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Dale Herspring, The Kremlin and the High Command. Presidential Impact on the Russian Military from Gorbachev to Putin

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- 1 In late 2008 Russian civil-military relations underwent a difficult period. Following the war in Georgia, the political leadership initiated new efforts to reform the military. Anatoly Serdiukov, the Russian Defense Minister, was appointed in 2007 by former president Vladimir Putin with a clear mandate to control military spending and eliminate many redundant senior officer posts. Concurrently, the new Russian president, Dmitri Medvedev, has affirmed his predecessor's position that the condition of the armed forces should be improved.
- 2 Given these circumstances it seems an appropriate time to look back and consider Dale R. Herspring's book, *The Kremlin and the High Command*, which scrutinizes the evolution of Russian civil-military relations with a particular focus on the "presidential impact on the Russian military from Gorbachev to Putin". During this period, when the military had to contend with "three very different types of presidents with their very different leadership styles" (p. 2), international and domestic events combined to undermine relations between the civilian and military leadership: the military reaction to "liberation movements" in the Soviet republics (see the analysis of the "Tbilisi syndrome" p. 50), the failed coup in 1991, the collapse of the USSR, the crackdown on the White House in 1993 followed by two wars in Chechnya; all occurring within the context of stringent budgetary conditions for the Russian armed forces were critical factors in this decline. Throughout this period the High Command was looking "to the political leadership for guidance but often found the country's political leaders ... confused about what should be done" (Preface, p. i). Such a "lack of presidential leadership" (p. 118) seriously and lastingly spoiled civil-military relations, certainly braking reform processes within the army.
- 3 Dale Herspring, in a very clear style and with a wealth of detailed information, provides an insightful analysis of Presidential-High Command interaction from Gorbachev (1985-1991) through Yeltsin (1991-1999) and Putin (2000-2005). President Mikhail Gorbachev's task was the most difficult. Aiming to reduce the burden of the military on the Soviet state, he was the first leader in decades to de-prioritize defense spending and to expose the closed military system to glasnost'. Both changes were no longer an issue under Yeltsin. However the Yeltsin era was certainly the most traumatic for the military. The dearth of funding was coupled with a strong sense of disillusionment in the military due to the realization that Boris Yeltsin's primary concern vis-à-vis the army was to keep it politically weak and outside politics – a determination which led him to, among other things, treat other civilian power structures better than those of the army.
- 4 Neither Gorbachev, nor Yeltsin were able to offer "the ideal world for Russian military officers: stability and predictability". Despite the fact that they ruled under very different circumstances, there were several points common to the way these two presidents dealt with the military. These common features did more to disenchant the High Command than financial pressures. Indeed, according to Herspring, the top military leaders were aware that in crisis circumstances, the money "had to be spent elsewhere" (p. 197). The most serious problem for them was that both Gorbachev and Yeltsin did not assume responsibility for the orders they gave the High Command – the former when he sent the troops to quell

disturbances in the constituent Soviet republics, the latter when he decided to start a war in Chechnya. These actions generated indignation within a military that had no tradition of or desire for domestic interventions. Further, in both cases the High Command expected that the new political leadership could be effective. In the late 1980s, “the generals initially believed [Gorbachev’s] policies would make a positive difference” (p. 195) in the sense that they would help to restore the political system. Herspring’s points out that the military was instrumental in making Yeltsin the major beneficiary of the August 1991 coup in the hope that he would restore the prestige of the army as well as public respect for it. Indeed, Yeltsin had “told them (the High Command) how much he respected them and appreciated their contribution to Russia’s defense”(p. 197).

5 Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin failed to fully exploit the “...tremendous opportunity to reshape the military...” (p. 8). Acting amidst a host of social and economic problems, they proved unable to fulfill the role of a “strong president... prepared to enforce order in the [*military*] system” (p. 1). The High Command did not regard Gorbachev or Yeltsin as sufficiently competent in military affairs. The generals did not recognize Gorbachev’s ability to engage in organizational matters, particularly as he relied heavily on civilian experts. The Yeltsin administration was viewed as similarly unprofessional and characterized by a lack of executive interest in seeking out the military men’s views on the management of army issues. The most prominent illustration of this behavior was the war in Chechnya, which many top officers opposed but whose advice the President ignored. Another characteristic of the period is that the two presidents did not fully attempt to break the traditional autonomy of the Russian army. This was not challenged under Gorbachev, if only because the president was not interested in personnel policy, organizational matters or military strategy. Herspring also underlines Yeltsin’s “lack of interest in things like the role of NCOs or his failure to force [*the military*] to come to grips with the end of the world mass armies” (p. 200). All these phenomena, combined with poor management, caused the army to fall into “organizational chaos” (p. 194) while giving the High Command many reasons to resist reforms on issues such as *dedovshchina*, NCOs, crime, corruption, threat assessment, etc. (see p. 119).

6 Then came the administration of Vladimir Putin. The High Command proved much less vocal in opposing military reforms under this president’s rule. This is paradoxical since Putin attacked the military’s traditional institutional autonomy, which the Gorbachev-Yeltsin era had left more or less intact. This is probably due to the fact that the majority of the military command appreciated that President Putin was attempting to repair the damage done to their institution under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Indeed the top brass had “been impressed by the way he (Putin) ran the second Chechen war while he was still Prime minister” (p. 200). Also, during his eight-year presidential rule, money returned to the defense sector. In addition, President Putin tried to restore the military’s prestige, which the relatively better operational performance of the army in the second Chechnya conflict helped him to achieve. In the context of this war, he proved to be “...a politician who did not shirk responsibility for what he ordered the military to do...” (p. 143) and would not use the army as a scapegoat. In other words, “...the important point from the generals’ standing point is that Putin dealt with the military in a serious fashion.” (p. 193). So, while Herspring’s book was completed well before the end of Putin’s second term, it was already clear that the new president would enjoy the relative support of the military because he was perceived to be able to “...reintroduce stability and predictability into the military” (p. 155) and to compensate at least partially for the “...loss of state structure which, to a certain degree had meant that the military had lost ‘its *raison d’être*’.” (p. 5).

7 This book, among other things, confirms that some Western observers’ apprehensions about a potential military coup in Russia, provoked by the High Command’s discontent

with the civilian authorities' policies, were inflated. After all, the period concerned in Herspring's essay was marked by painful systemic changes for the former Soviet army – the end of priority funding for defense, the end of the prestige of a military career and military service and the end of Russia's status as a superpower. The fact that even in such a difficult period, which not only profoundly undermined its standing and operational capabilities, but also brought the military into domestic conflicts, it largely retained its tradition of non-intervention in political matters shows how deeply entrenched these traditions were.

- 8 The author may devote too few pages to the Russian military's inherent conservatism and their tactics for shunning change and reform. However, it is true that by constantly exploiting the theme of perceived threats from the West, the first two post-Soviet presidents did little to change the military's world view and therefore its understanding of its missions. This well written book is certainly important and well documented, including Russian sources, an asset for anyone seeking clearer prospects on the status and ambiguities of civil-military relations in Russia at the beginning of President Medvedev's administration.

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