

# Putin 2.0: Redefining Russia's Military Priorities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Newly inaugurated Russian President Vladimir Putin has indicated that the level of change that swept the country's Armed Forces since 2008 will continue, while offering unambiguous political support for the ambitious plans to rearm the military by 2020. Although a switch has occurred within the ruling duumvirate, the reform initiated in the autumn of 2008 evidently had strong backing from Putin, and this will likely endure. The continuity in the reform ambitions was signaled by re-appointment of Anatolii Serdiukov as Minister of Defence on May 21.

Since 2008, the reform of the Armed Forces has mutated and shifted from its early focus on downsizing the officer corps to a target of 150 000, later reset to 220 000, creating "permanent readiness" brigades to enhance mobility and combat readiness levels, streamlining the military educational system, improving social conditions for personnel and raising standards of combat training. Yet, mixing twelve month serving conscripts with low numbers of contract personnel within the Ground Forces' brigades, coupled with failing to adequately raise standards among non-commissioned officers (NCOs), has restricted the capability of the Russian military to project force.

The policy-planning problem is that over the past four years multiple statements by senior defence officials and the top brass resulted in no clear picture as to what the reform was actually about; Dmitrii Medvedev summarized its five main points in September 2008, and by November 2011 the Defence Minister Anatolii Serdiukov and the Chief of the General Staff, Army General Nikolai Makarov had expanded this to seven main points; introducing Military Police and the Aerospace Defence Forces (*Vozdushno-Kosmicheskaia Oborona* – VKO) among its priorities.

This sense of confusion about the nature of the reform agenda, or providing sufficient explanation for its core constituency – the officer corps – reflected low defence planning capacity in the defence ministry and frequently hurried efforts to find or implement new ideas in the absence of proper scientific research or testing of these initiatives. At a deeper level, of course, the political-military leadership elaborated no consistent explanation of either the fundamental driving force behind the reform or for what mission types it was geared to develop, train and equip the force structure. Russia's experience of small wars since the early 1990s and persistent security concerns in the North Caucasus or on its periphery, pointed in the direction of focusing on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, yet the enlarged military district system and reported emphasis on Iskander-M missile systems, submarines and fifth generation fighters in the State Armament Program (SAP) to 2020, betrays enduring interest in large-scale combined-arms operations.

Many among the top brass emphasize the adoption of network-centric warfare capabilities as a key aim in reforming the Armed Forces, though design issues in the software for the prototype Unified System for Command and Control at the Tactical Level (*Yedinaia avtomatizirovannaia sistema upravleniia takticheskim zvenom*– YeSU TZ) and anxiety over its possible susceptibility to electronic warfare have resulted in delays to introducing such new technology in the brigades. More significantly, no senior official has explained how an essentially post-modern approach to warfare may be successfully introduced into a military that does not function in a post-modern society.

In one of his series of pre-election articles, Putin offered insights into the possible contours of his emerging military

priorities (<http://rg.ru/2012/02/20/putin-armiya.html>). Although he covered many complex defence related issues, Putin essentially presented no new initiative, simply preferring to summarize advances in the reform and outlining ambitious aspirations, with little credible explanation on how these plans might be achieved. The future benchmark to test the success of the reform and modernization agenda was raised to keeping up with the latest advances in military technology, while admitting that rearmament will prove costly, placing higher demands on an already ailing and overstretched defence industry riddled with corruption. Putin's vision for the Russian military is to build an army and defence industry capable of strengthening the national economy, protecting Russia's sovereignty and commanding the respect among the country's partners.

Meandering towards implementing anything resembling such lofty ideals includes gradually professionalizing the system of manpower, reaching a target of 70 per cent contract personal over the next eight years, including the preservation of 140 000 conscripts and referring to a "reserve;" implying that "mobilization" remains a strong element in Russian security thinking. In Putin's view, rather than abolishing conscription, it simply must be improved, through varied means ranging from Military Police to official chaplains promoting higher standards of discipline and morale, and patriotic education of citizens at an early age.

As Putin delineated the priorities for military modernization to 2020 he placed modernizing the nuclear deterrent in pole position followed by the VKO, C4ISR, transport aviation, enhancing the protection of soldiers in theatres of operation and procuring precision-guided weapons and the means to counter such systems. Putin highlighting the aim to procure 2 300 new tanks in the SAP implies continued reliance on tank-centric rather than network-centric principles of warfare. In order to realize such ambitious rearmament plans, Putin understands the need to mitigate the negative impact of corrup-

tion in the military and the defence industry, suggesting this could be considered as treason, but he is stronger on condemning the symptoms of this malaise rather than addressing its causes.

Putin's return to the Kremlin will likely witness a restatement of the reform agenda, stressing its earlier progress and delivering a "work in progress" message, bolstering the defence industry and increasing the pressure on some of its companies under the watchful eye of Dmitry Rogozin. Putin knows the reform will likely require more than a decade, as well as the potential limits of the SAP rooted in the severe test that confronts the defence industry. But the deeper underlying and complex tasks of building new Armed Forces more suited to Russia's evolving threat environment will also demand addressing mentality and military cultural issues, *inter alia*, recruiting, retaining and developing a reformed generation of officers with higher standards of leadership as well as an ability to cope with delegating authority to entirely higher calibre of NCO equally determined to take on the responsibility of training and leading their subordinates and exercising real authority. The lengthy transition from a systemology of combat rooted in the means and methods of industrial era warfare to harness the force multiplier of the information era will necessitate a root and branch reform few could have foreseen at the outset in 2008.

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