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Meeting Summary: Russia and Eurasia Programme

Civilian Control of the Russian Military?

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Changes have occurred in the division of responsibilities between two parallel bodies: the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff. Both experienced radical downsizing and restructuring as a part of the latest reform.¹ The Ministry of Defence staff numbers were reduced fourfold last year. The central *apparat* has remained in place, but other functions have been moved elsewhere. Some planning problems have occurred: the current institutional statutes describe a situation that has already changed, i.e. there is no written manual for the reform procedure. The functions of the two bodies remain closely intertwined: the General Staff is supposed to make plans for the MoD to implement. Personalities are important for this division to work, as the open conflict in the 1990s demonstrated.

The revamped Security Council is a control and command body. It takes decisions in its own right and formulates the main directions of domestic and foreign policy. It is also an additional instrument of control for Vladimir Putin – the current membership includes five of his close associates. The body has explicit oversight of the military, monitoring decisions, budget and also running the reform programme. Dmitry Medvedev and Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov are officially in charge of the reform, but both tend to delegate decisions to the Security Council. After three years of a career rollercoaster for many, the reform process seems to be running more smoothly now. The Joint Strategic Command structure has become operationally smoother. The military district commanders have more freedom in terms of procurement. One of the intended effects is to provide tighter control over smaller units.

Concerned about the extent to which the military were prepared to deceive the government in the past, Putin has sought to acquire levers of control. The military now reports to a special Duma committee, but this does not amount to a civilian control over the military as understood in the West, as there is no regularly changing, accountable government.

Questions and discussion

Certain people involved in the implementation of the new doctrine, such as Yuri Baluyevsky, have now left the Security Council. Asked what this meant for the future of military reform, the speaker replied that Baluyevsky was one of the main reasons why the implementation was bumpy at first. The top

¹ This discussion is based on research conducted by Conflict Studies Research Centre for a forthcoming paper, "Who Gives the Orders in the New Russian Military", to be published by NATO Defense College, Rome, in February 2012.

echelons of the government support reform – it would not have been possible to execute it otherwise as there was opposition from within the military. Serdyukov has largely achieved what he was appointed to do; so his departure, too, is not likely to affect reforms now that positive results have started to appear. The regime is unlikely to backtrack. The forthcoming change in the presidential seat will also not make much difference in terms of the balance of power between the government and the military.

Before the reform, the Security Council had been a destination for people put aside by government. Nowadays, it is increasingly used as an instrument of control over the military. The aim is to contain the independent nature of the military and put a lever of control on spending, doctrine and structure. Serdyukov and Chief of the General Staff Nikolay Makarov have to explain their actions to a Duma committee, though it has no control over them.

The main goal of reform is to move away from an army based on conscription to a professional force; although there has been some vacillation over conscription. The situation was in decline for a long time but recently began to improve. The reorganisation came at the worst time for recruitment; some of the conscripts taking part in the 'Vostok' exercises in July 2010 had only been in the army for two months. The reform introduced a promotion freeze and sliced off a huge percentage of "paper colonels". New aptitude tests have been introduced and many have taken the opportunity to leave the service. The MoD structure has become more meritocratic. Officer crime is officially down, though this is not surprising given there are far fewer officers. The nature of *dedovshchina* has remained more or less the same; it is a way of enforcing order. Many assumptions are still based on the availability of reservists. The number of people on the military register has not changed, but there is no longer capacity for that number of reservists. The army's stocks of equipment, for example, do not suggest the defence establishment actually intends to use the reservists.

The Joint Strategic Command was established to introduce more control over what goes on locally -to prevent cases of small units in remote areas lagging behind developments in the rest of the army. The unit commanders now have greater latitude in procuring materiel and services for the local units. Another reason behind decentralising control over procurement is that it should help divest non-military functions from the units so that soldiers spend more time training. Of course, this has created fertile ground for corruption as financial dealings have become yet more opaque. Equipment modernisation has been stymied by the underinvestment of the past fifteen years. A surprising number of capabilities need to be restarted from scratch. There seems to have been

some progress but the planned commitment of 5-6% of the GDP is not realistic.

It is not clear whether Russia perceives China as an economic and military threat, but the regime is careful not to present China as an adversary. One of the reasons behind Russia's stance on missile defence is its consciousness of the weakness of its own military and the perception that real power resides in nuclear missiles. While some of the US-proposed actions could be implemented, Russia would oppose them on principle anyway. This is more of a foreign policy issue than a security issue. Lack of US interest in Russia is not acceptable for the Russian leadership because of domestic politics. Each of Russia's red lines over missile and radar stationing has been repeatedly stepped over – Russia has nothing substantial behind them.