P | I | P | S

Conscripts and Cathedrals

Taking Advantage of Russia's Intra-Military Elitism

PIPS White Paper 11.2: *Executive Summary*

Marie Murphy, Research Fellow
Graham Pfeiffer, Research Intern

Since assuming the presidency, Putin has reinstated the Tsarist and early Soviet practice of forming ethnically and religiously homogenous units and has revived the Russian Orthodox Church as the spiritual foundation of the Russian military. A stagnant economy also has deprived the military of the funds needed for modernization. Taken together, these trends will likely divide the Russian armed forces along ethno-religious lines.

Separating units based on ethnicity breeds tensions within the military and the emphasis on Orthodox Christianity isolates religious minorities and erodes their loyalty to the state. While budget cuts affect all levels of the armed forces, elite and specialized units comprised of ethnic Russians do not face cuts as severe as those faced by conscript-based conventional forces on the periphery of the country.

The division of Russia's military along ethno-religious lines poses new threats to and opens opportunities for the United States and its allies. Russia's professional elite in-group is highly motivated and better equipped. They pose a significant hybrid threat and are capable of limited high-intensity operations. At the same time, Russia's elite forces are comparatively small in number and needed for internal security. Moscow's non-elite, conscript-based out-group suffers from ethnic tension and poor training and equipment.

U.S. defense policy should capitalize on the growing divisions in the Russian military, recognizing the limitations of the military in-group, while encouraging dissent in the out-group.

Critical Trends in the Russian Military

Three factors contribute to the ethno-religious divide developing in the Russian military: (1) the formation of ethnically based operational units, (2) the announcement of the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces and accompanying Christian religious rhetoric from prominent government and military officials, and (3) budget limitations necessitating selective modernization.

- *Ethnically Based Military Units.* President Putin's policies increasingly segregate the military along religious and ethnic lines. The military recruits for its elite units based on

an individual's perceived "Russian-ness". This policy combined with allowing conscripts to serve near their homes and the growing size the non-Russian population will increasingly divide the military into an in-group of ethnic Russians serving in elites units and an out-group mixed or non-Russian composition serving in regular army, stationed along the Russia's periphery.

- *The Christianization of the Russian Military*. Prominent government and military officials increasingly emphasize the Christian-ness of the Russian state and military. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow sought a new ideology to guide and motivate the military. This search led to a revival of the Russian Orthodox Church as the "mantle of spiritual leadership of the Russian armed forces" and the recent building of Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces. The emphasis on Orthodox Christianity will increasingly disenfranchise non-Russian ethnic and non-Christian religious groups.

- *Selective Military Modernization.* Russia has the 4th largest defense budget in the world, but operational and manpower budget projections out to 2022 show a consistent decline from 2015 until 2020, when they are predicted to plateau. Lower defense spending has stalled military modernization and led Moscow to focus its defense spending on elite military units comprise of ethnic Russians, while providing minimal training, new equipment and living amenities to the regular army, which, given demographic trends, will increasingly be staffed with non-Russians.

Moscow's emphasis on Russian ethnicity, growing Christian religious rhetoric in the armed forces, and differential spending on elite units will increasingly divide the military along ethno-religious lines into an ethnic Russian elite in-group and an ethnically diverse out-group. The divide will become more pronounced in the future assuming current demographic projections hold and the Russian economy continues to stagnate.

Emerging In-Group: Strengths and Limitations

Russia's elite military units, staffed by contracted soldiers of primarily of Russian ethnicity, are motivated by Russian and religious nationalism and are better trained and equipped than the regular army. Largely stationed near Moscow and other major cities, Russia's military elite provides the Kremlin with internal security forces similar to those seen in coup-proofed regimes. In external affairs, Russia's elite units are capable of conducting hybrid and asymmetric warfare and limited, high-intensity combat operations.

Russia's elite in-group constitutes the most capable element of the Russian armed forces. However, their limited size, the need to keep forces available for internal security, and reduced military spending constrain the ability of these elite units to conduct long-term, large scale operations against a highly capable adversary, such as NATO.

Emerging Out-Group: Strengths and Limitations

Russia's military out-group is becoming increasingly diverse. It is largely comprised of conscripts, many of whom are ethnic minorities, who serve for one year. This group is poorly trained and equipped, stationed along the country's periphery with close ties to local communities. The out-group's strength lies in its size. These forces provide the first line of defense, guard the border regions of the state, and can be used overwhelm weaker opponents.

However, the out-group of conscripts and ethnic minorities found in the regular army pose a significant threat to internal security. The Kremlin is particularly concerned with the potential for inter-ethnic military conflicts in peripheral regions. It is also concerned with providing those who may have divided loyalties with military expertise. The out-group will likely face increasing ethnic unrest in the future, given the Kremlin's emphasis on ethnic Russian nationalism and the Russian Orthodox Church. In external security, the out-group is poorly trained and equipped, and suffers from high turn-over. This force would sustain significant losses against a highly capable adversary and is of limited utility in high-intensity combat.

Russian's Military Divide: An Opportunity for the United States

As the divide between the military in-group and out-group grows, the United States should recognize the limitations of Russia's conventional forces, while taking advantage of the disenfranchised out-group for intelligence collection and increasing internal pressure on the regime.

- *Russia's conventional limitations.* Moscow's elite troops are highly capable, but constrained by size, budget, and the dual mission of maintaining internal security. Russia's out-group, including units of mixed and of non-Russian ethnicity, will likely feel progressively marginalized in an increasingly Christian- and Russian-dominated military and state, and has older equipment and poor training. Its advantage in combat is in numbers, but little else.

  U.S. defense policy should capitalize on these limitations when planning for future combat. Washington should confront the Russian military with increasingly complex and varied threats to further limit the utility of Russia's military out-group. Simultaneously, policy should also recognize the capabilities and human and budgetary resources of the elite in-group. Given the likely need of the in-group to conduct rapid operations and mitigate internal security concerns, the United States should focus on military technologies and strategies that will slow down the speed of Russian operations and increase attrition.

- *Disaffected out-group as a source of intelligence and leverage.* Russia's increasingly disenfranchised and ill-trained military out-group provides the United States with a potentially valuable source of intelligence not only about military movements and operations, but also about the potential for internal conflict and the Kremlin's methods to suppress and deter it.

The out-group also is a potential target for U.S. information operations. The United States could stoke dissatisfaction in the out-group, capitalizing the poor treatment of conscripts and non-ethnic Russians. Doing so may force the Kremlin turn its attention inward to quell domestic military and social unrest and away from international operations.

Conclusion

U.S officials tend to view the Russian military as resurgent and focus on a select significant capabilities. They, however, pay little attention to the likelihood of a growing division within the Russian military. This division will increasingly limit the effectiveness of a large portion of the Russian military. It also will add to the stress on Russia's elite forces as they must increasingly divide their duties between external and internal security.

The United States should capitalize on the growing divide in the Russian military by presenting Russian troops with increasingly complex battlefield threats. The U.S. could use disenfranchised members of the military out-group as a source of intelligence and as a target for information operations.