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Russia's New Military Doctrine All Bark, No Bite

By Alexander Golts

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In approving the newest draft of the country's military doctrine, President Vladimir Putin waited until the very end of 2014 — when most of Russia's media outlets and their military analysts were on holiday. This is undoubtedly because Russia's top brass once again failed to deliver any hard-hitting, fateful decisions, but instead produced the equivalent of a little mouse — albeit a rather vicious one.

Recall that back in the fall, Putin announced that the military threat to this country had increased so dramatically as a result of the Ukrainian crisis and the insidious policy of the West that Russia would have to rewrite its military doctrine. Almost immediately, General Yury Yakubov, the coordinator general of the Defense Ministry's Office of the Inspector General, announced that the new version of the document should clearly identify the country's main potential enemy and define the conditions for a pre-emptive nuclear strike.

The general held no doubts that the United States was Russia's main potential enemy. As for a

pre-emptive nuclear strike even in the context of a local conflict — Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev raised that possibility more than four years ago, prior to drafting the previous version of the military doctrine.

Obviously, any such declaration would return Russia to a state of direct nuclear deterrence with the West. And after the annexation of Crimea, it seemed that such lunacy could become a reality.

However, nothing of the kind appeared in the new version of the military doctrine. Instead, it retains the old, wholly reasonable formulation regarding the use of nuclear weapons.

"The Russian Federation reserves the right to utilize nuclear weapons in response to the utilization of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, and also in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation involving the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat."

What's more, the new version's definition of regional conflicts eliminates the former reference to the possible use of nuclear weapons. Thus, with the country in a currency crisis, leaders begrudgingly gave way to reason, knowing they could not afford to prod the West into a new arms race.

Putin's experts painted a graver picture of the threat posed by so-called color revolutions and proposed ways to counter them with force. Anyone familiar with the materials presented at the "international" conference the Defense Ministry held in May 2014 would have naturally expected the worst.

After all, in an attempt to please the president, the top brass seriously argued that color revolutions not only result from conspiracies by hostile intelligence agencies, but are also a new form of war. Consequently, the authorities can define any act of civil protest as aggression by a foreign enemy.

The result is that the new military doctrine proclaims "there is a trend of misrepresenting military dangers and threats in Russia's internal informational space." In addition, the section listing "the main military dangers" says that "states neighboring Russia have established regimes, including as the result of the overthrow of legitimate bodies of state government, that threaten the interests of the Russian Federation."

Also, the section listing "the main internal military dangers" refers to "informational activity influencing the population, especially young citizens, aimed at undermining the historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions concerning the defense of the fatherland."

And finally, the doctrine's authors describe modern military conflicts as "the comprehensive use of military force as well as political, economic, informational and other non-military means together with the extensive use of the population's potential for protest and special operations forces."

That last phrase is especially remarkable. It places the protest potential of the population on a par with actions by enemy special forces. In other words, citizens who say they dislike something in their country are equated with enemy saboteurs.

At the same time, the doctrine does not indicate which institutions will determine exactly who is undermining the "historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions concerning the defense of the fatherland" and who is strengthening them.

Is that the job of the Defense Ministry or the Federal Security Service? Or maybe just the Security Council? And which authors will be accused of undermining the foundations of patriotism — Alexander Solzhenitsyn or current Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky? Vasily Grossman or Alexander Prokhanov?

Putin recently decided it was permissible to consider Mikhail Lermontov a patriot, even though he had written the line: "Farewell, unwashed Russia." However, I am not entirely certain that this particular poem corresponds to what the military doctrine authors consider "spiritual and patriotic traditions."

Of course, this all looks awful. And yet, the Defense Ministry did not take the seemingly logical next step. This is because, for years now, Russian military theorists have fruitlessly attempted to resolve the intractable problem of how the military should respond to non-military threats.

Thus, they stopped short of clearly providing for the use of armed force against domestic protestors, only hinting at that possibility instead. At the same time, the doctrine contains no direct statement on the subject, providing at least a shred of hope that Russian military strategists possess some remnants of sound judgment.

Thus, with its newest military doctrine, Russian leaders have informed the world not only that they consider their citizens little more than idiots whom Western intelligence agencies can easily manipulate, but also that they are not yet prepared to use force against those citizens if their thinking should fall out of line.

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