

Quality Over Quantity

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In his recent article on national defense published in the Feb. 20 issue of Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin once again confirmed his ambitious plans for building up the military over the next decade. The degraded, demoralized and poorly equipped army must be transformed into a modern mobile military force that is designed for fighting local and regional conflicts.

In the article, Putin reaffirmed his determination to provide the necessary resources to modernize the country's armed forces. The numbers involved are enormous. The total cost of rearmament over the next 10 years will reach 19.5 trillion rubles (\$673 billion). Putin also calls for a sharp rise in salaries for military personnel and major improvements in soldiers' living conditions.

All of this raises concerns that an excessive military expenditures would make it impossible to modernize the country's infrastructure, health care and education systems. It could also mean an increase in taxes. Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin has been most critical of the plan, claiming that it will lead to dangerous budget deficits, higher inflation and other negative economic consequences.

But considering that national defense has been seriously underfunded and largely neglected for the past 15 years, the planned expenditures in many respects are reasonable. Overall, the plan strikes the proper balance by allocating the minimum resources needed to restore the effectiveness of the armed forces but the maximum that can be spent without threatening the country's normal development.

At the same time, however, there is something to be said for Kudrin's concerns because all of these plans are based on the assumption that the Russian economy will continue to grow over the next decade. In fact, it is more likely that Russia will enter a prolonged period of stagnation and possibly recession. Even if oil prices remain above \$100 per barrel, Russia can expect no more than 4 percent annual growth in the best of circumstances, according to most economists' forecasts, and this might not be enough to fund the ambitious military projects.

If oil prices drop below \$100 — a real possibility if there is a global economic slowdown — then it will be impossible to fund the projects. It is therefore no surprise that the Finance Ministry is reportedly developing a backup plan for reducing military expenses by 0.5 percent of the gross domestic product. The question is whether room can be found for lowering the planned military expenditures while modernizing the armed forces.

I believe that it is possible to achieve both goals if quality takes precedence over quantity, and if brainpower takes precedence over unnecessary hardware.

No one has ever made a convincing argument why the Russian army needs to maintain its current size of 1 million soldiers. In any case, Russia's demographics make it practically impossible to maintain a million-man army. The number of conscription age youth is at an all-time low because this generation was born during the early 1990s, when the country went through one of its worse economic crises in modern history. And if you look at the young men who are drafted into the army, a significant percentage of them are in poor health and have no interest whatsoever in serving in the army.

In the North Caucasus, there are much higher birth rates, and the young men there are in much better physical shape, but there are serious questions regarding their loyalty to the military. Indeed, as a rule, the armed forces have limited their numbers in draft calls.

The maximum realistic number of soldiers is closer to 800,000, and the military could probably afford cutting numbers to as low as 600,000 troops as long as the situation in the North Caucasus or Central Asia remains relatively calm. Overall, Russia could risk eliminating from six to eight army brigades. That would produce significant savings in combat training and troop maintenance costs, leaving more money for modernizing remaining units.

The second principle — "people over steel" — calls for strict compliance with all of the social obligations the state holds toward military personnel and for continuing the trend of the past two to three years of making a greater investment in combat training. At the same time, there are plenty of opportunities to save money in weapons purchases.

Maintain a strong nuclear deterrent is the one sacred cow in defense spending, something Putin has repeatedly stressed as a means to preserve Russia's sovereignty. Everything else, though, is open to discussion.

The Navy is a good place to start when looking to cut costs. Constructing a modern naval fleet is enormously costly and slow-moving, but Russia's geographical position and its military history suggest that the Navy can play an important role. If absolutely necessary, Russia could limit itself to a fleet of missile-carrying nuclear submarines deployed in the north and in the waters off Kamchatka. In any case, with Russia having the sixth-largest economy in the world based on purchasing power parity, there is no need to pursue an ambitious global projection of its military might or to make any attempt at a show of force. Moreover, Russia could easily walk away from the most conspicuous of its white elephants, such as the two French-made Mistral helicopter carriers, worth \$1.5 billion, or the project to return the Kirov-class heavy nuclear cruisers.

Of course, a more modest military would mean a slight loss of prestige, but the first step to modernizing the military and Russia as a whole is to overcome the futile struggle for superpower status.

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