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WILL RUSSIA GO FOR A MILITARY VICTORY IN CHECHNYA?

Pavel Baev

The first sign of a discrepancy between Russia's military operation in Chechnya and political campaigning was the fact that the Russian flag had not been raised over the familiar ruins of the presidential palace in Grozny on the eve of the parliamentary elections in mid-December. During the autumn, politics and war had worked in perfect synch, making war-fighting a highly efficient election tool. By late December, however, the contours of an undesirable and unavoidable military deadlock had appeared, and the Kremlin policy-makers worked out that from then on time would be working against them. Hence the surprise resignation of President Yel'tsin, which not only provided Prime Minister Putin with the advantageous position of acting president, but also set a new time-scale. However, even three months is a long time in politics, particularly with a military disaster in the making on your hands. The 'election war' worked just fine for one election campaign, but threatens to become a massive liability for the second one. Putin now has to do more than just damage limitation, and in order to evaluate his options, we need to take a closer look at the conduct and style of the Second Chechen War on its many levels.

Starting, as military science prescribes, on the tactical level, we immediately see the difference with late 1994. Back then, the Russian Army hardly had a clue about what sort of war it was fighting and how it should perform, mixing experience from Afghanistan with some lessons from post-Soviet 'peace' operations. In autumn 1999, it had a clear idea and implemented it quite consistently. Some Western experts have concluded that the Russians are following the NATO model from Kosovo, but in fact it is quite difficult to find much similarity between the two operations: NATO used massive airpower with high-precision strikes in order to avoid a ground campaign, while Russia has used limited airpower (with very little precision to speak of) in support of the ground campaign, relying primarily on massive and indiscriminate use of artillery. There is nothing new about this 'firewall' Russian tactic, but in the First Chechen War it was just not possible to apply it due to political reservations and public opposition. This tactic has worked reasonably well in lowland Chechnya and provided for destruction and capture of all major urban centres, except the fortified Grozny, with minimal casualties. As the federal troops have reached the mountains and surrounded Grozny, the effectiveness of the 'firewall' has gone down. After the Chechen counter-attacks in early January 2000, Russian military commanders

promised some changes in the tactics, but the only real measure has been tough interrogation of all Chechen males in the age group 10-60, which requires concentration camps and actually means ethnic cleansing.

On the operational level, which is traditionally the strong side of Russian military thinking, there are several visible improvements in the conduct of the current campaign. First of all, the interaction between different units of the Army, between its branches and the Air Force, and, particularly, between the military and the Interior Troops works much better. Of the 100,000-strong federal grouping, the 'real' military hardly make up more than half, but, unlike the previous time, they are able to take the lead and organize combat cooperation. As the rotation of personnel began in early December, this cooperation has started to stumble. The key problem is how to control the 'liberated' cities and villages, and the series of sudden but well-coordinated Chechen attacks in early January (particularly on Argun and Gudermes) showed that the Interior Troops cannot secure the rear for the military, who now have to concentrate around Grozny and advance into the mountains.

On the strategic level, which deals with the organization and build-up of the Armed Forces for fighting wars of this type, the picture is somewhat surprising. Logically, the experience of this war (as well as the previous one) should be utilized for reforming and building up the mobile and combat-capable components of the army. The lessons about small-scale but high-intensity wars should be translated into new strategic guidelines. However, nothing resembling this learning process is visible in the General Staff, headed by the determined but not very imaginative Anatoly Kvashnin. The new Military Doctrine barely mentions local conflicts and 'peace' operations of various types; there is no effort towards creating any Mobile Forces (perhaps this notion is still too closely associated with Pavel Grachev, the 'best Defence Minister of all time', in Yel'tsin's words). The natural first step here is perhaps strengthening the Airborne Troops, who took the main burden of the first stage of this war in Dagestan and performed several battalion-size operations in the mountains, but even that step is not being taken because of the questionable political loyalty of these troops.

On the level of propaganda battles, the military are praised for doing a much better job than four years ago. Again, some specialists are quick to point out the influence of NATO's spectacular public relations achievements in Kosovo. But on a closer look, Russian military propaganda has hardly advanced very much beyond the boring reports and some incredible lies (like the famous '48 snipers' around Pervomayskoe in January 1996) of the First Chechen War. The real difference is that this time the media is eager to reproduce and recycle these lies, and that society is ready to swallow them – and ask for more. Only in January 2000 the first signs of criticism appeared in 'independent' media (ie not directly controlled by the government or by Boris Berezovskiy, the pro-Kremlin oligarch). A shift in public opinion has not happened yet, but Putin is under pressure to pre-empt it.

On the doctrinal level, which deals with the most fundamental military-political issues, we can find two significant features. The first is further strengthening of the political profile of nuclear weapons. This 'nuclearization' of Russia's foreign policy has taken a sharp turn in 1999; if earlier Yel'tsin tried to impress his NATO 'partners' with spectacular reductions and de-targeting, he later felt the need to threaten them with the 'whole arsenal of nuclear weapons'. Putin, avoiding Yel'tsin's extravaganza, has shown few doubts in instrumentalizing Russia's nuclear potential for countering Western pressure. His harsh comments on Chechnya while observing a missile test in early December 1999 were

perhaps just an early warning; the revision of the National Security Concept with more emphasis on nuclear instruments probably makes a more credible threat. The First Chechen War saw one nuclear alert (caused by a Norwegian meteorological missile launch), now we might see something more dramatic.

The second significant feature is the deep split between the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff. Tensions between these two powerful military bureaucracies are quite traditional, but now the split is also functional: the MoD gives priority to the nuclear weapons and programmes, while the *Genshtab* is handling the war. This brings to the forefront the painful issue of distribution of resources, since the government, accommodating as it is, cannot increase the supply that much. Defence Minister Sergeyev will continue to push hard his beloved ICBM *Topol* project, while the Chief of the General Staff Kvashnin demands that every military rouble should go to Chechnya – or to the related production and acquisition of conventional hardware. At the moment, General Kvashnin appears to be the winner, and General Sergeyev may well be on his way out. But the political demand for a nuclear 'show' continues to be high, so the strategic forces most probably would be able to keep their share of resources. The General Staff has already shown signs of losing its political influence (the removal of two top generals from the Chechen campaign in early January 2000 is certainly symptomatic), and Kvashnin makes a perfect scapegoat.

And that takes us to one fairly obvious point: the Second Chechen War in its current military setting is not winnable. Capturing all the major cities (even Grozny), conducting brutal *zachistka* (combing) of the villages and setting *blockposts* on every crossroads are all familiar settings of the first war, so the outcome is very much predetermined. The newly-burned armour on Minutka Square in Grozny shows that all the improvements in tactics and in organization of the operation do not make a victory more achievable. But another defeat is unacceptable not only for the General Staff and presidential candidate Putin, but for Russian society as a whole. What was started as a smart political game to boost Putin's popularity has grown into a matter of national pride and revival, has become an existential issue for Russia. Squaring the circle of unwinnable war and unacceptable defeat requires some radical political decision-making.

One way to go might be to open serious negotiations with the Chechen President Maskhadov, perhaps enjoying the position of strength. Now that Acting President Putin has such solid support in the State Duma, he may feel secure enough to attempt a compromise solution, unpopular as it might be, particularly with the 'top brass'. His personal statements about Maskhadov as well as attempts to play up Bislan Gantemirov as an alternative Chechen leader are certainly not very helpful for this strategy, but the really big problem is public opinion. The turn to a strategy of negotiated settlement could cut 15-20% from his ratings (the 'if' about him being elected might be bigger than it seems at the moment) and will not necessarily give him a way around the situation when time is working against his presidential campaign. A peaceful settlement might reproduce the previous situation of an uncontrollable and chaotic Chechnya, and that might cause quick erosion of Putin's presidential legitimacy by summer-autumn 2000 (this legitimacy is already weakened by his manipulating of Yel'tsin's departure). The significant (even if slightly diminishing) majority of Russian voters still wants to see a clear victory in Chechnya – and Putin is well aware of that.

The circle of unacceptable defeat, unsustainable deadlock and unachievable victory might be squared from the military side. Victory is not possible in the present military format –

but that does not mean that it is entirely impossible. Chechnya is not Vietnam, where millions were able to hide in the jungle; it is also not Afghanistan, with its endless mountains. It is a relatively small piece of land (about half the size of Wales) with mountains only in the south; it had a population in 1991 of up to 1.2 million of which more than half have already fled. Stalin crushed the Chechens in a couple of weeks. It is just a question of being consistently brutal and sufficiently deadly. This kind of victory is currently being advocated by Aleksandr Rutsikoy, Governor of Kursk and Afghan veteran who is among those nominating Putin for president. It might be achieved in a matter of months even without paying a high price in Russian lives. To see how, we need to go again through the spectrum of the war.

On the tactical level, the two highly efficient methods not yet used are 'carpet' bombing and massive mining. So far, the use of the Air Force is limited to some 50 sorties on a good day (and there are not many of those in winter), with the frontal Su-25 being the main workhorse and the heavier Su-24 delivering selective strikes. If the long-range all-weather Tu-22M are employed for systematic bombing of the mountain valleys, that might deny the rebels any 'safe areas'. Multi-layer mining of the openings of these into the plains might make the combat manoeuvring of the partisan units quite difficult. Conveniently, Russia is not a signatory to the Land Mines Convention, despite some loose promises from President Yel'tsin. A 'tactical' nuclear strike on Grozny appears to be an impossible option, but Russia's political re-nuclearization implicitly puts it on the list.

On the operational level, the key 'winning' idea might be to turn the stretch of land between the River Terek and the mountains into a 'burned land'. All the main urban centres in Chechnya are located in that area, so they have to be thoroughly destroyed (perhaps with the use of strategic aviation). If this 'buffer zone' becomes a strictly 'no-go' territory (constantly bombed and massively mined), it would not matter so much if the rebels still controlled the mountains (under 'carpet' bombing), since they would not be able to attack and retreat. Certainly, large-scale expulsion and relocation of population would be necessary, but the methods are familiar and in fact half of this work is already done. Northern Chechnya could then be kept relatively stable by a force of some 20,000 and ruled by local collaborators.

On the theatre level, such a victory would not provide for a stabilization of the North Caucasus and would require the permanent presence of a significant combat-capable force. Dagestan, with its ethnic diversity and totally corrupt leadership, would remain prone to internal conflict; Ingushetia, overcrowded with refugees and sympathetic to the Chechens, would become a guerrilla base; North Osetia, emboldened by the status of Russia's key ally, might demand merger with South Osetia, currently part of Georgia; Kabardino-Balkaria is already poised to fall apart violently; Abkhazia, with its conflict-oriented leadership, will persist in its secession from Georgia and build ties with other trouble-makers. To prevent at least some of this and to contain the rest - and it is Putin's stated intention to preserve the Russian Federation in its present form - would necessitate a long-term deployment of a military grouping of some 250,000 - certainly in violation of the newly-revised CFE Treaty.

On the highest level of military-political interaction, this victory would mean that the 'Chechen' Army remained a powerful political actor in Moscow. Democracy, which was not at all advanced by the December 1999 parliamentary elections and will hardly blossom in the presidential elections, might be curtailed further. Relations with the West, which finds it difficult now (note the appeal of the Nobel-prize laureates Médecins Sans Frontières)

and impossible after the 'victory' to leave the war crimes committed in Chechnya unnoticed, could deteriorate to open hostility. At the same time, the Russian economy, even if efficiently controlled from the centre and supported by high oil prices (the best possible option), would not be able to generate resources sufficient for a Soviet-style military machine. It probably would be able to sustain the strategic nuclear forces and the military grouping in the North Caucasus – and nothing else. More specifically, it means retreat from Tajikistan, a defenceless border with China, and no Navy (except for some nuclear submarines).

Will Russia go for this victory and accept these consequences? The results of the parliamentary elections generally point to the affirmative. The pressure of the presidential race definitely pushes Putin in the same direction. The Army leadership shows determination to achieve its victory and forget about reforms. Hopes for a negative answer are pinned to common sense, liberal values and consciousness – commodities which are in very short supply in today's Russia.

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