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Challenges Facing the Russian Defense Establishment

Efforts to reorganize and modernize the Russian military have generated an increased demand for manpower and modern equipment. The country's widening demographic crisis and procurement challenges, however, threaten to seriously undermine these efforts, or so argues Dmitry Gorenburg.

By Dmitry Gorenburg for ISN

Over the last four years, the Russian government has undertaken an unprecedented effort to reform the structure of its military. As part of this effort, it has sought to begin the process of shifting the military to a more professional manning structure, providing it with modern weapons and equipment, and reorganizing it to be prepared to fight the conflicts it is most likely to face in the coming decades. While the reorganization process has proceeded fairly quickly, a demographic crisis and continuing problems in the defense industry will present grave challenges to the military modernization effort in the coming decade.

Military reorganization

At the start of the reform process, Russian military forces had few combat-ready units; most units were staffed only with officers, with the expectation that these officers would command units made up of reservists called up in the event of a major conflict. Planners expected it to take a full year to bring the military to full readiness in such circumstances. This type of structure worked for the Soviet military engaged in the Cold War confrontation with NATO but did not make sense for a military that expected to be involved primarily in local, counter-guerilla and counter-terrorism operations. Being prepared for this type of conflict leads to far less stringent requirements in terms of army strength and mobilization capability, while emphasizing greater professionalism and combat readiness on the part of the military.

To better prepare the military to fight in 21st century conflicts, the Ministry of Defense mandated major changes in command structure to improve command and control. As part of this plan, traditional military districts were eliminated in favor of four Unified Strategic Commands (USCs). Each USC was given responsibility for all conventional military units in its region, in both peacetime and wartime. This was the first step of an effort to create truly joint military forces in which troops belonging to various services are under a single command and able to easily communicate with each other. As part of this change, the military shifted from a four-tier to a three-tier command structure, with combined arms armies and brigades below the USCs. The goal was to make the military more

compact and mobile and to allow for rapid troop deployment, all as part of an effort to prepare the military to fight smaller local wars, rather than the huge frontal conflicts of the past.

The second part of the reorganization involved making the brigade the basic unit of the military. The reform created modular brigades that combine three infantry or tank battalions with dedicated reconnaissance, artillery, air defense, logistics, and repair units. These brigades are much more self-sufficient in combat than a regiment, but at the same time more mobile than a division.

The reorganization process was largely completed in 2011. However, the Ministry of Defense is still facing challenges in maintaining the newly formed brigades at a high readiness level and in providing communications equipment to facilitate joint operations involving multiple armed forces branches. These challenges are related to the two greatest problems facing the Russian military: inadequate staffing and outdated equipment.

A continuing manpower shortage

Despite the need for an increase in the number of professional soldiers, the Russian military has largely failed to resolve its manpower shortage. Although it officially has a one-million-man army, actual staffing is around 750,000. The gap between the official position and reality, of course, implies that 25 percent of billets are currently vacant. This does not bode well for the concept of fully manned permanent readiness brigades, which have been at the core of recent military reform efforts.

The manpower shortfall is due to a combination of a rapid decline in the number of 18-year-old men eligible for conscription and an inability to recruit enough contract soldiers to fill the gap in the number of conscripts. Presently, there are no more than 700,000 men reaching the age of 18, of whom only about 400,000 are considered draft-eligible because of various deferments and health exemptions. Furthermore, the severe drop in the birth rate in the 1990s means that within the next two years, the number of 18-year-olds will decline by a further 40%, leaving less than 300,000 draft eligible 18-year-olds. The number of conscripts called up annually has already declined to 270,000.

Some politicians have sought to address the manpower shortage by proposing an increase in the length of conscript service to either 18 months or two years. This is a politically unpopular measure that will most likely lead to popular protest. Given the fragility of the current political regime, it seems fairly unlikely. Furthermore, if it happens, it will signal the rollback of military reform and the victory of the old guard over the reformers.

The military is instead banking on vastly increasing the number of contract soldiers serving in the military. This has been the stated goal of military reformers for many years. But so far they have little to show for their efforts. In fact, over the last 15 years Russia has actually regressed in its ability to attract professional soldiers. In 1995, the Russian military had 380,000 contract soldiers and NCOs in service. Because of a combination of financial problems and resistance by senior generals, by 2003 this figure had shrunk to [135,000](#). Since then, there has been a modest increase to [190,000](#). The MOD has set a target of reaching 425,000 contract soldiers by adding 50,000 per year starting in 2012. To this end, it has increased salaries and improved living conditions for soldiers. Despite these actions, it is falling short of its recruiting targets for this year and is not assured of continued financing for contract soldier recruitment going forward. Given its manpower problems, the military would do better to abandon the fiction that the Russian military has one million personnel and admit that 800,000 is a more realistic target going forward.

Outdated armaments

The Russian military is also facing a crisis in its equipment. Because of a lack of funding, the military

received virtually no new equipment between 1993 and 2008. As a result, the vast majority of its armaments are both physically old and based on outdated designs. To deal with this problem, the Russian government has begun to implement a 10-year and \$650 billion State Armament Program. The program's goal is to ensure that 70 percent of the Russian military's equipment is modern by 2020. The program's top priorities are to re-equip the Strategic Rocket Forces, the air force, the air defense and space forces, and to provide more advanced command and control equipment for the military.

The program suffers from a number of problems. First of all, when Russian officials discuss their goals for procuring modernized weaponry over the next 10 years, they never define their terms. They do not have a list of what types of armaments are considered modern. In some cases, systems that are based on 20-50 year old designs are described as modern. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that the MOD is implicitly defining modern equipment as any equipment that was procured in the last few years, rather than equipment actually based on new designs.

More importantly, analysts have grave doubts that the program will actually be carried out. Prominent Russian political figures have argued that the government cannot afford to spend such sums on rearmament given the need to revitalize the country's civilian infrastructure and the need to fund social programs in a deteriorating economic environment. Last summer, senior officials were considering a decrease in procurement funding for the next several years. [Some sources](#) indicated that the entire State Armament Program would simply be extended for three years—that is, it would run through 2023 rather than 2020.

Even if procurement funding is maintained at planned levels, there are grave doubts about the Russian defense industry's ability to produce modern weapons. Only a few enterprises have modernized their facilities and begun to work on new designs. The rest have outdated equipment and are not prepared to fulfill the military's needs. Most are continuing to lose skilled workers because the civilian sector can pay higher salaries. This is in addition to the disappearance of an entire age cohort (ages 30-50) who didn't go into the field over the last two decades because of its lack of financing and low prestige. Even companies that have modernized are dependent on subcontractors for their supply chains, and these subcontractors are often in much worse shape.

There are also problems with the defense industry's organization. As part of Russia's overall re-centralization under Putin, the Soviet-era sectoral ministries were largely restored as holding companies (United Shipbuilding, United Aircraft, Rostekhnologii). Many of the constituent units of these companies are dysfunctional — with the more effective units used to keep the effectively bankrupt ones afloat. All this means that the modernization of the industry has only barely begun. And it is difficult to understand how the State Armament Program can be fulfilled without the modernization of the defense industry.

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