

Push for comprehensive military reform continues in Russia

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13 April 2011

In March, the Institute of Contemporary Development, a think tank closely allied to Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, issued a report promoting ongoing plans for comprehensive reforms to the Russian military. The changes are part of a broader policy initiative known as Strategy 2020.

Backed by Medvedev, the proposed military reforms would transform the country's conscription-based forces into a volunteer army. In early April, the president indicated that the process of moving away from universal conscription would be implemented gradually over the course of many years, with the country maintaining a mixed conscript-volunteer force for some time.

If fully implemented, the proposed reforms would reduce Russia's 1.2 million-strong army to 1 million by 2016. Especially large cuts would be made to the officer corps, which could fall from 350,000 to 200,000. The powers of the high command would be curtailed to strategic planning and advising the commander in chief, as opposed to setting overall defense policy.

The plans also entail a vast upgrade in weaponry, hardware and technology, as well as efforts to cleanse the armed forces of corruption, with the intention of transforming the Russian military into a modern fighting force.

Experts believe that in its current state the Russian army is incapable of militarily competing with the US or other NATO countries, and that its frequent military exercises have more to do with "sabre rattling" aimed at concealing its military weakness. The logistical and technological difficulties the Russian army encountered in 2008 during a brief ground war with Georgia

underscored the problems facing the military, despite the fact that Moscow was ultimately able to triumph over its much smaller neighbor.

The reforms currently being advocated are not new. Medvedev's predecessor, the current prime minister Vladimir Putin, had already indicated the government's intentions to reform and modernize the military more than 10 years ago. Since then, however, little has changed.

Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov has been criticized for failing to push ahead with the restructuring of the military and cutting deals with the military leadership, which opposes the cuts and any curtailment of their rights.

Currently, the Russian army is primarily made up of impoverished young men whose families cannot afford to buy them out of military service through bribery or by paying for them to attain a higher education. Alcohol and drug dependence in the Russian army is widespread, as is the use of intimidation and torture against new recruits who face brutal hazing practices upon joining.

In order to increase the reliability of troops and make compulsory work in the army, police and secret service more attractive, President Medvedev has announced plans to increase salaries and pensions beginning in January 2012, together with offering improved health insurance and care for soldiers' families.

Further reforms currently proposed include the merger of various special units into a national guard. In Russia there are more than half a dozen different special forces, whose areas of responsibility and powers are cloaked in secrecy. The creation of a National Guard would mean significant reductions and restructuring, particularly among Interior Ministry troops, which would be reduced by 22 percent by 2012.

The main role in the National Guard would be played by the Russian secret service, the FSB, whose powers have been considerably extended over the course of the last several years.

The successful implementation of the reform is far from certain, with resistance to the proposed cuts both within the military and the Interior Ministry. In addition, the transformations and upgrades would demand a massive injection of funds—\$500 billion rubles a year, or 5.5 percent of Russian gross domestic product, a figure which even exceeds US military spending. Whether such expenditures are possible depends both on oil prices and political wrangling within the ruling elite over the use of state funds.

Regardless of whether or not the Kremlin proves successful in its implementation of the proposed military reforms, its aim is the creation of military force capable of suppressing social unrest and political opposition within Russia's immediate borders, as well as projecting the country's might in regions that are critical to its geopolitical, strategic and economic interests.



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