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Debates on the Structure of Military Command in Russia

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Since the emergence of the new Russian state, the Russian armed forces have been undergoing major structural changes. On October 2, 2003, at a conference in Moscow involving the nation's top military and political leaders a qualitatively new stage in this process was announced.¹ According to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, "The ultimate goal is to create an effective military organization of the state, which will have a rational structure, composition and size, and which will not overlap other ministries and agencies in terms of ensuring Russia's military security."²

A key feature of the debates since the October conference has been a discussion of who will oversee the defining and implementing of Russia's military strategy—the Defense Ministry or the General Staff. Of course such controversies stem from differing views on the nature and scope of civilian control over the military. However, they also reflect serious personal rivalries in the military-political hierarchy.

The clash of ideas and personalities came into the open at the annual conference of the Academy of Military Sciences dedicated to "Problems of the Contemporary System of Military Command and Ways of Its Improvement with Due Account for the Changing nature of Future Wars" that was held on January 24, 2004 in Moscow.

As reported, the keynote speech by Minister Ivanov focused on deficiencies in the General Staff approach to its roles and the need to reconfirm the strict subordination of the General Staff to the Defense Ministry. Needless to say, this explicit criticism came as a surprise to the audience and General Staff Commander Anatolii Kvashnin.

The head of the Defense Ministry declared that "the contemporary situation calls for the maximal strengthening of the role of the General Staff however this strengthening should primarily occur through a much more exact definition of the functions and tasks that arise for the top bodies of military command."³ He then chastised the General Staff for "assuming excessive administrative and command functions to the detriment of the classical General Staff and essentially wasting its huge organizational and intellectual potential on the solution of secondary issues".⁴ In his words:

While performing functions of the Defense Minister, I could find out that our General Staff not only elaborates key decisions on issues of state military security, construction and development of the armed forces, but is also forced to take care of their practical implementation while controlling the conduct of specific activities and variegated day-to-day routine. Objectively, this decreases

¹ See Andrei Shoumikhin, *The Russian Military's New Open Doctrine*, October 2003, <<http://www.nipp.org/Adobe/Russian%20Web%20Page/October%20wepage%20rev.pdf>>.

² "Russian Defense Minister Calls for Coordinated National Defense," *Interfax-Agentstvo Voennykh Novostei*, 8 January 2004. FBIS translated Document ID: CEP20040108000103.

³ "Sergei Ivanov Intends to Reform the General Staff," vip.lenta.ru, 24 January 2004. <<http://lenta.ru/russia/2004/01/24/ivanov>>.

⁴ Vadim Solovyev, "Sergei Ivanov Brings Anatolii Kavshnin to Reason," *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 23 January 2004.

its effectiveness and leads to a situation when beautiful ideas do not always lead to the best of results.⁵

To confirm his views, as is often done in the Russian context, Sergei Ivanov used analogies with the Soviet experience during WWII. He stated:

It is only opportune to recollect the experience of the Great Patriotic War when the Soviet General Staff could start fulfilling its functions successfully only after the Supreme Command [*Stavka*] could concentrate its activity on defining the overall strategic line, planning of military operations, and general command of their implementation, having rid it of excessive administrative functions.⁶

Ivanov declared that “the General Staff should be relieved of its unusual functions that have overburdened it in recent years... [Instead] the highly professional specialists concentrated at the General Staff should be dealing with issues of strategy and operational art.”⁷ In all appearance, Ivanov was primarily alluding to the considerable expansion of the General Staff’s sphere of competence under Presidential Decree No 1058 of 10 September 2003 that confirmed it in the role of a coordinator of the activities of all power structures in the Russian Federation that have a military component.

Liberal expert opinion in Russia sees the expansion of the clout of the General Staff and the actual merger of its functions with those of the Defense Ministry as a threat to the principle of civilian control. In the opinion of Vadim Solovyev, Editor-in-Chief of the leading military weekly *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*:

The functions of the Defense Ministry and the General Staff have been practically fused together. However, according to the indubitable laws of a democratic state they should have been divided: the purely political and administrative ones – should be attributed to the Defense Ministry and the direct command of the troops – should go to the General Staff. This is one of the components of the principle of civilian (political) control. Another manifestation [of this principle] is the independent subordination of each power structure to the president. Their fusion in a single organization, albeit under the aegis of the General Staff is counter-indicated to a democratic state.⁸

Whether or not Sergei Ivanov was preoccupied with the same problem of civilian control over the military or was simply expressing his displeasure at the “excessive” powers of his rival Kvashnin, in his presentation at the conference he did not fail to emphasize the importance of the principle of “single-line command” in guiding the troops, and spoke against the direct subordination of the General Staff to the top military-political leadership of the state, i.e. the President. In his view, “the violation of this rule has

⁵ Aleksandr Bogatyrev, Oleg Falichev, and Vitalii Denisov, “Century XXI: Science to Win,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 27 January 2004.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Solovyev.

⁸ Solovyev.

always created disruptions in leading military construction, introduced chaos into troops' command and engendered bickering, intrigues and irresponsibility.”⁹

In his own speech at the conference, Anatolii Kvashnin insisted on the importance of the current functions of the General Staff, although he did not argue with the Defense Minister directly. However, the prevailing views of the General Staff were laid out by the conference's host—President of the Academy of Military Sciences Col.-General Makhmud Gareev.

In his report at the conference, Gareev also alluded to WWII Soviet experience “when the Supreme Commander assured the strategic command of the troops through the General Staff” in order to substantiate his main thesis on the central importance of the General Staff for the overall military organization of the state.¹⁰

While agreeing that “a well-tuned system of political and civilian control over military agencies is important for the reliability of military command” Gareev tried to set limits to such control so that “it does not harm the professional activity [of the military] and would not become an aim in itself that becomes an absurdity.” He claimed that “as demonstrated by past experience, extensive interference in the system of military control had bred only irresponsibility.”¹¹

Speaking specifically about the role of the General Staff and other staff structures, Gareev called for setting significant caps on “the interference of civilian military specialists” [*grazhdanskie voenspetsy*] who allegedly “go as far as suggesting to eliminate all discretionary and operational functions of the staffs.”¹²

General Makhmud Gareev also rejected Sergei Ivanov's criticism of the General Staff for overlooking issues of strategic planning in favor of daily routine in the troops:

Sometimes they claim that the General Staff and other staffs should engage in strategic and operational planning, while the organization of the implementation of the set goals and the control over their implementation should be entrusted to others. This is what happened at the beginning of the [Second World] War and exceptional measures had to be adopted to assure more active staff participation in troop C&C. There should be no discrepancy between what command bodies do during peace- and war-time.¹³

Interestingly, General Gareev advocated an expanded role for the Defense Minister, beyond powers defined in Presidential Decree No 1058. He proposed to promote the Defense Minister to the dual post of First Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Vice-Premier of the government during both peace- and war-time. Were such a position created and

⁹ “Sergei Ivanov Intends to Reform the General Staff,” vip.lenta.ru, 24 January 2004. <<http://lenta.ru/russia/2004/01/24/ivanov>>.

¹⁰ Makhmud Gareev, “Leadership Role of the General Staff Is Unquestionable,” *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 6 February 2004.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

filled by a military officer—as many senior officers hope—it would in effect restore the preeminent status enjoyed by the military during Soviet times.

By way of contrast, the roles of the Defense Ministry and the General Staff are set apart in two other Slavic republics of the former Soviet Union – Belarus and Ukraine, however obviously for different reasons and with different implications.

As stated at the conference by Aleksander Zatyanaiko, the Ukrainian Defense Minister:

Ukraine has completed the de-linking of the functions of the Defense Ministry and the General Staff. The main structures in the central apparatus of the Ukrainian Defense Ministry include departments that perform administrative functions and assure the supply of necessary resources to the armed forces. A gradual transition to the civilian Defense Ministry is under way... The main structural elements of the General Staff of the armed forces include chief directorates that would assure operational command of the armed forces.¹⁴

As confirmed by Zatyanaiko, the “separation” of the General Staff and the Defense Ministry appears to be geared to introducing strong civilian control over the military in order to comply with Western standards and facilitate potential Ukrainian entry into NATO.

Defense Minister of the Republic of Belarus Anatolii Maltsev, who also spoke at the above conference, described the separation of powers between the Defense Ministry and the General Staff in these terms:

Several structural components of the Defense Ministry have been reorganized. The Main Staff of the armed forces has been transformed into the General Staff that is the main body of military command that performs operational functions of troop command, provides for their high combat readiness, organizes interaction and coordinates the activity of the structural elements of the state’s military organization. Delineation of the military-political, administrative, supply, planning and other functions between the Defense Ministry and the General Staff has been legally confirmed. The Defense Ministry has acquired the status of a republican body of state governance, and it devotes its main efforts to the implementation of the military policy, administrative command of the armed forces and their comprehensive supply, as well to the coordination of the activities of other bodies of state governance on defense issues... The main task of the General Staff is strategic planning of the use and operational command of the armed forces, as well as organization of cooperation of all power structures in preparation for the defense of the state. The General Staff provides for the strategic command of the state’s military organization by the Commander-in-Chief.¹⁵

¹⁴ Aleksandr Zatyanaiko, “Moving to Civilian Defense Ministry,” *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 6 February 2004.

¹⁵ Anatolii Maltsev, “Minsk Has Separated the General Staff from the Defense Ministry,” *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 6 February 2004.

Unlike Ukraine, Belarus regards NATO as a potential enemy. The reorganization of top command structures in Belarus appears to follow “classical” Soviet thinking of the WWII period, and is hardly aimed at developing civilian control over the military.

Mr. Putin’s announcement of a pre-election overhaul of Russia’s Cabinet of Ministers has led to extensive speculation about changes at the top of Russia’s military command. While some predictions reconfirm Sergei Ivanov in the capacity of the Defense Minister, other potential candidates for this post include both civilian and military figures.

In the opinion of Vadim Solovyev, two top contenders to replace Sergei Ivanov include Kvashnin and Commander of the Navy Vladimir Kuroedov. Solovyev recollects that Kavashnin:

used to struggle [for this post] with the former Defense Minister Igor Sergeev primarily by relying on his close relations with the President. Similar competition was going on under the current head of the military organization however, given the lessons of the past, it was proceeding in a more camouflaged fashion. The contradictions [between Anatolii Kvashnin and Sergei Ivanov] came into the open at the conference of the Academy of Military Sciences, where the Commander of the General Staff argued in favor of his direct subordination to the Commander-in-Chief, and the General Staff structurally devouring the Defense Ministry.¹⁶

Intensification of the Kvashnin-Ivanov rivalry has led to speculation that Kvashnin purposefully masterminded a series of failures during the January-February strategic command-staff exercise to discredit Sergei Ivanov in front of Vladimir Putin.¹⁷

In Solovyev’s opinion, Vladimir Kuroedov may be a serious opponent for Kvashnin. Kuroedov’s clout also comes from his close association with the Russian President. In effect, notes Solovyev, no military commander could survive the serious failures that have recently happened in the Navy, including the loss of the nuclear submarine *Kursk* and the failed missile launchings in the Barents Sea during the command-staff exercise in February 2004, without the personal patronage of the President.¹⁸

The appointment of a military commander to head the Defense Ministry would send an important signal to society on the restoration of Soviet norms and methods of governance. Says Solovyev: “In the early 1990s in Russia they tried to implement a model of political (civilian) control. However 10 years later, everything is in effect returning to the Soviet system albeit of the 1950s, when all power structures were united under the Ministry of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of State Security.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Vadim Solovyev, “Defense Ministry Waits for the New Boss,” *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 20 February 2004.

¹⁷ Viktor Baranets and Aleksandr Milkus, “Why Did Missile Not Take Off?”, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 18 February 2004.

¹⁸ See, “Chasing Three Hares...” vip.lenta.ru, 18 February 2004 <<http://vip.lenta.ru/fullstory/2004/02/18/hare>>.

¹⁹ Vadim Solovyev, “Sergei Ivanov Brings Anatolii Kavshnin to Reason,” *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 23 January 2004.

On the contrary Vladimir Putin's choice in favor of a civilian, e.g. former Deputy Defense Minister and currently Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences Andrei Kokoshin whose candidature is being discussed together with a few similar ones, would signify that the Russian President, who has emerged as a uncontested ruler of the country, is determined to continue substantive democratic reforms within the military establishment.