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Publisher: Routledge
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The Journal of Slavic Military Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fslv20>

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Available online: 25 May 2012

To cite this article: Alexander Sergunin (2012): On the Russian Military Reform: A Rejoinder, The
Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 25:2, 251-256

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2012.676515>

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Letter to the Editor

On the Russian Military Reform: A Rejoinder

Having read Gregory Lannon's,¹ Charles Bartles,² and Stephen Blank's³ articles on the Russian military reforms I'd like to make several comments both to develop/update those authors' argumentation and challenge some of their points.

I find myself in agreement with them on a number of key points regarding the aims, nature, and effectiveness of the Russian military reform. For example, I agree with Charles Bartles' assessment that under Anatoly Serdyukov, the first really civilian Defense Minister, the Russian armed forces had undergone the most serious structural changes in the post-Soviet era.

At the same time, I'd like to define more precisely the Medvedev-Serdyukov military reform's objectives. In contrast with the Yeltsin and Putin who tried simply to downsize the huge Soviet-born military monster, the current Russian leadership wants to create a principally new army. The Kremlin aims at making the armed force structure adequate to, on the one hand, the nature of domestic and external threats to Russia's military security and, on the other, Russia's economic, technical, demographic, and intellectual capabilities. The priority is to develop the armed forces and other services designed to deter aggression, as well as mobile elements, which can be quickly delivered and deployed in the required area(s) and carry out mobile operations in any region where the security of Russia might be threatened.

I agree with Gregory Lannon who believes that the ongoing Russian military reform is generated by the radical change of Moscow's threat perception and abandonment of the Soviet-type global ambitions. However, I disagree with his point that Russia's future strategic role will be reduced to the purely regional one and that Moscow will be mostly concentrated on countering

¹ Gregory P. Lannon, 'Russia's New Look Army Reforms and Russian Foreign Policy,' *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24 (2011) pp. 26–54.

² Charles K. Bartles, 'Defense Reforms of Russian Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov,' *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24 (2011) pp. 55–80.

³ Stephen Blank, 'Russia's Geo-economic Future; The Security Implications of Russia's Political and Economic Structure,' *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24 (2011) pp. 351–395.

the so-called 'southern threats' (separatism in Northern Caucasus, 'revisionist' Georgia, Islamic extremism in Central Asia, etc.).⁴ Russia cannot be only a 'normal' regional power because it possesses a huge nuclear arsenal, it is engaged in a dialogue with the United States, NATO, and EU on global issues such as arms control, local conflict management and resolution (including peace-keeping operation in various parts of the world), fighting international terrorism, organized crime, and piracy, as well as developing a rather aggressive arms export policies around the globe. For this reason, the future Russian armed forces will be designed to cope with both regional (not only 'southern' but, as Lannon himself mentions, also Western/NATO) and global threats but in a non-aggressive (defensive) manner (here I again agree with the analyst from the U.S. Department of the Army).

To add some details to the description of the Russian military reform made by American experts I'd like to note that in structural terms it has the following priorities:

- Force reduction. The armed forces were reduced from 1.2 in 2008 (when the reform started) to 1 million by 2012. Originally it was decided to have 1 million troops by 2016, but Serdyukov proposed to implement this plan ahead of schedule. The most painful reductions concern the officer corps which must be reduced by 185,000 by 2012. Some officer positions such as ensigns (Army) and warrant officers (Navy) are, in fact, abolished. Part of these military positions will not be reduced, but replaced with civilian positions—physicians, journalists, lawyers, and others. Another part will be substituted with sergeants. The ratio between senior and junior officers' positions will also be changed in favor of the latter (see Table 1). Very serious reductions were planned in the central apparatus of the armed forces. It will be reduced from 22,000 to 8,500 positions. It also concerns the General Staff: the number of its departments will be reduced by half.

TABLE 1 Planned Reductions of the Military Personnel, 2008–2012

Category	01.09.2008	Reduction by 2012	Change
General	1107	866	–22%
Colonel	15365	3114	–80%
Lieutenant-Colonel	19300	7500	–61%
Major	99550	30000	–70%
Captain	90000	40000	–56%
First Lieutenant	30000	35000	+17%
Lieutenant	20000	26000	+30%
Total, officers	365000	142000	–61%
Ensign (Army)	90000	0	–100%
Warrant Officer (Navy)	50000	0	–100%

⁴ Lannon, *Op. cit.*, 29–30, 32, 50–52.

- military-administrative reform. The central command bodies of the three armed services (Army, Air Force, and Navy) have been reorganized and streamlined. Instead of six military districts four new districts (similar to the NATO/US strategic commands) have been created—Western, Eastern, Southern, and Central.
- complicated four-echelon management system (military district-army-division-regiment), that was inherited from the Soviet time, was replaced by a new, three-echelon, system (military district (strategic command)-operative command-brigade). The new management system was again borrowed from the NATO/US experience.
- reorganization of the land forces (Army) by
 - a. abolishing the old military structures such as armies, divisions and regiments;
 - b. replacing them by brigades;
 - c. eliminating the non-combat ('cadre-strength') units with a minimal/reduced manpower, and (d) making all army units 'troops of permanent readiness' (combat units).

This structural reform will inevitably entail the reduction of the general number of units in the Russian armed forces (see Table 2).

- similar reorganization of the Air Force by replacing armies, corps, divisions, and regiments by air force bases and brigades.
- reorganization of the Army Reserve, including its training system.
- reform of the military education system. 65 military higher education institutions that existed by 2008 will be merged into 10 military academies and universities and a system of training and research centers will be created.
- Expanding the civilian control over the armed forces. Currently, only two of ten deputy ministers are on the active military service, other deputies have a civilian background. Moreover, the civilian component of the supply and logistic system of the armed forces (the so-called 'out-sourcing system') was strengthened.
- More attention is given to the social dimensions of the armed forces development. The Kremlin promised to take care of housing for active duty and retired servicemen. According to prime minister Putin, about 130.000 officers (and their families) still had problems with housing by the end of

TABLE 2 The Number of Military Units in Russian Armed Forces

Military Service	2008	2012	Change
Land Forces	1890	172	-90%
Air Force	340	180	-48%
Navy	240	123	-49%
Strategic Rocket Forces	12	8	-33%
Space Forces	7	6	-15%
Airborne Forces	6	5	-17%

2011. In early November 2011 (just one month before the parliamentary elections) President Medvedev signed a law to increase salaries for servicemen by two–three times and military pensions by 1.5 times. It was promised to make the military service for conscripts ‘more humane’, including permission to use cell phones, introduction of the five-day work week, expansion of contacts with civil society institutions, etc. The military doctrine of 2010 called for ‘boosting the prestige of military service’ and the Ministry of Defense (MoD) launched some programs to better prepare potential conscripts for military service.

As the above-mentioned *JSMS* authors mentioned, the Serdyukov team’s reformist efforts were heavily criticized by the political opposition. However, the opponents of the reform are non-monolithic and should be differentiated by their ideology and motivation. The Communists blamed the Medvedev-Serdyukov tandem for the destroying the armed forces by the ‘ill-advised’ and ‘chaotic’ reform that is based on the ‘business-like’ or ‘commercial’ approach. The liberals were discontent with the organization of the civilian control over the military. They pointed out that civilians were brought only to the top of the military managerial system while the rest of the personnel were recruited from the professional military. They also believed that the level of the Defense Ministry’s cooperation with civil society institutions was insufficient. Moreover, they stressed that the increase in the military’s salaries was a purely populist measure undertaken by the Medvedev-Putin tandem on the eve of the parliamentary and presidential elections. Alexei Kudrin, the liberal-minded Finance Minister, has even resigned in a protest against the substantial increase in military spending (amidst the global economic crisis).

The transformation from divisions (that were the key element of the Soviet/Russian armed forces) to brigades is also a subject of heavy critique from many Russian military analysts. This group of experts believes that this transition will dramatically weaken the armed forces and will make it impossible to wage a large-scale war against a ‘strong enemy’. As a result, Russia will be able to fight only in limited military conflicts, like the ‘five-day war’ with Georgia. Moreover, as these experts underline, in the long term such a transformation will negatively affect Russian generals’ professionalism because only after having the experience as a division commander can a general obtain real operational and strategic skill.

To continue the analysis of the Medvedev-Serdyukov ‘endeavor’: these leaders paid much more attention to the economic aspects of the military reform than their predecessors. They understand that without a solid economic basis the Russian armed forces will be unable to successfully complete the modernization process and ensure its sustainable development in the foreseeable future.

More specifically, the military-economic strategy has four main priorities—

- a. equipping the army with modern weapons;
- b. maintenance and development of the material/resource basis of the armed services;
- c. reinvigoration of the defense-industrial complex (DIC), and
- d. securing and expanding of the country's mobilization capacities.

As far as the task of re-arming the military with modern weaponry is concerned the State Program of Armament for the period of 2007–2015 (SPA-2015) was adopted by the Putin administration. The new program (for the period of 2011–2020 - SPA-2020), worth 19 trillion rubles (\$613 billion), was issued by the Medvedev administration even before the completion of the previous program. The SPA-2015 called for raising the number of modern weapons and equipment to 80–100 percent of the total by 2020. However, later the modernization aim was lowered to 70 percent advanced weapons in 2020.

Given the lack of financial and material resources the Russian strategic planners aim at re-equipping, first of all, the most important components of the armed services—nuclear strategic forces, conventional rapid reaction forces, commandos (*spetznaz*), and anti-terrorist units. It was decided to concentrate on the following priorities:

- a. to create multifunctional (multirole) weapon systems;
- b. to develop new models of high-precision weapon systems;
- c. to develop information warfare capabilities;
- d. to improve the quality of information communication systems on the basis of the up-to-date technologies, and
- e. to improve C³ (command, control, communications) systems at the strategic, operational-strategic, operational, operational-tactical, and tactical levels.

However, as Stephen Blank rightly put it, in 2009–2011 the governmental arms procurement program has experienced a serious crisis and was in fact stalled because of either inability of the Russian defense industry to produce modern weaponry (due to the lack of the skilled labor force and modern technologies) or MoD's unwillingness to buy outdated armaments. For example, the MoD decided to buy the French *Mistral* because it was unsatisfied with a too high price that the Russian DIC offered for the building of a new helicopter carrier. As a result of the 'price conflict' between the MoD and the DIC the state arms procurement orders were not fully implemented in 2009–2011.

The inability of the Russian DIC to equip the armed forces with modern and reliable weaponry at a reasonable price caused the need for its long-delayed reform. However, the reformist programs suggested by the

Medvedev administration are quite ambiguous. On the one hand, the Kremlin aims at modernization of the DIC on the basis of the principle of self-reliance, i.e., new weapon systems should be developed with the use of home-born technologies and assembly parts. On the other hand, the Russian leadership encourages the DIC to develop military-technical cooperation with foreign partners that are ahead of Russia in military R&D. For example, Russia plans not only to buy *Mistrals* but also to continue acquisitions of Israeli drones, French avionics for the Su aircraft, Western guns for the *spetznaz*, and some Western electronic components to modernize T-90 tanks.

The Kremlin promised the state financial support for the DIC. According to the SPA-2015, the state must fund 80 percent project costs while a defense industrial company's share must be only 20 percent. However, under the SPA-2020 the ratio has been changed from 80:20 to 60:40 and this put most of the DIC enterprises into a rather difficult situation. In addition, there are numerous delays (from the MoD side) both in signing contracts with companies and money transfers to them which create additional hindrances to a successful implementation of projects. In mid-December 2011, Serdyukov had to replace its deputy who was in charge with the state defense order with a new one both to accelerate the process of signing contracts with arms producers and fight corruption in the entire procurement mechanism.

Having acknowledged the above inconsistencies and problems I would, however, contest Blank's gloomy prediction that the Russian defense sector is doomed to the oscillation between 'restoring something like the Soviet mobilization system' and 'throwing further subsidies at an already hopeless sector'.⁵ I believe that both the Russian leadership and DIC will find—most likely by the trial and error 'method'—the optimal combination of developing own military technologies and—where necessary—importing modern weaponry from abroad, exactly like other countries do in our globalizing world.

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⁵ Blank, Op. cit., 383.