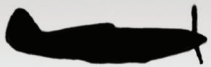


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MORE OF THE SAME?

THE FUTURE OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY
AND ITS ABILITY TO CHANGE



KATHERINE KJELLSTRÖM ELGIN

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Executive Summary

Assessing the type of threat that Russia is likely to pose in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine is a critical challenge for the United States and its allies. The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) described Russia as an “acute threat.” However, since the release of the NDS, Ukrainian forces have continued to inflict severe costs on the Russian military, damaging Russian equipment and depleting Russian stockpiles. Meanwhile, the international community has restricted Russia’s access to advanced technology, inhibiting the Kremlin’s ability to reconstitute, and the enlargement of NATO has dramatically reshaped the threat environment that Moscow faces. Still, the Russian military maintains the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, important components of its armed forces remain relatively untouched, and the Russian government appears to continue to harbor revisionist intentions.

Given these developments, what will the Russian military look like in the future? Two schools of thought are emerging. The first postulates that the Russian military will remain a significant threat—and perhaps become a very different and even more serious one. This argument holds that the Russian military will reconstitute in a relatively short time frame and may reform according to lessons learned during the war in Ukraine. After all, organizations do have the capacity to learn. The second school argues that the Russian military will pose a far less formidable conventional threat going forward. Not only has the war against Ukraine, proponents of this school contend, exposed fundamental weaknesses in the Russian military, but Moscow’s ability to address those weaknesses will be limited by available manpower, sanctions, and export controls. These two schools of thought, however, provide an incomplete picture of the future of the Russian military.

This report argues that the Russian military may indeed attempt to rebuild and reform in the aftermath of war, but the fighting force that emerges from these efforts is likely to operate in ways similar to the force that invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Substantial changes to Russian armed forces could be announced but are only likely to succeed under very narrow conditions—conditions that probably will not materialize. In short, the Russian military is unlikely to substantially reform in the short- to medium-term. The Russian military is indeed learning and adapting during the war in Ukraine, and Russia is expected to remain a threat. Even so, it is unlikely that its future force will be drastically different in

character from the Russian military that exists today. To help analyze if the Russian military is indeed changing in significant ways, this report identifies indicators that the Russian military is going against predictions and successfully transforming into a different force.

To assess the future of the Russian military, this report analyzes the Russian military's ability to conduct major reform projects. First, it identifies five key organizational dynamics of the Russian military and examines how these dynamics influence reform processes, highlighting key organizational barriers to dramatic reform efforts. In particular, the report shows that Russia has a propensity to pursue top-down, structural reforms, which often have limited effects on the battlefield.

Although successful significant reform by the Russian military that overcomes these five dynamics may be rare, it is possible. This report develops a framework for forecasting the ambition and implementation of Russian military reform programs, based on the intensity and duration of political leadership focus on reform and the level of resources available for reform efforts. In so doing, the report develops a theory that deep, sustained attention from political leadership combined with high levels of available resources can form the conditions for reform success. Under conditions of low or high but brief attention from the political leadership and/or low levels of resources, the Russian military is likely to fail to reform, unless the defense leadership is particularly motivated and capable. The report also examines three case studies of previous reform efforts—the Miliutin reforms of the 1860s-1880s, the lack of reform in the 1990s, and the 2008-2022 New Look reforms—to better understand how history and culture may inform the future of Russian military reform.

The Russian military is capable of reform, especially of a structural nature. That does not mean, however, that reform will be easy. Indeed, Russia's tendency to seek top-down structural reforms matched with enduring characteristics of the Russian military suggest that a transformation of the Russian military will be difficult.

Main Findings

The Russian military's bureaucratic culture and structure affect its ability to reform. Five characteristics of the Russian military are particularly impactful: (1) the special relationship the military holds with the political leadership, (2) hierarchical and centralized decision-making, (3) skewed and siloed information flows, (4) an emphasis on theorization over implementation, and (5) widespread corruption. These characteristics shape reform behavior in several ways. For example:

- **The Russian defense leadership may have trouble accurately diagnosing problems that need reform, and the Russian military is more likely to focus on emerging strategic-level challenges than on weaknesses at the tactical or operational level.** This means that many challenges, especially any that primarily unfold at lower echelons, may go unaddressed. On the other hand, since the Russian

military has a strong history of assessing the changing character of war, it may be earlier than others in recognizing a need to adapt to aspects of emerging warfare.

- **The Russian military may not make optimal decisions about which reform paths to pursue** due to political interests, inaccurate estimates of costs, obstacles to implementation, and a lack of feedback from key stakeholders.
- **Once the Russian military decides which reforms to pursue, it often has difficulty implementing reform policies**, particularly those that involve cultural change or many actors due to a military culture that does not encourage authority, a lack of talented and empowered middle management, inaccurate information, and a lack of flexibility to adjust course.

Due to these reform tendencies, **Russian military leaders who seek reform are likely to focus on big structural changes** (e.g., reorganizing military districts) or, in conditions of budget abundance, problems that can be mitigated with injections of cash (e.g., modernizing equipment). On the other hand, **reforms that require change from the bottom-up or that touch on political sensitives are inherently more difficult for the Russian military** due to officer conservatism, inaccurate information for tracking and enforcing reform progress, a lack of accountability, widespread corruption, and political sensitivity.

There are ways in which the Russian military may try to improve the way in which it reforms, increasing the chance that reforms may succeed. For example, the Russian military could try to improve its management practices and culture to promote innovation and reform implementation. Although history and bureaucratic tendencies suggest it is unlikely, indicators that Moscow is serious about its reform and may thus succeed in transforming itself include efforts to decentralize command and control (C2), minimize information silos, and eradicate corruption. However, these changes run counter to existing Russian bureaucratic tendencies and will thus be difficult to fully achieve.

Three variables help predict Russian reform program ambition and level of implementation: (1) the political leadership focus on reforms (in both intensity and duration), (2) the level of resources available to the military to reform, and (3) the managerial skills and the dedication to reform of top defense leaders.

By examining how these factors interact, this report develops a framework to predict the scope and likely success of possible Russian reform programs “left of boom.” The framework describes six scenarios and provides predictions for the level of ambition and the level of successful implementation of reform programs under each scenario.

Reforming the Russian military is difficult—but not impossible. A scenario with both high levels of resources and sustained levels of high focus on the reforms from the Russian political leadership provides the greatest chance for successful transformative military reform.

However, the way the Russian military operates today may be here to stay. The other five scenarios this report describes outline differing levels of ambition of any future

reform program and scales of implementation. Each scenario highlights how difficult a truly transformative reform program is likely to be. In the short- to medium-term, the Russian military is likely to receive low levels of resources, and the political leadership is unlikely to provide sustained attention to military reforms. Thus, any reform project that the Russian military pursues is likely to be ambitious in scope—due to initial political leadership interest in reforms—but suffer in implementation.

If the Russian military leadership recognizes that they are unlikely to transform how the Russian military operates, then **the Russian military is likely to rely on non-conventional tactics to deter against foreign aggression and to pursue Russian interests.** These tactics include increased threats of nuclear use (particularly below the strategic level), coercive measures below the threshold of war, and investment in high-visibility capabilities that it believes the United States fears, including anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities and hypersonic weapons. The Russian military may also continue to rely on mass to deliver battlefield effects, dependent on lessons learned from Ukraine

Recommendations

The future shape—and capabilities—of the Russian armed forces is an important topic for U.S. and allied policymakers. Should analysts underestimate the power of the Russian armed forces, the United States and its NATO allies risk underinvesting in their own military capabilities, potentially putting the security of European allies and U.S. and NATO interests at risk. On the other hand, should analysts overestimate the capabilities of the Russian armed forces, the United States risks developing a force structure that overemphasizes Europe at the cost of investments in other regions, such as the Indo-Pacific.

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the importance and difficulty of assessing military capabilities. Based on the belief that the Russian military was a formidable, modern fighting force that had improved significantly since its 2008 war with Georgia, many analysts in the runup to Russia's invasion in February 2022 suggested that the Russian military would rapidly defeat Ukrainian forces. Instead, the early stages of the Russian invasion exposed low morale, brittle logistics, overly centralized command and control, deficiencies in equipment, rampant corruption, and an overreliance on esoteric doctrine, revealing that the reform efforts that began in 2008 had failed to fully deliver on many of their core objectives.

This report develops several recommendations for the intelligence community (IC) and analysts more broadly as they seek to assess future Russian reform programs and the future of the Russian military. Given the importance of the level of resources, the intensity and duration of political leadership, and the defense leadership in predicting the ambition and success of Russian military reforms, putting resources towards answering the following questions will provide significant predictive leverage:

- **What will the Russian military budget look like?** Major economic projections foresee a decline in the Russian economy. Thus, it may be tempting to predict

that resources available to the Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces will be low. However, it is important to note that it may not be as low as many analysts predict: the Russian government and its Soviet predecessor have a history of continuing to spend money on defense even when the economy more broadly is struggling. Thus, while resources to the military are likely to be constrained, the level may not be directly correlated with the trajectory of the overall Russian economy.

- **What will the political leadership’s focus look like?** Though it is difficult to predict the interests of Russia’s political leadership, the report describes several scenarios that may emerge. Analysts should examine both the leadership’s level of interest in reforms (especially any specific areas of focus stated publicly) and the leadership’s duration of focus on reforms. Does the leadership give one speech and move on, or does the president and the presidential administration devote continued time, attention, and resources to the issue of military reform?
- **What will the defense leadership look like?** To identify the next class of Russian military leadership’s likely approaches to reform, **analysts should work to track the rise of new military leaders, as well as their approaches towards reform efforts, their interest in personal gains, and their managerial styles.**
 - **Analysts should work to generate an understanding of where ideas and managerial styles are likely to emerge.** Wartime experiences shape the leadership styles and ideas of military leaders. The next generation of Russian military leadership, thus, is likely to emerge from the battlefield and command centers of the current war. With what aspects of Russian military performance are they frustrated? Have they developed different command behaviors than their predecessors? From whom are they learning? Which officers are being rewarded, and which voices are being silenced? Operational failures can give rise to new subcultures as individuals seek to improve performance. Are we seeing officers offer new ideas, and are any gaining traction?
 - To track the rise of potential emerging military leaders from outside the current defense community, **analysts should examine voices from outside the military who are gaining respect from servicemembers.** For example, these voices could emerge from military blogs, the intelligence services, or private military companies (PMCs).
- **What incentives does the Russian military have to seek a major reform effort?** While the war in Ukraine has demonstrated several areas of Russian inefficiency and potential weakness, it would be unwise to assume that the Russians will indeed seek a major reform program. Personal and professional incentives—including admitting that previous efforts had failed—may stand in the way of recognizing the need for such a program, and military leaders may rationalize any poor performance in Ukraine by arguing that the military did not fight according to doctrine or by claiming that this was

not the type of war for which the military was built. Furthermore, the political context and sensitivity of military performance could discourage seeking reform programs. Perceived victory or success in Ukraine could also diminish pressures to reform.

- Finally, **what are the signs that the Russian military is truly changing?** The United States and its allies would be wise to pay particular attention to the political leadership's focus on reform, as well as the military leadership's interest in reform and managerial styles. Signs that Russia is trying to change how it reforms would include efforts to shift its bureaucratic reform tendencies, such as: changes in management processes; the creation of a culture more acceptant of failure and with greater emphasis on accurate information; improvements to the military education system and curricula; greater legislative and public oversight; a greater number of voices in idea generation, selection, and evaluation; and a well-resourced program targeting corruption at all levels. Another indicator of true change would be adopting and following through on reforms that cost serious political capital, suggesting that the interest in reforms is real and not simply convenient. On the other hand, harbingers of failure to implement reforms include announcements of lofty and unspecific goals, scaling down the scope of or backtracking on objectives, and shifting or unfocused political interest.
 - The Russian military leadership, if it recognizes how difficult reform is, may also seek innovation in doctrine, method, or capability. Here, the United States and its allies should pay close attention to discussions of innovation in military doctrine and strategy. As with other reforms, however, the implementation of any innovations and their implications will be key.

The report also suggests ways in which the United States and its allies and partners could shape Russian reform behavior.

- **The United States and its allies and partners should continue to leverage sanctions, export controls, and other financial measures to constrain the Russian military's ability to reform, while recognizing these instruments' limits.** These tools can impact the overall size of the economy—and thus the total level of resources available for the federal budget—and make it more difficult for Russia to acquire material for military equipment. However, even if the Russian economy is constrained, Moscow could continue to devote significant resources to defense. Thus, relying on these economic tools should not be seen as sufficient if the United States seeks to limit Russia's ability to rebuild its military.
- **The United States and its allies and partners could impact leadership focus on reforms by increasing the range of problems with which Russian leaders have to contend.** For example, increased and diversified military exercises, signaling of new capabilities, public statements, and other activities could serve to overwhelm or shape political leadership focus. Such activities should be carefully calibrated with considerations of escalation risk.

If the Russian defense establishment is unable to transform, then the United States and its allies can prepare for deterrence and defense against Russian aggression with a greater level of knowledge about how the Russian military is likely to operate. Given the damage that has been done to the Russian military, the United States and NATO is in a rare position to capitalize on a moment of relative Russian weakness to strengthen its own position, as well as the position of partners (including Ukraine). Thus, the United States, NATO, and partners should:

- **Continue to develop ways to minimize the impact of below-threshold aggression**, particularly through societal resilience. The Russian military is likely to continue to use—or increase its use of—below-threshold activity to pursue its interests. The United States and NATO should work to minimize the impact of these activities, including through developing societal resilience, increasing messaging about efforts, and developing other countermeasures.
- **Be diligent in holistically assessing high-visibility weapons programs.** The Russian military may seek to invest in weapons programs that its analysts and policymakers believe deliver a high deterrent impact, including anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities and hypersonic weapons. Of course, these capabilities in and of themselves do not win wars, but if the Russian government believes that the United States is fearful of them, it may put increased emphasis on demonstrating these capabilities—even if they are not yet fully developed. The United States and its allies, thus, should expect grandiose language and demonstrations out of Russia, but should be careful to assess capabilities for what they are—not what they appear to be in staged tests, exercises, press releases, speeches, and parades.
- **Review approaches to escalation management, ensure that capabilities and plans are up to the task of extended deterrence, and continuously adjust and improve the effective communication of deterrent messaging.** Given a possible increase in reliance on nuclear threats, the United States and NATO should ensure that its nuclear posture is equipped to respond to and deter any Russian threats of use or employment.
- **Build capabilities and capacities that counter Russian conventional strengths.** In addition to preparing against Russian capabilities that have been less affected by the war in Ukraine (including some air and ground systems), NATO should prepare to counter other Russian conventional strengths and capabilities that are being tested in Ukraine, including capabilities to counter unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), mines, armor, and electronic warfare (EW).
- **Prepare to exploit existing enduring vulnerabilities of the Russian military**—including low soldier morale, difficulty with coordinating joint operations, poor command and control (C2), and high levels of corruption.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A critical challenge for the United States and its allies is assessing the type of threat that Russia is likely to pose in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) describes Russia as an “acute threat.”¹ However, since the release of the NDS, Ukrainian forces have continued to inflict severe costs on the Russian military, damaging Russian equipment and depleting Russian stockpiles. Meanwhile, the international community has restricted Russia’s access to advanced technology, inhibiting the Kremlin’s ability to reconstitute, and the enlargement of NATO has dramatically reshaped the threat environment that Moscow faces. Still, the Russian military maintains the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, important components of its armed forces remain relatively untouched, and the Russian government appears to continue to harbor revisionist intentions.

Given these developments, what will the Russian military look like in the future? Two schools of thought are emerging. The first postulates that the Russian military will remain a significant threat—and perhaps become a very different and even more serious one. This argument holds that the Russian military will reconstitute in a relatively short time frame and may reform according to lessons learned during the war in Ukraine.² After all, organizations do have the capacity to learn. The second school argues that the Russian military will pose a far less formidable conventional threat going forward. Not only has the war against Ukraine exposed fundamental weaknesses in the Russian military, proponents of this school

1 “2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, October 2022), 2.

2 See, for example: David Brennan, “Russia’s Military Is Transforming—NATO Is Rushing to Compete,” *Newsweek*, May 21, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-military-nato-compete-ammunition-estonia-1801393>; Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, “Russia Is Already Looking Beyond Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/22/russia-nato-beyond-ukraine-estonia-baltic-eastern-flank-military-threat/>; Chels Michta, “Russia’s Military Has Improved — The West Should Take Note,” Center for European Policy Analysis, May 16, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/russias-military-has-improved-the-west-should-take-note/>; Lukas Milevski, “How Long Do the Baltic States Have? Planning Horizons for Baltic Defense,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 11, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/07/how-long-do-the-baltic-states-have-planning-horizons-for-baltic-defense/>.

contend, but Moscow’s ability to address those weaknesses will be limited by available manpower, sanctions, and export controls.³ These two schools of thought, however, provide an incomplete picture of the future of the Russian military.

This report argues that the Russian military may indeed attempt to rebuild and reform in the aftermath of the war, but the fighting force that emerges from these efforts is likely to operate in ways similar to the force that invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Substantial changes to Russian armed forces could be announced but are only likely to succeed under very narrow conditions—conditions that probably will not materialize. In short, the Russian military is unlikely to substantially reform in the short- to medium-term. The Russian military is indeed learning and adapting during the war in Ukraine, and Russia is expected to remain a threat. Even so, it is unlikely that its future force will be drastically different in character from the Russian military that exists today.

A key determinate of the type of threat Russia will pose in the future is the Russian military’s ability to address its weaknesses and conduct major reform projects. This report analyzes this ability by first examining how organizational dynamics influence reform processes and by highlighting key organizational barriers to dramatic reform efforts. In particular, the report shows that Russia has a propensity to pursue top-down, structural reforms, which often have limited effects on battlefield performance.

To explain when the Russian military may overcome those barriers to reform, the report then develops a theory that deep, sustained attention from political leadership, combined with high levels of resources, can form the conditions for success. Because these conditions are so rare, it will be difficult (although not impossible) for the Russian military to reshape itself into a fundamentally different force. These challenges are illustrated by three case studies of previous major reform efforts: the Miliutin reforms of the 1860s-1880s, the failure to reform in the 1990s, and the New Look reforms that began in 2008.

The Problem

The future shape—and capabilities—of the Russian armed forces is an important topic for U.S. and allied policymakers. Should analysts underestimate the power of the Russian armed forces, the United States and its NATO allies risk underinvesting in their own military capabilities in Europe, potentially putting the security of European allies and U.S. and NATO interests at risk. Alternatively, if analysts overestimate the capabilities of the Russian

³ See, for example: Alexandra Brzozowski, “Russia’s Military Power Is ‘Cracking’, EU Says,” *Euractiv*, June 26, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-russia/news/russias-military-power-is-cracking-eu-says/>; Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, and Julian E. Barnes, “As Russia’s Military Stumbles, Its Adversaries Take Note,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/07/us/politics/russia-ukraine-military.html>; David Von Drehle, “War Proves That Russia Is No Longer a Superpower,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/15/ukraine-war-proves-russia-no-longer-a-superpower/>; Paul Krugman, “Russia Is a Potemkin Superpower,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/28/opinion/putin-military-sanctions-weakness.html>.

armed forces, the United States risks developing a force structure that overemphasizes Europe at the cost of investments in other regions, such as the Indo-Pacific.

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the importance of assessing military capabilities accurately. In the runup to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many analysts implicitly or explicitly suggested that the Russian military would rapidly defeat Ukraine.⁴ This assessment was based in large part on the belief that the Russian military was a formidable, modern fighting force that had improved significantly since its 2008 war with Georgia, which had exposed serious shortcomings that the Russian military sought to address.⁵ Following that five-day war, the Russian military undertook a massive reform program aimed at transforming the Russian Armed Forces into a more modern, flexible, and ready organization. Based upon the performance of Russian forces in the seizure of Crimea in 2014 and in air campaigns over Syria, many analysts judged these reforms to have been a success.⁶

Instead, initial stages of the Russian invasion exposed low morale, brittle logistics, overly centralized command and control, deficiencies in equipment, rampant corruption, and an overreliance on esoteric doctrine, revealing that the reform efforts that began in 2008 had

4 See, for example: Samuel Charap and Scott Boston, "The West's Weapons Won't Make Any Difference to Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/21/weapons-ukraine-russia-invasion-military/>; Frederick W Kagan et al., "Putin's Likely Course of Action in Ukraine: Updated Course of Action Assessment," Forecast Series (Washington, D.C: Institute for the Study of War, January 2022); Michael Kofman and Jeffrey Edmonds, "Russia's Shock and Awe," *Foreign Affairs*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-21/russias-shock-and-awe>; Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, "How Do the Militaries of Russia and Ukraine Stack Up?," Council on Foreign Relations, February 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-do-militaries-russia-and-ukraine-stack>; Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "Putin Has Put Ukraine on the Horns of a Dilemma," RUSI, February 4, 2022, <https://www.rusi.orghttps://www.rusi.org>.

While many thought that Russia may relatively easily overcome the Ukrainians in an initial stage, many also anticipated that an insurgency-like phase during occupation would pose greater challenges for the Russian Armed Forces.

5 "Russia's Army Is in a Woeful State," *The Economist*, April 30, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/how-deep-does-the-rot-in-the-russian-army-go/21808989>. For an earlier analysis of how the Russian military might perform in an operation against NATO, see: David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics" (RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1253>.

6 See, for example: James Hackett, Nick Childs, and Douglas Barrie, "If New Looks Could Kill: Russia's Military Capability in 2022," *Military Balance Blog (IISS)* (blog), February 15, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2022/02/if-new-looks-could-kill-russias-military-capability-in-2022>; Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018); Paul Sonne and Isabelle Khurshudyan, "As It Weighs Action in Ukraine, Russia Showcases Its New Military Prowess," *Washington Post*, January 27, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-military-advances-ukraine/2022/01/26/25f959b0-7ec4-11ec-a844-86749890616a_story.html; Anton Troianovski, Michael Schwartz, and Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia's Military, Once Creaky, Is Modern and Lethal," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/europe/russia-military-putin-ukraine.html>; Fredrik Westerlund, *The Role of the Military in Putin's Foreign Policy: An Overview of Current Research* (Stockholm, Sweden: Totalförsvarets Forskningsinstitut (FOI), 2021), 41; "Russian Military Forces Dazzle after a Decade of Reform," *The Economist*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/11/02/russian-military-forces-dazzle-after-a-decade-of-reform>.

Of course, many analysts—including several of those cited above—offered a nuanced position and recognized where the reforms had fallen short.

failed to fully deliver on many of their core objectives. Gintaras Bagdonas, former head of Lithuanian military intelligence, told the *New York Times* that although Russia had started to rebuild its armed forces after 2008, “they built a new Potemkin village.” Much of the modernization, he said, was “just *pokazukha*,” or window-dressing.⁷ Clearly, Moscow’s reform efforts had not been as successful as some had predicted before the war. Of course, other elements (notably including political decision-making, faulty Russian assumptions, Ukrainian fighting power, and Western support of Ukraine) also impacted battlefield performance, and the degree of Russian military reform success alone could not have predicted how the Russian military would perform. However, over-estimation of Russian power may have had real impacts on the battlefield, particularly if it led NATO members to provide less support to Ukraine prior to and during the initial stages of the invasion.

Indeed, one of the most challenging tasks in defense policy and intelligence is to accurately assess the capabilities of militaries.⁸ Assessing military power involves not only the quality and quantity of equipment and manpower available, but also combat experience, training levels, logistics, command and control, morale, and more.⁹ The task of examining military strength only becomes more difficult when trying to compare militaries’ capabilities and to

7 Michael Schwirtz, Anton Troianovski, Yousur Al-Hlou, Masha Froliak, Adam Entous, et al., “Putin’s War: The Inside Story of a Catastrophe,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html>.

8 There is a wide literature examining how to assess military capabilities. For a comprehensive overview of the challenges of measuring military capabilities, see: A. W. Marshall, *Problems of Estimating Military Power* (RAND Corporation, 1966). Biddle offers a fundamental contribution to this topic of study: Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010). See also Volume 28, Issue 3 of the *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2005) for responses to Biddle’s argument. For a debate from the 1980s military balance between NATO and the Soviet Union, see: Barry R. Posen, “Measuring the European Conventional Balance: Coping with Complexity in Threat Assessment,” *International Security* 9, no. 3 (1984): 47–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538587>; John J. Mearsheimer, “Numbers, Strategy, and the European Balance,” *International Security* 12, no. 4 (1988): 174–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539001>; Eliot A. Cohen, “Toward Better Net Assessment: Rethinking the European Conventional Balance,” *International Security* 13, no. 1 (1988): 50–89, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538896>. The *Military Balance 2023* provides a defense for its approach to estimating military capabilities: *The Military Balance 2023* (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023).

This is related to another, even more difficult, challenge in intelligence and analysis: gauging the intentions of others. See, for example: Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

9 Biddle, *Military Power*.

For debate about why analysts misestimated Russian military power, see: Phillips Payson O’Brien, “How the West Got Russia’s Military So, So Wrong,” *The Atlantic*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/russia-ukraine-invasion-military-predictions/629418/>; Chris Dougherty, “Strange Debacle: Misadventures in Assessing Russian Military Power,” *War on the Rocks*, June 16, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/strange-debacle-misadventures-in-assessing-russian-military-power/>; Ryan Evans, “What the Experts Got Wrong (and Right) About Russian Military Power,” *War on the Rocks*, accessed May 30, 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/what-the-experts-got-wrong-and-right-about/id682478916?i=1000564489035>.

assess likely war outcomes between multiple actors.¹⁰ A major critique of many predictions of the war in Ukraine, for example, was that many analyses underplayed the capabilities and will to fight of the Ukrainian military.¹¹

Military reforms can be a signal of changing or improving military capabilities.¹² Announced military reform programs indicate areas in which the leaders of a military believe there is room for improvement, as well as which aspects of warfare they consider to be important for the future. Progress in these areas can provide observers with information about how the military in question has improved or changed since its last performance.

How we understand and assess any future Russian efforts at reform, then, is key to our ability to analyze future Russian military power. The analytical community's treatment of the 2008 reform program, however, highlights the difficulty of assessing reform efforts and emphasizes the need for better tools to understand which reform efforts may actually take root. Although many conversations have focused on how long it may take Russia to reconstitute, it would be a mistake to focus too heavily on the number of soldiers, sailors, and aviators that Russia can deploy or the technical details of Russian military equipment. These are important dimensions of Russian military power, of course, but one lesson from the 2008 reform efforts should be that these facts and figures tell us little about *how* and *how well* the Russian armed forces will operate on the battlefield. It would similarly be a mistake to take the Russian military's word on any reform agenda and reform progress updates at face value. Developing a framework for understanding the degree to which the Russian military can truly address the weaknesses that have been demonstrated in Ukraine provides one important tool for policymakers and analysts as they seek to understand the future of the Russian military.

10 Importantly, the task includes not just estimating the capabilities of adversaries, but also of oneself and one's allies and partners. On net assessment, see: Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Net Assessment and Military Strategy: Retrospective and Prospective Essays* (Cambria Press, 2020).

For more on assessing military power, see, for example: Robert J. Carroll and Brenton Kenkel, "Prediction, Proxies, and Power," *American Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 3 (2019): 577–93; Andres Gannon, "Planes, Trains, and Armored Mobiles: Introducing a Dataset of the Global Distribution of Military Capabilities (rDMC)," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, September 24, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3930390>.

11 Nomaan Merchant, "US Misjudged Ukraine's Will to Fight Russia, Officials Admit," *AP*, March 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-zelenskyy-nato-europe-fc52fa8b510fef79cb5505ebe8a841a8>. For examples of pre-war publications that analyzed the Ukrainian military, see: Mike Eckel, "How Long Could Ukraine Hold Out Against A New Russian Invasion?," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-invasion-scenarios/31614428.html>; Amy Mackinnon and Jack Detsch, "Ukraine's Military Has Come a Long Way Since 2014," *Foreign Policy*, December 23, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/23/ukraine-russia-military-buildup-capabilities/>; Dan Peleschuk, "Ukraine's Military Poses a Tougher Challenge for Russia than in 2014," *POLITICO*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraines-military-poses-a-tougher-challenge-for-russia-than-in-2014/>.

12 Innovation and reforms do not always bring progress. See: Kendrick Kuo, "Dangerous Changes: When Military Innovation Harms Combat Effectiveness," *International Security* 47, no. 2 (October 1, 2022): 48–87, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00446.

In studying the Russian military’s propensity to reform, the motivating question of this report is: How much is the Russian military likely to be able to change in the future? To develop insights into this question, this report analyzes how organizational characteristics of the Russian Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces affect reform processes and examines the Russian military’s ability to break through its reform tendencies. For the purpose of this report, military reforms are defined as changes to the policies and practices of a military institution in an effort to improve the performance of the organization, including both performance on the battlefield and as a bureaucracy.¹³ The report focuses specifically on major reform programs, which are defined as packages of reforms that seek to fundamentally change the operations and culture of the military organization.¹⁴ It excludes the continuous, incremental development and improvement that organizations tend to do on a day-to-day basis, focusing instead on efforts that attempt to radically reshape the military organization. Scoping analysis in this way allows analysts to analyze the types of major reform programs and efforts to reshape the Russian military institution that one might expect after major geopolitical shifts—such as the exposure of military weaknesses—rather than examining smaller, more mundane changes. The report is interested in reforms to the defense establishment, including the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces.¹⁵ The report focuses on reforms to both civilian functions within the Ministry of Defense and military functions within the Armed Forces.¹⁶ It thus excludes both private military companies (PMCs) and government forces that report to other ministries, agencies, and bodies.

This report contributes to conversations about the future of the Russian military by examining the Russian military’s propensity to reform. It does not focus on the specific content of any reform program, but rather how ambitious and successful any reform program might be. In so doing, it provides a sense of what it would take for the Russian military to fundamentally change its enduring characteristics. The report begins by identifying how dynamics of the Russian military organization influence reform efforts, often serving as barriers to substantial reform.

13 This could include procurement decisions, but procurement decisions and programs can also take place outside of the reform program. Reforms target *how* the organization does business, not just with what. Furthermore, doctrinal changes can be included in major reform programs for the purpose of this report but are not limited to them. Doctrinal adjustments, like procurement programs, can take place without major reforms to the organization and culture itself.

14 These programs can take place in either peacetime or wartime, though they may be more likely during peacetime given the scale of reforms involved.

15 Throughout the report, I use “Russian military” as shorthand for the Russian defense establishment, including both the MoD and the Armed Forces.

16 In other words, for the purpose of this report, “organizational culture” refers not just to the culture of the armed forces or of one service, but of the culture of the organizations of the Russian Armed Forces—to include the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff, and the military itself. This distinction is important because there are indeed differences in culture between each of the services; however, this report is interested in the defense organization in general and not any specific service.

The report then develops a framework to assess the conditions under which the Russian military may be able to overcome these barriers and successfully implement major reform programs. The report applies this framework to and develops other insights from three historical cases of attempted Russian military reform—the Miliutin reforms that began in the 1860s, the failure to reform during the 1990s, and the New Look reforms that began in 2008—to understand these dynamics.

The report concludes by describing what the framework and the characteristics of Russian military reform tell us about the likely future of the Russian military. The Russian military is capable of reform, especially of a structural nature. That does not mean, however, that reform will be easy. Indeed, Russia's tendency to seek top-down structural reforms matched with enduring characteristics of the Russian military suggest that a transformation of the Russian military will be difficult. Thus, in terms of culture and behavior, the Russian military we see today may be close to the Russian military of tomorrow.

CHAPTER 2

Reform with Russian Characteristics

The Russian military of today in many ways resembles the Russian and Soviet militaries of the past. Indeed, transformative reform in the Russian military has been a relatively rare phenomenon. Why has the Russian military struggled to enact major reforms? It is not simply that change is difficult—which it often is—but also that organizations change in ways that are particular to them. Every military organization is shaped by its history, its leadership, its country’s strategic culture, its own organizational culture, and its bureaucratic politics. Similarly, these factors influence the way in which the Russian military attempts to reform.¹⁷ By examining what we know about organizational characteristics of the Russian military, analysts can begin to put together a picture of the distinct tendencies of Russian reform behavior.

Understanding the characteristics of a military organization—its bureaucratic structure and culture—can shed light on how it might reform, as well as the barriers it might face.¹⁸ These characteristics shape every step of a reform process, providing insight into the ways in which a military organization might undergo reform programs.¹⁹ These organizational dynamics can both support and hinder the ideal execution of a reform process. As Frank Hoffman

17 This chapter will not attempt to define all Russian strategic, military, or organizational culture, as that would be outside the scope of the project. Rather, it examines vital characteristics of the Russian military organization. Of course, it should also be noted that the Russian military organization is not a monolith, and there are sub-cultures and sub-organizational characteristics within the Ministry and the Armed Forces.

18 Organizational culture consists of the “beliefs, symbols, rituals, and practices which give meaning to the activity of an organization” (Theo Farrell, “World Culture and Military Power,” *Security Studies* 14, no. 3 (April 2005): 410, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410500323187>). For this study, I add to organizational culture considerations of the bureaucratic structure—which both shapes and is shaped by organizational culture—to better encapsulate the organizational characteristics that might influence reform processes.

19 Keir suggests that culture shapes behavior by providing the means, not the ends, of action. Elizabeth Keir, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine Between the War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 31.

writes about organizational culture, “Culture is not a driver or a prescriptive barrier, but it does serve as a prism for how organizations view problems and establish limits to acceptable solutions.”²⁰ Where organizational dynamics do impede successful reform processes, they can be overcome. In other words, organizational characteristics are not a guarantor of success or failure of reform efforts, but they can tell us something about *how* a reform program might be approached and executed.

Characteristics of the Russian Military

Of course, the outside analytic community has limited insight into the bureaucratic culture and inner workings of any foreign military, including the Russian military. However, it is possible to identify several characteristics of the Russian military that are structural and/or have endured over time (summarized in Table 1).

TABLE 1: KEY ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY

Organizational Characteristics of the Russian Military
A Powerful Institution Reporting Directly to the President
Hierarchical and Centralized Decision-Making
Skewed and Siloed Information Flows
An Emphasis on Theorization—not Implementation
Widespread Corruption

A Powerful Institution Reporting Directly to the President

Throughout history, the Russian military has typically been viewed within Russia as an institution that is central to the existence of the state.²¹ As early as Peter the Great, Russia has had a militarist legacy supported by a “defense-mindedness” (*oboronnoye soznaniye*).²² The status of the state is frequently associated with the power and status of the military—there is a strong association between having a powerful military and being a great power.²³

20 Frank G. Hoffman, *Mars Adapting: Military Change during War*, Transforming War (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021), 47.

21 For example, when Nicholas II abdicated in 1917, he sent his letter of abdication not to the Duma (which had demanded it), but to the Chief of the Russian General Staff. Cited in Fritz W. Ermarth, “Russia’s Strategic Culture: Past, Present, and ... in Transition” (SAIC, October 31, 2006), 4.

22 Alexander M. Golts and Tonya L. Putnam, “State Militarism and Its Legacies: Why Military Reform Has Failed in Russia,” *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004): 121–58.

23 Renz, *Russia’s Military Revival*, 22–30.

Thus, the military has customarily had significant administrative and operational autonomy, and there has traditionally been substantial deference to the military.²⁴

The Russian military has thus become accustomed to having a significant degree of autonomy and influence within the body politic on defense policy issues.²⁵ This autonomy can lead the military to resist civilian-led policies with which it disagrees. For example, as part of his “thaw” and theory of “peaceful coexistence,” Nikita Khrushchev sought reductions to the size of the military. Soviet theorists at the time believed that nuclear weapons had significantly changed the nature of war and that warfare would rely less on operational maneuver. The General Staff were advocates for the primacy of nuclear weapons. However, they did not seek a reduced role for conventional forces.²⁶ Indeed, by going against the military’s recommendations, Khrushchev seemed to be asserting his control of Soviet strategic planning.²⁷ Yet, in part due to the military’s pushback, his efforts never took off. On the other hand, where the military has agreed with the political leadership’s view, the military traditionally has had the power to influence decision-making throughout the entire government.²⁸

The Russian military’s significant degree of influence, however, has not led it to become an actor that frequently interferes in domestic politics. Coup attempts in Russia are rare, and there has not been a successful coup in Russia in over 200 years.²⁹ The analytic community that studies the Russian military has argued that the Russian military’s organizational and cultural history has encouraged the officer corps to see armed intervention against civilian leaders as wrong.³⁰ This does not mean that coup attempts will not occur, but rather that the threshold for coup attempts is likely quite high.³¹

The Russian military has typically been closely tied with the Russian leadership and, given the nature of Russia’s autocratic and centralized regime, with the Russian leader

24 Under Putin, the military has retained a special place in decision-making. However, it seems to have increasingly had to share this spot with other power ministries.

25 For a comprehensive view of civil-military relations in Russia prior to 2000, see: Brian D. Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

26 Kimberly Marten Zisk, *Engaging the Enemy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 64.

27 Zisk, 64.

28 Stephen R. Covington, “The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia’s Modern Approaches to Warfare” (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, October 2016), 4.

29 The 2023 mutiny led by Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group provides an interesting case. It was not a military coup in the traditional sense. The mutiny emerged from a private military company (PMC), but by most measures it also does not seem that Prigozhin sought to overthrow Putin himself. Instead, it appears that he sought to convince Putin to remove Shoigu and Gerasimov from office.

30 For example, see: Zoltan Barany, “The Politics of Russia’s Elusive Defense Reform,” *Political Science Quarterly* 121, no. 4 (2006): 599.

31 Notably, this does not mean that the political leader might not still try to make efforts to ensure that a coup is not attempted. In other words, just because a military has a tradition of *not* conducting coups does not mean that a leader does not fear a coup possibility.

in particular.³² One analyst has called the Russian military a “presidential institution,” “answerable only to the Commander-in-Chief and relying on his special attention.”³³ The centralization of power within Russia gives Vladimir Putin an outsized role in policymaking in general, and this is true within the military organization as well. Similarly, Joseph Stalin’s power centralization and hands-on approach to the military gave him significant leverage over the direction of the military, and even though Alexander II was supportive of reform efforts, his personal selection of officers had a negative impact on the battlefield.

The Russian military’s relationship with the central political leadership is not just due to a sense of national loyalty: the centralization of power in the Kremlin also suggests that the top leaders of the Russian military organization are beholden to the president for their authority and livelihoods.³⁴ For example, the president determines both the appointment and the term length of the Chief of the General Staff (CGS). Although the Minister of Defense may provide some input, it is ultimately the president who chooses and determines the tenure of the CGS. The CGS has no official term limit, so he or she serves at the pleasure of the president.³⁵

Accustomed to both a mix of direct connection to the top political leadership and a certain sense of autonomy, the Russian military has traditionally been relatively free from other outside interference. Technically, Russian politicians hold budgetary and other oversight measures over the Russian military, though they have rarely executed them with authority.³⁶ Anatoly Serdyukov’s reform efforts that began in 2008 increased some aspects of oversight from the Duma, though it is unclear the degree to which this has truly impacted policymaking norms. Furthermore, since 1992, the Chairman of the Duma Committee on Defense has consistently been an active-duty, reserve, or retired officer at the rank of colonel

32 Of course, variation in the degree of closeness can vary over time and between leaders. However, overall, the Russian military has traditionally held a close relationship with the Russian political leadership. For more on Russian civil-military relations, see, for example: Zoltan Barany, *Democratic Breakdown and the Decline of the Russian Military* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Timothy J. Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics*, Russian Research Center Studies (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Aleksandr Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2018); Dale R. Herspring, *Russian Civil-Military Relations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996); Kirill Shamiev, “Civil–Military Relations and Russia’s Post-Soviet Military Culture: A Belief System Analysis,” *Armed Forces & Society* 49, no. 2 (April 1, 2023): 252–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X211062932>; Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army*.

33 Pavel K. Baev, “The Plight of the Russian Military: Shallow Identity and Self-Defeating Culture,” *Armed Forces & Society* 29, no. 1 (2002): 133.

34 Mahoney describes the Soviet-era General Staff as a political entity, more closely tied to the regime than to the armed forces. Bruce Manning and Shane E. Mahoney, “Final Report to National Council for Soviet and East European Research” (National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1982).

35 Alexis A. Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff: Understanding the Military’s Decisionmaking Role in a “Besieged Fortress”* (RAND Corporation, 2023), 18, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1233-7.html.

36 Golts and Putnam, “State Militarism and Its Legacies,” 155.

or above, implying that they may be less likely to closely question the military.³⁷ The public has seldom been involved in military matters, though there are a handful of exceptions (such as the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers), and the military blogging community has become increasingly vocal during the war in Ukraine. The military organization is also averse to independent and/or external assessment.³⁸

This creates a situation in which the military is simultaneously relatively autonomous and under the thumb of the presidential administration. An expert on Russian civil-military affairs summarizes it well: "The minister of defense has almost absolute power and is subject to one person's will: the president of Russia."³⁹ The president *can* exert control over the military and its leadership, but often gives them relatively free rein within guidelines. "Thus," write two analysts, "the pattern of civil-military relations in Russia is one which combines close political control of the military leadership with a lack of concrete political direction on matters of policy."⁴⁰

Hierarchical and Centralized Decision-Making

One of the most notable aspects of the Russian military organization is its top-down, hierarchical decision-making structure. Although most militaries are hierarchical in nature, militaries in personalized autocratic regimes may be especially so.⁴¹

The ultimate decision-maker in Russia is the President, who serves as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. Underneath him sits the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Minister of Defense, who technically sits above the General Staff (GS) and the Chief of the General Staff (CGS). In peacetime, the Military Districts serve as the next rung on the ladder, and, in wartime, the Joint Strategic Commands (OSKs) do.

37 Carolina Vendil Pallin, *Russian Military Reform: A Failed Exercise in Defence Decision Making* (London: Routledge, 2011), 42.

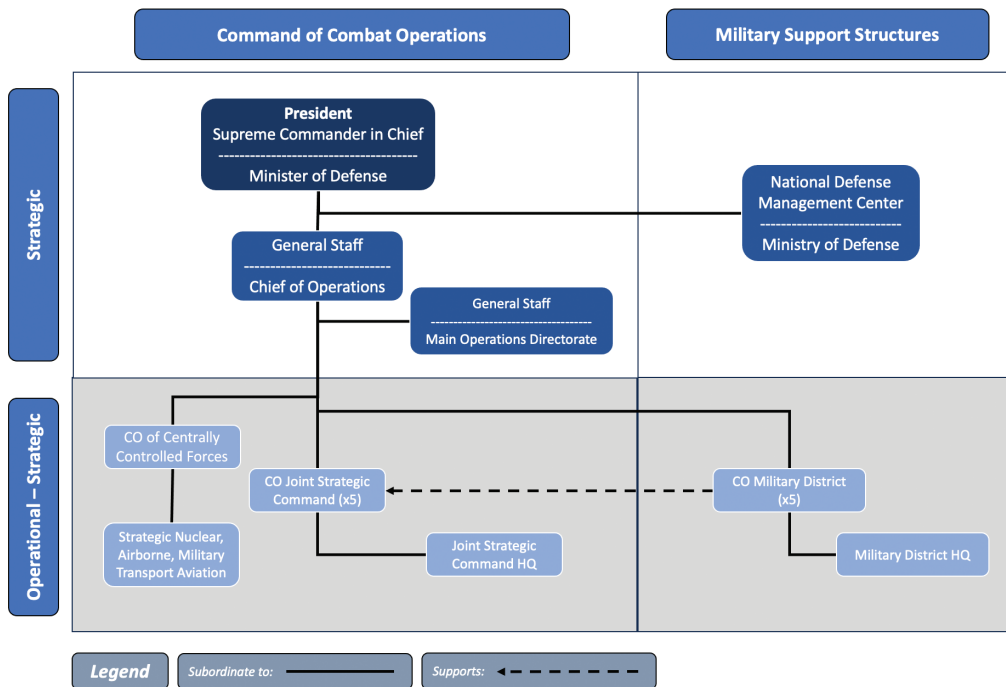
38 Shamiev, "Civil–Military Relations and Russia's Post-Soviet Military Culture."

39 Kirill Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics within the Russian Military* (Washington, D.C: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-senior-leadership-dynamics-within-russian-military>.

40 David J. Betz and Valeriy G. Volkov, "A New Day for the Russian Army? Reforming the Armed Forces under Yeltsin and Putin," in *Russian Military Reform, 1992-2002*, ed. Anne Aldis and Roger N. McDermott (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 9.

41 For a concise treatment of Russia's history of centralized, hierarchical decision-making, see: Philip G. Wasielewski, *The Roots of Russian Military Dysfunction* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2023), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/the-roots-of-russian-military-dysfunction/>.

FIGURE 1: THE ASSESSED ORGANIZATION AND CHAIN OF COMMAND OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY



Adapted from Johan Norberg and Fredrik Westerlund, "Russia's Armed Forces in 2016," in Fredrik Westerlund, ed., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective 2016* (Stockholm, Sweden: Totalförsvarets Forskningsinstitut (FOI), 2016).

More attention has been given within the literature, understandably, to the command structure of the Russian Armed Forces than to the hierarchical nature of the Ministry of Defense and the Russian military organization more broadly. However, given the intricate relationship between the Russian Armed Forces and the Russian Ministry of Defense, we can carefully draw similarities in culture between the military and the ministry for several reasons. First, because the Russian system is highly personalized, individuals and their informal networks play an important role in policymaking.⁴² A plurality of the 'civilian' ministers since 1992 have served in the military or the intelligence services, with the MoD

42 See, for example: Kimberly Marten, "Informal Political Networks and Putin's Foreign Policy: The Examples of Iran and Syria," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 71–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1010896>; Andrew Monaghan, "Defibrillating the Vertikal?," Research Paper (London: Chatham House, October 2014).

widely staffed by professional military personnel.⁴³ Second, the General Staff has significant power within the Ministry and the national power structure more broadly. While the GS technically sits below the Minister of Defense, in practice, the relationship between the Defense Minister and Defense Ministry and the CGS and GS is more symbiotic.⁴⁴ The GS is seen as the most “central, important, and influential military institution,” and “the Russian Chief of the General staff has far more authority than any flag grade officer in the U.S. military.”⁴⁵ Though the Russian General Staff is often compared to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, the General Staff plays a much larger institutional role. Unlike most Western countries’ systems, the Ministry of Defense “seem[s] to be a *support* rather than a *control* body for the General Staff.”⁴⁶ The Ministry of Defense currently has two First Deputy Ministers—one of which is the Chief of the General Staff. One author compared the General Staff and the MoD to a board of directors, in which the General Staff was the “true corporate headquarters” and the Chief of the General Staff was the CEO.⁴⁷

To get a sense of the civilian hierarchy and the importance of top leadership, it is worth noting that each major reform program in Russia has tended to be associated with individuals—for example, the “Miliutin reforms,” the “Frunze reforms,” and the “Serdyukov reforms.”⁴⁸ In the Soviet system, morale and inspiration was seen as coming from the top-down.⁴⁹

43 Shoigu is the exception here, with a background in the Ministry of Emergency Situations. He is generally considered one of the ‘*siloviki*,’ personnel from the power ministries or security services, though there is a debate about the degree to which Shoigu can truly be described as in this group. For more on the *siloviki*, see: Michael Rochlitz et al., “Russian Siloviki,” *Russian Analytical Digest (RAD)* 223 (September 12, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000289654>; Kirill Shamiev and Bettina Renz, “The Security Services,” in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society*, ed. Graeme Gill, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2022); Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia’s Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011); Brian D. Taylor, “The Russian Siloviki & Political Change,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 53–63, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00434.

The status of civilians within the Ministry of Defense warrants further research. Zisk argues that the role of civilian Soviet defense analysts grew and played a key role in late Cold War Soviet planning. However, by the 1990s, there was a reluctance to subordinate military officers to civilian officials. Serdyukov improved the civilian-uniformed ratio within the Ministry, though it appears that Shoigu remilitarized many posts. See: Zisk, *Engaging the Enemy*; Jennifer G. Mathers, “Outside Politics? Civil-Military Relations during a Period of Reform,” in *Russian Military Reform, 1992-2002*, ed. Anne Aldis and Roger N. McDermott (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003); Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics within the Russian Military*, 3.

44 Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, 28.

45 Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 49; Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), 10.

46 Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, 28. Italics original.

47 Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russia’s Imperial General Staff,” *Perspective* 16, no. 1 (November 2005), <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/3628>.

48 Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics within the Russian Military*.

49 Nathan Constantine Leites, *Soviet Style in Management* (RAND Corporation, 1984), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R3128.html>.

This top-down nature is clearly exemplified in military operations. Although doctrine stipulates that, in most scenarios, the Joint Strategic Command (OSK) commanders have operational control, guidance and coordination comes from the General Staff.⁵⁰ Representatives from the General Staff's Main Operations Directorate are embedded in field units and often participate in day-to-day planning.⁵¹ Unlike in the United States in which a commander provides guidance and makes decisions but often leaves planning up to a staff, in the Russian military, the commander also does the planning.⁵² As one Russian proverb says, "as goes the commander, so goes the unit."⁵³

This leaves little room for initiative at lower levels. Within the Russian military culture, there is little appreciation of "commander's intent." Rather, the commander states the specific conditions of success and does not expect subordinates to take initiative when those conditions change.⁵⁴ Not only do subordinates receive direct commands rather than being given room to find their own solutions to problems, but they are actively discouraged from independent problem-solving.⁵⁵ This lack of trust and sense of centralization of duty has helped contribute to Russia's inability to create an empowered non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps.⁵⁶

While, in theory, centralized decision-making could reduce the amount of time it takes to make a decision because there are fewer actors involved, in reality, the decision-making process is often slower. This is exemplified on the battlefield where, instead of allowing NCOs and junior officers on the frontlines to make decisions based on local conditions, information must first travel to the rear headquarters in order for a senior leader to choose a course of action. Once the senior leader has made the decision, the order must then be transmitted back to the front for execution.⁵⁷ In part to try to correct this issue and to get a closer view of what is happening on the front line, Russian generals have a greater tendency

50 Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*. See also: Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*.

This does not mean that command structure is not messier in practice. Hunzeker makes the point that a military's structure on paper may not match how a military actually practices command and control in battle: Michael A. Hunzeker, *Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 27–28.

51 Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, 20.

52 Grau and Bartles, *The Russian Way of War*, 51–58.

53 Grau and Bartles, 55.

One common explanation for this centralized command is that Russia has, historically, fought wars in or near its territory. Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, 28–29.

54 Roger N. McDermott and Charles K. Bartles, "The Russian Military Decision-Making Process & Automated Command and Control," #GIDSresearch (Hamburg, Germany: German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies, October 2020), 28–29.

55 Anika Binnendijk et al., *Russian Military Personnel Policy and Proficiency: Reforms and Trends, 1991–2021* (RAND Corporation, 2023), 54, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1233-6.html.

56 Wasielewski, *The Roots of Russian Military Dysfunction*.

57 Wasielewski, 8.

than their Western counterparts to serve closer to the front, which can help explain the high number of casualties among Russian generals during the early stages of the war in Ukraine.⁵⁸

The hierarchical nature of the organization reinforces a desire to please supervisors. With a lack of outside oversight and input, careers are often decided based upon personal relationships. As an individual in the Russian military system has explained, it is “not the most independent, knowledgeable, thinking people [who] go to the highest positions, but those who just please their superiors.”⁵⁹ Thus, personal relationships and the *appearance* of success may be more important than truly making progress. Indeed, not wanting to disappoint or provoke one’s bosses, one might seek to do the bare minimum or to give signs of progress even if little is being made. This is not a new dynamic: Soviet leaders wanted “activeness” at all levels but noted a tendency towards inaction (*bezdeistvie*). They expected that tasks would frequently not be completed.⁶⁰

Despite this tendency towards inaction, the Russian military system is one in which commanders hold a significant amount of personal responsibility for their duties.⁶¹ For example, the code regulating the General Staff states that the Chief of the General Staff “bears personal responsibility for the fulfillment of the tasks assigned to the General Staff and the military command and control bodies directly subordinate to him.”⁶² This accountability may not necessarily flow down the command ladder, however. As an expert told one analyst, “Attestation, officer meetings, everything is now under the control of commanders, and it does not bring up [encourage] the personal responsibility in officers.”⁶³

If leaders are held personally accountable for everything and yet there is a general culture of inaction and a lack of accountability at lower levels, leaders are likely to seek ways to demonstrate their “success,” and, particularly if they do not trust their subordinates to deliver, these leaders may seek shortcuts. Among Soviet party cadres, “many of their activities, on the managerial or even the ministry level, [were] for appearance only and [hid] inaction.”⁶⁴ Reports from the last year demonstrate that some of this inaction, coupled with incentives to participate in corruption, remains. For example, *New York Times* reporting described one

58 Notably, the lack of non-commissioned officers also contributes to this tendency.

“Why Are so Many Russian Generals Dying in Ukraine?,” *The Economist*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/31/why-are-so-many-russian-generals-dying-in-ukraine>; William Booth, Robyn Dixon, and David L. Stern, “Russian Generals Are Getting Killed at an Extraordinary Rate,” *Washington Post*, March 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/26/ukraine-russian-generals-dead/>.

59 Shamiev, “Civil–Military Relations and Russia’s Post-Soviet Military Culture,” 265.

60 Leites, *Soviet Style in Management*.

61 Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, 17.

62 Quoted in Blanc et al., 17.

63 Shamiev, “Civil–Military Relations and Russia’s Post-Soviet Military Culture,” 265.

64 Leites, *Soviet Style in Management*, vii.

training facility that by outward appearances for official visits looked complete, but in areas off the official tour was clearly incomplete.⁶⁵

Skewed and Siloed Information Flows

In part due to a pressure to please one's superiors, a tendency that pervades even the highest levels of political leadership, skewed and often siloed information is common within the Russian military organization.⁶⁶ Indeed, there is a prevalent pathology within the Russian military of providing superiors overly optimistic information, a norm that seems to stem from a combination of the hierarchical, personalistic nature of the regime and a culture that does not promote honesty. Further reinforcing this may be a culture of wishful thinking not rooted in reality.⁶⁷ For example, during the war in Ukraine, planners created "wildly unrealistic" timelines.⁶⁸ This tendency towards (over-)optimistic thinking extends to estimates of the defense industry's capacity, creating delivery timelines that are unrealistic and often fail.⁶⁹

Even if information is accurate, it frequently does not appear to be well disseminated. This is in part due to a culture of secrecy, which prevents accurate information from being shared—even within the armed forces and the Ministry, much less to other institutions.⁷⁰

The lack of external input and analysis also impacts information flows. The debate surrounding defense policy is being increasingly tightened. There was a brief period during Serdyukov's tenure (2007-2012) that the conversation seemed to open, though this has been reversed since Sergei Shoigu became minister and has only worsened since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. One can find coded criticism of policies within military journals, though rarely does the criticism become pointed until the political environment has shifted. For example, as part of the research for this report, the CSBA team conducted a wide review of Russian military journal articles discussing the reform efforts. Few were critical of Serdyukov during his tenure, but after his dismissal, the number of articles sharply critical of his reforms rose steeply. Furthermore, Russian analysts have become increasingly

65 Michael Schwartz, Anton Troianovski, Yousur Al-Hlou, Yousur Froliak, and Adam Entous, "Putin's War," *New York Times*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html>.

66 Inaccurate information appears to be a feature of other parts of the Russian bureaucracy as well. Wasielewski argues that this is a common feature of autocratic control. Wasielewski, *The Roots of Russian Military Dysfunction*. See also: Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "Informational Autocrats," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (November 2019): 100–127, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.33.4.100>.

67 Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 50–53.

68 Schwartz, Troianovski, Al-Hlou, Froliak, Entous, et al., "Putin's War."

69 Pavel Baev, "Military Reform against Heavy Odds," in *Russia After the Economic Crisis*, ed. Åslund Anders, Sergei Guriev, and Andrew Kuchins (Washington, D.C, 2010), 185.

70 For a discussion on secrecy from the Soviet era, see: Sergo A. Mikoyan, "Eroding the Soviet 'Culture of Secrecy,'" *Studies in Intelligence* 45, no. 5 (2001); Asif A. Siddiqi, "The Materiality of Secrets: Everyday Secrecy in Postwar Soviet Union," *Continuity and Change* 38, no. 1 (May 2023): 75–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416023000103>.

discouraged from speaking with foreigners, which previously served as an avenue for gathering new ideas and comparing best practices.⁷¹

An Emphasis on Theorization—not Implementation

The Russian military community has a rich history and culture of conflict analysis and theory. Military science is a well-developed field in Russia, with a focus on forecasting and holistic thinking.⁷² It is a highly regarded and prestigious field, exemplified by the General Staff's role in forecasting.⁷³

However, the Russian military often fails to implement theory. Having a vision of future warfare is not enough to build a force capable of being successful in the future warfare; the vision must be balanced with and connected to operational realities and then implemented.⁷⁴ For example, Russian analysts in the 1970s and 1980s were among the first to recognize a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA, also known as a Military-Technical Revolution (MTR)) based upon the growth and spread of information technologies. However, the Russian military was unable to carry out the implications of the trend their own analysts had recognized.⁷⁵ As Dima Adamsky has written, “Pathologically inept implementation of ideas has been strongly manifested in Soviet military affairs.”⁷⁶ Elements of this tendency have seemingly carried into the current government.⁷⁷

One reason for the inability to convert ideas into implementation could be explained by a lack of capability and capacity. For example, it was highly doubtful that the Soviet defense

71 Lucian Kim, “Russia’s ‘Foreign Agent’ Law Targets Journalists, Activists, Even Ordinary Citizens,” *NPR*, July 31, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/31/1021804569/russias-foreign-agent-law-targets-journalists-activists-even-ordinary-citizens>; “Russian Scientists Complain New Rules Would Sharply Restrict Foreign Interaction,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-scientists-complain-new-rules-would-sharply-restrict-foreign-interaction/30109691.html>.

72 Charles K. Bartles, “Defining Russian Military Science,” NATO Defense College, July 20, 2021, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=705>; Clint Reach et al., “Russian Military Forecasting and Analysis: The Military-Political Situation and Military Potential in Strategic Planning” (RAND Corporation, June 23, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA198-4.html; Michael Kofman et al., “Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts” (Arlington, VA: CNA, August 2021).

73 Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, 11–13.

74 Barry Watts and Williamson Murray, “Military Innovation in Peacetime,” in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. Williamson R. Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 369–416, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511601019.011>.

75 Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*.

76 Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, “Russian Campaign in Syria – Change and Continuity in Strategic Culture,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (January 2020): 109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1668273>.

77 While the Russian Federation is not the Soviet Union, and neither is the Russian Empire, culture, history, and the transition between governments have left an indelible mark on the way in which Russia operates. On the transition between the USSR and the Russian Federation, see, for example: Maria Snegovaya, “Why Russia’s Democracy Never Began,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (July 2023), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/why-russias-democracy-never-began/>; Maria Snegovaya and Kirill Petrov, “Long Soviet Shadows: The Nomenklatura Ties of Putin Elites,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 4 (April 11, 2022): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2062657>.

industry could have delivered the quality and quantity of technology that would have been required to take full advantage of the implications of the RMA.⁷⁸ The relationship between the armed forces and the Russian defense industry allows for state planning to set much of the shape and agenda of the defense industry, but the industry is rife with under-delivery, delays of high orders of magnitude, ballooning costs, and corruption.⁷⁹

Other cultural and organizational characteristics of the Russian military institution also contribute to what one author calls poor “conversion capabilities.”⁸⁰ The focus on holistic thinking can leave practitioners without the skills to think about how to make ideas reality. In Russian military practice, tactics have never really been considered prestigious, with an educational and professional focus on other levels of war.⁸¹

Russian management and implementation is commonly known to be full of “recklessness” (*razgildistvo*) and “carelessness” (*bezalabernost*), which can contribute to “chaos” (*bardak*).⁸² Others describe “recklessness” in failures to carry out routine inspections, ignorance of rules and regulations, the use of weapons beyond their shelf life, and lax safety rules.⁸³ In military academy curricula, “military administration” was replaced with “management of everyday activity,” suggesting a de-emphasis on studying how to manage the military as an organization.⁸⁴ Indeed, planning for the New Look reforms was messy, as

78 Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 38; Mary C. FitzGerald, *Impact of the RMA on Russian Military Affairs*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C: Hudson Institute, 1997).

79 For more on the Russian defense industry, see, for example: Max Bergmann et al., *Out of Stock? Assessing the Impact of Sanctions on Russia's Defense Industry* (Washington, D.C: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/out-stock-assessing-impact-sanctions-russias-defense-industry>; Tor Bukkvoll, “The Russian Defence Industry – Status, Reforms and Prospects” (Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), June 3, 2013); Vladislav Inozemtsev, “Russia’s Defense Sector: An Economic Perspective” (Stockholm, Sweden: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, March 2019); Michael Kofman et al., *Assessing Russian State Capacity to Develop and Deploy Advanced Military Technology* (Washington, D.C: Center for a New American Security, 2022); Pavel Luzin, “Russia’s Defense Industry and Its Influence on Policy: Stuck in a Redistributive Feedback Loop,” *Russia Matters*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/russias-defense-industry-and-its-influence-policy-stuck-redistributive-feedback-loop>.

For one example of how the bureaucratic culture of the defense industry and the MoD interact, see: David Hambling, “Russians Are Developing An Arsenal Of Deadlier FPV Drones – But Bureaucracy Is Holding Them Back,” *Forbes*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidhambling/2023/09/01/russias-new-arsenal-of-deadlier-fpv-drones-is-coming--if-they-can-get-through-the-bureaucracy/>.

80 James A. Marshall, “Russia’s Struggle for Military Reform: A Breakdown in Conversion Capabilities,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 189–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2013.844488>.

81 Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 53.

82 Within the context of the military organization, see: Adamsky, “Russian Campaign in Syria”; Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, chap. 2; Roger N. McDermott, “The Brain of the Russian Army: Futuristic Visions Tethered by the Past,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 4–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2014.874840>.

83 Michael Bohm, “Carelessness as a Russian National Trait,” *The Moscow Times*, August 1, 2013, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/01/carelessness-as-a-russian-national-trait-a26388>.

84 McDermott, “The Brain of the Russian Army,” 17.

demonstrated by several abrupt and often unexplained policy shifts and frequent unclear direction from Serdyukov.⁸⁵

One telling example of the lack of clear planning is provided by the difficulties in creating an NCO education program. In 2008, Russia announced it would create a new training program for professional NCOs. While the previous sergeant training program was five months long, this new effort was advertised as a 34-month program. Initially, the Ministry had envisioned NCOs being trained at six higher military training centers, but only one, at Ryazan, opened.⁸⁶ In the summer of 2009, the Russian government announced that more than 2,000 recruits would be selected to join the course, offering increased pay and allowances to attract candidates. But when the course finally commenced in December 2009, only 254 students were enrolled. Potential recruits had arrived for the entrance exam, only to fail due to their inability to do basic math.⁸⁷ The length of the program was shortened to less than a year by 2011 because senior Russian military officials thought that that was all that was needed.⁸⁸ After an unimpressive start, the program was quietly ended in 2016.⁸⁹ Clearly, those charged with planning the program had failed to accurately get a sense of how many servicemembers were likely to join the course or get agreement on what the content, curriculum, and length of the course would be. One critic of the reforms described the training center as little more than a public relations stunt.⁹⁰

Widespread Corruption

Corruption affects every part of the Russian military.⁹¹ The Russian government estimated in 2018 that corruption in the Russian military had led to the loss of nearly \$110 million.⁹² That figure is likely higher in reality, given that it is difficult to measure corruption since its nature is to go unreported and given that policymakers likely have incentives to hide the true extent of the problem.

There are at least common three ways that corruption in the Russian military manifests during peacetime: equipment procurement; the manipulation of reported numbers of troops

85 McDermott, "The Brain of the Russian Army."

86 Athena Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform in the Aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War," *Demokratizatsiya* 21, no. 3 (2013): 359–60, https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/21_3_To320R1173M61414.pdf.

87 McDermott, "The Brain of the Russian Army," 22–23.

88 Roger McDermott, "Russia's 'Spineless' Army: Paper Sergeants," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 8, no. 76 (April 19, 2011), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-spineless-army-paper-sergeants/>.

89 Binnendijk et al., *Russian Military Personnel Policy and Proficiency*, 88–90.

90 McDermott, "Russia's 'Spineless' Army."

91 Dalsjö et al point to corruption and rot as one of the main explanations for reduced levels of Russian military efficacy. Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson, and Johan Norberg, "A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War," *Survival* 64, no. 3 (May 4, 2022): 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2078044>.

92 "Corruption in Russia's Military Quadrupled in 2018, Prosecutors Say," *Moscow Times*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/03/21/corruption-in-russias-military-quadrupled-in-2018-prosecutors-say-a64907>.

in a given unit to receive a greater budget allocation; and the purchase of domestic goods and services.⁹³ Corruption also occurs during wartime. For example, during the wars in Chechnya, there were reports that Russian soldiers sold weapons to the Chechen resistance, sold fuel to private citizens, and gave themselves unwarranted combat bonuses (*boievye*).⁹⁴ In Bosnia, Russian peacekeepers engaged in graft, including by reselling fuel supplies from the United Nations.⁹⁵ A 2022 BBC report documented more than 500 instances of Russian soldiers and officers stealing clothing from the military.⁹⁶ Days before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian officers were reportedly selling military-provided fuel on the black market.⁹⁷

Within Russian politics and business, corruption is recognized as a problem.⁹⁸ Politicians and government leaders from different political generations have tried, at least rhetorically, to address it. Yet, corruption is still endemic. One possible explanation lies in a lack of real interest in the executive to truly root corruption out, in part because top bureaucrats and political leaders themselves may participate in it or benefit from its structures. Additionally, controlled corruption has been seen as a tool for influence over generals, developing *kompromat* (comprising information) on individuals that could prove to help control them.⁹⁹ For example, when General Anatoly Kvashnin and his cadre of officers became dominant in defense policy in the early 2000s, the Kremlin allegedly told the FSB to start storing *kompromat* on the group in case it would become necessary to oust them.¹⁰⁰ In a similar vein, Yeltsin knew about several cases of corruption within the officer corps, but did nothing. Several close to the president, pointing to managerial traditions that Yeltsin had learned during the Soviet era, claim that one of his main motivations for not cracking down on the schemes was the power the knowledge gave him.¹⁰¹

93 Tor Bukkvoll, “Their Hands in the Till: Scale and Causes of Russian Military Corruption,” *Armed Forces & Society* 34, no. 2 (January 2008): 261, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X06294622>.

94 Bukkvoll, 262.

95 John Pomfret, “Planners of NATO-Led Bosnia Force Wary of Graft among Russians,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/11/06/planners-of-nato-led-bosnia-force-wary-of-graft-among-russians/odb828dd-d4e4-44a6-a48c-7aaa550d02cc/>.

96 Andrey Zakharov, “‘Вывозили На КАМАЗе’. Как Российские Солдаты и Офицеры Воровали у Армии Трусы, Берцы и Бронежилеты [‘They Took It out on a KAMAZ.’ How Russian Soldiers and Officers Stole Shorts, Berets and Body Armor from the Army],” *BBC News Русская Служба*, October 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-63177093>.

97 “‘They Drink A Lot, Sell Their Fuel’: Belarusians Give Low Marks To Russian Troops Deployed For Drills,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/31157751.html>.

98 For a more academic critique of the way corruption affects the efficacy of Russian bureaucracy, see: T.A. Alexeeva and E.A. Kozlova, “Современная Российская Бюрократия: Историческое Наследие Или Новый Путь? [Modern Russian Bureaucracy: Historical Legacy or New Way?],” *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk*, no. 3 (September 30, 2013): 19–26.

99 Bukkvoll, “Their Hands in the Till.”

100 Bukkvoll, 271. Interagency competition may also be a factor in this kind of behavior.

101 Aleksandr Zhilin, “How Corrupt Is Russia’s Military Leadership?,” *Prism* 1, no. 20 (September 22, 1995), <https://jamestown.org/program/how-corrupt-is-russias-military-leadership/>.

Other explanations lie in the relative acceptance of corruption in the military and across the Russian economy more broadly. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, which measures perceptions of how corrupt a country's public sector is, regularly lists Russia as among the most corrupt countries in the world. In 2022, Russia had a score of just 28 out of 100, with a rank of 137 of 180 countries.¹⁰² Russian criminal law expert Vitaly Nomokonov has argued that "corruption has a social role in Russia" and that a certain degree of corruption is seen as necessary for normal functioning.¹⁰³ Indeed, survey data has suggested that bribery has become a social norm in Russia.¹⁰⁴ Corruption also plays a key role in keeping the elite satisfied.¹⁰⁵

How the Russian Military Reforms

To develop a framework to assess how these characteristics shape the way the Russian military reforms, for the purpose of this report I identify six stages of an ideal reform process, based on the literature on innovation alongside literature on organizational learning.¹⁰⁶ In the first stage, the organization *observes* and evaluates its current or past performance before *identifying and diagnosing* problems, challenges, or areas for improvement. The organization then undergoes an *idea generation* stage before *selecting a path* forward. Finally, the organization *implements* the policies and then *evaluates* the success of the policies and changes course as necessary. Within each stage, I identify a series of features that would seem to support the ideal execution of each task (see Figure 2). Although they are not meant to be exhaustive, they provide a good sense of the types of procedures and characteristics that can facilitate reform efforts.

102 "2022 Corruption Perceptions Index," Transparency International, 2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>.

103 Vitaly A. Nomokonov, "On Strategies for Combating Corruption in Russia," *Demokratizatsiya* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 124.

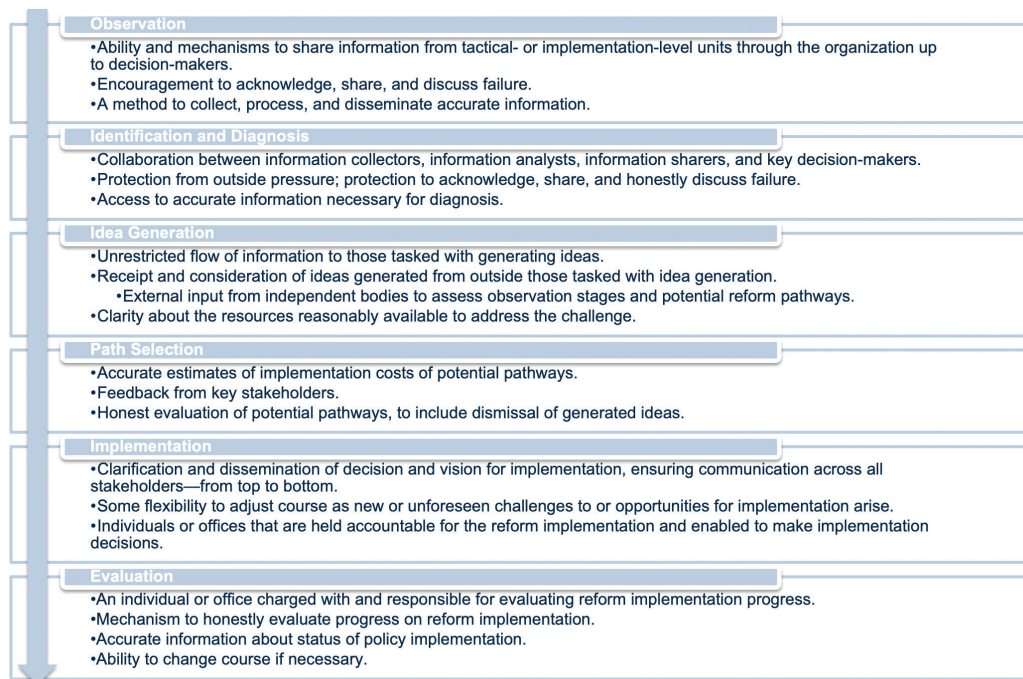
104 Vladimir Rimskii, "Bribery as a Norm for Citizens Settling Problems in Government and Budget-Funded Organizations," *Russian Politics & Law* 51, no. 4 (July 2013): 8–24, <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940510401>.

105 Miriam Lansky and Dylan Myles-Primakoff, "Power and Plunder in Putin's Russia," *Journal of Democracy* 29 (2018): 76.

106 The model was especially influenced by, among others: Hoffman, *Mars Adapting*; Hunzeker, *Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front*; Thomas G. Mahnken, Evan B. Montgomery, and Tyler Hacker, *Innovating for Great Power Competition: An Examination of Service and Joint Innovation Efforts* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2023); Martijn van der Vorm, "War's Didactics: A Theoretical Exploration on How Militaries Learn from Conflict," Research Paper (Breda, Holland: Netherlands Defence Academy, January 2021).

I am grateful to Joe Ross and Mary Waterman for their support in developing this model.

FIGURE 2: FEATURES OF AN IDEAL REFORM PROCESS



Several themes emerge from an examination of these features of an ideal reform process (see Table 2). First, *recognizing the problem* is key. As Williamson Murray has written, “Without a coherent system of analyzing what is actually happening, military organizations have no means of adapting to the conditions they face except doggedly to impose assumptions on reality or, even more dubiously, to adapt by guessing.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, asking the correct questions and developing systems to analyze areas for improvement are key to making an organization more effective.¹⁰⁸ An organization must be driven to establish these systems and investigate performance. This motivation can be derived externally (e.g.: from past failure, external threats, or competition with other organizations) and/or internally (e.g.: from leadership support or personal or professional incentives).¹⁰⁹

107 Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2009), 1–16.

108 Rosen points out the role that access to the correct instruments, measures, and metrics plays in successful innovation. Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

109 A review of Russian military reforms in the 1800s identified defeat and threat perception as two key motivators. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning, “Introduction,” in *Reforming the Tsar’s Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution*, ed. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning (Washington, D.C.; Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

TABLE 2: THEMES OF AN IDEAL REFORM PROCESS

Recognition of the problem	Processes to analyze areas for improvement and the motivation to change
Accurate, ample, and disseminated information	Accurate and ample information to correctly recognize and diagnose a problem, as well as develop, weigh, and plan policy options
Understanding of the means of reform	Accurate knowledge about the resources required and the path for implementation
Culture of reform	A culture that protects and encourages the acknowledgement, sharing, and discussion of honest information and which provides flexibility for implementation
Leadership	Leadership behavior and culture that impacts several stages and features of the reform process through, for example, providing motivation, identifying priorities, and shaping the organizational culture

Second, correctly recognizing and diagnosing the problem or challenge, as well as developing and weighing policy options, requires access to accurate and ample *information*, at both the collection stage and in dissemination to the necessary groups within the organization.¹¹⁰ Third, a realistic understanding of the *means* of reforms—the resources required and available as well as the path for implementation—is a recurring theme in the latter stages of the ideal reform process. Fourth, a *culture* that protects and encourages the acknowledgement, sharing, and discussion of honest information and which provides some flexibility for implementation is a feature that occurs throughout the ideal reform process. Finally, the role of *leadership*—both civilian and military—also seems key and can impact several stages and features of the reform process.¹¹¹ Among other tasks, leaders can provide motivation, identify priorities, and shape the culture of an organization.

As Hoffman writes, “Each step of the process—and every individual within the process—is influenced by the character of the institution and the culture, perspectives, and mental

110 This also appears required for successful innovation. See, for example: Watts and Murray, “Military Innovation in Peacetime,” 413–14.

111 The innovation literature concurs with the point that leaders matter. However, *how* and *why* leaders matter is less clear. For example, Posen clearly thinks that civilian leadership matters. Rosen highlights military leaders who help identify and encourage future leaders. Mahnken et al also clearly identify senior-level leadership sponsorship and support as key. Hoffman suggests that while there can be wartime military adaptation without civilian influence, civilian influence can be crucial to the initiation and sustainment of a change. Jensen describes the role of building networks and political coalitions. Harkness and Hunzeker provide an example of discussing the role of politics (and political leaders). Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986); Rosen, *Winning the Next War*; Mahnken, Montgomery, and Hacker, *Innovating for Great Power Competition*; Hoffman, *Mars Adapting*; Benjamin Jensen, *Forging the Sword: Doctrinal Change in the U.S. Army* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Kristen A. Harkness and Michael Hunzeker, “Military Maladaptation: Counterinsurgency and the Politics of Failure,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 6 (September 19, 2015): 777–800, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.960078>.

models that are encoded by that [military organization].¹¹² The key organizational characteristics of the Russian military identified above—a powerful institution reporting directly to the president; hierarchical and centralized decision-making; skewed and siloed information flows; an emphasis on theorization—not implementation; and widespread corruption—affect each of these themes and each stage of the reform process.

Recognition of the problem and motivation to change: The objectives outlined in various major reform programs suggest that the Russian defense leadership does recognize many of the challenges facing the Russian military. If a problem reaches the top level of leadership and, particularly if it is a problem that is made apparent to supervisors and to the president especially, leaders of the military organization—chiefly the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the General Staff as the two primary individuals responsible for the state of defense—may be especially motivated to address the problem. Since the Russian military has a strong history of assessing changing characters of war, it may be earlier than others in recognizing a need to adapt to aspects of emerging warfare.

However, other problems may remain unobserved by top leadership due to the hierarchical nature of the organization, particularly if the problems are most salient at the bottom. The culture of false reporting also risks leaving problems unidentified, as problems may be covered up by “window dressing.” The General Staff’s intellectual focus on the future of warfare and strategic questions could also lead it to de-prioritize existing problems, especially at the tactical level.

Furthermore, the restricted information environment combined with the need to protect oneself in a personalistic top-down driven structure may mean that leaders deny or miss evidence of a problem. For example, although it may be obvious to many outside Russia that the war in Ukraine has exposed serious weaknesses in the Russian military, Russian military leaders may believe that the issues were circumstantial or that the war in Ukraine represents an exception to how the military would fight another conflict.

Even if a problem is recognized, there may not be true motivation to change it. For example, corruption has been singled out several times as a problem facing the Russian military. However, there seems to be little desire or perhaps means to truly change the system.

Accurate, ample, and disseminated information: The Russian military’s skewed and siloed information flow affects reform efforts at each step of the process. The pathology of false reporting at all levels—itsself a result of culture, a poor information environment, and personal incentives to deliver good news to one’s boss—means that an individual is both discouraged from providing negative information *and* is likely receiving overly optimistic information upon which they build their own assessments, meaning that the level of falsehood increases with each level of reporting. Furthermore, the often-siloed information

112 Hoffman, *Mars Adapting*, 43.

environment within the military organization means that dissemination of information is not guaranteed, so parts of the organization may not receive the information they need to make the most effective decision.

Information asymmetries between different levels of the military organization hierarchy can have several effects on decision-making and implementation.¹¹³ First and foremost, decision-makers at the top of the hierarchy will not be likely to have accurate information, increasing the chances of them choosing a suboptimal option. Assessments and shared analysis could have both collection issues and analysis issues: in other words, the information collected could be poor or incomplete *and* information (even if correct) could be analyzed in a biased manner. Those making decisions at the top of the hierarchy are likely to be removed from on-the-ground realities, compounding a Russian tendency towards what Adamsky has called “wishful thinking.”¹¹⁴ For example, it seems that Putin received overly optimistic intelligence about the prospects of a Russian invasion of Ukraine in the run-up to February 2022.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, because a supervisor may not gain access to accurate information, subordinates may be encouraged to focus more on the indicators of success rather than achieving true progress on a given issue. In other words, subordinates may be encouraged to fake success or obfuscate failure since the supervisor cannot easily double-check the status of a project.

The position of advantage that the Russian military enjoys within Russian society, as well as its culture of secrecy, has encouraged it to resist outside interference. The Russian Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces holds back significant amounts of information from outside actors who could offer oversight and/or provide new perspectives and ideas about how to improve the reform process. For example, in the early 2000s the Ministry of Defense refused to release the official numbers of personnel serving in the armed forces to Vladislav Reznik, who at the time was chairman of the Duma Committee for the Secret Sanctions of the State Budget.¹¹⁶ This withholding of information not only means that the Ministry and the Armed Forces receive little outside feedback and oversight, but also that their ability to learn from

113 The implications in this paragraph are partially drawn from Avant, who points out that principal-agent problems are exacerbated by information asymmetry. She argues that this can lead to adverse selection, morale hazard, and instable organizational choices. Deborah D. Avant, “The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine: Hegemons in Peripheral Wars,” *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1993): 409–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600839>.

114 For example, see: Adamsky, “Russian Campaign in Syria,” 110.

115 Mike Eckel, “Russian Officials Predicted a Quick Triumph In Ukraine. Did Bad Intelligence Skew Kremlin Decision-Making?,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-invasion-ukraine-intelligence-putin/31748594.html>.

116 Bukkvoll, “Their Hands in the Till,” 261.

other militaries may be limited. It additionally encourages groupthink, which is already at high risk within a personalist autocracy.¹¹⁷

Understanding the means of reform: To create realistic policy options to address a challenge, to weigh policy options honestly, and to develop an implementation plan, policy-makers and analysts require an understanding of *how* reform will occur, both in terms of the resources (budget) required and the paths and policies required to enact reform.

Developing accurate costs of programs is always difficult. Projects run or contracted by the U.S. Department of Defense—which, unlike the Russian Ministry of Defense, has a transparent budgeting and reporting process—often run over budget. The Russian military’s opaque budgeting process and far-reaching corruption amplifies the problem of accurately estimating likely project budgets. For example, while planners may estimate one policy to cost a certain amount, it is difficult to assess how much of that cost will be wasted through corruption. This is compounded by the fact that there is little oversight of the defense budget, so the ability to hold project managers accountable is reduced.

The Russian military’s emphasis on theory rather than implementation contributes to a culture that poorly understands how much a policy may cost or what steps are necessary to complete a project. Implementation is not typically as rewarded or taught as theory generation. It is thus unclear if there is a cadre of good project managers who are given (and accept) authority. Since there is little practice at management and independent decision-making as individuals work their way up the hierarchy, there may be a lack of good middle management. Furthermore, since little authority to be creative is given at the lowest levels, those implementing policies may not be able to adjust how a policy is implemented if conditions change. On the other hand, the strategic imagination of Russian military intellectual thought might allow Russian leaders to generate creative solutions to problems.

The difficulty of assessing required resources and a lack of attention to implementation was demonstrated during the downsizing of the officer corps during the New Look reforms. The Ministry set a goal of cutting the officer corps from 355,000 to 150,000, but its plans for *how* it would handle the process of dismissals appeared to be an afterthought.¹¹⁸ For example, the Ministry dismissed thousands of officers—only to find that Ministry could not provide these officers the housing that is promised by law to retired officers who have served more than ten years. The Ministry of Defense had incorrectly predicted the financial costs

117 Groupthink is often a feature of autocracies in general. It has been used to explain Russian decisions, including the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan and the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea. See: Tuomas Forsberg and Christer Pursiainen, “The Psychological Dimension of Russian Foreign Policy: Putin and the Annexation of Crimea,” *Global Society* 31, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 220–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2016.1274963>; Artemy Kalinovsky, “Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: From Intervention to Withdrawal,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 4 (2009): 46–73; Mette Skak, “Russian Strategic Culture: The Role of Today’s Chekisty,” *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 324–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201317>.

118 McDermott, “The Brain of the Russian Army.”

of reducing the officer corps in neglecting the need to provide such housing.¹¹⁹ In 2009, the MoD was able to acquire less than 50 percent of the housing it needed for these officers.¹²⁰ To help ‘solve’ the problem, the Ministry created a special status for officers that they wanted to phase out but for whom they could not find housing: at the disposal of the commander (*u rasporyazheniye komandira*).¹²¹ Tens of thousands of officers were placed in limbo, neither being officially retired nor actively serving. They were also allegedly still being paid, despite not performing any duties.¹²² The endeavor, while it did succeed in reducing the size of the officer corps (at least temporarily and on paper), cost the Ministry a substantial sum.

Culture of reform: The Russian military does not seem to have a culture of true reform. Scholarship suggests that the more centralized and hierarchical an organization, the less likely it is to innovate.¹²³ The top-down nature of the Russian military organization, coupled with a broad lack of trust, suggests that little authority is given to assess weaknesses honestly and develop ideas to address them. As one analyst has written, “[T]he top-down structure of the Russian military reflects the top-down structure of Russian politics ... in which even the slightest criticism or questioning can get your rank demoted, your assets seized, or your body thrown out a window. Military officers absorb *these* lessons—which encourage caution, not creativity.”¹²⁴ The Russian military’s organizational culture of discouraging honest information would seem to discourage a culture of innovation.

Leadership: The autocratic and top-down nature of the Russian regime, and particularly within the Russian military, points to the importance of the president’s leadership. Zoltan Barany summarizes this dynamic well: “The Kremlin runs the Russian armed forces, and today the Kremlin means Putin.”¹²⁵ As noted above, the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the General Staff have a particular incentive to try to anticipate and respond to the president’s wishes, since they serve at his or her pleasure. Because decision-making is centralized, one might expect that this could theoretically speed up decision-making, but if the defense leadership is constantly trying to anticipate what the leader wants, it could actually *increase* the amount of time for decisions to be made. The role of the president also

119 Baev, “Military Reform against Heavy Odds,” 183.

120 Baev, “Military Reform against Heavy Odds.”

121 Oleg Falichev, “Перемены Вместо ‘Реформ’ [Changes Instead of ‘Reform’],” *VPK (Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kur’er)*, April 7, 2020; Gennady Makarenko, “Проблемы Реформирования [The Problems of Reforms],” *Flag Rodiny*, August 28, 2009.

122 Falichev, “Перемены Вместо ‘Реформ’ [Changes Instead of ‘Reform’].”

123 Theo Farrell, “Improving in War: Military Adaptation and the British in Helmand, 2006-2009,” in *Contemporary Military Innovation between Anticipation and Adaption*, ed. Dima Adamsky and Kjell Inge Bjerga, Cass Military Studies (London: Routledge, 2012); Harvey Sapolsky, Benjamin Friedman, and Brendan Green, eds., *US Military Innovation since the Cold War: Creation Without Destruction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).

124 Fred Kaplan, “Why the Russian Army Isn’t Learning From Its Mistakes,” *Slate*, March 6, 2023, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/03/ukraine-war-why-russia-army-isnt-learning-from-its-mistakes.html>.

125 Zoltan Barany, “Armies and Autocrats: Why Putin’s Military Failed,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (January 2023), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/armies-and-autocrats-why-putins-military-failed/>.

points to the fact that military plans can be subject to quick changes if the president shifts course. For example, several officers that had been considered as potential future intellectual leaders of the Russian Armed Forces were removed during Joseph Stalin's purges. Just months before Serdyukov's ouster, analysts described how successful the reform programs seemed to be.¹²⁶ When Putin replaced Serdyukov with Shoigu, however, the content and nature of the reform program shifted. The central role of the president highlights the importance of the president's interest in and management of reforms. Historian Jacob Kipp has written, "In this government of men and now laws, the only prospect for meaningful reform seems to lie in the emergence of a charismatic figure with sufficient political appeal and military understanding to provide leadership."¹²⁷

On the other hand, the hierarchical nature of the Russian military means that where the president does not intervene, the top-level leadership within the Ministry and the Armed Forces will have significant leeway in making decisions. Indeed, because the political leadership has a wider set of policy issues with which to contend and thus has limited bandwidth to pay attention to military issues, the top-level defense leadership is likely to be able to take ownership of most military issues. In particular, the General Staff has significant power. If the General Staff is against a reform, it will be very hard to push it through and will likely require major intervention from the president. Because of the individualist and top-down nature of the Russian military hierarchy, the interests, personalities, and skillsets of the individuals at the top of the Russian military institution are likely to have an outsized impact on any reform efforts. For example, while in the 1860s Dmitry Miliutin presented and gained approval of his reform proposals before presenting it to the tsar, in the period after 2008 Serdyukov allegedly never sought approval from the officer corps, meaning that Russian officers felt little connection to or understanding of the reforms.¹²⁸

Tendencies of Russian Reform

Overlaying the organizational characteristics of the Russian defense establishment onto reform processes suggests several tendencies of Russian reform. At the *observation stage*, the Russian military likely receives overly optimistic information, leading top levels of leadership to believe that it is performing better than in reality. This may be especially true during peacetime, when indicators of performance are less clear. During wartime, the bias towards overly optimistic performance assessments is still true, but these biases may be more strongly confronted when faced with metrics like casualties and territorial loss/gain. There may also be unspoken, but widely recognized truths or behaviors that individuals

126 See, for example: Keir Giles, "A New Phase in Russian Military Transformation," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 147–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2014.874850>.

127 Jacob W Kipp, "Russian Military Reform: Status and Prospects (Views of a Western Military Historian)" (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1998), 8.

128 Roger McDermott, "Russia's 'Military Reform': Flowers, Weeds and AWOL Gardeners," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 9, no. 159 (September 4, 2012), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-military-reform-flowers-weeds-and-awol-gardeners/>.

do not feel they can officially acknowledge. At the *identification and diagnosis stage*, the Russian military is more likely to focus on emerging strategic-level challenges rather than problems at a more granular level due both to a greater organizational interest in big questions and to false reporting. A lack of accountability, the difficulty of accessing accurate information, and false reporting also suggests that the Russian military may not investigate the root causes of an issue and instead seek to find bandages to cover up a problem.

During the *idea generation phase*, ideas may not match the reality of resourcing and implementation paths available. Furthermore, the Russian defense establishment may rely on older ideas, due to the lack of new voices and external input. Describing how the 2008 reforms reflect thinking from the Ogarkov era, Michael Kofman writes, “Implementing reforms to previous reforms is a Russian tradition.”¹²⁹ When the leadership chooses a path, there is unlikely to be accurate estimates of how much each option will cost. Moreover, particularly without higher-level support, the leadership may choose the path with the fewest obstacles, even if it is not the most effective path. Military leadership may also seek to satisfy the political leadership, so military leadership may weigh what they believe to be the leader’s preferences over other considerations. Because of the top-down nature of the organization, feedback from key stakeholders may or may not be sought, so the decision may be made in the absence of understanding its most granular effects.

Implementation is also affected. For implementation to have the highest chance of success, clear, detailed direction may be necessary from the highest levels of government since subordinates are not given the authority or tools to make their own decisions. In the absence of such detail, implementation is likely to waver. Any guidance is also likely to be rigidly adhered to since there is little flexibility to adjust course at the lower levels. However, leaders at the highest levels are unlikely to be able to foresee all the possible impediments to policy implementation, so in the face of any unforeseen impediments, subordinates are likely to have to either go back to the supervisor for further instructions, ignore the obstacle and push forward at the cost of efficiency and possibly success, or delay the project hoping conditions change. Due to the information climate, honest evaluation of how a policy is progressing will be difficult.

If the military leadership is dedicated to reform, they will seek ways to overcome the enduring vulnerabilities to the reform process. To reduce the information accuracy problem, for example, the military leadership is likely to be drawn to reforms that are easy to make progress checks on themselves and to reforms for which disguising progress is harder. This is likely to lead military leaderships to big structural changes (e.g., reorganizing military districts) or, in conditions of budget abundance, problems that can be mitigated with injections of cash (e.g., modernizing equipment). Furthermore, to keep the political leadership

129 Michael Kofman, “The Ogarkov Reforms: The Soviet Inheritance Behind Russia’s Military Transformation,” *Russia Military Analysis* (blog), July 11, 2019, <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2019/07/11/the-ogarkov-reforms-the-soviet-inheritance-behind-russias-military-transformation/>.

happy, the military leadership is likely to seek changes that can be pointed to as a success. These changes are ideally large and quantifiable, leading the leadership again to big structural changes or problems that can be mitigated with money.¹³⁰ Sergei Witte, who in 1905-1906 served as the first prime minister of the Russian Empire, said, “In Russia, you need to enact reforms quickly; otherwise, they mostly do not work out and are obstructed.”¹³¹ As a reformer, if you seek to change the system, you may see yourself as only having a short period of time to enact change before the political winds change, and thus you may lean towards reforms you yourself can control—revolutionary, top down, and structural reforms. Thus, the Russian defense establishment is most likely to be both pursue and succeed in top-down, structural reforms.¹³²

On the other hand, reforms that require change from the bottom-up or that touch on political sensitives are inherently more difficult in the Russian system. The difficulty of both bottom-up changes and politically sensitive reforms is true of reforms in general, but perhaps especially so in Russia for several reasons. First, the lack of accurate information for tracking, enforcing, and evaluating reform options and progress and the lack of accountability suggest that reforms that require a broader buy-in and implementation will be difficult to monitor. Moreover, due to the widespread nature of corruption in the Russian military, the more people who are involved in a project or touch the money for a project, the more graft there is likely to be, supporting a tendency towards tightly controlled projects.¹³³ If a policy becomes politically sensitive or is opposed by powerful interest groups, the support of the president becomes very important. However, unless the president is truly behind reforms, there is a history of forcing a reversal on policies that become politically sensitive, especially if the president seeks to prioritize other policy areas. Thus, unless the president puts his or her weight behind a controversial policy, it is unlikely to come to pass. A savvy military leader is, therefore, likely to avoid implementing these policies if they do not know that they have presidential support.

Russian reform programs have often seemed to seek—to use language from the literature on military innovation—*revolutionary* change. This type of innovation is disruptive and largely top down. Particularly in the Russian system, it is clear why this type of innovation and reform would be attractive, since it does not necessarily rely on changing culture. However, in the long-term, *evolutionary* change, which builds over time to impact organizational culture, can be necessary to address cultural weaknesses. This requires sustained

130 The political leadership might also especially like these types of reforms since they can point to them to gain domestic political support. Big, structural reforms can also be easily spun to foreign audiences, potentially having a higher deterrence impact.

131 Gudrun Persson, “In the Service of Russia,” Russian Studies Series 5/19 (Rome, Italy: NATO Defense College, June 5, 2019), <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=596>.

132 For example, in the 2008-2012 period, Serdyukov’s most successful reforms were those which were structural or were improved with budget increases.

133 In other words, a solution to one problem can lead to further centralized decision making.

organizational focus, “rather than on one particular individual’s capacity to guide the path of innovation.”¹³⁴ As we will see, the Miliutin reforms from the 1860s-1880s had significant impact on the culture of the Russian military and indeed of the Russian society—but Miliutin had the benefit of a long tenure and support from the political leadership. Once he was replaced, much of the progress seems to have stopped. In the Russian system, with an emphasis on individual leaders at both the political and military level, sustained effort across multiple leaders is difficult—yet, without addressing a cultural tendency that discourages innovation, cultural inertia reinforced by large bureaucratic size and long bureaucratic history, as we have seen in the case of the Russian defense establishment, can actually lead to a failure to see through on revolutionary change.¹³⁵

In summary, the Russian defense establishment has a tendency to seek and be most successful in top-down, structural reforms and those that require an injection of money. Reforms that require bottom-up change or which are politically sensitive are the least likely to be successful.

Thus, we see that the organizational characteristics of the Russian military establishment impact all stages of the reform process. None of this is to say that the characteristics, individually or taken together, create a total block on reform programs. As Chapter 4 will demonstrate, major reform programs have occurred. Similarly, the Russian military has innovated in the past and has demonstrated significant military power capable of winning wars.

The Russian military is able to reform, but it does so under the influence of its enduring organizational characteristics. In short, a combination of the rigid, top-down decision-making process, corruption, and poor information encourage reformers to seek reforms that are centrally executed and that have demonstrable effect. Reforms that require change from the bottom-up or that touch on political sensitivities are inherently more difficult. Frequently, the Russian military ends up with transformation efforts that look impressive, but which in reality do not change the ultimate characteristics of the organization, thus giving the Russian military remarkable continuity over time.

134 Williamson Murray, “Innovation: Past and Future,” in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. Williamson R. Murray and Allan R. Millett, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 309, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511601019.009>.

135 Michael L. Tushman and Charles A. O’Reilly III, “Ambidextrous Organizations: Managing Evolutionary and Revolutionary Change,” *California Management Review* 38, no. 4 (Summer 1996): 8–30.

CHAPTER 3

A Framework for Forecasting Russian Reform Ambition and Success

Although transforming the Russian military is rare, it is not impossible. This chapter identifies the conditions under which the Russian military may be able to overcome the dynamics that impede major reform efforts and may, thus, succeed in fundamentally changing the Russian military.

This chapter develops a framework for thinking about how ambitious a given reform program will be (that is, does the military seek fundamental change or marginal change) and how likely the Russian military is to achieve its stated goals. In so doing, this chapter emphasizes the importance of two key variables: the level of resources available to the military to conduct reforms, and the political leadership's level of focus on military reform. Of course, other factors will affect reform efforts, but these two variables encapsulate, and provide a framework for forecasting, the level of ambition and likely degree of implementation of Russian major military reform programs.

That the level of resources available for reform is an important indicator of reform success is in some ways obvious: the more money that the military has, the more likely it may be able to implement reforms. During the 1990s, one common complaint from Russian military leaders was that they did not have the resources to be able to reform. During the 1970s, the economic and political climate did not allow the military to acquire the resources necessary to adopt lessons from the Revolution in Military Affairs.¹³⁶ Resource levels shape the breadth and depth of reform efforts, and low levels may force the Russian defense leadership to make decisions about which reforms to prioritize.

136 Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 37–39.

While the level of resources clearly matters, it is not sufficient to explain whether a reform program will be successful. Nor do resources necessarily correlate with the ambition of a project. Another element, thus, must be added in order to develop an understanding of how ambitious a program might be and whether a reform program will be successful.

The role of leadership is an additional dimension that can help provide insight into Russian reform programs. The literature on military innovations emphasizes the role that civilian and military leaders play in encouraging, adopting, and implementing innovation.¹³⁷ For example, Barry R. Posen posits that civil-military relations are key to innovation. Because militaries are institutions that are hesitant to change, according to Posen's argument, outside civilian intervention may be necessary to force them to innovate.¹³⁸ Others within this school argue that military doctrinal innovation can be explained by the delegation of power between the civilian and military organizations.¹³⁹ Stephen P. Rosen, anchoring a school of thought that emphasizes the role of intraservice dynamics in innovation, contends that uniformed leaders can push for change by championing a new theory of victory and creating and encouraging new promotion pathways in order to elevate leaders with new ideas.¹⁴⁰ Frank G. Hoffman argues that while wartime military adaptation can occur without civilian influence, civilian influence can be crucial to the initiation and sustainment of a change.¹⁴¹

The role of leaders in supporting reform efforts matters especially in the Russian military system, which is particularly hierarchical. Given the authoritarian nature of the Russian regime, the political leadership often has an outsized influence on policies at all levels, whether through explicit directives or bureaucrats seeking to please (or at least, not displease) the political leader. Indeed, from Peter the Great, Alexander II, and Nicholas II to Stalin, Khrushchev, Yeltsin, and Putin, the Russian political leadership has had tremendous impact on reform efforts.¹⁴²

However, support and interest from the political leadership is not sufficient to explain reform success or failure. A leader can support a reform program while doing little to ensure that it is implemented. Levels of support can also vary over time.

Thus, instead of looking at leadership support alone, I propose considering the level of the political leadership's focus on reform efforts as a primary variable that varies along two

137 For a framework for how to think about military innovation, see: Mahnken, Montgomery, and Hacker, *Innovating for Great Power Competition*, chap. 2.

138 Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*.

139 Avant, "The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine"; Deborah D. Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

140 Rosen, *Winning the Next War*.

141 Hoffman, *Mars Adapting*.

142 Pallin suggests that the role of political leadership is key in shaping Russian reform programs. See: Pallin, *Russian Military Reform*.

dimensions.¹⁴³ First, the leader's *intensity of focus* varies. If the political leadership has a high intensity of focus, they will prioritize military reform efforts and pay close attention to the military's programs on reform. On the other hand, if the political leadership has a low intensity of focus, the military will be left with relatively free reign to make its own decisions. The intensity of focus, however, can change over time. Thus, I also introduce the *duration of focus*. Therefore, political leadership focus can be described as high and sustained, high but brief, and low.¹⁴⁴

TABLE 3: A FRAMEWORK OF RUSSIAN MILITARY REFORM

		Political Leadership's Focus on Reform		
		<i>High and Sustained</i>	<i>High but Brief</i>	<i>Low</i>
Level of Resources	<i>High</i>	Prediction: High ambition, high implementation	Prediction: High ambition, implementation dependent on defense leadership	Prediction: Highly determinant on defense leadership
	<i>Low</i>	Prediction: High ambition, but budget restraints force prioritization or incomplete implementation	Prediction: High ambition, but poor implementation, though motivated defense leadership be able to deliver progress with limitations	Prediction: Likely low ambition and low implementation, though motivated defense leadership may be able to make small changes

If the political leadership has a high level of focus on military reforms, he or she is likely to put pressure on the defense leadership to build a program that will deliver big changes the public can see and that will address any issues that have risen to the political leadership's level of attention. In other words, high political leadership focus is likely to put pressure on the military to demonstrate an effort to deliver significant change. Thus, high focus on reform from the political leadership, regardless of the duration of the focus, is likely to result in ambitious reform agendas. In the case of high political focus, the likely level of implementation is impacted by the duration of political focus.

If the political focus is sustained, the political leadership, by paying attention to the reforms, will put pressure on the military over time to continue to make progress on the reform program. Thus, if the political leadership's focus is high and sustained, the Russian military's reform program is likely to be ambitious, and there is likely to be pressure to deliver progress. High levels of resources will support efforts to deliver this progress, resulting in a higher likelihood of successful implementation of the stated goals. Lower levels of resources, however, will put the military in a tough position in situations of high and sustained political

143 I focus on "political leadership" rather than a specific top leader or position (be it president, tsar, or premier) to allow for the fact that influential focus could also come from members of the autocratic leader's team. However, the top leader today, Vladimir Putin, is clearly the most important figure within the Kremlin and thus will be the most impactful.

144 I do not distinguish between low and sustained or low but brief focus since the initial low focus will likely set the tone. If the political leadership later becomes interested, categories could change. One can, however, imagine a scenario in which the political leadership only becomes focused on reforms after a reform program becomes politically sensitive or becomes so successful it derives substantial domestic support. Either of these scenarios could impact the way in which the political leadership puts pressure on the military to see the reforms through.

leadership focus: the military leadership will have announced an ambitious program and feel pressure to deliver on it, but may be unable to do so due to budgetary constraints. Thus, they may prioritize certain aspects of the program and put others aside, either for another time once resources are more abundant or for good. Alternatively, they could achieve incomplete implementation. This could take a few forms. For example, the military leadership could try to spread the tight resources equally across the reform areas, resulting in uneven levels of completion across the program. Alternatively, to show progress on reform efforts, the military could seek shortcuts, finding reform efforts that appear successful but lack substance. The military leadership could also prioritize efforts that are more easily achieved so that they have something on which to report progress. One final option the military could take is simply to argue to the political leadership that they cannot undertake the efforts without a greater budget.

If the political leadership’s focus is high but brief, the military is still likely to announce an ambitious program but will have greater variation in implementation because the political leadership is not pressuring the military to deliver. In times of high resources, the leadership of the defense organization will shape the likelihood of implementation success.¹⁴⁵ If the defense leadership is committed to the reform, then the chances of successful implementation will be higher. However, if the defense leadership cannot come to an agreement or disagrees with the reform program, then implementation is likely to be poor.

If the political leadership’s focus is high but brief and the resource level is low, implementation is more likely to be poor given that there is less incentive to make tough decisions and to show results. However, if the defense leadership is dedicated to reform efforts, they may be able to deliver some progress, but it will require clear prioritization and difficult decisions that are likely to upset groups who either do not receive resources or whose resource allocation is reduced. Furthermore, if any issues arise that become controversial within the military, or if they impede on the preferences of strong interest groups, they are unlikely to be able to overcome the issues without the political leadership’s intervention.¹⁴⁶ Since the political leadership has de-prioritized military reforms, any policies that become politically sensitive such that they distract the political leadership from their other goals are unlikely to gain support from the political leadership and may in fact result in a backfire to any progress.

If the political leadership has low focus on military reforms, the defense leadership plays a greater role in both the level of ambition and the implementation. This is true particularly

145 Given the symbiotic relationship between the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff, I use “defense leadership” to refer more generally to the individual, individuals, or group who holds the most sway within the military organization. The balance of influence can shift over time, but is likely to be a balance between the Chief of the General Staff and the Minister of Defense.

146 On the role of interest groups in Russian military reforms, see: Kirill Shamiev, “Against a Bitter Pill: The Role of Interest Groups in Armed Forces Reform in Russia,” *Armed Forces & Society* 47, no. 2 (April 1, 2021): 319–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X19852648>.

when resources are abundant. If the defense leadership wants to seek an ambitious reform program and is able to press the military organization to agree to reforms, then they may be able to push through a reform package. The level of implementation will be similarly determined by defense leadership interest and management style. If the defense leadership does not want to seek reforms, then a program is unlikely to be set or it will be unambitious. Alternatively, if the ruling defense leadership seeks personal gain or seeks to advocate for their service or other interests, then they may skew reform efforts in that direction.

Then again, if political focus is low and resources are also low, we are likely to see both low ambition and low implementation. This is because there is no pressure to set lofty reform goals, and defense leaders can set realistic expectations or feel no need to set any reform goals at all. Without political pressure to implement, defense leaders uninterested in or not dedicated to reforms are unlikely to fully reach any reform goals. However, if the defense leadership is motivated, they may be able to make changes—though given budget constraints and the lack of political support for any large issues that arise, these changes are likely to be relatively small.

This framework emphasizes not only the importance of resources and the political leadership's intensity and duration of focus, but also, in several scenarios, the importance of the defense leadership. The defense leadership, as the main representative and manager of the military, plays an important role in any transformation process. Their interest in reform, management style, and ability to get buy-in and consensus will be especially key in situations in which the political leadership is not paying close and sustained attention to the reform process.

Other factors will inevitably also impact the ambition and implementation of any reform program. For example, it seems that geopolitical factors like the balance of power, threat perceptions, or a recent military loss could influence the perceived need for reforms, thus possibly increasing both the scope of and determination to complete any reform program. However, geopolitical factors alone are unlikely to fully explain reform scope and success. For example, the Soviet military's poor performance in Afghanistan and the burden of defense spending on the Soviet economy highlighted for many during the late Soviet period the need for military reform. However, Gorbachev seemed to approach military reform with hesitation, not announcing the unilateral cuts until December 1988.¹⁴⁷ With three models of reform in discussion, the breakup of the Soviet Union came before reform could be "articulated, much less executed."¹⁴⁸ In other words, threat perceptions can put pressure to be effective but does not necessarily ensure successful results. In this report's model, these geopolitical pressures can play a role by increasing both the political leadership and defense leadership focus on reforms. Another factor that may play a role is domestic stability. This is likely to be more of an intervening variable than an explanatory variable, as there

147 William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 88–89, 118.

148 Kipp, "Russian Military Reform: Status and Prospects (Views of a Western Military Historian)."

have been periods of domestic stability in Russia without any interest in military reform. However, domestic stability likely enables high levels of resources and may enable political leadership focus.

This model provides a framework for understanding and predicting the ambition and success of Russian military reform programs. Utilizing three variables—resource levels, the political leadership’s focus on reforms (in both duration and intensity), and the defense leadership—analysts can thus gain significant insights into how the Russian military reforms. In the following chapter, I apply this framework to three previous cases of Russian military reform to demonstrate the model’s utility and to generate further insights into the ways in which the Russian military attempts to change.

CHAPTER 4

Three Cases of Russian Military Reform Efforts

Following a disappointing battlefield performance, the Russian military undertook a major reform program that drastically reshaped the armed forces. The military's leadership pursued reforms in administration, doctrine, education, and staffing. Some fifteen years later, the Russian military went to war. The reform program's goals supported expectations that the military should have performed well. Instead, they were met with serious problems in tactics and command.

This story should feel familiar to contemporary observers. The exposure of Russian weaknesses during the 2008 Georgia War spurred the implementation of a massive military reform program under the leadership of Minister of Defense Anatoliy Serdyukov. Fourteen years later, the Russian army conducted a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in a war many predicted that Russia would win swiftly and decisively. Instead, the Russian army failed in the initial stages of the invasion and has demonstrated serious areas of weakness, though the final outcome of the war remains to be seen.

Observers from the 19th century would also recognize the story. After facing humiliating defeat in Crimea, Dmitry Miliutin oversaw a transformative reform program that began in the 1860s. Fifteen years after his appointment as war minister, Russia fought the Ottoman Empire. Although the Russian coalition did ultimately win, the Russian military also demonstrated severe challenges and areas for improvement in the process.

The contemporary Russian military, like the Soviet and Imperial militaries before it, has undergone several efforts to transform. In this chapter, I examine three cases of post-geopolitical crisis reform efforts: the Miliutin reforms of the 1860s-1880s following the humiliating defeat during the Crimean War, the lack of reforms in the 1990s despite major expectation and discussion of the need to reform after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the Serdyukov and Shoigu reform efforts that began in 2008 following the war in Georgia.

These cases span Russian history and represent diverse examples of Russian military reform efforts. The Miliutin case represents a best-case scenario for the Russian military in which reforms were successful, the reform attempts during the 1990s represent a worst-case scenario in which no reforms were pursued despite interest in them, and the New Look case represents a best-case scenario that then shifts mid-course. Examining these cases representing both success and failure allows us to better understand the dynamics of Russian military reform.¹⁴⁹ Applying the framework developed in Chapter 3 to these major Russian military reform efforts enables better contextualization of recent reform programs and identification of patterns in both Russian reform behavior and organizational characteristics of the Russian military.

The Miliutin Reforms

If Peter the Great, who established the Imperial Russian Army, is seen as the father of the modern Russian military, Count Dmitry Alekseyevich Miliutin should be seen as the father of Russian military transformations. Miliutin, who served as Alexander II's Minister of War from 1861 to 1881, oversaw the first major military reform program since the creation of Peter the Great's army. Indeed, many saw it as the most major military reform program in Russia's history until Serdyukov announced his reform agenda in 2008.¹⁵⁰

Miliutin's reforms, which had wide-ranging military and societal impacts, transformed what had been a relatively small army of conscripts who served most of their lives into an army with significant mobilization capacity due to a large reserve pool.¹⁵¹ The reforms sought to create a better educated and more representative army, increase the status of and cohesion within the armed forces, and support a more modern society. In so doing, Miliutin declared compulsory military service for all Russian males (notably including nobles), created military districts, and reformed the military education system.

149 Per Seawright and Gerring, I adopt a diverse case method, which is appropriate for an exploratory or confirmatory study. I choose the cases to best illuminate the ambition and success of reform programs, as well as to demonstrate dynamics across Russia's history. Jason Seawright and John Gerring, "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options," *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2008): 294–308.

150 Charles Clover, "Moscow Marches on with Military Reform," *Financial Times*, June 25, 2009, <https://www.ft.com/content/e57b3e2c-61a7-11de-9e03-00144feabdc0>.

151 David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning, eds., *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution* (Washington, D.C.; Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Walter M. Pintner, "Mobilization for War and Russian Society," in *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History: Proceedings of the Twelfth Military History Symposium, United States Air Force Academy 1-3 October 1986*, ed. Carl W. Reddel (Military History Symposium (U.S.), Washington, DC: United States Air Force Academy, Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1990).

The reforms were motivated by several factors, first among which was Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean War.¹⁵² Threat perception was also growing and changing, with the possibility of a conflict with both a united Germany and a resurgent Austria-Hungary. Watching the Prussian military success against Austria in 1866 and France in 1870-1871, the Russian military leadership observed the potential value (and perhaps necessity) of universal conscription, mobilization, and railroad transportation.¹⁵³ Miliutin had been tasked with not only improving the operations of the military, but also reducing its costs.

In 1862, Miliutin proposed a sweeping reform plan to Alexander II. Having been reviewed by more than 200 commanders and experts, the bulk of his plans were approved—and, by the end of his tenure, most of his goals were accomplished.¹⁵⁴ What emerged was a military transformed.

Several factors seem to have contributed to the successful implementation of this transformation. First, Miliutin's leadership and vision clearly played a role. His predecessor, Nikolai Sukhozanet, had similarly been tasked with carrying out reforms, but Sukhozanet seemed lost in the task.¹⁵⁵ When Miliutin entered office, he brought ideas for reforms and submitted a plan just two months after his appointment.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, he held the position of Minister of War for two decades, providing stability in ministry leadership. The minister was once quoted as saying, "All reforms may be beneficial only when they are accomplished gradually, without any interruptions and interference..."¹⁵⁷ Second, the military press during the Great Reforms era seemed to play a role in encouraging policy improvement, spurring debate

152 An 1854 article from the *Economist* described four causes of Russian weakness, which will sound familiar to contemporary observers: the geographic spread of the country and difficult transportation, inflation of numbers, a lack of morale and motivation, and discontented neighbors. "Perennial Sources of Russian Weakness," *South Australian Register*, January 19, 1855, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article49302039>. See also: Max Boot, "Russia Keeps Losing Wars Because of Its Dysfunctional Military Culture," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/04/12/ukraine-military-culture-advantage-over-russia/>.

153 Gudrun Persson, "Russian Military Attachés and the Wars of the 1860s," in *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution*, ed. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning (Washington, D.C.; Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

154 There were some failed reform efforts. For example, Miliutin sought to modernize the navy fleet, but private industry struggled to deliver on technological change and the army received the bulk of the budget. Jacob W. Kipp, "The Russian Navy and the Problem of Technological Transfer," in *Russia's Great Reforms, 1855–1881*, ed. Ben Eklof, John Bushnell, and Larissa Zakharova (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Scott Patrick Anderson, "The Administrative and Social Reforms of Russia's Military, 1861-1874: Dmitrii Miliutin Against the Enscenced Power Elite" (University of Oregon, 2010), 24.

155 Alexander provided his own ideas, though according to one author "many of them involved redesign of uniforms." John S. Bushnell, "Miliutin and the Balkan War: Military Reform vs. Military Performance," in *Russia's Great Reforms, 1855–1881*, ed. Ben Eklof, John S. Bushnell, and Larissa Zakharova (Indiana University Press, 1994), 145.

156 Bushnell, 145.

157 As quoted in: E. Willis Brooks, "The Russian Military Press in the Reform Era," in *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution*, ed. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning (Washington, D.C.; Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 113.

but also serving as a way for Miliutin to advocate for and spread awareness of his ideas.¹⁵⁸ Third, outside events helped keep motivation for reforms high: for example, the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War served as a reminder of the consequences of poor reform and set the example of successful German mobilization.

The support of Alexander II and a broader political interest in reforms also appears key. Alexander's formative experience at the beginning of his tenure was the loss of the Crimean War and the sense among much of the educated elite that Russia had appeared backwards compared to Britain and France. Alexander was motivated to change the country, enacting a series of economic, judicial, educational, and military reforms referred to collectively as the Great Reforms.¹⁵⁹ Nicknamed Alexander the Liberator, he is perhaps most well-known for emancipating Russian serfs in 1861. It is not surprising that he supported Miliutin's military reform efforts and his leadership of the military as War Minister, and he did so visibly during his tenure.¹⁶⁰ Miliutin faced opposition from conservatives in the military, but Alexander's support seemed to boost Miliutin's efforts.¹⁶¹

Subsequent defense leadership reversed many of Miliutin's policies or struggled to implement continuations of the policies. When Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, Miliutin was forced out of office—and many reform policies, particularly those which aimed to include a broader social base in the armed forces, were reversed or abandoned.¹⁶² Notably, Aleksey Kuropatkin, who in 1898 became the first War Minister to have received his education at one of Miliutin's reformed schools, sought to push education reforms further.¹⁶³ However, he did not have the support of Nicholas II, who defended the privileges of the aristocracy and the “increasingly more anachronistic parade culture that characterized the

158 Brooks, “The Russian Military Press in the Reform Era.”

159 See, for example: Ben Eklof, John Bushnell, and Larissa Zakharova, eds., *Russia's Great Reforms, 1855–1881* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); W. E. Mosse, *Alexander II and the Modernization of Russia*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

160 For example, after rearranging the emperor's Main Staff, Miliutin had some concern that during meetings concerning the military, Alexander might prefer a military staff member sit next to him. Doing so would have tacitly suggested that the military staff, not Miliutin, was the primary representative of the military. Alexander solved the problem for Miliutin: during one meeting, when the commander of a military department attempted to sit next to the emperor, Alexander requested that Miliutin take the seat. Anderson, “The Administrative and Social Reforms of Russia's Military,” 33–34.

161 For example, Prince Field Marshal Aleksandr Bariantinskii, formerly Miliutin's patron, thought that the Russian army should be remodeled along Prussian practices, with Miliutin overseeing administrative and support services and a Field Marshal in a new office as chief of staff overseeing military affairs. Bushnell, “Miliutin and the Balkan War: Military Reform vs. Military Performance,” 151.

162 John L. H. Keep, “Soldier in Tsarist Russia,” in *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History: Proceedings of the Twelfth Military History Symposium, United States Air Force Academy 1-3 October 1986*, ed. Carl W. Reddel (Military History Symposium (U.S.)), Washington, D.C.: United States Air Force Academy, Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1990), 9.

163 John W. Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men: Russia's General Staff and the Fate of the Empire, 1898-1914* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

imperial army.¹⁶⁴ He also alienated older officers as he expanded exercises and tried to move summer maneuvers away from being large reviews for the emperor, and the reforms lost political capital. Though the Russo-Japanese War provided some motivation to revisit the reforms, John Steinberg argues that conservative elements within the army—including the new tsar—thwarted major reform efforts.¹⁶⁵

The implementation of Miliutin's reforms seems to have been affected by finances and demands on the military, though not to a large degree. Miliutin regularly complained about not having enough money and about what he described as the Minister of Finance's indifference to military requirements.¹⁶⁶ While the military budget did, in fact, grow steadily during the time period, that money did not necessarily reach all parts of the organization.¹⁶⁷ For example, training was often episodic, in part because soldiers frequently left their units to earn money to buy the necessities that the Ministry did not provide.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, planned reductions in the force may have been more rapid if the armed forces had not been engaged in other operations, such as putting down the January Uprising in Poland.¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, on the whole, Miliutin's reform program seems to have been a success.

The successful implementation of reforms, however, did not translate into clear success on the battlefield.¹⁷⁰ The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 presented the first major test of the new system, and particularly of mobilization.¹⁷¹ In October 1876—the month that Russia issued an ultimatum to the Ottoman Empire—the Russian military conducted its first conscription lottery, conscripting over 95 percent of its goal.¹⁷² The mobilization system

164 Mark L. von Hagen, "Autocracy Defeats Military Reform on Eve of First World War," *Russian History* 38, no. 1 (January 2011): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633111X549669>.

165 Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men: Russia's General Staff and the Fate of the Empire, 1898-1914*.

Sanborn argues that the direct evidence for this is weak. For this and other critiques, see: Joshua Sanborn, "All the Tsar's Men: Russia's General Staff and the Fate of Empire, 1898-1914. By John W. Steinberg. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Xvii, 383 Pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Figures. Tables. \$60.00, Hard Bound," *Slavic Review* 70, no. 2 (2011): 462–63, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.70.2.0462>.

166 Rarely will a political actor claim that their organization is receiving adequate funding.

167 Bushnell, "Miliutin and the Balkan War: Military Reform vs. Military Performance," 146.

168 Bushnell, 154.

169 Bushnell, 147.

It is notable that the rebellion in Poland was in part spurred by renewed conscription policies.

170 For more on the various factors that contribute to battlefield effectiveness, see: Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley, eds., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

171 Bushnell, "Miliutin and the Balkan War: Military Reform vs. Military Performance."

172 Robert F. Baumann, "Universal Service Reform: Conception to Implementation, 1873-1883," in *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution*, ed. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning (Washington, D.C.; Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17–18.

delivered fairly well, but it could not make up for other core deficiencies, including poor command.¹⁷³ In his diaries, Miliutin admitted that the commanders appeared to be incompetent, but he did not seem to acknowledge this as a failure of the reform program.¹⁷⁴ His hands in some sense were tied: the command appointments were decided by the tsar, only occasionally seeking Miliutin's advice and, although Miliutin did make changes to the admissions standards for the General Staff Academy, few of those officers were in high command by 1877.¹⁷⁵ The Russian army, moreover, although perhaps better administrated, still fought in a very similar manner, with an emphasis on the bayonet and rigid formations instead of on fires and dispersion.¹⁷⁶

Under Miliutin's tenure, the political leadership's focus on reform was high and sustained, with high levels of resourcing. While Miliutin complained about not having enough resources, the budget increased over time and did not seem to significantly limit his implementation efforts. Thus, Miliutin's reforms could be categorized as being in the "high and sustained and high resource" category of the framework described in Chapter 3, predicting high ambition and high implementation, which was true of the Miliutin reform era. When the political leadership changed and became less interested in military reform, the more conservative elements of the defense leadership stymied further reform efforts, corresponding with the framework's prediction that low political leadership focus will lead to situations in which reform ambition and success is highly determinant on defense leadership.

The Lost 1990s

A century later, the collapse of the Soviet Union left the new Russian military in disarray as it faced the withdrawal and reorganization of former Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, an appalling state of equipment, and widespread resignation among servicemembers.¹⁷⁷ The challenges facing Russian military leadership were difficult: the military Russia inherited was built for a much larger state, and as military districts formerly under Soviet responsibility became independent states, the military had to decide what to do with forces associated with those districts. Furthermore, the war in Afghanistan had ravaged the

173 Bushnell, "Miliutin and the Balkan War: Military Reform vs. Military Performance."

174 As cited in Bushnell, 145.

175 Bushnell, "Miliutin and the Balkan War: Military Reform vs. Military Performance."

176 Bushnell, 152–53.

177 For an overview of the context and reforms of the 1990s, see: Anne C. Aldis and Roger N. McDermott, eds., *Russian Military Reform, 1992–2002* (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003); Marcel de Haas, "Russia's Military Reforms: Victory after Twenty Years of Failure?," Clingendael Paper (The Hague, Netherlands: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, November 2011).

reputation of the Soviet military and exposed perceived limits of Soviet military strength.¹⁷⁸ A new military demonstrating serious problems under new political conditions should have provided motivation for reform, with an extensive list of key elements that needed attention. Issues to contend with ranged from the size and composition of the force, the budget, doctrine, and organizational and command structure to civilian-military relations, procurement practices, and the living and working conditions of personnel. Despite the need for reform, however, true transformation never took place.¹⁷⁹

The Russian military leadership did succeed in enacting some changes to the military during the 1990s, but these paled in comparison to the true transformation expected and advocated for.¹⁸⁰ For example, the size of the Russian armed

MINISTERS OF DEFENSE 1992-2001

March–May 1992	Boris Yeltsin (acting)
May 1992–June 1996	Pavel Grachev
June–July 1996	Mikhail Kolesnikov (acting)
July 1996–May 1997	Igor Rodionov
May 1997–March 2001	Igor Sergeev

forces was significantly reduced during the 1990s and early 2000s, with the force in 2006 roughly half of what it was in 1992.¹⁸¹ The military also adopted new doctrine, though it was somewhat incoherent, seeking to balance an approach focused on smaller regional threats with one focused on NATO. Igor Sergeev, Minister of Defense from 1997-2001, managed some reorganization and restructuring. However, one of his major accomplishments—abolishing the ground forces headquarters—was later reversed. These changes, in other words, fell drastically short of transforming the Russian military.

The lack of reforms was not caused by a dearth of ideas about how to reform the military or from a lack of recognition that reform was necessary. There was plenty to discuss—from the size and force model of the military to its threat orientation and cost—and there was certainly interest. Boris Yeltsin himself critiqued Mikhail Gorbachev for failing to reform

178 For more on the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, see: Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1999); Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lester W Grau and Michael A. Gress, eds., *The Soviet Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost: The Russian General Staff* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), http://archive.org/details/The_Soviet-Afghan_War_How_a_Superpower_Fought_and_Lost.

179 For a piece that analyzes different periods within the 1990s, see: Pavel K. Baev, “The Trajectory of the Russian Military: Downsizing, Degeneration, and Defeat,” in *The Russian Military: Power and Policy*, ed. Steven E. Miller and Dmitri Trenin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

180 For an overview, see: Douglas Barrie and James Hackett, eds., *Russia's Military Modernisation*, An IISS Strategic Dossier (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020), 13–21.

Whisler argues that the 1990s, particularly the last years of the decade, set the stage for peacetime formations and permanent readiness units. Gregory Whisler, “Carving a Peacetime Force from a Mobilization Military: The Overlooked Pillar of Post-Soviet Russian Defense Reforms,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 34, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 357–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2021.1995133>.

181 Baev, “The Trajectory of the Russian Military: Downsizing, Degeneration, and Defeat”; Barany, “The Politics of Russia's Elusive Defense Reform,” 605.

the military, and in 1992 his Minister of Defense, Pavel Grachev, announced a three-stage reform plan that never fully materialized. Grachev repeatedly pronounced that the military reform was on track, though Russian performance in Chechnya would suggest otherwise.¹⁸²

The First Chechen War—and a new presidential election—reinvigorated conversation about reform.¹⁸³ The conversation, however, never took off. For example, in February 1996, after a meeting of the Russian Security Council, it was announced that Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin had ten days to put forward a plan for military reform. When one journalist called the Ministry of Defense about the plans, the staff he spoke to told him that “Grachev had gone to ex-Yugoslavia, his first deputy Andrei Kokoshin had a cold, and if Chernomyrdin was charged with reforming the army in ten days, that was his problem.”¹⁸⁴ Unsurprisingly, plans did not emerge after ten days. Instead, Yeltsin fired his minister of defense, announced he would create a new commission on military reform, and signed a decree to abolish conscription by 2000.¹⁸⁵ During his second term, Yeltsin established two commissions on military reform, though neither amounted to significant change.¹⁸⁶ As one Russian military officer put it, “We have been doing nothing but talking about the reform of the armed forces and making some incomprehensible attempts in this direction.”¹⁸⁷ Yeltsin appeared to be making relatively empty statements about reform to appease public interest while doing little seriously inside the bureaucracy to ensure that reform in fact occurred.

There are three main arguments commonly used to explain the lack of reform during the 1990s.¹⁸⁸ The first focuses on the lack of available resources.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, the Russian military—and the Russian state as a whole—faced a tight budget environment. The ministers of defense during this period were not shy to point out what they saw as the tension between the budget and expectations. Defense Minister Igor Rodionov was fired in 1997 after he and

182 Mark Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, Illustrated edition (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014).

183 In 1995, there were rumors of a new military reform plan, and indeed a group of experts in the president's administration was preparing a proposal. There were arrangements to hold a conference under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister to confirm the reforms, but the conference never took place and the head of the group was shortly thereafter sacked. Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russian Military Reform: Ten Years of Failure” (Russian Defense Policy Towards the Year 2000, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School: Federation of American Scientists, 1997), <https://nuke.fas.org/guide/russia/agency/Felg.htm>.

184 Felgenhauer.

185 Yeltsin signed the decree to abolish conscription by 2000 just one month before the presidential election. Igor Rodionov, who would become Yeltsin's Minister of Defense in the summer of 1996, told one journalist that the act was “dangerous and irresponsible electioneering rhetoric.” Felgenhauer.

186 For a summary, see: Sergey Rogov, *The Evolution of Military Reform in Russia, 2001*, ed. H.H. Gaffney and Dmitry Gorenburg (Alexandria, VA: The CNA Corporation, 2002), https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/do004857.a1.pdf.

187 Quoted in Barany, “The Politics of Russia's Elusive Defense Reform,” 30.

188 Of course, in reality, the reasons are multifold.

Pallin provides a good summary of the arguments: Pallin, *Russian Military Reform*.

189 For example, Rogov focuses on resources in his examination of Russian military reforms in the 1990s: Rogov, *The Evolution of Military Reform in Russia, 2001*.

Yuri Baturin, the head of the Defense Council, publicly went head-to-head about whether or not the military could reform without substantial additional funding.¹⁹⁰ Rodionov's successor, Igor Sergeyev, once said, "To draw up a budget like Mozambique but demand armed forces like the United States is not entirely logical."¹⁹¹ However, while resource availability is in many ways the easiest answer, a small budget does not explain the military's inability to optimize what it did have nor address the fact that the military's existing budget and orientation with the defense industry was unsustainable.¹⁹²

The second argument considers the role of military officers in resisting change. For example, while Grachev was minister, the General Staff was accused of "quietly sabotaging" his plans to develop a Mobile Force, a small, elite force that could be rapidly deployed anywhere within Russia.¹⁹³ There was also disagreement about the direction of Russian armed forces and their subsequent composition. For example, in the late 1990s, reform efforts were brought to a halt by an antagonistic (and at times public) clash between Sergeyev and Chief of the General Staff Anatoly Kvashnin about the balance between nuclear and conventional forces.¹⁹⁴ When Yeltsin dismissed Rodionov, he put the blame for lack of change squarely on the military staff, saying, "The generals are today the main obstacle to army reforms."¹⁹⁵

The third argument focuses on civil-military relations and, in particular, a lack of civilian intervention.¹⁹⁶ This argument presumes that the conservative Russian military needed civilian intervention to push reform—but the intervention never materialized.¹⁹⁷ Yeltsin, early in his presidency, recognized he would need the support of the military. However,

190 Betz and Volkov, "A New Day for the Russian Army? Reforming the Armed Forces under Yeltsin and Putin," 46–47.

191 Quoted in Kipp, "Russian Military Reform: Status and Prospects (Views of a Western Military Historian)."

Betz and Volkov describe the state of the economy as the "downfall" of Sergeyev's reforms. Betz and Volkov, "A New Day for the Russian Army? Reforming the Armed Forces under Yeltsin and Putin," 56.

192 Baev, "The Trajectory of the Russian Military: Downsizing, Degeneration, and Defeat"; Golts and Putnam, "State Militarism and Its Legacies," 133–34; Peter J. Sutcliffe and Chris Hill, "An Economic Analysis of Russian Military Reform Proposals: Ambition and Reality," in *Russian Military Reform, 1992–2002*, ed. Anne Aldis and Roger N. McDermott (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003).

193 Felgenhauer, "Russian Military Reform: Ten Years of Failure."

194 For an overview of reform efforts around the turn of the century, see: Rogov, *The Evolution of Military Reform in Russia, 2001*.

195 Quoted in Golts and Putnam, "State Militarism and Its Legacies," 137.

196 Aldis and McDermott, *Russian Military Reform, 1992–2002*; Barany, "The Politics of Russia's Elusive Defense Reform."

Golts and Putnam argue that the public and elite leaders did not put more pressure on the Russian military to reform due to a legacy of state militarism. Interestingly, Golts and Putnam also identify brief interruptions to a culture of militarism, usually related to crises: 1860–1880, 1905–1914, 1925–1935, and 1991–2004. The periods correlate with significant reform discussions, which suggests that perhaps reform conversations are more possibly during times in which the military is less powerful. Golts and Putnam, "State Militarism and Its Legacies," 124.

197 Baev, "The Trajectory of the Russian Military: Downsizing, Degeneration, and Defeat." See also: Shamiev, "Civil–Military Relations and Russia's Post-Soviet Military Culture."

This argument has elements of Posen's argument about the need for civilian intervention to push the military towards innovation. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*.

after 1993 when the military shelled the White House on Yeltsin’s orders during the standoff between parliament and the president, Yeltsin seemed to direct little leadership toward the military, instead giving them a “carte blanche” for designing and executing reforms.¹⁹⁸

A more holistic approach to understanding the failure of military reforms in the 1990s lies in combining the three arguments. The 1990s was a period of low resources, and the political leadership’s focus on reform was marked by several instances of high but brief political leadership focus. According to the framework developed in Chapter 3, in periods marked by low resources and high but brief political leadership focus, reform programs are likely to have high levels of ambition but poor implementation. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, the Russian military and political community’s conversation about military reform was marked by lofty goals with little meat to them. The framework also points to the importance of the defense leadership during these periods, arguing that motivated defense leadership could have delivered progress. During the 1990s, the defense leadership lacked agreement on the path forward for the Russian military and featured several prominent disagreements about strategy.

One could also argue that the 1990s was a period of low resources and low political leadership. Whether this is the case is a question of time and scale. The framework described in Chapter 3 offers ideal types, so reality may exist between categories. If one takes a view of the 1990s overall, one could argue that Yeltsin’s focus was never high, depending on how one reads his public statements and actions regarding military reform. Still, the framework provides utility. In cases of low resources and low focus, the framework predicts low ambition and low implementation but recognizes that motivated defense leadership could play a role. The difference between the two predictions is in the level of ambition, and it can be debated whether the level of ambition in the 1990s was high or low depending on how concrete one expects the plans to be. The level of ambition could be considered high if one considers the types of issues the reformers were grappling with and the aspirations that they sought, but low if one considers that the plans were not ever truly agreed upon or specified.

Regardless, the framework introduced in Chapter 3 offers an explanation for the lack of reforms of the 1990s by combining the level of resources with the political leadership’s focus on reform and by recognizing the role that a motivated defense leadership could have played.

The New Look Reforms

The reform program that began in 2008, collectively known as the “Serdyukov Reforms” or the “New Look Reforms,” represented the largest announced reform program of the Russian Armed Forces since the Miliutin reforms.¹⁹⁹ This program was marked by high ambition and mixed implementation, with notable shifts when the defense leadership changed in 2012.

198 Baev, “The Plight of the Russian Military,” 135.

199 For one discussion of the reforms, see: Renz, *Russia’s Military Revival*.

Putin entered office in 1999 with an interest in military reform, though his initial efforts at reforms floundered.²⁰⁰ In some sense, it appears that Putin, still consolidating his power, was being careful not to upset the power ministries.²⁰¹ He did not yet have “his guy” in the Ministry of Defense, and it is difficult to imagine him forcing generals who had supported his re-invasion of Chechnya to implement any reform they opposed. Instead, he focused on bringing the security organs under his control.²⁰² As Pavel Baev concludes, “Putin’s record of reshuffling rather than restructuring the military’s top echelon during his first term suggests a preference for neutralizing potential political challenges rather than preparing to defend Russia’s interests against the emerging security challenges.”²⁰³ Once he consolidated power and as Putin’s foreign policy outlook became more aggressive, however, he became more serious about and invested in military reform.²⁰⁴

Plans for a major reform program began in the mid-2000s under the Ministry leadership of Sergei Ivanov, but it was not until 2008 and under a new Defense Minister that the program really gained traction.²⁰⁵ In 2007, Putin replaced Ivanov and appointed Anatoly Serdyukov Minister of Defense, giving him the task of fighting corruption and inefficiency.²⁰⁶ Serdyukov, who had previously led the tax ministry, was introduced by Putin as someone with experience in auditing who could deal with “rational spending of the budget’s money.”²⁰⁷ He was seen as an outsider with a “hardnose approach” who could rein in MoD spending and oversee any subsequent increases in the defense budget.²⁰⁸ At first, many within the armed forces were skeptical of Serdyukov, giving him the nickname *bukhalter*,

200 For one review of this time period, see: de Haas, “Russia’s Military Reforms: Victory after Twenty Years of Failure?,” 11–17.

201 For example, see Barany about Putin courting military leadership: Barany, *Democratic Breakdown and the Decline of the Russian Military*.

For a contemporaneous piece, see: Peter Reddaway, “Will Putin Be Able to Consolidate Power?,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2001): 23–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2001.10641493>.

On Putin’s consolidation of power overall, see, for example: Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin’s Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2016).

202 de Haas, “Russia’s Military Reforms: Victory after Twenty Years of Failure?,” 11.

203 Baev, “The Trajectory of the Russian Military: Downsizing, Degeneration, and Defeat,” 62.

204 Tor Bukkvoll, “Military Innovation Under Authoritarian Government – the Case of Russian Special Operations Forces,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (July 29, 2015): 602–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1056342>.

205 For a summary of reforms during the early 2000s, see: Barrie and Hackett, *Russia’s Military Modernisation*, 22–23.

206 While the reforms are known as the Serdyukov reforms, it is worth noting the role that his Chief of the General Staff, Nikolai Makarov, played. He appeared dedicated to reform and, in his memoirs, seems to identify with Miliutin. There is some debate about how active of a role he took in the reforms, however, with some analysts describing him as taking a more passive role and being acquiescent to Serdyukov’s efforts rather than proactively supportive. See: Persson, “In the Service of Russia”; Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics within the Russian Military*, 6.

207 As cited in: Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics within the Russian Military*, 3.

208 Charles K. Bartles, “Defense Reforms of Russian Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 28, 2011): 80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2011.549038>. See also: Anton Lavrov, “Anatolii Serdyukov: Five Years at the Helm,” *Moscow Defense Brief*, February 29, 2012, 24–25.

describing someone whose job is just to shuffle papers.²⁰⁹ Serdyukov faced “open opposition and covert resistance” immediately.²¹⁰ For example, the Chief of the General Staff at the time, Yuri Baluyevsky, so strongly disagreed with Serdyukov that he allegedly submitted his resignation multiple times before Putin accepted it.²¹¹

The 2008 war in Georgia, however, convinced several generals of the need for change.²¹² While the Russian military did achieve its principal objectives in the five-day war, the fighting also demonstrated several weaknesses and inefficiencies in the Russian military.²¹³ For example, the Russian Armed Forces struggled with effective command and control and had difficulty conducting joint operations, particularly between the air and ground forces. The Russian military was also unable to suppress Georgian air defenses, and the air force suffered from both Georgian hits as well as friendly fire. Several Russian casualties were caused by accidents rather than hostile action.²¹⁴

Shortly after the war, in the fall of 2008, the Russian government announced a sweeping reform of the Russian Armed Forces.²¹⁵ Serdyukov called for a major restructuring of the Armed Forces, outlining plans to move the Russian military away from the old Soviet model based on mass, to professionalize the armed forces, to replace the division with the brigade as the basic building block for the ground forces, to streamline command and control, and to make the army sleeker and more efficient. Five priorities were announced:

- improving the organization and structure of the Armed Forces;
- procuring and modernizing equipment;

209 Dale R. Herspring, “Is Military Reform in Russia for ‘Real’? Yes, But...,” in *The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow: Essays in Memory of Mary Fitzgerald*, ed. Stephen J. Blank and Richard Weitz (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, 2010), 157, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA525166>.

210 Mark Galeotti, “Reform of the Russian Military and Security Apparatus: An Investigator’s Perspective,” in *Can Russia Reform? Economic, Political, and Military Perspectives*, ed. Stephen J. Blank (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, 2012), 162, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA561500>.

211 Dale Herspring, “Anatoly Serdyukov and the Russian Military,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 60, no. 6 (November 1, 2013): 45, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216600604>; Dale R. Herspring and Roger N. McDermott, “Serdyukov Promotes Systemic Russian Military Reform,” *Orbis* 54, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 284–301, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2010.01.004>; Oleg Shchedrov, “Russia Military Denies Top Brass Revolt over Cuts,” *Reuters*, March 26, 2008.

212 Galeotti, “Reform of the Russian Military and Security Apparatus: An Investigator’s Perspective,” 62.

213 See, for example: Tor Bukkvoll, “Russia’s Military Performance in Georgia,” *Military Review* 89, no. 6 (December 2009); Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011); Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, “Russia’s War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no. 2 (June 2009): 400–424, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310902975539>; Ruslan Pukhov, ed., *The Tanks of August* (Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), 2010), <http://www.cast.ru/eng/?id=386>.

214 Pukhov, *The Tanks of August*, 131.

215 Dmitry Solovyov and Christian Lowe, “Russian Army Shaken by Post-Georgia Reform Plan,” *Reuters*, October 17, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-military-idUSTRE49G1Z920081017>. For one early summary of the goals of the 2008 program, see: Ruslan Pukhov, “Serdyukov’s Plan for Russian Military Reform,” *Moscow Defense Brief*, no. 4 (December 31, 2008): 21–24.

- revising the military training programs;
- reforming professional military education programs for officers and NCOs;
- and improving the social status of military personnel, “humanizing” military service.²¹⁶

In short, Serdyukov’s plans called for a new era in the Russian Armed Forces, building a modern, combat-ready force.

As one of his first measures as Minister of Defense, Serdyukov sought to streamline personnel policy.²¹⁷ He aimed to reduce the size of the forces from 1.35 million to 1 million, rebalance the officer-enlisted ration, increase the number of contract servicemembers, raise the prestige of military service, establish an NCO corps, and improve the quality of education and training. Perhaps his most controversial policy was halving the number of officers, a decision that made him unpopular among several officer populations and that bubbled into the public domain after the Ministry failed to prepare to give the now-retired officers promised housing.²¹⁸

He also sought to tackle corruption, with mixed results. In 2008, one estimate held that one-third of government spending on the armed forces was lost to corruption.²¹⁹ Serdyukov hit the ground running, seemingly setting the tone in his first year to emphasize tackling the endemic problems of corruption.²²⁰ In addition to arresting individuals charged with corruption, Serdyukov restructured the auditing process and sought to keep uniformed soldiers out of procurement process.²²¹ Although it is difficult to measure progress on eliminating corruption, it is clear that corruption by the end of Serdyukov’s tenure had by no means

216 Nikolai Makarov, “Итоги строительства вооруженных сил российской федерации в 2009 году [Results of Construction of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in 2009],” *Rossiiskoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 1, 2010.

217 Tackling personnel policy first could be seen as a smart tactical move by Serdyukov, since personnel-related reforms—including in manpower recruitment, education, and retention—could take years to play out. Herspring, “Is Military Reform in Russia for ‘Real’? Yes, But...,” 181; Gustav Gressel, “Russia’s Quiet Military Revolution and What It Means for Europe,” Policy Brief (European Council on Foreign Relations, October 12, 2015), https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/russias_quiet_military_revolution_and_what_it_means_for_europe.

218 See, for example: Makarenko, “Проблемы Реформирования [The Problems of Reforms]”; Philip Pan, “A Quick March to Homelessness or Shoddy Housing for Russian Military Careerists,” *The Irish Times*, June 1, 2009, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/a-quick-march-to-homelessness-or-shoddy-housing-for-russian-military-careerists-1.774479>.

One Russian author after the fact provided a blistering review of Serdyukov’s handling of the officer reduction: “It is important to remember that many officers were hastily and recklessly purged by the Ministry of Defense, and they clearly exceeded the original plan. ... Behind every dismiss was the fate of a person, a family, and kids.” Falichev, “Перемены Вместо ‘Реформ’ [Changes Instead of ‘Reform’].”

219 Steven Eke, “Russia Military ‘Deeply Corrupt,’” *BBC News*, July 3, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7488133.stm>.

220 Ruslan Pukhov, “Serdyukov Cleans Up the Arbat,” *Moscow Defense Brief*, March 31, 2008.

221 For a brief summary of anti-corruption efforts, see Herspring, “Anatoly Serdyukov and the Russian Military,” 46–47.

disappeared. In 2011, reports claimed that one-fifth of Russia's defense spending was lost to corruption.²²²

Serdyukov's reforms with the greatest implementation success rate seemed to be structural and top-down.²²³ For example, he successfully oversaw the reduction of the number of military districts, the creation of Joint Strategic Commands (OSKs), and the replacement of the four-tier command system (military district, army, division, company) with a three-tier system (military district, operations command, brigade). Serdyukov was able to increase the pay for servicemembers and initiated a major modernization program.²²⁴

Support from both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev bolstered Serdyukov's ability to act. From the beginning, both leaders stood behind the new minister and his reform efforts.²²⁵ Serdyukov continued to face opposition within the ministry and from interest groups, but he was able to overcome much of that opposition thanks to support from the political leadership.²²⁶ As Mark Galeotti has written, the reforms "represented a dramatic reorientation of Russia's military structures and thinking and could only have been done with the full support of both Vladimir Putin and Medvedev."²²⁷ Serdyukov was, in part through the creation of a Personnel Inspectorate, able to quietly remove older officers who opposed his efforts from service and to bring in personnel more favorable to his program.²²⁸

Serdyukov also benefited from an increased budget. After recovery from the 1998 economic crash and with the beginning of Putin's tenure, the Russian defense budget grew substantially. While in constant price rubles, the defense budget struggled to return to pre-1998 levels for a decade, according to the Ministry of Finance, by 2008 the defense budget surpassed the 1997 level and continued to grow throughout Serdyukov's tenure.²²⁹ By other measures, too, the purchasing power of the Ministry of Defense grew throughout

222 Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia Says a Fifth of Defense Budget Stolen," *Reuters*, May 24, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-defence-idUSTRE74N1YX20110524>.

223 For one overview of the 2008 reform efforts, see: Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*.

224 Herspring provides a measured review of Serdyukov's accomplishments: Herspring, "Anatoly Serdyukov and the Russian Military."

225 Clover, "Moscow Marches on with Military Reform."

226 Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform in the Aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War," 364.

227 Galeotti, "Reform of the Russian Military and Security Apparatus: An Investigator's Perspective," 62–63.

228 Bartles, "Defense Reforms of Russian Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov," 61–62, 80; Pukhov, "Serdyukov Cleans Up the Arbat"; "War at the Ministry," *The Economist*, July 18, 2008, <https://www.economist.com/news/2008/07/18/war-at-the-ministry>.

229 Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, and Brian Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities* (RAND Corporation, 2019), 5–6, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2573.html.

Serdyukov's tenure and beyond.²³⁰ The increases took place despite the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, demonstrating the importance placed on the reforms. IISS estimated that between 2008 and 2013, Russian defense spending rose 31 percent.²³¹ Serdyukov was also promised continued high levels of funding, with, for example, the State Armament Plan for 2011-2020 pledging 19.4 trillion rubles (roughly 685 billion 2011 USD) over the ten-year period.²³²

In 2012, however, the reforms were interrupted as Serdyukov was removed from office, ostensibly for his involvement in a corruption scandal.²³³ Cheating on his wife—the daughter of a former Prime Minister and Putin ally who seems to have been a driving force in Serdyukov's career—did not help.²³⁴ However, he also faced increasing disapproval. One common critique of Serdyukov is that he did not keep the officers informed and did not allow the officers to feel that their voices were heard, doing what Putin wanted but, in the process, creating resentment and confusion from military members who were used to having a larger voice.²³⁵ Having made the most difficult and painful of reform decisions, perhaps his time had run out and the forces against him were too strong.²³⁶ Alternatively, perhaps Putin recognized that the reforms were unpopular and needed a scapegoat.

Serdyukov was replaced by Sergei Shoigu, a popular figure who had served as minister for emergency situations for more than 20 years. Shoigu continued several aspects of the New Look reform programs, at least until the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The replacement of Serdyukov led many to suggest that Shoigu would end the reform program, though in reality Shoigu and the new Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, preserved many of

230 Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly, "Why Russian Military Expenditure Is Much Higher Than Commonly Understood (As Is China's)," *War on the Rocks*, December 16, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/why-russian-military-expenditure-is-much-higher-than-commonly-understood-as-is-chinas/>.

For a comparison of sources on Russian defense expenditure, see, for example: Jim Nichol, "Russian Military Reform and Defense Policy" (Washington, D.C: Congressional Research Service, August 24, 2011), 30.

231 Peter Apps, "Russia Raises Military Clout with Reforms after Georgian War," *Reuters*, February 27, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-military-clout-idUKBREA1Q1Z420140227>.

232 Nichol, "Russian Military Reform and Defense Policy," 31.

233 Will Englund, "Putin Fires Russian Defense Chief Tied to Corruption Scandal," *Washington Post*, November 6, 2012.

234 Andrew E. Kramer, "Putin Ousts Defense Chief, Longtime Ally," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/07/world/europe/putin-dismisses-russian-defense-minister.html>; Masha Lipman, "Putin's Circle: Corruption, Connections, and Adultery?," *The New Yorker*, November 24, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/putins-circle-corruption-connections-and-adultery>.

235 Herspring, "Anatoly Serdyukov and the Russian Military," 54.

236 Igor Sutyagin, "Crime and Punishment: Why Was the Russian Defence Minister Sacked?," RUSI, December 12, 2012, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/crime-and-punishment-why-was-russian-defence-minister-sacked>.

the Serdyukov objectives.²³⁷ For example, equipment modernization objectives were largely retained, and the military leadership continued to emphasize increasing the number of contract soldiers. Serdyukov’s emphasis on high readiness also continued.²³⁸

That being said, Shoigu did make his own mark on the New Look program, changing some of Serdyukov’s reform objectives and adding others.²³⁹ Shoigu reversed or revised many efforts, including by transitioning Serdyukov’s brigade-based structure in favor of divisions and bringing back some mid- and senior-level officers. Shoigu also introduced a program of large-scale combat-readiness, or “snap,” exercises held at the military district or branch level and created the Aerospace Forces by combining the Air Force and the Space Forces. Overall, the focus of the reforms launched by Shoigu were more concretely aimed at a potential conflict with NATO rather than regional wars.

Notably, the tenor of discussion seemed to change with the new Minister of Defense and the new Chief of the General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov. Shoigu, according to several accounts, had a better understanding than Serdyukov that the structural and personnel-related reforms were unpopular and made “superficial changes” to quell dissent.²⁴⁰ He made a point to signal that he was an insider and an ally of the military, contrasting himself with Serdyukov’s outsider status, by making symbolic gestures to signal his adherence to culture, including by wearing the uniform of an army general and by renewing the military’s participation in Victory Day parades.²⁴¹ Whereas dissonant voices and more open conversation had been encouraged at a higher level during Serdyukov’s tenure, the space for discussion began to close again under Shoigu and Gerasimov.²⁴²

Throughout the New Look reforms, the Russian military’s resourcing was high, and the political leadership’s focus on reform was high and sustained. The framework established in Chapter 3 predicts that under these conditions, ambition levels and implementation should

237 See, for example: Roger McDermott, “Shoigu Kicks Serdyukov Reform into Long Grass,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 10, no. 96 (May 21, 2013), <https://jamestown.org/program/shoigu-kicks-serdyukov-reform-into-long-grass/>. For one rebuttal, see: Dmitry Gorenburg, “Is Shoigu Reversing Serdyukov’s Military Reform?,” *Russian Military Reform* (blog), February 11, 2013, <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2013/02/11/is-shoigu-reversing-serdyukovs-military-reform/>; Dmitry Gorenburg, “The Russian Military under Sergei Shoigu: Will the Reform Continue?,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo (Washington, DC: PONARS Eurasia, June 2013).

238 Barrie and Hackett, *Russia’s Military Modernisation*, 27.

239 For a thorough summary, see: Barrie and Hackett, *Russia’s Military Modernisation*. One particular overview occurs on pages 32–36.

240 Pavel Baev, *Ukraine: A Test for Russian Military Reforms* (IFRI, 2015), 7, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifri_rnr_19_pavel_baev_russian_military_reform_eng_may_2015_0.pdf.

241 Baev, 7; Margarete Klein and Kristian Pester, “Russia’s Armed Forces on Modernisation Course: Progress and Perspectives of Military Reform” (Berlin: Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, January 2014), 2, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/39125>; Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics within the Russian Military*.

242 Barrie and Hackett, *Russia’s Military Modernisation*, 28.

be high. Indeed, the reforms were sweeping in their ambitions, and implementation—though not perfect—was relatively high.

Even with fairly successful implementation, the New Look reforms also speak to the difficulty of implementing reforms and to patterns in Russian behavior towards reforms. While the reform efforts were the most successful and wide-ranging since the Miliutin reforms, several goals of the program either had mixed results or failed. For example, the reforms may have contributed to reductions in levels of corruption, but they certainly did not eliminate it. The officer-enlisted ratio remained unbalanced, and Shoigu and Gerasimov reduced Serdyukov's efforts to streamline military educational institutions. While there was some success in increasing the number of contract service members, the original objectives were not met.

The New Look reforms that succeeded were largely structural and driven from the top-down. However, goals that required cultural change were largely stymied. Furthermore, even several structural changes appear to have been shoddily planned, and the goals and objectives of the reform program changed over time.²⁴³ The New Look reforms, in other words, while ambitious and relatively successful, failed to completely break through the barriers to reform identified in Chapter 2.

Conclusions

In addition to supporting the findings of Chapter 2 in describing Russian reform tendencies, each of these three cases demonstrates the utility of the framework proposed in Chapter 3. Although the level of resourcing is often used as a measurement of likely reform implementation success, it does not offer enough explanatory power to fully predict the ambition and implementation of any reform program. It may be tempting to conclude that, since resources were high in both the Miliutin period and the Serdyukov period, the level of resourcing would explain success, but the level of resourcing provides little information about the level of ambition and may neglect scenarios in which the military may have large levels of resources but chooses not to significantly reform the institution. For example, defense expenditure increased markedly after 2012.²⁴⁴ Yet, the ambition of the reforms did not dramatically increase.

243 McDermott, "The Brain of the Russian Army."

244 For example, in 2012, the defense budget expanded by 16 percent over the previous year. Jonas Grätz, "Russia's Military Reform: Progress and Hurdles" (CSS - ETH Zurich, April 2014), 2, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse152-EN.pdf>; Sam Perlo-Freeman, "Russian Military Expenditure, Reform and Restructuring," in *SIPRI Yearbook 2013: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2013).

On the 2012-2020 reform period, see: Kalev Stoicescu, "Defence Minister Shoigu Sells Russia's Military 'Success Story,'" International Centre for Defence and Security (Tallin, Estonia), October 4, 2019, <https://icds.ee/en/defence-minister-shoigu-sells-russias-military-success-story/>.

By introducing the variable of political leadership focus, the framework offers greater nuance for analysts to use in predicting Russian reform programs. In particular, it recognizes that leadership interest varies over time and by leader. For example, Yeltsin appeared to show fleeting interest in reforms, but never in a sustained manner. The case studies also show that political focus can help overcome bureaucratic hurdles and give reformers legitimacy, as demonstrated by both the Miliutin and the New Look cases.

The framework, importantly, also acknowledges the role that the defense leadership plays in reform programs. For example, while Serdyukov was able to overcome several hurdles due to the support he received from Putin and Medvedev, his leadership style and lack of planning ability seemed to hinder policy implementation.²⁴⁵ Miliutin entered office with clear objectives, while his predecessor failed to provide reform direction. On the other hand, the cases also demonstrate the way that defense leadership can shape the character of reforms. While Shoigu continued many aspects of the Serdyukov reforms, he also put his own spin on the reform efforts. On the other hand, the defense leadership during the 1990s could not, or did not, seek to overcome barriers to implementing a major reform program.

The cases also suggest that poor performance may work as a clear motivator for change. The Miliutin reforms were spurred largely by the defeat in the Crimean War, and though the 2008 reforms had origins in earlier discussions, the war in Georgia helped bring generals on board. On the other hand, during the 1990s, there was disagreement about whether the Soviet military needed to change its orientation.

These cases furthermore underline the point that successful implementation of reform programs—even large-scale reform programs—does not guarantee improved battlefield performance.²⁴⁶ There are several reasons why this might be the case. First, the leadership could pursue the wrong kind of reforms by focusing on developing capabilities for a type of war that does not emerge. If the military prepares for a conflict that does not emerge, then any changes it makes towards that conflict may not be useful in the war that actually occurs. For example, there is little evidence that the Russian military’s training was modified to prepare for tasks that they would face in a Ukraine contingency.²⁴⁷ Second, implementation could be done so that it is successful on paper but fails to truly accomplish stated goals. By 2020, Shoigu claimed that 70 percent of Russian equipment was new or modernized.²⁴⁸ However, there was an unequal distribution of “modern” equipment across the branches, and the definition of “modern” was unclear.²⁴⁹ Third, reform programs could accomplish

245 McDermott, “The Brain of the Russian Army.”

246 Brooks and Stanley, *Creating Military Power*.

247 Dara Massicot, “What Russia Got Wrong,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 2 (April 2023).

248 For one analysis, see: Anna Maria Dyner, “Assessment of the Russian Armed Forces’ State Armament Programme in 2011-2020” (Warsaw, Poland: Polish Institute of International Affairs, June 2021), <https://pism.pl/publikacje/assessment-of-the-russian-armed-forces-state-armament-programme-in-2011-2020>.

249 Barrie and Hackett, *Russia’s Military Modernisation*, 33.

the more easily changed aspects of the military organization while failing to address more difficult aspects. For instance, poor command proved a major weakness during the Russo-Turkish War, but Miliutin had limited ability to replace officers.

Indeed, many of the successful reform efforts from both the Miliutin reforms and the New Look reforms appear to have been structural or administrative in nature, such as the creation of new military districts, the establishment of new bodies within the organization, or the adjustment of the bases for military formations. These reforms' impacts on the battlefield, however, were limited. Meanwhile, attempts to change the culture of the military have frequently floundered. In other words, although the Russian military has been able to change, its reform efforts are often limited by its own organizational dynamics. Even if the Russian military does succeed in reform programs, it is likely to do so with particular tendencies towards top-down, structural change.

CHAPTER 5

Implications and Conclusion

In January 2023, Ukrainian officials warned that the Kremlin would seek major military reforms in the future. However, Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Ukrainian General Staff also said that war losses, sanctions, and structural weaknesses in the Russian military had reduced Russia's force generation capabilities and should raise doubts about whether Russia can implement reforms.²⁵⁰ The question of how the Russian military reforms is not just a hypothetical question—it is of real and immediate importance.

This report has highlighted that the Russian military is an organization that can implement major reform programs, but it is most successful at pursuing major reform programs only under narrow circumstances. Even when it does succeed, its efforts to reform bear the mark of organizational characteristics of the Russian military. The bottom line for policymakers and analysts is that, while it may be unlikely, the Russian military can reform—even if the process is not ideal.

The five key organizational characteristics of the Russian military—as a powerful institution reporting directly to the president and with hierarchical and centralized decision-making, skewed and siloed information flows, an emphasis on theorization, and widespread corruption—affect every step of the reform process and the primary factors that support an ideal reform process. Although some of the characteristics' implications—such as the speed with which decision-making can occur and the country's history of deep intellectual thought about military problems—could support Russian reform efforts, there are also several barriers to ideal reform, including inaccurate information, a rigid decision-making structure that discourages creativity and accountability at lower levels, and widespread corruption.

However, this does not mean that the Russian military cannot successfully reform. High levels of resources, as well as high, sustained focus from the political leadership provides the

250 Riley Bailey et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 12, 2023" (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, January 12 2023).

easiest context for successful reform programs. In the absence of these conditions, the military leadership is likely to play an important role in both the ambition and success of any reform programs.

What the Future Holds

Given its performance in Ukraine, and the revelation of Russian military inefficiency that has brought, the Russian military may seek to transform itself into a more efficient fighting force. This report has suggested that the Russian military, if it chooses to undergo a transformative reform program, will likely seek top-down, structural changes. But how ambitious might that program be, and how likely is it to succeed? The framework provided in Chapter 3 suggests that identifying the level of resources and the intensity and duration of political leadership focus will provide an understanding into the likely shape of any major reform program. Several questions thus emerge as important.

First, given the importance of resources, **what will the budget look like?** Major economic projections foresee a decline in the Russian economy.²⁵¹ Sanctions and exports control will continue to take a toll on the Russian economy, though Russia is likely to seek ways to mitigate these effects, as it has already been doing.²⁵² Regardless, the Russian economy is likely to be contracted for the foreseeable future. Thus, it is tempting to predict that resources available to the Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces will be low. It is indeed probable that resourcing will be limited—however, it is important to note that it may not be as low as many analysts predict: the Russian government and its Soviet predecessor have a history of continuing to spend money on defense even when the economy more broadly is struggling.²⁵³ Furthermore, while the Russian defense industry does have limitations, the Russian military can procure equipment domestically in rubles and from state companies, reducing the need for foreign purchases.²⁵⁴ Therefore, while resources to the military are likely to be low, the level may not be directly correlated with the trajectory of the overall Russian economy, particularly when measured in U.S. dollars.

Second, **what will the political leadership’s focus look like?** While we cannot exactly predict the interests of Russia’s political leadership, we can imagine several scenarios. First, if the war in Ukraine ends in ‘victory’ for Russia (or at least if the Kremlin is able to spin Ukraine into a victory story domestically, regardless of battlefield outcome), there may be little pressure

251 “Russian Federation and the IMF,” International Monetary Fund, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/RUS>.

252 Julian E. Barnes, Eric Schmitt, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Russia Overcomes Sanctions to Expand Missile Production, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/13/us/politics/russia-sanctions-missile-production.html>; Bergmann et al., *Out of Stock?*

253 Richard Connolly, “Myth 7: ‘Russian Military Spending Is Unsustainable,’” in *Myths and Misconceptions around Russian Military Intent*, by Keir Giles et al. (London, United Kingdom: Chatham House, 2022), 7, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/myths-and-misconceptions-around-russian-military-intent/myth-7-russian-military-spending>.

254 Kofman and Connolly, “Why Russian Military Expenditure Is Much Higher Than Commonly Understood (As Is China’s).”

from the president to reform. Meaningful and public reform efforts could be seen as admitting weakness and contradictory to any narrative that Putin has returned military might to Russia. If the war becomes a stalemate, we may see a similar scenario, with low focus on reform from political leadership as they seek to distract the domestic populace and turn the domestic policy conversation back to issues closer to home. In that way, the Kremlin might seek a scapegoat, change military leadership, and then consider the case closed. If the war ends in clear defeat for Russia, we are likely to see high but brief interest. In this scenario, the president might seek to reassure the domestic populace that he is working on the problem, but then quickly try to move the conversation onto more positive policy programs. On the other hand, particularly if military renewal becomes central to Putin's legacy, then he might have high and sustained interest and potentially risk intervening too heavily, dictating which changes should be made (perhaps contrary to the opinions of military expertise) or otherwise hindering progress by slowing or confusing decision-making.

If the Putin regime were to fall and a new leader were to come to power, several scenarios could emerge. Any new leader could bring their own visions for the military, provide impetus for cultural change, or perhaps empower reforms that had previously been on the sidelines. Especially if the new leader adopts a narrative that Putin failed the military and that the Armed Forces require major improvement, the leader could put high focus on military reform. Alternatively, the leader may decide not to champion major reform efforts. Given the instability that is likely to follow any power transition, gaining the support of military leadership and the officer corps could be key. The Russian officer corps, broadly, is conservative, and seeking to redirect the Russian military could be unpopular among them. The August Coup that sought and failed to overthrow Gorbachev could be seen here as a cautionary tale. The new leader may take a lesson from Gorbachev that policy changes can be risky and that it is best to keep the military and intelligence apparatus on their good side.

Third, **what will the defense leadership look like?** It is possible that Shoigu and Gerasimov could survive the war in Ukraine. However, particularly if the war in Ukraine does not end in victory for Russia, it seems more likely that the Kremlin will elect to replace both men with new faces. Given the important role that the defense leadership will play in any reform efforts, the intelligence community should pay close attention to the personalities that are gaining voice during the war in Ukraine.

One potential implication of the war in Ukraine is the possibility for greater infighting as servicemembers seek to understand the causes of the war and the Russian military performance during the war in Ukraine. The lessons that the Russian military draws from the war and that will inform the future shape of the armed forces will depend in large part on the dominant post-war narrative that develops. There is also a chance that the military may seek to reassert its independence. The Russian military has traditionally had a significant amount of autonomy, even as it remains intricately tied to the president. By public accounts, Putin has taken an increasingly heavy hand in military operations during the war in Ukraine. It is possible that the Russian military may try to push back against this micromanaging.

Finally, it is worth asking: **will the Russian military seek a major reform effort?** A transformative reform program is difficult to undertake during wartime because resources are focused on immediate issues and officers tend to have shorter time horizons dictated by the tempo of war.²⁵⁵ As the war tempers into a stalemate or ends, it would seem reasonable for the Russian defense establishment to undertake a significant review of its processes, organization, policies, doctrine, training, and materiel. After all, while the outcome of the war in Ukraine is yet to be seen, the Russian military has demonstrated several areas of inefficiency and potential weakness. After the war, the Russian military may also diagnose a new strategic context, seeking to pursue its interests with fewer resources in the face of a changed Europe.

However, it would be unwise to assume that the Russians will indeed seek a major reform program. The incentives for reform may not be in place. For example, while a changing international situation or a demonstration of weaknesses could lead to reforms, the leadership could rationalize the poor performance of Ukraine. Admitting that previous attempts at reforming had been insufficient (or, in other words, admitted that you failed) is difficult, both on a personal psychological level and, particularly in a rigid, unforgiving hierarchical environment like Moscow, on a professional level, where the consequences could be grave.²⁵⁶ The military could argue that, had they planned the war and fought it according to doctrine, the armed forces would have performed differently. Furthermore, Putin and the military leadership could, instead of blaming the Russian military, place the blame on the United States and its NATO allies for supporting Ukraine. Finally, the military leadership could also claim that this is not the type of war that the military was built for. The political leadership may also want to move on from the war as quickly as possible, trying to shift the conversation beyond the military. The political context and the sensitivity of military performance could, furthermore, discourage reforms. If Russia perceives itself as having won the war, there could also be little incentive for reform.

255 War conditions could, alternatively, give military leadership particular leverage to change the military and adapt. However, it is unlikely that major bureaucratic change would be the focus, given bandwidth issues.

256 Andriy Zagorodnyuk, a former Ukraine defense minister, has written about fear of retribution within the Russian military during the war in Ukraine: “With the hunt now underway for guilty parties, nobody will want to take responsibility for decisions that could lead to further defeats. Instead, officers at every level will seek to act as loyal cogs in the system while forcing those higher up the chain of command to issue orders.” Andriy Zagorodnyuk, “Ukrainian Victory Shatters Russia’s Reputation as a Military Superpower,” *Atlantic Council* (blog), September 13, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukrainian-victory-shatters-russias-reputation-as-a-military-superpower/>.

TABLE 4: REVISITING THE FRAMEWORK OF RUSSIAN MILITARY REFORM

		Political Leadership's Focus on Reform		
		<i>High and Sustained</i>	<i>High but Brief</i>	<i>Low</i>
Level of Resources	<i>High</i>	Prediction: High ambition, high implementation	Prediction: High ambition, implementation dependent on defense leadership	Prediction: Highly determinant on defense leadership
	<i>Low</i>	Prediction: High ambition, but budget restraints force prioritization or incomplete implementation	Prediction: High ambition, but poor implementation, though motivated defense leadership be able to deliver progress with limitations	Prediction: Likely low ambition and low implementation, though motivated defense leadership may be able to make small changes

Revisiting the framework developed in Chapter 3, it seems that the most likely scenario in the short- to medium-term future is high but brief leadership focus with low resources. It may be likely that Putin will want to reassure the domestic public that he is taking Russian military's performance issues seriously, but then may seek to turn away from that conversation quickly. In this case, analysts should pay particular attention to early announcements, given that any programs announced early may take priority. These programs are also likely to be the first to draw from the budget, leaving less room for other objectives. A lack of resources, leading to the impediment of reform progress, may reinforce reliance on nuclear signaling for deterrence purposes. Given the likely scenario facing the Russian military, the defense leadership will likely play an outsized role in determining the implementation and character of any Russian reform programs, though even if they seek reforms, they are likely to be limited by existing Russian reform tendencies. Finally, if the General Staff believes that the military needs to be reformed following its performance in Ukraine, but Putin shows little interest in providing the support and resources necessary to do so, they may grow frustrated with Putin's fleeting focus. This does not necessarily suggest a coup, but the military may try to do something to get his attention.

Implications for the United States and its Allies

Given the enduring qualities of the organizational characteristics of the Russian defense establishment, it seems likely that, if Russia does pursue a major reform program in the short- to medium-term, it will rely on structural, top-down changes and those that are largely solved by inflows of money. Broader reforms that require bottom-up or cultural changes will be harder for Russia to achieve. However, if the level of resources is high and the political leadership's focus on military reforms is high and sustained, they have the best chance of succeeding.

These tendencies will be hard to change: the organizational characteristics identified in this report are long-standing facets of the Russian system. However, that does not mean that they *cannot* change.

The Russian defense establishment could try to change its organizational characteristics to develop more effective and efficient reform processes. While it is difficult to change enduring

organizational characteristics, there are several aspects which the Russian political and military leadership could try to affect. The United States and its allies would be wise to pay particular attention to the political leadership's focus on reform, as well as the military leadership's interest in reform and managerial styles. A focus on cultural changes instead of structural changes would be a strong indicator that Russia is seeking to fundamentally alter its forces, particularly if it works to change the way that the five bureaucratic characteristics identified in Chapter 2—a powerful institution reporting directly to the president and with hierarchical and centralized decision-making, skewed and siloed information flows, an emphasis on theorization, and widespread corruption—impact reform processes. Specific signs that Russia is trying to change how it reforms could include: changes in management processes; the creation of a culture more acceptant of failure and with greater emphasis on accurate information; greater legislative and public oversight; a greater number of voices in idea generation, selection, and evaluation; and targeting corruption at all levels. One specific reform would be to improve the officer corps' education and to establish incentives to focus on innovation.²⁵⁷ Another indicator of true change would be adopting and following through on reforms that cost serious political capital, suggesting that the interest in reforms is real and not simply convenient.²⁵⁸

Although cultural changes are most impactful, they are also likely the most difficult and unlikely to occur, especially during peacetime. More likely, if the Russian military sought to improve its reform ability, the Russian defense establishment could seek to change management processes, focusing on the structure of the organization instead of on cultural aspects. For example, the Ministry of Defense could reform the way in which information flows between departments or create new groups to think about reform. The MoD could do this in such a way to open information flows, but they could equally as well decide to *tighten* information flows to streamline reform processes. In other words, there is no guarantee of progress to move closer to an ideal reform process. That being said, wartime experiences can accelerate cultural change if the military adapts in order to better perform on the battlefield.²⁵⁹ Indeed, the Russian military has proven capable of adapting during the war in Ukraine, though it is unclear if this has reached a cultural level of change.²⁶⁰ The substantial numbers of casualties, especially in the officer class, could also give rise to new officers with new ideas.

257 Andrew Hill, "Military Innovation and Military Culture," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 45, no. 1 (March 1, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2809>; Murray, "Innovation."

258 This is a similar dynamic to Keohane's distinction between cooperation and harmony. Cooperation requires each actor to endure costs and change behavior for the sake of cooperation, whereas harmony is a cost-free alignment of goals. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 51–52.

259 Hunzeker, *Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front*.

260 On Russian tactical adaptations during the war, see: Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, "Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine," Special Report (London, England: RUSI, May 19, 2023).

While it is possible that the Russian military may try to pursue transformational cultural change, it is more likely that, if the Russian leadership recognizes and wishes to fix the weaknesses demonstrated in Ukraine, any reform program will likely focus on top-down, structural ways to mitigate the problems. However, in truth, this will be unlikely to truly solve the issues, as many of the weaknesses demonstrated by Russia in Ukraine seem to be cultural and/or require changes in practices from the bottom up. Harbingers of failure to implement reforms include announcements of lofty and unspecific goals, scaling down the scope of, or backtracking on, objectives, and shifting or unfocused political interest.

Thus, it seems that it will be difficult for the Russian military to undertake truly transformational reforms. The Russian military is, of course, likely to rebuild—but there is a difference between rebuilding and transforming: namely, transforming is a lot more difficult than rebuilding.

What would happen if the Russian political and military leadership recognizes that reform failure is likely, but still wants to change the Russian military? One answer could be to try to replace leadership, purging the military of those who hold onto previous beliefs. However, if the new leadership proves inexperienced, any purged knowledge and ideas may reemerge as the military searches for answers, as occurred in the mid-20th century when Mikhail Tukhachevsky's ideas about "deep battle" (*glubokiu boi*)—which had fallen from favor after Tukhachevsky's execution—reemerged during the Winter War and World War II.²⁶¹ Another answer could be that the Russian leadership may try to completely shift strategies and tools. For example, Khrushchev advocated for a shift away from conventional capabilities towards nuclear reliance.

In this vein, we may see the Russian military and the political leadership rely more heavily on tools that they believe are a powerful deterrent against U.S. aggression. After all, Russian interests are unlikely to substantially change. If the Russian military feels that it cannot conduct any aggressive operations and that it cannot rely on conventional military strength

261 David M. Glantz, "Toward Deep Battle: The Soviet Conduct of Operational Maneuver," in *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History: Proceedings of the Twelfth Military History Symposium, United States Air Force Academy 1-3 October 1986*, ed. Carl W. Reddel (Military History Symposium (U.S.), Washington, D.C: United States Air Force Academy, Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1990); Peter J. Vlakancic, "Marshal Tukhachevsky and the 'Deep Battle': An Analysis of Operational Level Soviet Tank and Mechanized Doctrine, 1935-1945," *The Land Warfare Papers* (Arlington, VA: Association of the United States Army, November 1992); Peter Whitewood, "Subversion in the Red Army and the Military Purge of 1937-1938," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 1 (2015): 102-22.

For more on Tukhachevsky, see: Sally Stoecker, *Forging Stalin's Army: Marshal Tukhachevsky And The Politics Of Military Innovation* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 1999).

to deter perceived adversarial aggression, it may seek non-conventional tactics to achieve its goals.²⁶²

Relying on non-conventional tactics could take several forms. For example, there may be more frequent threats (implicit or explicit) of nuclear use, particularly below the strategic level. This could include modernization programs, rumored or actual deployment of warheads and missiles in more or different locations, announced changes in policy, and saber-rattling, all meant to signal to the United States and others that the risk of Russian nuclear use should be taken seriously. The Russian government may also rely more heavily on information operations and other asymmetric options, including below-threshold behavior meant to intimidate adversaries, to sow chaos, or to weaken coalitions.

Finally, in the absence of being able to truly reform the military itself, the Russian military may decide to put resources towards the development and testing of what it perceives as weapons that the United States sees as sensitive, even if they are not particularly useful in combat. For example, Russia is likely to increase its development and testing of anti-satellite weapons (ASAT) and hypersonic weapons. Of course, these capabilities in and of themselves do not win wars, but if the Russian government believes that the United States is fearful of them, they may put increased emphasis on demonstrating these capabilities—even if they are not yet fully developed. The United States and its allies, thus, should expect grandiose language and demonstrations out of Russia. However, analysts should be careful to assess capabilities for what they are—not what they appear to be in staged tests, exercises, press releases, speeches, and parades. Russian investment in these high-visibility capabilities, paradoxically, absorbs resources that could be put into reform programs.

If the Russian military and political leadership recognizes the difficulty of reform, they may seek truly transformative innovation in doctrine, method, or capabilities. Here, the United States and its allies should pay close attention to any discussions of innovations in military doctrine and strategy within the Russian military community. As with other reforms, however, the implementation of any innovations and their implications would be key.

Recommendations

This report has highlighted the importance of resources, political leadership focus, and military leadership in affecting the ambition and successful implementation of Russian military

262 Other analysts have also asserted that Russia's non-conventional capabilities, and in particular its nuclear capabilities, are likely to remain a threat and may be used more frequently following the war in Ukraine. See, for example: Dmitry Adamsky, "Russia's New Nuclear Normal," *Foreign Affairs*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/russias-new-nuclear-normal>; Lisa Aronsson, John R. Deni, and Hanna Notte, *Agile and Adaptable: U.S. and NATO Approaches to Russia's Short-Term Military Potential* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/agile-and-adaptable-us-and-nato-approaches-russias-short-term-military-potential>; Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Kofman, "Russia's Dangerous Decline," *Foreign Affairs*, December 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russia-dangerous-decline>; Kofman et al., *Assessing Russian State Capacity to Develop and Deploy Advanced Military Technology*.

reform programs. Of these factors, the United States and its allies has the greatest ability to affect the resources—to a degree. The United States and its partners and allies should continue to use sanctions, export controls, and other financial measures to impact the overall size of the economy and make it more difficult for Russia to acquire the inputs needed to produce military equipment.²⁶³ However, even if the Russian economy is constrained, Moscow could continue to put money into defense. Thus, relying on these economic tools should not be seen as sufficient if the United States seeks to limit Russia’s ability to rebuild its military.

One additional tool at the West’s disposal is its ability to shape the Russian leadership’s focus. If a goal is to decrease the changes of reform implementation, one method is to reduce the political leadership’s ability to focus on military reforms. The United States and its allies could impose costs on the leadership by increasing the range of problems with which they have to contend. For example, increased and diversified military exercises, signaling of new capabilities, public statements, and other activities could serve to overwhelm or shape political leadership focus. Such activities should be carefully calibrated with considerations of escalation risk.

For the intelligence community (IC) and analysts, this report develops a framework to begin to assess possible Russian reform programs “left of boom.” In particular, given the importance of military leadership in several outlined scenarios, analysts can begin to generate an understanding of from where ideas and managerial styles are likely to emerge. Wartime experiences shape the leadership styles and ideas of military leaders. The next generation of Russian military leadership, thus, is likely to come out of the battlefield and command centers of the current war. With what aspects of Russian military performance are rising leaders frustrated? Have they developed different command behaviors than their predecessors? Who are they learning from? Which officers are being rewarded, and which voices are being silenced? Operational failures can give rise to new subcultures as individuals seek to improve performance.²⁶⁴ Are we seeing any officers offer new ideas, and are they gaining traction?

It is also possible that military leaders will be chosen from outside the defense community, but as we saw with Serdyukov, the perceived legitimacy of a leader from the outside is not guaranteed.²⁶⁵ Thus, analysts should also be looking at voices from outside the military (for example, military bloggers, the intelligence services, or, perhaps, from private military companies (PMCs)) who are gaining respect from servicemembers. Tracking the rise of new

²⁶³ In the future, it may become possible to offer carrots, to include lifting sanctions, to the Russian political leadership to incentivize desirable changes. However, under the current political environment, it appears likely that any such efforts are infeasible.

²⁶⁴ Adamsky, “Russian Campaign in Syria,” 119.

²⁶⁵ Rosen writes, “Civilians are outsiders to the community; they can favor their military proteges, but cannot give them legitimacy within the military.” Stephen Peter Rosen, “New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation,” *International Security* 13, no. 1 (1988): 142, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538898>.

military leaders, as well as their approaches towards reform efforts, interest in personal gains, and managerial styles, allows analysts to identify likely reform approaches of the next class of Russian military leadership, allowing the United States and its allies to develop a better understanding of the likely trajectory of the Russian military.

If the Russians are unable to significantly reform, the United States and its allies can prepare for deterrence and defense against Russian aggression with a greater level of familiarity of how the Russian military is likely to operate. Given the damage that has been done to the Russian military, the United States and NATO are in a rare position to capitalize on a moment of Russian weakness to strengthen its own position, as well as the position of partners (to include Ukraine).

First, the United States, other NATO members, and partners should continue to develop ways to minimize the impact of aggression below the threshold of war, including through societal resilience, increasing messages about adversarial efforts, and developing countermeasures.²⁶⁶ Second, given a likely reliance on high-visibility weapons programs, policymakers should be diligent to not believe the hype of these weapons' development and possible impact on the battlefield. Third, given a possible increase in reliance on nuclear threats, the United States and NATO should review its approaches to escalation management, should ensure that its capabilities and plans are up to the task of extended deterrence, and should continuously adjust and improve the effective communication of deterrent messaging.²⁶⁷ Fourth, the United States and its allies and partners should aim to achieve economy of force by focusing on building capabilities and capacities that counter residual Russian conventional strengths, including capabilities to counter unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), armor, mines, and electronic warfare (EW).²⁶⁸ The Russian military, if it does not transform and remains dependent on lessons learned from the war in Ukraine, may

266 Elisabeth Braw, *The Defender's Dilemma: Identifying and Deterring Gray-Zone Aggression* (Washington, D.C: American Enterprise Institute, 2021); Christopher S. Chivvis, *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare": And What Can Be Done About It* (RAND Corporation, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7249/CT468>; Karlijn Jans, "NATO 2030: Hybrid Future, Hybrid Readiness?," in *NATO 2030: Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, ed. Jason Blessing et al. (Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 315–36, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/11/oa_edited_volume/chapter/3103406; Alexander Lanoszka, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January 2016): 175–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12509>; King Mallory, "New Challenges in Cross-Domain Deterrence" (RAND Corporation, April 12, 2018), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE259.html>; Michael Rühle and Clare Roberts, "Enlarging NATO's Toolbox to Counter Hybrid Threats," *NATO Review*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/03/19/enlarging-natos-toolbox-to-counter-hybrid-threats/index.html>.

267 Mary Chesnut, *US/NATO-Russian Strategic Stability and the War in Ukraine* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2023), <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/06/us-nato-russian-strategic-stability-in-ukraine>; Andrea Kendall-Taylor et al., *Assessing the Evolving Russian Nuclear Threat* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2023), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/assessing-the-evolving-russian-nuclear-threat>; Kofman et al., *Assessing Russian State Capacity to Develop and Deploy Advanced Military Technology*; Janice Gross Stein, "Escalation Management in Ukraine: 'Learning by Doing' in Response to the 'Threat That Leaves Something to Chance,'" *Texas National Security Review* 6, no. 3 (Summer 2023), <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/47414>; Gregory Weaver, "The Urgent Imperative to Maintain NATO's Nuclear Deterrence," *NATO Review*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2023/09/29/the-urgent-imperative-to-maintain-natos-nuclear-deterrence/index.html>.

268 Aronsson, Deni, and Notte, *Agile and Adaptable*.

also continue to emphasize mass. With this knowledge, NATO militaries should begin work now to develop counters to this approach to warfare. However, the United States should also exploit existing enduring weaknesses of the Russian military—including morale, joint operations, command and control (C2), and corruption—both during peacetime and, if necessary, wartime.

Understanding and developing a framework for assessing how militaries reform and change is vital. Future work could more rigorously test the political leadership focus/resource framework developed in Chapter 3. For example, other cases could be developed: among other cases, the building of the Red Army and reforms associated with Mikhail Frunze had lasting effects. Further research may also consider how unique these characteristics and the framework are to Russia. For example, given the high impact of the centralized decision-making structure and access to the autocratic leader, might this approach apply to other authoritarian regimes?

Revisiting Pokazukha Reforms

This report began by describing how one former head of Lithuanian military intelligence called the 2008 reforms “just *pokazukha*” (window-dressing).²⁶⁹ This report was motivated in part by a desire to understand *why* the Russian military, despite laying out several admirable goals, failed to truly transform. Certainly, Serdyukov had not set out to fail in his stated objectives. Why, then, did the efforts at transformation come to look like *pokazukha*?

Enduring vulnerabilities are structural weaknesses that are lasting and not easily changed. By understanding where the Russian military often fails to transform, we can better identify what enduring vulnerabilities exist within the Russian military. These include corruption, inaccurate information, centralized decision-making, and poor implementation.

The history of Russian military efforts at transformation, coupled with an examination of organizational characteristics of the Russian military and how they interact with the reform process, demonstrates that the Russian military has struggled, and likely will continue to struggle, to implement cultural changes to the Russian military. For example, efforts in the 2000s to create a strong non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps were met with strong resistance by a top-heavy structure with little room for initiative at the lower levels. Efforts to bring more social representation into the Imperial military were reversed after the original reformer, Miliutin, was forced out of office. Repeated efforts to reduce corruption have failed to take off.

It is not that the Russian military does not know that it has enduring weaknesses—it is that it is unwilling or unable to change them. Military leaders who seek transformation have to work with the military organization that they are given, and a combination of inaccurate

269 Schwirtz, Troianovski, Al-Hlou, Froliak, and Entous, “Putin’s War.”

information, the role of the political leader, a lack of accountability at lower levels, and the top-down nature of the organization suggests that they will be most likely to seek structural changes to the military. Furthermore, the Russian military is one that particularly struggles with reform implementation, driven by a combination of corruption, a lack of accountability, inflexibility, and a focus on theory. The Russian military leadership often recognizes that changes that touch on culture are necessary—but instead of seeking those changes, they are incentivized to seek structural changes that are likely to have mixed implementation. These structural changes, while flashy, may cover up the deeper weaknesses the reformers have not yet been able to impact.

This is not to say that the Russian military cannot be effective. The organizational characteristics of the Russian military described in Chapter 2 are enduring. However, the Russian military has also succeeded in wars—even if it did not perform optimally.

This is also not to say that the Russian military cannot change. Indeed, there are scenarios that could raise the likelihood of success—namely those in which there are high levels of resources and high intensity and sustained political leadership focus. There are, however, more scenarios that lower the likelihood of transformational success. Organizational characteristics that negatively impact the Russian reform process, such as the lack of external voices, are growing deeper under the Putin regime. In other words, the picture is grim.

The Russian military of today is not the Russian military of 2008, and the Russian military of tomorrow will not be exactly the same as the Russian military of today. However, history rhymes, and change is difficult. Though not impossible, given bureaucratic and organizational characteristics of the Russian military and its history, the Russian military will find it difficult to truly transform. The Russian military of the future, given the difficulties of reform, is likely to bear significant resemblance to the Russian military of today.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ASAT	Anti-Satellite Weapons
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
C2	Command and Control
EW	Electronic Warfare
GS	General Staff
IC	Intelligence Community
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MTR	Military-Technical Revolution
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NDS	National Defense Strategy
OSK	Joint Strategic Command (<i>Obyedinennyye Strategicheskoye Komandovanie</i>)
PMC	Private Military Company
RMA	Revolution in Military Affairs
UAS	Unmanned Aircraft Systems

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