerous development when taken against the background of a society and state in transition from a centralized to a free market economy and from a communist to a democratic political system.

Moreover, this lack of political control has produced tremendous confusion and mismanagement, and has complicated our much needed military reform efforts. It has created enormous additional hardships for the Russian military by hampering the orderly reduction and redeployment of forces, convulsing the process of defense conversion, fostering chaos in the military personnel system, and adversely affecting housing for most of its officers.

In the absence of a consistent security policy or budgetary guidance from above, military reform has been implemented by adapting traditional military institutions, concepts, and functions to the conditions presented by severe budgetary limitations. The armed services and the departments of the Russian General Staff have been trying to preserve as much of their strategic doctrines, personnel levels, deployment patterns, arsenals, and missions as possible, but this has come at the expense of readiness, training, maintenance, and modernization. Their ability to perform the novel tasks warranted by the new security environment is scant, at best.

Institutionally, the Russian armed forces are very much like those of other nations in their tendency to retain as much as possible of their traditional strategic roles and operational missions while giving lip service to the realities of the post- Cold War environment. Therefore, institutional interests in self-preservation determine policy formulation for force structure and deployment, with the primary constraint being budgetary limitations. This drives the threat assessment. Things should, of course, be the other way around with threat assessments driving budgetary requirements, force structures and levels, and deployment. To some extent all large institutions, civilian as well as military, are subject to this kind of institutional behavior. But in Russia, it has become elevated to the highest degree due to the

general domestic disarray which is taking place against the background of an unprecedented uncertainty in the external security environment.

In recent years, the shallow declarations by Russia's top political leaders that Russia has no foreign enemies or opponents (something that was included in the 1993 version of Russian military doctrine) has put the military in a quandary. Is the Russian military not supposed to prepare for any war? If so, then that would bring into question their very reason for being. Or is the Russian military to prepare for and plan for war with all those states located around Russia or those nations with forces that can directly threaten Russian territory?

It follows from the new military doctrine and numerous statements made by top military commanders, including the present Minister of Defense, that planning contingencies are numerous and complex. They include being prepared for wars in the west, south, and east; large-scale and theater- wide operations as well as limited and local operations, or some combination of these which would make for war on a global scale. Russian forces must be prepared to fight alongside probable allies or to fight alone. Our armed forces allegedly must be capable of deterring a potential foe as powerful and sophisticated as the NATO Alliance, or as primitive as Muslim fundamentalist guerrillas, by being ready to fight effectively against either or both, if need be. It follows that Russian forces have to be ready to counter any hostile invasion of Russian territory, and capable of mounting military interventions in the "near abroad" and beyond when needed.

The inability of the top political and military leaders to make difficult choices from a number of competing priorities has led to spreading limited resources much too thinly, and thereby undermining our overall defense capabilities. But making difficult choices entails risks which bureaucrats are unwilling to take. Such decisions must be imposed by a determined political leadership operating from outside the defense establishment.

The second paradox is that despite all its declarations that the United States, NATO, and other Western powers no longer constitute a threat to Russia, our military requirements, at least 50-60 percent of them, still revolve around contingency planning for a major war with the United States and NATO in the West and with the United States and Japan in the East. I can only assume that Western contingency planners regard Russia in much the same way. In any event, our military planners, professionally if not emotionally, miss the "Blue Threat" every bit as much as American military planners must miss the "Red Threat."

After all, it is easy to reason that if the other party may not be an opponent today, it may become one again in the future. And since "they" possess huge military capabilities, it is only prudent to hedge against the worst case scenario. In our case, that worst case scenario is seen as a hostile NATO bolstered with the added forces of some of our former Warsaw Pact allies. The sacramental rule of the Cold War was that military capabilities are to be taken into account, not political intentions. Capabilities, after all, take many years to shift while political intentions can change overnight. I am confident that U.S. defense planners share this strategic concept with their Russian counterparts, although they are less outspoken about it.

Therefore, for all the dramatic changes that have taken place politically over the last decade, very little has changed in the fundamental way either Russia or the United States approaches contingency planning. The factors that seriously affect Russian planning are the financial situation, which is in a crisis, the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact, the disinte- gration of the Soviet Union, and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Central Europe to within 250-300 miles of the Kremlin. Indeed, it has been a long time since the Moscow Military District was our front-line area of defense.

The third paradox is the dichotomy afflicting Russia's defensive posture. On the one hand, due to the present and foreseeable balance of forces, Russia cannot hope to mount a serious challenge to Western military power. The possibility that NATO may unite with some of Moscow's former Warsaw Pact allies or some of the former republics of the Soviet Union only means, from our perspective, that the Russian urban, administrative, and industrial heart- land will be within the combat radius of even tactical aircraft. As recently as 1988, the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies held a quantitative edge over NATO of about 3-1 in main weapons of conventional ground and air forces. But as a consequence of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and as a result of reductions in compliance with the CFE Treaty, today Russia is quantitatively inferior to NATO forces by a ratio of from 1-2 to 1-3. With NATO first phase enlargement, this ratio will change to a 1-4 imbalance. And, if some of the former Soviet republics join NATO, the odds will increase to 1-5 or beyond. Given the ability of NATO and the West to mobilize superior economic and technological resources, the discrepancy is even more alarming from a Russian perspective. Chillingly, in the case of revived hostilities, only nuclear weapons can be relied upon to negate this gaping imbalance.

Planning for a war with the West makes Russian defense requirements virtually open-ended. Whatever the share of limited resources allocated to such a profound contingency, the armed forces cannot come close to attaining even minimally sufficient defense capabilities.

On the other hand, there is no conceivable contingency involving Russia's armed forces in the near abroad that could justify sustaining present conventional force levels. In time, China might provide the exception by threatening the Russian Far East, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan, but that is not now the case. Whether China develops as a threat, however, very much depends on Russia's current military reform and its ongoing arms and technology transfers to Beijing. It also depends on Moscow's future relationship with the buffer states named above and the course of future relations with Japan.

There is a fourth paradox. Over the next 5 years, the present policy, driven as it is by bureaucratic inertia and the lack of any political guidance, will keep Russia's armed forces numerically quite large even as they continue to deteriorate qualitatively. Fortunately, no major external threat looms. But eventually the old capital invested in the Soviet Army will be spent out of the current Russian Army. There is, therefore, the possibility that by the time a definitive threat manifests itself, Russia will have to face that threat with small and completely inadequate forces equipped with obsolete weapons.

The fact is that present expenditures for maintenance of its large armed forces depletes those ever diminishing resources available for training and housing and for research, development, and procurement. With the Gross National Product (GNP) about 15 percent of that of the United States, Russia supports a military establishment of approximately the same size to include 2.5 million men and women in uniform and civilian employees, and about 1.2 million others serving in border guard, internal troop, and railway guard units.

From the first-class superpower armed forces of the Soviet Union, one equal to that of the United States in conventional and nuclear forces, and superior in some aspects, Russia is drifting toward the kind of armed forces China had in the early 1970s. In 10-15 years, the Russian military may look like the People's Liberation Army of old; large, technologically backward, and supported by a few hundred vulnerable nuclear weapons linked to an inadequate C3I system. These forces would be lacking in mobility and, quite possibly, poorly trained. By comparison to the West, the scientific community would be meager, and the once robust Russian military industrial complex will have deteriorated. Russia's armed forces would not be capable of defending the nation from external threats. They may, indeed, become a major threat to Russia's own internal security and stability. And that is a very

frightening possibility.

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