

## Strategic Insight

### Russia's Military and Operation Enduring Freedom

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The Russian government, on orders of President Vladimir Putin, has cooperated with the United States in Operation Enduring Freedom. Measures include: issuing statements of support for U.S. policy; encouraging (or, at least, not discouraging) the nations of Central Asia to provide military bases for U.S. operations; and according to newspaper reports, sharing intelligence on Afghanistan with the United States and providing weapons to the Northern Alliance. Many Western observers have described President Putin's decision to side with the United States in the 'war on terrorism' as a radical departure from the established course of Russia's national security policy. This observation, however, is a bit superficial. Putin's desire to be accepted by the West dates back to the very beginning of his presidency, and is rooted in his political views and personal preferences. There are several reasons behind this:

- Putin is preoccupied with Russia's economic weakness. During his 2000 election campaign, he noted that in order to reach the level of Portugal's GDP per capita, the Russian economy will have to grow at the heady rate of eight per cent a year for fifteen years. Putin sees that Russia has no other way out of its current economic predicament but to develop a free market economy and attract Western investment.
- His other major preoccupation is the war against separatists in Chechnya. This has become something of a personal endeavor for him, ever since he made the promise to deal decisively with what he termed Islamic extremism and terrorism a main plank of his presidential campaign in 1999-2000.
- Finally, Putin is acutely aware that he was in effect appointed as a successor to former President Boris Yeltsin, whose entourage masterminded Putin's election as president of Russia in March 2000. This circumstance has weakened his political legitimacy as a world leader both at home and abroad.

Indeed, the first two meetings between Putin and U.S. President George W. Bush in July and July 2001 were generally characterized as positive in spirit, if somewhat short on concrete agreements. Then the terrorist attack against the United States on September 11, 2001, presented Putin with an opportunity to improve relations with the United States by offering his support in an hour of need. He took advantage of the moment by endorsing U.S. political and military actions against terrorists, and by not objecting to a U.S. military presence in the former Soviet republics (primarily Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) of Central Asia. Prior to September 11, such a move would have been considered contrary to Russian interests. This more cooperative policy can accomplish three goals:

- Help Russia's economy by enlisting U.S. support for Russia's entry to the World Trade Organization and fostering a favorable political climate for Western investment in Russia
- Soften Western criticism of Russia's war in Chechnya, where the Kremlin claims to be fighting not only separatism but also Islamic extremism and terrorism
- Legitimize Putin as a major figure in world politics

Additionally, the destruction of the Taliban regime addresses Russia's grave concern over the spread of Islamist militancy from Afghanistan to Central Asia, and eventually into Russia itself, whose population includes a substantial Muslim minority.

For the Russian military high command, however, Operation Enduring Freedom has created a number of problems, some of them related to Russia's military posture and some to the corporate self-interests of the military elite. The first group of problems arises from the anti-NATO direction of Russia's military doctrine. This doctrine was adopted in the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign, at a time when Russia's civilian and military elites designated NATO as the main threat to Russia's security. In fact, a scenario exercise conducted by the Russian military on September 11 reportedly was based on an attack by NATO against Russia's ally Belarus in the West, and by what looked like a NATO supported force from Afghanistan against Russia's Central Asian neighbors.[1](#)

While Russia's foreign policy has become much more friendly to NATO and the United States since September 11, the Russian military still live with the same anti-NATO military doctrine and related strategic concerns and operational plans.[2](#) The high command still count on repelling an attack by NATO in the West by mobilizing resources in the relatively safe internal Urals, Volga and Siberian military districts. These districts now lie in proximity to the new U.S. air bases in Central Asia.[3](#)

Some Central Asian states continue to serve as home to a number of important Russian military installations, including not only the Baikonur space launch center (open to Western companies since the mid-1990s) in Kazakhstan, but also the still secret BMD test range of Sary Shagan (Kazakhstan), a navy communication center and a torpedo testing facility (Kyrgyzstan), and a space control center in Nurek (Tajikistan).[4](#)

Another concern is competition to Russia's arms exports from the United States and other NATO nations. The Russian defense industry cannot survive without arms exports. While about 90 percent of sales of Russian weapons in 2001 went to India and China, Moscow would like to export more to the post-Soviet states, including those in Central Asia. A strong Western military and political presence in the region may result in a reduced market for Russia's arms exporters.[5](#)

No one in the Russian military high command is yet complaining openly, but these first leaked reservations about the outcomes of Putin's support for the United States are indicative of the military's stance on the issue. We are likely to hear more and louder complaints. If the Russian military's reaction to NATO enlargement is a valid precedent, next in line will be a complaint that the U.S. Air Force could deliver a decapitating conventional strike from its Central Asian airfields against the Russian strategic nuclear forces. Indeed, Gen. Andrey Nikolaev (ret.), Chairman of the Defense Committee of the State Duma of the Russian Federation (the lower house of the Russian parliament) has already brought up the issue.[6](#)

The political implausibility of such scenarios is not likely to stop those promoting them. At issue are not real threats to Russian national security, but the failure of Russian politicians and the high command to give their country a military ready to handle the threats of the 21st century, instead of one still looking back nostalgically at old Soviet war plans. Military reform has been a subject much discussed by politicians and the military in Russia over the last ten years, with little practical results. The military of the Russian Federation remains, for the most part, a smaller -- and infinitely weaker -- copy of the Soviet military, whose main mission was to fight a global war against the West.

There has been no public professional military comment on Operation Enduring Freedom in Russia, which is a sign that the high command feels considerable unease over the whole matter. The only comment came via a usual proxy, retired Army General Makhmout Gareyev, president of the non-governmental (but closely linked to the Ministry of Defense and General Staff) Academy of Military Sciences. Gareyev in effect dismissed the possibility that a U.S. victory might serve as a lesson in modern military operations for the Russians. He emphasized that massive ground forces have not lost

their importance, and that without Russia's support the United States not only would not have been able to defeat the Taliban, but would have been stuck in Afghanistan for "twenty years".<sup>7</sup>

Why such a reaction? From the point of view of the Russian military, Operation Enduring Freedom took place at the wrong time and in the wrong place, and was fought the wrong way. It coincided in time with President Putin's increasingly sharp demands for military reform, and growing pressure from his office on the military to shift to a relatively small force (800,000 instead of today's approximately 1.2 million) consisting primarily of volunteers instead of conscripts. The Americans' lightning success in Afghanistan, of all places, contrasts with the Soviet quagmire there in the 1980s, and reminds the Russians of their military's two unsuccessful (so far) campaigns against another group of Muslim insurgents, the Chechens.

The way the American military fought in Afghanistan, relying on air power, smart weapons, advanced reconnaissance systems and highly trained small special forces teams, suggests a path of change for the Russian military -- a path the Russian high command does not want to see. Following this path would require several major changes.

First of all, a drastic reduction in the size and role of the bloated General Staff, a structure whose intellectual and organizational lineage can be traced back to the German General Staff of a hundred years ago.<sup>8</sup> This would result in a substantial reduction in the number of billets for generals and admirals, of which it is said that there are more now than there were in the Russian military's much larger Soviet predecessor. Most of these billets, furthermore, are said to be in comfortable Moscow.

A similar reduction would need to be carried out in the armor-heavy Ground Forces, which continue to be the centerpiece of Russian conventional forces. Such a makeover again would target both cozy command billets and the traditional way of doing things. The current system of conscription -- with which the Russian high command does not want to part -- perhaps made sense for a war against NATO, but conscripts would be of little use in an operation executed along the lines of Enduring Freedom. Special forces, because of their inherently small size, also are not a very good breeding ground for large command structures that can accommodate many high ranking officers.

On top of all this, Operation Enduring Freedom has wreaked havoc on the Russian military's hierarchy of threats.

Led by the United States, Number One Threat NATO acted in concert with Russia and thereby brought a thaw in their previously icy relations. At the same time, the success of Operation Enduring Freedom has significantly weakened, if not eliminated, the designated Threat Number Two, Islamist fundamentalism in Afghanistan. The operation thus created a new strategic environment for Russia, one to which the Russian generals have not yet adapted.

Operation Enduring Freedom should, in theory, make it more difficult for the Russian high command to justify their resistance to change. But since change is painful, the reality behind the need for change can be denied -- and change postponed -- at a great cost to Russia.

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## References

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8. See V. Shlykov, "Nuzhen li rossii general'nyy shtab?" *Voenny vestnik*, no. 7, Moscow, October 2000, p. 30.