

The sinking of the Kursk and the crisis of the Russian military

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The sinking of a nuclear submarine of the Russian North Sea fleet on the 12th of August occurred in the midst of a conflict between the Defence Ministry in Moscow and the Russian Chief of General Staff, which had grown increasingly heated over the previous weeks.

The dispute, which apparently runs right through the government and military, has its roots in the NATO war against Yugoslavia and has been brewing for over a year. It is a consequence of the difficulties facing the Russian military in measuring up to the tasks imposed upon it by Moscow under conditions of a general deterioration of equipment, discipline, pay and morale. It stems, in other words, from the contradiction between the deplorable economic situation of Russia and the striving of the ruling elite to consolidate itself internally and at the same time adopt the airs of a great power on the world arena.

At the beginning of July of this year the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Kvashnin, presented the government with a proposal for the radical restructuring of the army, envisaging a six-fold or seven-fold reduction of the nuclear strike force by the year 2003.

Kvashnin's proposals went far beyond the reductions contemplated for Russia within the terms of the START-II-treaty for the decommissioning of weapons agreed with the US in 1997. Kvashnin proposed the virtual dissolution of Russia's independent nuclear strike forces, with the weaponry to be redistributed between the army, air force and navy.

The justification given by the General Staff was that the Russian military urgently required more money for its conventional strike forces. Otherwise, it would not be in a position to successfully prosecute its war in Chechnya. For future interventions in the Caucasus, in Central Asia and, in general, for the struggle against "terrorism" it was necessary to insure that adequate means were available. The army chiefs in Chechnya, it was said, unequivocally supported this position. Kvashnin is their man and has himself led two military operations in Chechnya.

For his part, Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev described Kvashnin's proposal as an "act of madness", amounting to the complete disarmament of Russia in the face of the threat from NATO and, in particular, the US. The plans of Marshal

Sergeyev, who prior to his nomination as minister was supreme commander of the country's nuclear forces, envisage a drawing together of the various nuclear strike forces—air-based, water-based and ground-based—under a single central command and a concentration of defence spending in this area.

It came to an open altercation at a sitting of the military heads in the middle of July, when Kvashnin and his supporters opposed the defence minister and categorically demanded more money for the war in Chechnya. The dispute became public, an unparalleled development up until then, and eventually, on July 31, President Vladimir Putin fired seven senior generals who were employed in the Defence Ministry. Those sacked were responsible for the following departments: radiation, chemical and biological protection, air defence troops, armaments, missiles and artillery, foreign economic relations, ground troops and the press service. A number of other leading officers were also forced to go, leading to reports in the Russian press of a veritable "purge."

On August 11, one day before the catastrophe on the Kursk, the National Security Council met and the same differences of opinion emerged in the course of the meeting.

The military manoeuvres involving the Kursk had begun on August 10. It was the largest naval manoeuvre carried out by Russia in years, and was based on the official military doctrine of the government as put forward by Sergeyev. Amongst other exercises, the navy practised the firing of cruise missiles, long-range rockets and torpedoes. As in manoeuvres which had already been carried out in June of last year and which, according to military reports, took place "in consideration of the experience with NATO in the Kosovo war", the scenario was one of confrontation with NATO. After last year's manoeuvre, the Kursk had sailed to the Mediterranean and simulated an attack on a US carrier battle group.

The war against Yugoslavia in the spring of last year led to a reshaping of Russian defence and military doctrine. NATO actions under the leadership of the US, which carried out bombing raids without a mandate from the United Nations, were regarded as a direct threat to Russia. Chief of General Staff Kvashnin stated at the time that the West was demonstrating "a growing readiness to impose military force at various levels in a very direct and brutal manner". This was

demonstrated by “the operations in Kosovo and Iraq.” Kvashnin added, “We must assume that they will also proceed against other targets, including those which are former Soviet territory.”

Putin's rise to the head of state was directly bound up with this development. In March of 1999 Putin, at that time head of the domestic intelligence agency FSB, was appointed to the additional post of secretary of the National Security Council. In April 1999, under his leadership, the Security Council began to rework Russia's defence policy. Existing military doctrine, signed by Boris Yeltsin in December 1993, was revised. The “expansion of NATO towards the East” was now expressly declared to be a threat to Russian security. The new concept was tested out in various manoeuvres, and finally in October two papers laid down new concepts for “national security” and “military doctrine.”

On the basis of these drafts Putin, as newly appointed head of government, undersigned a changed national security doctrine in early January 2000. The most significant change was a revision of limitations governing the use of nuclear weapons.

According to the previous doctrine, the use of nuclear weapons had been limited to circumstances that constituted a “threat to the very existence of the Russian Federation as an independent sovereign state.” According to the new doctrine, the use of nuclear weapons is justified “if all other means of resolving the crisis situation have been exhausted or proved ineffective.” Such a situation had been simulated in a manoeuvre carried out in the summer of 1999, which assumed a NATO attack on the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. According to the scenario upon which the manoeuvre was based, Russian conventional strike forces were only able to hold out for three days.

The emphasis on nuclear capability was supposed to increase the weight of the new rulers of Russia on the international stage, and went hand in hand with a strengthening of the state against the country's own population. Putin invoked the glories of “great Russia” and promised to establish order with an iron fist, knowing that, for the time being, he had the backing of the security apparatus as well as the military.

In April of 2000, just after officially taking over the post of president, he visited the North Sea fleet in the full glare of the media, sailed with the nuclear submarine Karelia, which carries cruise missiles in the Barents sea, and attended its test firing of two intercontinental rockets.

To the extent that he was not able to prevent the further economic decline of the country, enthusiasm for Putin sank rapidly among sections of the military. The deplorable level of equipment and pay for the troops remained as catastrophic as they had been previously. The ten-year decline of the military proceeded apace.

Russia was attempting to maintain its role as a military world power, on a par with the US, under conditions where the Russian defence budget amounted to four billion dollars,

compared with the US budget of three hundred billion.

Numerous reports have been published in the international press in connection with the sinking of the Kursk which, taken together, provide a devastating picture of the state of the Russian military. According to foreign experts, it is estimated that of the 1.2 million Russian soldiers who remain from the original five-million-strong army of the Soviet Union, no more than two hundred thousand are actually capable of combat.

Pictures of rusting submarines in the port of Murmansk have been shown around the world, and the state of the rest of the military is no better. Payment for members of the armed forces is so bad—even officers earn only about 100 dollars a month—that every form of equipment not nailed to the floor is liable to be sold off on the black market.

Putin can court the favours of the army, but he is unable to resolve its crisis and satisfy its demands. Together with the Kursk, all the dreams that Russia could re-emerge as a great power now lie on the seabed. A further intensification of conflicts concerning military strategies between General Headquarters and the government seems inevitable.

In the past few days Putin has made a number of decisions aimed at improving his weakened position. Relatives of the sailors who died in the Kursk are to receive compensation—savings books with the equivalent of ten years pay. Members of the army and police, customs officers and prison warders will receive a twenty percent wage rise from the first of December. Those employed in the development and production of nuclear weapons will also receive more money and improved pensions. However, compared to the scale of the economic decline of Russia, these measures amount to no more than mere gestures and signs of helplessness.

The crisis of the military reflects the extraordinary weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie. Unable to implement any type of economic development, the new Russian ruling elite is unable to emerge as an equal player on the international stage. It compensates for its physical and spiritual inadequacies with national self-adulation and pompous symbolism, not the least of which was the recent naval exercise. To maintain this combination of incapacity in fact and omnipotence in words, the 118 sailors of the Kursk paid with their lives.



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