

Putin's Russia: Towards A New Combination Of Military And Foreign Policies

Since the collapse of the USSR, military reform seems to be one of the most important issues for the transition of Russia. This reform is related not only to civil-military relations but also to the orientation of foreign policy. On this second point, the key question is: what kind of army does Russia actually need? In 2003, according to Alexei Arbatov: "The brief answer is that Russia needs an army which would be antipodal to the one it now possesses"¹. One year later, Sergey Ivanov, Defence Minister of the Russian Federation and General of FSB, declared: "Today we can say with confidence that the period of crisis development of the Russian military is over (...) In the 21st century, Russia's armed forces must correspond to the status of this great power"².

Who should we trust? Undoubtedly, these statements point out differences of perception within Russia's security elite. Furthermore, they indicate the gap that exists between political goals and military capabilities (which is not a Russian specificity by the way). As a great power, Russia needs to link its military and foreign policies and create a better interaction between means and ends. From this point of view, the current situation in Russia is much more than delicate. In the military field, it is disturbing, with the sinking of the *Kourask*, chaos in Chechnya and reform at a standstill. In the diplomatic field, the situation is a little better: stronger influence compared to Boris Yeltsin's time, improvement in relations with a large number of countries and the vigorous pursuit of national interests.

In order to understand how military policy and foreign policy interface with each other, it is important to remember two key points. During the Soviet period, the main task devoted to the military was to ensure territorial invulnerability. This task was connected to an active foreign policy aimed at extending power abroad for both ideological and realistic reasons. Moscow, therefore, developed an intensive military influence through programme assistance, direct interventions and/or covert actions. Furthermore, the country's resources were used to support

¹ A. Arbatov was at that time Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma Defense Committee. A. ARBATOV, « What Kind of Army Does Russia Need ? », *Russia in Global Affairs*, n° 1, 2003.

² S. IVANOV, « Russia's Geopolitical Priorities and Armed Forces », *Russia in Global Affairs*, n° 1, 2004.

the foreign policy. Under Putin, the main task devoted to the military is still to ensure territorial invulnerability at all costs. But there have been two main shifts. On the one hand, preparations for a confrontation with another great power are far less relevant than the need to deal with local conflicts. On the other hand, Russian foreign policy is committed to providing resources in order to improve the domestic situation. This evolution does not mean that Russia has abandoned the idea of extending its power. Accordingly, it is worth pondering both the nature of this extending power and its implications in terms of military policy. In fact, the real question is whether, and how, current Russian foreign policy can influence the stagnant military reform process. In answering this question the constraints on Russia and its internal resources will be taken into account before summing up the most crucial strategic issues facing Vladimir Putin.

Constraints

Russia's security concerns are largely dictated by its geography. A glance at a map reminds us of the uniqueness of Russia with its 60,933-km border, including approximately 56,500 km of water border (rivers, sea and lakes). Russia currently has 16 neighbours, located in Europe (Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Finland and Norway), the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Georgia – with which tensions were revived in summer 2004), Central Asia (Kazakhstan) and the Far East (Mongolia, China, North Korea, Japan and the US). Of the 89 entities of the Russian Federation, 45 are border regions, home to roughly 74 million people (almost 50% per cent of the population). This territorial and demographic situation places Russia in a highly complicated strategic context.

Since 1991, Russia's security policy has come up against the Soviet heritage. In short, this heritage consists of a superpower mentality based on the nuclear arsenal, an anti-Western vision, a "zero sum" geopolitical mindset and finally, a post-imperial posture *vis-à-vis* the former Soviet republics. The most prominent problem following the collapse of the USSR has been a combination of identity and international ambitions, closely linked to Russia's financial, as well as moral, resources. The overall economic situation explains why the military budget decreased sharply, affecting both the position of the military within society and available options in terms of foreign policy. Soviet foreign policy was both ideological and practical: it could count on a very powerful military tool, even though the intervention in Afghanistan had demonstrated its limits. After 1991, however, everything from military

concepts to arms acquisition should have been reconsidered, and especially the interface between foreign and military policy.

According to many Russian and Western experts, a great deal of time has been wasted in getting to grips with military reform during the last decade. This failure is officially explained by a shortage of financial resources, but the main problem has certainly been the lack of a clear vision of what kind of military forces Russia actually needs³. From the West's point of view, the Russian military is seen as only prepared for an overall (nuclear) confrontation and unable to deal effectively with asymmetric conflicts. Moreover, the Russian military does not appear to have learnt from its painful experiences in Chechnya (1994-1996, and 1999 until the present). In fact, these assumptions need to be moderated. The Chechen experience has had many real impacts on the ongoing transformation of Russia's armed forces⁴. Indeed, the Russian army has succeeded in building a few higher-readiness units able to perform efficient operations. Compared to the first war, there has been an improvement (from a purely military point of view), but it has not been sufficient to bring the conflict to an end. More importantly, it has never been clear what sort of victory Russia is actually looking for.

Resources

Concerning Russian military and foreign policies, an old adage should be kept in mind: the Russian army is never as strong as it thinks itself, but it is never as weak as it seems from the outside. Following the dismissal of Anatoly Kvashnin, many decisions were taken concerning the MoD organisation as well as its funding. On 13 August 2004, Vladimir Putin decided to increase defence spending by 40 per cent. This year, the Russian Defence Ministry's budget is approximately \$13.1 billion. According to Sergey Ivanov, two divisions numbering 50,000 troops will be transferred to contract service in 2005. It seems obvious that Russia can currently count on new means favoured by its brisk economic growth -- estimated at 7.4 per cent for 2004.

The very high export prices for oil and gas are playing a key role in Russia's economic performance. The instability in the Middle East and the situation in Venezuela indirectly impact Russia's economic performance. As everyone knows, Russia has highly valuable energy resources. In terms of economic development, as well as international influence, it is

³ D. TRENIN and A. MALASHENKO with A. LIEVEN, *Russia's Restless Frontier*, Washington D. C., Carnegie, 2004, p. 104.

one of Moscow's most important assets. With the world's largest gas reserves (32 per cent of world reserves) and second largest oil exports (just after Saudi Arabia), Russia can easily prompt some countries, especially in its neighbourhood, to make decisions in its favour.

Russia is actually not an emerging country similar to the others. Russia has an international status to defend along with its membership of the UN Security Council and G8 (plus its non-membership of the WTO). Despite its (impressive) demographic decrease, Russia still has an educated population able to produce state-of-the-art technology in many sectors of the defence industry. Russia continues to be pro-active in the international arms market — the economic and political weight of the military complex explains why the arms trade can not be disconnected from military and foreign policies. It is clear that Russian defence exports are still based on Soviet-designed systems and technology. There are serious questions about Russia's (in)ability to produce a new generation of equipment (this is not only a technical matter but a political one, related to threat perceptions as well as diplomatic partnerships). Vladimir Putin announced that the volume of Russian arms exports amounted to \$5.56 billion in 2003. Concerning the destination of the arms exports, two major shifts have taken place. Firstly, India has surpassed China as the leading recipient of Russian weapons and systems for the first time in several years. Secondly, in addition to India and China, a third destination for arms exports is emerging: Southeast Asia — especially Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam⁵.

Generally speaking, Putin's foreign policy can be considered more successful than Yeltsin's in terms of image as well as influence. Putin's policy is aimed at promoting Russia's economic development and at creating a *tous azimuts* diplomatic stance so as to become a highly sought after partner on the international scene. Therefore, he is deeply involved in the process of policy-making in order to merge economic interests with security challenges, whilst opting for multilateral dialogue in order to make his country's voice heard. The fight against «international terrorism», along with intelligence sharing, is consistently used by Moscow to facilitate its integration into many international frameworks (bilateral and multilateral)⁶.

⁴ P. BAEV, « The Challenge of 'Small Wars' for the Russian Military », in A. ALDIS and R. McDERMOTT, *Russian Military Reform 1992-2002*, London, Frank Cass, 2003, p. 189.

⁵ M. PYADUSHKIN, « Russia's Military-Technical Cooperation with other Countries in 2003 », *Moscow Defense Brief*, no. 1, 2004, p. 13-16.

⁶ T. GOMART, « Vladimir Poutine ou les avatars de la politique étrangère russe », *Politique étrangère*, no 3-4, 2003, p. 789-802.

It is important to note that Russia is probably at a turning point. Indeed, for the first time in years, Russia is engaged in a capital expansion, especially within the CIS. The effectiveness of Russian private capital can not be disconnected from state support. This is probably the sense of the expression “liberal empire” used by Anatoly Chubais to describe Russia’s global strategy⁷. The Russian strategic view on the CIS is certainly based on three main principles:

- use of Russian capital to obtain economic assets in different countries;
- use of political influence to defend Russian security interests;
- will to create some kind of common cultural space based on the Russian language⁸.

Utilising the new means available as a result of its improved economic situation, Russia is looking to diversify its international action. In fact, Putin’s policy is aimed at acquiring a set of options and a large range of policy tools (not just military or covert ones).

Key issues

Russia has to deal with many different situations and given the constraints and resources described above will have to make strategic choices. Even though Moscow seems in better shape today than during the previous decade, it still has to clarify the articulation between its means and ends, and to find the proper balance between military and foreign policy. To truly become one of the most influential powers in the world, Russia has to deal with three main issues.

1. Challenge local conflicts

It is axiomatic for Russian security officials to assert the primacy of defending the country’s territorial integrity. This integrity is today threatened by domestic actors (with possible but limited connections abroad) much more than by foreign powers. In the West, it should not be forgotten that Russia is at war in Chechnya (if there is any doubt, compare American and British losses in Iraq with Russian ones in North Caucasus). Chechnya is at the junction between foreign and military policies. Concerning the former, Russian officials always present the conflict as a strictly domestic issue, but also as an instance of “international terrorism” against Russia. Concerning the latter, the war in Chechnya involves the mobilisation of roughly 80,000 troops, incurring high costs. Approximately 20 per cent of the

⁷ I. KOBRINSKAYA, « The Multispeed Commonwealth », *Russia in Global Affairs*, n° 1, 2004.

⁸ D. TRENIN, « Identičnost’ i integraciã : Rossiã i Zapad v XXI veke » (« Identity and Integration : Russia and the West in the 21st century »), *Pro et Contra*, no. 3, 2004, p. 16.

military budget is devoted to this war. The question is whether Russia is capable of dealing with two local conflicts simultaneously.

2. *Design its conventional forces*

During the last decade, the security debate has focused on strategic forces (defended by Igor Sergeev) versus operational ground forces (favoured by Anatoly Kvashnin, finally fired in July 2004). The experiences in Chechnya and the Balkans explain why Kvashnin gave preference to large-scale ground forces at the expense of more sophisticated units, but he was fired not just because of the deteriorating situation in North Caucasus but also for having failed to implement an efficient reform in the ranks. In the conventional field, Russia's security establishment has not excluded a massive threat coming from its neighbourhood. That is why Russia is still concerned by NATO enlargement and tends to set up regional security organisation, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In the West, it should be understood that NATO does not just mean Washington, London, Paris or Berlin. Today, Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, Warsaw and Ankara are of increasing importance. At the same time, Russia actually wants to be highly involved in the fight against "international terrorism", implying modernisation of structures, systems (command, control, communication and information) and armaments. The big question is whether Russia wants to be prepared to counter a massive conventional threat or to create a new technological army? The answer is probably both, irrespective of available means.

3. *Define its nuclear power*

Inherited from the Soviet Union, Russia's nuclear arsenal was designed in terms of capabilities as well as possible use – mainly against the threat of the West. Arms control negotiations with the US are probably the most salient sign of Russia's former status as a superpower. However, Russia is currently faced with not only the US, the UK and France, but also with China, North Korea, India, Pakistan, Israel and, in the future, Iran. So, does Russia want to be prepared for these new threats or to give a strategic response to the US NMD programme? Again, probably both, irrespective of the available means.

We should keep in mind that Russia's primary concern is national security. A better combination between foreign and military policies implies an intellectual, strategic effort related to both threat perceptions and the availability of means. This is clearly one of the most important challenges facing Putin II.

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