

Putin's Pipe Dream for Building a Modern Army

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Listening to Vladimir Putin's statements during his presidential campaign, you would think the country was at war.

The national leader was constantly calling upon the Russian people to defeat the enemy, presumably the United States. To give substance to his fear-mongering, Putin held a record number of meetings with defense and security agencies, including a specially convened gathering of military unit commanders, the elite Taman mechanized-infantry brigade and experts at the federal nuclear weapons center in Sarov. At each meeting, participants asked prepared questions concerning the threat of a foreign-

financed Orange Revolution. Putin answered by saying the country would act in strict accordance with the law, which is to say that the siloviki will be willing to crush the protest movement, if necessary.

One way or another, Putin had to make a number of substantive statements on how the armed forces should be organized. To this end, he published a detailed article on the subject in Rossiiskaya Gazeta last month and referred to it in subsequent meetings with members of the military.

The most interesting aspect of that article was that Putin decided to share responsibility with Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov for implementing military reforms. For the first time, he explained that the reforms were not enacted for financial reasons, but to move away from the model of a mass-

mobilization army. Describing the military legacy he inherited from the Soviet era, Putin wrote about the inability of a mass-mobilization army to meet 21st-century security threats. In specific, Putin referred to the ineffectiveness of the armed forces during the second war in Chechnya from 1999 to 2000.

"There was only one way out," Putin emphasized. "We had to build a new army."

Of course, Putin didn't explain why it took eight years after the end of the second Chechen war to start the reforms. The reform plan was proposed to Putin back in 2001, but he refused to implement it because he would have had to fire thousands of military personnel. According to those who were directly involved in this plan, Putin did not want to play the same role for the military that liberal economist Yegor Gaidar had played for the country during the period of shock-therapy economic reforms in the early 1990s. As a result, the country's useless military units and depots remained in existence for another eight years, while the military budget disappeared into the mass-mobilization "black hole." Instead, Putin conveniently waited until Dmitry Medvedev took over as president in 2008 to make drastic cuts to the officer corps.

One of Putin's largest illusions is creating a professional army — or "smart defense forces," as he calls it, a term he borrowed from Russia's archenemy NATO. According to Putin's plan, the number of conscripts should be reduced to 300,000 by 2017, and to 147,000 by 2020.

One key requirement to become a professional soldier will be previous experience as a conscript. The idea is that once this plan is implemented, the armed forces will no longer have to draft hordes of young men who are physically unfit and who have no real interest in serving in the army. Of the 147,000 conscripts, the overwhelming majority will be qualified, healthy young men who are committed to further serve as professional soldiers once their conscript term has been completed.

Military service would thus be transformed from an onerous obligation — and, at times, basically slave labor — to a privilege. To help improve the prestige of the military, the government plans to pay for soldiers' tuition at leading Russian and foreign universities and to mandate that those who served in the military be given preference if they apply for government civil service jobs.

Unfortunately, this beautiful-sounding plan has little chance of becoming reality. The weakest point in Putin's plan concerns his promise to supply the military with modern equipment. Putin claims that by 2020 the armed forces will receive hundreds of new missiles and aircraft along with dozens of ships and submarines, but he doesn't explain how this

miracle of finance and defense industry will be pulled off.

Putin sadly notes that "Russia's defense research centers and production facilities have been slow to modernize over the last 30 years," and adds that "the excessively closed system has already led to a decline in competitiveness, inflated prices for military goods and exorbitant profits that have gone not into modernization, but into the pockets of individual businesspeople and officials."

But Putin fails to mention that he himself is responsible for these problems. After all, as president he corralled dozens of separate defense firms into several huge state corporations, a parody of the grossly inefficient Soviet-era defense industry. Worse, it seems that Putin has no plans to abandon the idea even now. On the contrary, he promised to build "a single operating algorithm for vertically integrated entities."

The other issue is how Putin will be able to deal with the problem of the influence of large lobby interests. Take, for example, Uralvagonzavod, the country's only tank manufacturer. Putin himself bowed to pressure to place an order for 2,300 tanks to be built over the next 10 years despite a recent statement by General Staff head Nikolai Makarov that the military would not be purchasing any tanks in the next five years due to their substandard quality. It is another question entirely how Russia will be able to produce 2,300 tanks — even bad ones — in 10 years, especially when they have not even been designed yet.

In general, it is difficult to imagine how Russia will find the means and know-how to make it a global leader in defense technology. The only concrete proposal has been to create yet another bureaucratic agency for military innovation and another one to oversee the fulfillment of defense contracts.

But Putin's most absurd idea was his appeal to military analysts to assess the national security threat for the next 30 to 50 years. Only a fortune teller or wizard could accomplish this. Perhaps Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov can lend a hand here.

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