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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Agnieszka Kopeć (Executive Editor),
Łukasz Adamski, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Leszek Jesień,
Beata Wojna, Ernest Wyciszkwicz

Armed Forces of the Russian Federation Three Years After the Conflict with Georgia

Robert Śmigielski

The reform of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (RF AF) is aimed at adapting the structure of the AF to new threats involved in local conflicts on the one hand, and, on the other, at enabling Russia to maintain strategic parity with the United States. The changes brought in to date have been largely formal, however, and they have had no major impact on the AF's combat capabilities. The success of the reform depends predominately on the improvement of the military personnel's skills and the re-equipment of the Armed Forces.

The reform of the Russian Armed Forces was launched in the autumn of 2008 with a view to comprehensively re-design the AF model inherited from the Soviet Union. The lesson of the Georgian conflict expedited changes and strengthened the resolve to modernise the AF. A sweeping reform of the Armed Forces' command and organisational structures, the upgrading of all units to permanent combat readiness, and increasing by 2020 the share of modern weapons to 70% are the means to increase the combat capabilities, mobility and flexibility of the AF. The importance the authorities attach to the modernisation is evidenced by the steady rise in Russia's defence spending despite the economic crisis and the budget deficit¹.

Reform of the RF AF in the Light of the RF's Military Doctrine. The military doctrine of the Russian Federation, adopted in February 2010, emphasises the diminishing risk of a large-scale war—a position warranted by the fact that after 1991 the Russian army had engaged in local low-intensity conflicts in Tajikistan, Chechnya or Georgia. At the same time, from the analysis of the military challenges and threats presented in the doctrine it follows that it is predominately the policies of the U.S. and NATO that Russia perceives as a potential threat to its own security². This dichotomy is reflected in the ongoing reform of the RF AF.

The disbanding of non-fully-manned ("cadre") army units (with a peacetime staffing of 5%–10%, to be brought up to the target wartime manpower levels only during mobilisation) marks a shift away from the erstwhile model of a massive army prepared for a global conflict. In practice, Russia has given up maintaining, in the different strategic directions, concentrations of conventional forces capable of repelling on their own a major land attack. This is a result of a rational analysis of the existing disparities in the conventional potentials of Russia, NATO and China. The decision to replace a division by a brigade as the basic tactical formation stemmed from the lessons of engagement in local conflicts, where enhanced battalions had shown themselves to be the most effective combat force. The principal task of the land forces—the significance of which is seen by the General Staff of the RF AF as declining relative to the air force and the navy—is to engage in local conflicts and in peacekeeping operations. At the same time, the marginal treatment of the land forces' needs in the AF re-equipment scheme until 2020 shows that the modernisation of the land forces is not a priority of the reform.

Under the military doctrine, Russian strategic nuclear forces remain the main component ensuring the security and sovereignty of Russia, just as they determine Russia's great-power status. The push to maintain strategic nuclear weapons at levels arising from the new START treaty limits and to maintain thereby parity with the United States, signals a priority treatment of these weapons in the AF

¹ R. Śmigielski, "Financial Aspects of Russian Military Reform," *PISM Bulletin* no. 119 (195), 23 September 2010.

² R. Śmigielski, "The Russian Federation's Military Doctrine," *PISM Bulletin* no. 28 (104), 18 February 2010.

re-equipment programme. It has been made known that, besides the missiles already under construction (SS-27 Topol M, RS-24 Jars) and the Borey strategic submarines carrying R-30 Bulava missiles, there are plans to build a new liquid-fuel heavy-duty missile to replace the SS-18s. Competition with the U.S. was the direct cause of the decision to develop, by the end of 2011, an air-and-space defence system to effectively repeal both a massive nuclear attack and conventional precision-guided missiles. This plan provides for the integration, within a unified structure, of air defence forces, missile defence forces, missile-attack early warning systems and space monitoring, and the development, by 2020, of 450 S-400 and 100 S-500 missile systems.

However, the experience of the recent two decades shows that plans for an air-and-space war hardly apply to the real threats to Russia's security. Moreover, these plans are targeted, first and foremost, at states with which Russia proposes to cooperate closely towards technological modernisation of its economy. This evidences contradictions between foreign policy priorities and the AF reform underway. Much too little attention has been given to preparing the AF to participation in local conflicts and peacekeeping operations in the CIS area and beyond, in the unilateral and multilateral format alike.

Effects of the Reform. In the first stage of the reform, till the end of 2010, the division-based structure of Russian Armed Forces was replaced with a brigade-based one; the six military districts were replaced with four unified strategic commands; the officer corps was reduced; and all military units were brought up to permanent combat readiness. While formal target indicators, such as the Armed Forces staffing and new structure, were met, the quality of these changes is dubious. Instead of three novel types of a general military brigade (light, medium and heavy), units which are scaled-down replicas of the former divisions, with the dominance of support units, have been formed—which belies assertions of their increased mobility and flexibility. There has been criticism from various quarters of the delay in establishing Military Police to counteract the steadily rising crime and corruption in the military. Despite the mounting spending on the procurement of new weapons, the re-equipment process has been exceptionally sluggish, practically rendering impossible the meeting of the 2020 AF re-equipment deadline. As much as 30% of 2011 defence procurement orders have yet to be placed. What is more, it is estimated that 20% of defence spending is embezzled. It is also incomprehensible why outlays on research and construction have been cut to 10% of defence spending, against Western armed forces' no less than 20%.

Since the results of the changes fell short of the Defence Ministry's expectations in many respects, an adjustment of the reform has been necessary. This applies first and foremost to the target manpower structure of the AF: 150,000 officers, 150,000 career non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and 700,000 conscripted troops. With the length of conscript service reduced to one year, 700,000 conscripts would need to be drafted—yet by now Russia's population of 18-year-olds has contracted to under 700,000 (of this total, 300,000 are draft-ineligible for health reasons or under student military draft deferments), making this steep target impossible to be met in the years immediately ahead. Moreover, the standards of conscripted soldiers are low both in terms of education and of physical fitness. Enrolment for the training programme for career sergeants, launched in 2009, has been about 1,000 candidates—well below the expected level as well as the AF's needs. A shortage of this category of military personnel seriously hampers the implementation of mission command tasks that enhance the flexibility of battlefield command. Under the circumstances, the Ministry of Defence decided to take back into service 70,000 officers and to increase the contract soldier quota to 425,000. The draft can thus be reduced to 355,000—a figure within Russia's demographical potential. This number of draftees will meet in full Russia's war mobilisation needs (the forming of 60 additional brigades manned by around 200,000 reserve soldiers). In practice, only after the transition to a fully professional army will all units of the RF AF have been upgraded to the category of permanent combat readiness, for reasons which include higher skills required of soldiers handling technically advanced weapons.

Conclusions for Poland. The reform of the RF AF implies that Russia will be seeking to maintain a military-power status, including nuclear parity with the U.S. Still, a large-scale land conflict with NATO is considered extremely unlikely. Only two of the 14 weapons storage bases from which to form additional units during mobilisation are located in the Western Military District. It is not to be expected that the reform will influence in a meaningful way Russia's position on CFE negotiations, since the RF AF re-equipment scheme is being carried out within the respective quantitative limits. On the other hand, a qualitative improvement can be expected in the potentials of the Baltic Fleet (new frigates, corvettes and submarines) and of the Kaliningrad District Force (the substitution of Iskander systems for the Tochka-U tactical missiles).