

The Russian Military Faces “Creeping Disintegration”

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There were virtually no units which were combat ready in 1997.
—Defense Minister Igor Sergeev

Although often ignored by observers and pundits, the Russian military plays one of the most important roles of any institution in that society. The reason is that the armed forces are always the last bastion against anarchy and chaos in any political system. And Russia now is on the verge of collapse and anarchy.

In taking a closer look at the Russian military and the role it plays in the Russian political system, I divide my observations into three categories. First is the question of the armed forces themselves. It is impossible to discuss the role of the military without understanding how serious the situation is in Moscow's armed forces. As those who have spent time working in the military or analyzing military issues know, reversing conditions like those that now characterize the Russian armed forces is not easy. It will take considerable time. The lead time on many weapons systems exceeds five years from planning to production.

A second issue is the question of whether there is a serious danger that the Russian military will become involved in politics. Finally, there is the question of what the West can do and should be doing at this point vis-à-vis the Russian military.

The Situation Facing the Russian Military

Despite Defense Minister Marshal Igor Sergeev's comment on 19 July 1999, to the effect that Russia's armed forces are “combat ready, controllable and capable of ensuring the military security of the country,” the fact is that their situation is nothing short of disastrous.¹ Equipment is outdated, officers and men are dispirited, thousands of the “best and brightest” are leaving, the budget is in shambles, generals have been politicized in a way unknown in the past, and talk of reform is a farce. The armed forces' ability to operate in an effective manner is open to serious question. Indeed, the situation appears to be so bad that, with the exception of some of its airborne troops, conventional troops are in disarray. Further-

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more, Moscow's ability to ensure that troops obey orders in a crisis (especially in an internal confrontation) is doubtful. Even more serious is the Kremlin's feeling that, given the problems its conventional forces face, there is no alternative but to rely more and more on nuclear forces. However, its nuclear forces are in such bad condition that it is questionable whether they would operate if Moscow decided to use them.

Everywhere one looks, the Russian military is beset with problems. The key issue facing the army for the past ten years has been money.² Its budget has been cut each year since 1993. This would not be so bad if the military actually received the money it was promised. More often than not, it has had to try and run on empty promises. For example, in 1993, the shortfall was 1 billion rubles; in 1994, it was 12.2 billion; in 1995, it was 6 billion; and in 1997, 34.4 billion. As of January 1999, of the 804 billion rubles appropriated for the armed forces only 44 billion had been received.³ While it is still impossible to say for certain how much the military will receive in 1999, it is worth noting that if it is allocated 2.17 percent (or 110 billion rubles) of the federal budget as some think will be the case, that will be only slightly more than the cost of two U.S. Stealth bombers.⁴ The military has been arguing for a budget of at least 3.5 percent, but even if they were to get a budget that large, there is no certainty that they would receive the full amount. To make matters worse, the Kremlin's decision to send 3,600 soldiers to Kosovo will strain the military budget even further, making it necessary to come up with an additional \$50 million just to cover costs for this year.

The constant budget shortfalls have had a cataclysmic impact on the military as a whole. Because of cutbacks in weapons purchases (for example, only two combat aircraft were purchased in 1995, compared with 585 in 1991), by 1998 only 30 percent of all weapons in the Russian inventory were modern; in NATO countries the number stood at 60 to 80 percent.⁵ If current conditions continue, by 2005 only 5–7 percent of weapons will be new, thereby pushing Russia into the Third World status militarily.⁶ Moscow's worry about weapons does not end with the need for new systems. Existing equipment is also in need of repair. Sergeyev noted as recently as April 1998 that 53 percent of aircraft and 40 percent of the anti-aircraft systems, helicopters, armored equipment, and artillery were in need of repair.⁷ The navy is in even worse condition, with more than 70 percent of its ships in need of major repairs.⁸

Equipment problems have had a disastrous impact on Russian combat operations. For example, in the war in Chechnya, the army soon discovered that it did not have enough money to carry out the costly operations. It was necessary to take money out of the regular budget, thereby worsening the situation for the armed forces as a whole. The situation was so bad that the shoes and the winter hats worn by Russian troops in Chechnya were paid for by a bank in Moscow—the army simply did not have the money to buy such “luxuries.” Furthermore, in Chechnya the military relied heavily on weapons and shells from as early as World War II.

The financial situation deteriorated to the point that by 1997 almost all government meteorological stations had stopped passing critical weather information

to the military, and Premier Chernomyrdin had to sign an order forcing power stations to keep supplying military installations with power even if they had not paid their electricity bills. In spite of this action, on 20 July 1999 it was reported that a local electricity supplier in the Far East cut off power because the Russian military had not paid its bills. As a consequence, radar units were unable to monitor the country's air borders; troops not only lacked electricity, but they had no water because it had to be pumped. This is at least the third time that sensitive military installations have found themselves without power because of unpaid bills.

As far as equipment is concerned, the situation is not likely to get better any time soon. On 8 February 1999, Marshal Sergeev told an audience at the Air Defense University in Tver that

the Russian armed forces will not receive new weapons until the year 2005. Until then, existing weapons will have to be repaired and updated. This does not mean that weapons production has stopped. There are estimates that by the end of 1999 the value of Russian arms exports could reach \$5.7 billion.⁹ Rosvooruzheniye, the

“The situation is so bad that the Russian military has faced problems in feeding its troops.”

country's official arms export company, expects to double or triple its exports in the next four to five years. Even South Korea has indicated an interest in taking Russian submarines as a way of helping the Russians pay off their debt to Seoul. The Russian military has no money to buy weapons. It must sit by and watch as Russian companies turn out weapons and equipment that go to China, the Middle East, or some other part of the world.

The lack of money also has hurt training, which is critical in any military. If soldiers don't train, their ability to carry out missions deteriorates quickly. The army has not conducted a single division-level ground forces operation since 1992.¹⁰ Training funds are down 90 percent from 1991.¹¹ Similarly, Russian pilots are lucky if they get in twenty-five hours flying a year—compared with the 150 to 200 hours that is standard among NATO countries.¹² And that number again was cut by 10–15 percent again during 1999.¹³ According to Russian sources, pilots often spend more time sweeping runways than they do in the air, and 2,000 of them were reassigned to the infantry, armor, artillery, and communications troops. There are no aircraft for them to fly and no fuel. In addition, many pilots are working part-time as cab drivers, and it is a common sight to see soldiers begging for money on the streets of Moscow.

Moscow made much of the “West-99” joint military exercise, which evoked considerable interest on the part of some in the West—especially when Russian bombers flew close to the Norwegian coastline. In fact, it was primarily a command and staff exercise that involved a number of ships, planes, and troops but fell far short of the types of exercises the Soviet army carried out in the past.

Reports from senior Russian officers to the effect that “the ground forces have at most seven combat-ready divisions” do not inspire much confidence in the Russian army.¹⁴

Recognizing just how bad the situation is, the Duma passed a resolution in 1998 in which it stated that “the Army and the Navy have virtually ceased to do combat training, and the amount of damaged equipment is increasing,” a statement with which almost no one close to the Russian military would disagree.

In spite of the resolution, the reality is that with the exception of some elite units—airborne troops and those engaged in peacekeeping operations—the vast majority of Russian soldiers receive little or no training and are in no position to carry out combat operations. If the Russian army were called upon to go to war (especially if the operations were large-scale and offensive), given its lack of training, the cost in terms of human life would be tremendous. The lack of sophisticated weapons and equipment would make the situation even worse and further undermine prospects for a successful outcome.

The country’s senior military officers understand fully the extent of the problem. As Marshal Sergeyev put it,

80 percent or more is spent on maintaining the Armed Forces, while combat training is funded from what is left—whatever can be scraped together is allocated for combat training, and that is obviously insufficient for maintaining combat readiness.¹⁵

At the same time that weapons, equipment, and training have been curtailed, military cohesion has been undermined to the point that the ability of the military to carry out operations on either internal or external fronts is open to serious question. The situation is so bad that the Russian military has faced problems in feeding its troops. Sailors have starved to death, forces stationed in the far north have been gradually withdrawn, and those stationed in Russia proper have often been told to pick mushrooms or berries to supplement their diets. “Russian soldiers are surviving mostly on bread and stocks of vegetables.”¹⁶ The problem was brought home even more clearly in March 1999 when a young soldier armed with an automatic weapon broke into a food store. When he was captured, the soldier confessed that he “was really hungry.”¹⁷

For someone familiar with the Soviet army during the cold war it is hard to grasp just how chaotic the situation has become. This is especially evident when it comes to personnel issues. One of the areas that has been affected by the “creeping disintegration” of the military is discipline. Take crime, for example. At one point, observers could talk of “Prussian-style” discipline in the Russian/Soviet military. I remember having seen many cases where Soviet soldiers and sailors were subjected to the most brutal discipline and behaved almost like mechanical puppets. Although some crimes probably occurred, they often were limited to instances such as senior officers using soldiers to build dachas for themselves. Soldiers might not have been the most efficient, and they might have taken whatever they could from the state, but by and large the amount of crime within the military was limited.

Over the past ten years, however, discipline has deteriorated to the point that

the prosecutor’s office has a full-time job pursuing those guilty of serious crimes, including murder. The chief military prosecutor noted in 1997 that fifty soldiers were shot by their fellow servicemen. And that is only the number of individuals on guard duty who shot each other! He further reported that by March 1998 another ten had died in the same way. And the problem is continuing to grow. In the Far Eastern Military District, in May 1998, four soldiers reportedly shot and killed their commanding officer. Even more alarming has been the spate of shootings at nuclear weapons facilities. The situation became so serious that on 20 October 1998, President Boris Yeltsin ordered an inspection of troops at a nuclear weapons production facility.¹⁸ From 1997 to 1999, the Russian military dismissed twenty soldiers who had access to nuclear weapons because of “psychological problems.”¹⁹

Part of the increase in crime is related to alcohol and drugs—the latter a new phenomenon in the Russian military. In 1996, there were only 256 drug offenses in the Russian armed forces. In 1998, there were 605, and the vast majority of those who took drugs began their habit while serving in the armed forces. Even more upsetting is the fact that there was a large increase in drug related incidents in the Strategic Rocket Forces—among those troops who have charge of the country’s nuclear weapons!²⁰

The AIDS virus also is becoming a serious problem in the Russian military. In early 1997, for example, the prosecutor of the Moscow Military District claimed that there were 128 HIV-positive cases, up from 32 cases for the entire period from 1993 to 1996.²¹

Overall, during 1997, there were 521 deaths in the army as a consequence of criminal activity. The same source reported that an investigation was under way of a major theft of fuel: “This is the most notorious case of 1998. But it’s too early to give any details. The investigation is still going on.”²²

During 1997, 487 soldiers committed suicide, an increase of 57 over the previous year.²³ Another source reported that between January and April 1998 another 132 committed suicide.²⁴ Although the cause of these suicides is unclear, most observers believe that factors such as poor food and working conditions and the widespread hazing of recruits are the primary causes. Rather than exerting close personal supervision of enlisted personnel, Russian officers have traditionally relied on senior conscripts to keep the junior ones in line—the so-called *dedovshchina*. But senior conscripts, called Deds, have brutalized many of the junior ones to the point that a number have committed suicide and others have been killed. As recently as May 1998, a young soldier was buried in the southern Russian city of Budennovsk. He was beaten to death because he refused to mend an older conscript’s soccer shoe. The army understands the problem, but it would require a major change in the way Russian officers and NCOs are trained and function for the problem to go away. There is little indication that the high command is prepared to make fundamental changes. Overall, during the first eleven months of 1998 “57 soldiers died and 2,735 were injured from hazing.”²⁵

Suicide is also a problem among officers, who account for 60 percent of all suicides. In October 1998, for example, a major and a lieutenant colonel com-

mitted suicide in Moscow. An investigation revealed that their families were starving and both officers knew that if they committed suicide their families would get their death benefits. Their monthly pension would be paid to their families when it was due, in contrast to the delays faced by those on active duty.²⁶

The Russian Defense Ministry reported on 1 December 1998 that about 10,500 crimes and criminal incidents had been reported, in comparison with about 10,000 the previous year—and this in a military that is being downsized to 1.2 million.²⁷ Incidents of bribery had risen 80 percent, and there was a 44 percent increase in cases of physical violence.²⁸ Stealing from military installations has also reached crisis proportions. According to Admiral Vyacheslav Popov, the commander of

the Northern Fleet, it has become so bad that “combat capability is being undermined and lives of servicemen are being jeopardized.”²⁹

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Lack of discipline has led to an increasing number of accidents. According to the mothers’ group that seeks to protect conscripts in the military, during 1997, 1,046 soldiers either took their own lives or were

killed in accidents. And there is no sign of a let-up in such incidents. In February, more than 6,000 23-millimeter aircraft cannon shells exploded during a fire on an air force base, and in Volgograd, some 2,000 tank shells exploded. In June, at least two dozen soldiers were killed at an ammunition depot near Sverdlovsk. In all of these cases, negligence was listed as the cause. Soldiers on guard duty were not taking their duties seriously.

Although they are not a result of a lack of discipline, accidents seem to be waiting to happen when it comes to the country’s nuclear submarines. Around one hundred of them are tied up waiting to be dismantled in the Northern Fleet alone. There are an additional fifty-seven tied up in the Far East. Some of the ships were decommissioned twenty-five years ago. Most observers believe that it will take approximately ten to twelve years to unload the nuclear cores from all of the submarines.³⁰ The process is going slowly, and in the meantime the submarines are sitting in salt water and rusting—with their nuclear cores on board. There are also reports that investigatory bodies sent from Moscow discovered that it was easy to walk aboard some of the decommissioned submarines because there were not enough sailors for guard duty. Indeed, there are many stories of officers being forced to perform guard duty because of personnel shortages.

Meanwhile, it was reported that 50,000 young men evaded the draft in 1997, and more than 12,000 conscripts went AWOL rather than endure the brutality of barracks life. Moscow military authorities estimate that there are almost 500 deserters living in Moscow,³¹ and it is estimated that 40,000 men are hiding from the Russian army.³²

According to Sergeyev, commanders in the Russian army have been guilty of some 18,000 serious breaches of military discipline. In a number of cases, this involved issuing illegal orders.³³ On 1 July 1999, it was reported by Russian prosecutors that seventeen army generals and navy admirals were found guilty of corruption during the preceding year. They also noted that the incidence of such crimes is rising.³⁴ There were 818 reports in 1998 that officers had assaulted subordinates—double the cases reported the previous year.³⁵

The quality of recruits into the army is deteriorating steadily. Forty percent of recent conscripts had not attended school or held a job in the two years prior to their military service. One in twenty had a police record, and others were “drug addicts, toxic substance abusers, mentally disabled and syphilitics.” Some 71,000 individuals who had committed crimes were not drafted, but 20,000 who had been given suspended sentences were drafted—much like the old American practice of giving a young man the option of jail or the military. As one source put it, “an ever greater proportion of conscripts are coming from lower social strata and from the impoverished countryside.”³⁶

The situation among junior officers is also getting worse. They are resigning their commissions at an alarming rate, and competition for officer schools (which once was very intense) had dropped sharply. In 1989, for example, there were 1.9 applicants per space as compared with only 1.35 in 1993.³⁷ By 1999, it was even lower. In fact, some educational institutions will accept every applicant just to fill their vacancies—and this when the number of such establishments is being reduced from 101 to no more than 50.

By 1996, more than 50 percent of all junior officers had left the service to enter business as soon as their obligation was finished.³⁸ Why should they remain in the military when they are paid about \$100 per month doing a job that requires heavy physical work and has all of the physical discomforts that go with it? Poor salaries and an insecure future, inadequate family quarters and supporting institutions, with prestige at an all time low, all take their toll. As of 1 June 1998, there were 110,000 men on duty and 160,000 discharged servicemen without housing.³⁹ In 1997, the Defense Ministry reported that the shortfall in junior officers was equivalent to the number of those graduating from all military educational establishments annually.⁴⁰ Some 19,000 officers under the age of thirty left the military during 1998 alone.⁴¹

Given the problems facing the military, it is not surprising that morale is at an all-time low. Not only do few of the professionals see any future in the military, but Pavel Felgenhauer, the highly respected Russian commentator on military affairs, has reported that senior military officers have begun openly to tell journalists that Marshal Sergeyev is not fit to command the Russian army, an action that would have been inconceivable during the Soviet period.⁴² Even more troubling from the Kremlin’s standpoint are the questions being raised concerning what officers would do if called upon to support Moscow internally. In 1995, for example, a survey of 600 field grade Russian officers revealed that questions concerning the army’s reliability were pervasive throughout the officer corps.⁴³ “Officers were particularly adamant in their opposition to using the military to quell a

separatist rebellion in one of the regions of the Russian Federation.” Only 7 percent supported such an action. In addition, when asked if they would follow Moscow’s orders if one of the republics declared independence, 39 percent “admitted that they probably or definitely would *not* follow orders.” This report confirms Felgenhauer’s comment in 1998 that “sending the present Russian armed forces into any kind of action would be a serious error. Things could get worse than they were in Chechnya—the troops could rebel instantly.”⁴⁴ To make matters more difficult, the government has now decided to increase the amount of taxes soldiers pay—something that can only lower morale further. In the past, military officers did not pay income tax. Now, not only must they pay income tax, but they are being deprived of benefits such as free travel and a 50 percent discount on housing. In addition to not being paid on time, officer pay has not been indexed for over two-and-a-half years!

The Russian Military and Politics

The problems that beset the Russian military will have, and already are having, a major impact on Russian civil-military relations. There has long been a misperception in the West that the Soviet military was highly politicized. But much depends on how one defines “politicization.” One commonly accepted definition in the West refers to the effort by a party-state such as the former USSR to inculcate a particular political point of view in the minds and hearts of its troops. In that sense, the Soviet military was very politicized. Political officers and indoctrination lectures were part of the life of the Soviet soldier.

There is, however, another type of politicization: the involvement of military officers in politics. In this sense, Western military officers have been much more politicized than Soviet. One need only spend time as a congressional staffer in Washington to note how politicized many senior American officers are.⁴⁵ Russian and Soviet officers were far more isolated from civilian society and, with the exception of a few at the very top, seldom became involved in the political process.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, this apolitical stance on the part of Russian military officers has broken down. Names of former Soviet (and Russian) generals such as Alexander Rutskoi, Boris Gromov, Alexander Lebed, Albert Makashov, and Andrei Nikolayev have become household terms among those who follow politics in Moscow. All have taken the plunge into politics with varying degrees of success, increasing the possibility that at some point Russian generals may move directly into the political realm.

The increased involvement by senior officers has had the effect of further undermining cohesion in the military, as generals begin to view themselves as political actors and sometimes find themselves on different sides of issues. After all, just because they wear (or wore) uniforms, it does not follow that all generals think alike, as some Western analysts seem to believe.

I am not suggesting that the Russian military is about to intervene directly in the political process. The military is too split internally to engage successfully in a coup—unless, of course, such an action were to be peaceful and not resisted by the country’s political authorities. On the other hand, if an attempt by a general

to seize power were resisted, military units would probably find themselves on different sides, raising the danger of a civil war. At minimum, a battle between military units would undermine further Moscow’s ability to retain central control over many of the regions that currently make up Russia.

The greater danger facing the Russian Army comes from the increasing need by senior officers to make deals with local and regional authorities. When a U.S. ship visited Vladivostok in 1989, I asked a senior Russian admiral to describe his most serious problem. He responded that it was trying to feed his sailors. He regularly made deals with local agricultural enterprises whereby he traded the labor of his sailors for part of the produce. The need to interact with local authorities has increased over time

because units in places such as Vladivostok cannot count on Moscow to provide them with the supplies they need. As one observer noted, “Many commanders no longer believe that the state is able to feed its troops and have begun to try to do it themselves.” For example, the commander of a Northern Fleet nuclear submarine

went to the city fathers of Bryansk to request ten tons of potatoes to feed his crew because he could not count on the military to supply them.⁴⁶ The increasingly close ties between the country’s military officers and local political and economic authorities have serious implications for the nature of civil-military relations in the country.

Continued disintegration of the military into the world of chaos and crime is also a possibility. What else can one expect from hungry and mistreated soldiers? Instead of deciding to support local warlords, they may decide to take matters into their own hands and seize local foodstuffs or take over the area in which they are stationed. Ex-soldiers—especially paratroopers—are already playing a significant role in organized crime. Because crime among officers and enlisted men within the Russian military has already reached epidemic proportions, it is not difficult for those individuals to make the transition to organized crime. Needless to say, such a development would have the most serious implications for the safety of Moscow’s nuclear weapons.

What Is to Be Done?

Reading official Russian military reports, one could easily get the impression that reform in the Russian military is well advanced and that its problems will soon be solved. In fact, if the reader were to count the number of times the phrase “military reform” has been mentioned in Soviet military circles during the past five or six years, I suspect he or she would discover that it was mentioned literally thousands of times.

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The most important, ambitious, and controversial plan is the one that the Russian high command claims is currently being implemented. Designed under Marshal Sergeyev's leadership, but with heavy political influence in the background, this plan divides military reform into two stages. In the first stage, which lasts until the year 2000, the military will be reduced to 1.2 million troops. To reach this number, thousands of troops are being discharged. The maximum number of generals (in both the military and all paramilitary units) is being cut to 2,300. A way will have to be found to pay those who are discharged, because Russian law requires that soldiers who are forcibly discharged receive a hefty separation allowance.

This proposal also called for the position of commander-in-chief of ground forces, one of the most powerful in the Russian army, to be abolished. It has been replaced by a Ground Force Main Department, and the military districts have been raised to the status of an operational strategic or territorial command. The latter change currently is being implemented and will lead to the discharge of thousands of officers and soldiers. For example, some 961 army aviation pilots and 1,134 flight and ground technicians were recently discharged.⁴⁷ The first stage also calls for the introduction of more mobile forces, and the Russians appear to be working in that direction, although progress in this area lags behind the others because of lack of funds.

The plan also calls for combining the air defense and air force into one service. This process is already well under way. Some 125,000 air force personnel were discharged in 1998 and a number of redundant offices and organizations were disbanded. The new plan is making the situation worse for junior officers. General Kornukov, commander of the now combined air force and air defense forces, made his priorities clear when he observed with regard to new graduates of officer schools,

We had 415 pilots, and 365 of them were dismissed. This is painful, we feel bad about it. But our aim was not to lose first-class pilots who are 25-30 years old. We should keep them, and we are letting younger and less experienced people go.⁴⁸

While one can certainly understand Kornukov's reasoning, his decision to let so many junior officers go will only exacerbate an already serious problem.

While these changes are taking place, Russia is placing primary reliance on nuclear weapons. Such weapons are cheaper than conventional systems and easier to maintain. The danger, however, is that by going to a "launch on warning" system, even greater reliance is placed on Moscow's command and control systems as well as its missiles. Unfortunately, both are deteriorating. There is a serious danger that these antiquated warning systems could misread the situation and lead the Kremlin to believe that it was under attack when that was not the case. The Russians have begun to upgrade their missiles with the introduction of the new Topol-M ICBM, although the latter has not fared well in tests. Even if the Topol-Ms enter the Russian inventory, they are not likely to have a major impact on the nuclear balance. Missiles are only as good as their command and control systems.

Stage two of the reform plan calls for even more ambitious changes. Space

forces may be combined with the air force, military academies will undergo major changes in terms of both curriculum and numbers, and there are suggestions that the military will be divided into conventional and strategic nuclear forces. The latter option will inevitably lead to a blurring of service lines (each has both kinds of forces), and opposition on the part of more traditional military and navy officers is already evident.

The fact is, however, that although officials in Moscow have made much of the military's reform plan, one can find even more articles written by both military and civilian observers that describe in considerable depth the nature of the problems facing the armed forces, as this article has demonstrated. My point is simple: even if the reform process were to succeed, it will be decades before the problems noted above can be successfully addressed.

Now that our bombing of Kosovo and our disagreements with the Russians are moving further into the background, it is time for the United States and NATO to work hard to reestablish military-to-military ties with the Russians. There is no doubt that there are senior Russian officers who will never be convinced of our peaceful intentions. Given the world they were raised in, the collapse of the USSR, and some of the policies the Western powers followed in dealing with Kosovo, that is not surprising. Furthermore, it should not come as any surprise that there are those among Moscow's civilian politicians who will also try to use the NATO or U.S. threat for their own narrow purposes. If being anti-NATO will help them win votes, I have no doubt they will play such cards. Politicians such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy or Gennady Zyganov are notorious for such actions.

In spite of these problems, there are still some things that we can and should do. First, and foremost, it is critical that we not isolate the Russian military. NATO did a good job of keeping the Russians involved in our search for a way out of the Kosovo problem. Indeed, one could make an argument that Mr. Chernomydin played a critical role.

In addition to firming up military-to-military contacts, it is time that we take a good look at cooperative peacekeeping activities. I was part of the U.S.-Russian exercise Peacekeeper 95 at Fort Riley, and I have participated in all of the U.S.-Soviet-Russian ship visits. Both sides learned much from those interactions. The Fort Riley experience, for example, was of direct benefit to some of our forces when they were sent to Bosnia. Such interactions are a win-win proposition.

It is time for Western militaries' to step up to the plate when it comes to providing the type of humanitarian and medical assistance that the Russian military so desperately needs. Despite the problems involved, there is something worth doing in this area. The Russian military has always been more willing to interact with other militaries than with civilians of any kind—including its own. What about sending MRES (Meals Ready to Eat) or medical supplies with appropriate safeguards to the Russians? The United States has hundreds of retired military officers who spent considerable time on the ground in Russia, and Russians still remember the aid we provided during the last war. I cannot count the number of times I heard references to “Villies” or “Spam” during my encounters with older Russians. An open hand is always better than a mailed fist.

Outlook for the Future

It is hard to be optimistic when looking at the situation facing the Russian military. President Yeltsin for several years has given the impression that he neither understands nor cares about the state of the armed forces. Rather, he tolerates the military and seems more interested in the country's internal security forces. The internal security forces are especially trained to deal with domestic violence, and if the collapse of the East German military demonstrates anything, it is that one cannot take as a given the willingness of the country's armed forces to put down internal disturbances.

For the first time, Russia has the outlines of a plan for reform and appears to be trying to implement it. The problem, however, is that the military is continuing to fall apart in the process. As the West knows only too well, downsizing is a very expensive process. As recently as July 1998, Yeltsin was promising the military—again—that the government would find enough funds to cover the costs of military reform. Whether or not he—or his successor—will follow through, considering how many empty promises he has made in the past, is open to question.⁴⁹ In fact, the situation is so bad that in the newly combined air force and air defense forces an effort is under way to sell 600 surplus aircraft to raise money to help pay basic operating expenses.

Even if the armed forces are able to carry out the kinds of reforms outlined above, it will be a long time before a military comparable to that under the old Soviet government reemerges. The chaos within the military is indicative of a larger problem: the instability that haunts the rest of the country. This means that the Kremlin can only hope that it will not have to call on the country's military to protect it from either internal or external enemies. What it needs is a honeymoon for the next five to ten years, a period of tranquillity in which to rebuild. Unfortunately, the country's leaders seem to believe that they can more-or-less ignore the situation in the military until the rest of the country recovers. Yeltsin's tendency to remove the country's prime minister every four months or so does not provide the type of political or economic stability that the military so desperately needs. In short, the Russian military may have not yet collapsed, but it is not very far from doing so.

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