

## U.S.-Russian Military Relations: Between Friend and Foe

How much and what precisely has changed since September 11? How quickly can relationships evolve, and how meaningful are promises of collaboration likely to be? These questions are much in the minds of those watching U.S.-Russian relations. Has the United States (finally) entered the qualitatively new era of cooperation with Russia—particularly between both militaries—that has been sought since the end of the Cold War? If serious cooperation ensues, what will it look like? Leaders in both countries have compared the war on terrorism with the struggle against Nazism. Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, could terrorism be the enemy that makes Russia and the United States if not exactly friends, then at least effective allies? If so, the change will be dramatic indeed.

In the months prior to September 11, the U.S.-Russian relationship had become stuck somewhere between friend and foe. Aside from some sweet murmurings by each president to the other at their first meeting, a chill was still in the air two years after the use of force by NATO in Kosovo—to which the Russians had vociferously objected. Perhaps unsurprisingly, policy drifted, particularly contact between the two militaries. Just weeks before the September attack, some Pentagon staffers confessed that they had little clue about what the goal of the relationship was supposed to be.<sup>1</sup>

It has not always been this way. If a high level of cooperation is achieved between the U.S. and Russian militaries in the coming months, it will not be

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the first time since the end of the cold war. In the 1990s, these militaries frequently worked together productively, and they received well-deserved attention from senior leadership on both sides. Initial efforts in Bosnia and specific aspects of nuclear transparency and nonproliferation stand out, as do joint search-and-rescue operations in the Arctic and the U.S. Pacific Command's relationship with the Russian navy.<sup>2</sup>

## Could terrorism be the enemy that makes Russia and the U.S. effective allies?

The breakthroughs, however, have been maddeningly ephemeral. The close relationship that developed between U.S. secretary of defense William Perry and Russian defense minister Pavel Grachev seemed to evaporate when they discussed Russia's first bloody war in Chechnya.<sup>3</sup> The initial strengths of joint U.S.-Russian peacekeeping operations in Bosnia were unsustainable and failed to trans-

late into a collaborative approach when Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic spread death and violence to Kosovo. Who can forget that June day in 1999 when U.S. and Russian troops (the latter from the very same brigade in Bosnia working with U.S. soldiers) nearly came to blows at the Pristina airfield?<sup>4</sup>

The events of September 2001 should make the U.S.-Russian military relationship more important to both countries. When considering what U.S.-Russian military relations will be, however, it is worth recalling that the expectations of policymakers in the mid-1990s never quite matched the realities of the militaries' work together. Even with Russian president Vladimir Putin and U.S. president George W. Bush making the most reassuring pronouncements supporting joint efforts to combat terrorism, both militaries are likely to lag in their enthusiasm for the other side's proposals in the day-to-day grind, as they have in the very recent past. Before either side can expect close and efficient cooperation, several issues must be resolved, including reaching a common understanding of who is a terrorist and how to fight this enemy. It is a tall order; the United States and Russia will need to restructure their military relations at the same time that Washington restructures its foreign policy priorities.

### Before September 2001

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In the early to mid-1990s, on the U.S. side at least, a fairly clear and ambitious concept guided U.S. interactions with the Russian military—"preventive defense." The theoretical purpose of improved relations between the militaries had three goals: (1) transforming the two militaries from "former mortal en-

emies into partners”; (2) contributing to democratization inside Russia; and (3) cooperating on a range of issues likely to lead to future threats, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, as well as on joint tasks, such as peacekeeping operations.<sup>5</sup> Then-Secretary of Defense William Perry believed that the U.S. military relationship with Russia could be treated separately from the larger political one and that “there was the possibility that the military-to-military relationship would become truly meaningful and indeed [lead] in some sense ... the U.S.-Russian ... relationship,” helping both the United States and Russia to prevent crises.<sup>6</sup>

Instead, in the 1990s the U.S.-Russian military relationship became captive to broader U.S.-Russian relations. Whatever problems existed between the White House and the Kremlin, whatever “bad news” policy issues were being discussed—and there were always several from which to choose—they impeded or stalled military contacts. The enlargement of NATO and the war in Kosovo had an especially deleterious impact.

Beyond substantive disagreements, numerous constraints arose. By the end of the decade, the relationship had become an enormous drain for those officials and personnel who had worked on advancing it; they had put in long hours with little to show for their efforts. The trajectory of the relationship seemed tied to an almost random process by which interested people moved in and out of positions of leadership, in some cases making the relationship a priority, only to be replaced by leaders with greater ambivalence about pursuing what was a difficult task. Personalities might not have been enough to turn around the relationship during especially bad times, but even in the best of times, these leaders could make or break progress. In addition, during the last 10 years, the Russian military has remained an intensely insulated and isolationist institution, especially when compared with others in post-Soviet Russia. The Russian military retains large bureaucratic obstacles that impede even the most basic forms of contact with foreign militaries.

### **NATO ENLARGEMENT AND THE ‘KOSOVO EFFECT’**

The impact of certain policy decisions on the U.S.-Russian military relationship was particularly pronounced in the steps leading to the political decision to expand NATO in the mid-1990s. Initially, policymakers in Perry’s Pentagon had been able to contain the collateral damage with Russia. Perry himself had deeply feared the impact of NATO expansion and “almost threw [his] body down in front of the train to try and stop” the enlargement of the alliance.<sup>7</sup> Strains in the militaries’ relationship only multiplied over time, growing particularly apparent in the autumn of 1998, following the crash of the ruble and the rise of a more nationalist Russian prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov. By December 1998, with the United States’ Operation

“Desert Fox” underway in Iraq, the Russians protested by putting the relationship on hold for several weeks.

The real turning point, however, came a few months later in March 1999, when NATO began to use force in Kosovo in response to the humanitarian crisis that Milosevic’s police and military had wrought. This war, coming only three weeks after NATO’s actual enlargement, put the relationship in the freezer and set it back several years. To the overwhelming majority of Russians, NATO’s decision provided proof that the organization was an offensive, not a defensive, alliance that directly threatened Russia.

**Both militaries are likely to lag in their enthusiasm in the day-to-day grind.**

For the Russian military, the politics of developing close relations with its U.S. counterpart shifted starkly. Before the war in Kosovo, a few officers within the Russian military had pushed for close cooperation with the West. These men, however, never stayed in one military office long enough to influence Russian policy. After Kosovo, encouraging a cooperative approach became nearly untenable. According to a U.S. military official, all Russian military officers who had said that NATO would be used offensively saw “NATO used offensively against a state that had not attacked it in a non-U.N. sanctioned action.... [NATO’s Operation Allied Force] undercut the moderates in Russia.” If one group in Russia had been advocating working with the West and another group urging Russia to stall, “we passed the football to Group B in Kosovo.”<sup>8</sup> It took more than a year to reestablish any formal joint military programs. In the weeks before the September 11 attack, the “Kosovo effect” remained a significant negative influence on the U.S.-Russian military relationship.<sup>9</sup>

As the political leadership in Russia expressed—at first cautiously, then more enthusiastically—its willingness to cooperate on fighting terrorism, the military leadership lagged behind noticeably. Chief of the General Staff Anatoly Kvashnin busily argued that Russia would not participate in U.S. retaliatory actions. Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov refused to consider the possibility that troops from NATO members would be deployed in any state of the Commonwealth of Independent States, declaring that there were “absolutely no grounds, not even for hypothetical suggestions.”<sup>10</sup> Evidently, Group B was having trouble adjusting to the new political realities.

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### **‘RUSSIA FATIGUE’**

If the Russians experienced the Kosovo effect, “Russia fatigue” overwhelmed U.S. policymakers and personnel working on the military relationship. The

Americans had hoped that “contact at the operational level between our militaries [would] provide counter examples to the myth ... that has been sustained in Moscow that we are all bad news.”<sup>11</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the United States was trying to improve the Russian military’s perception of its U.S. equivalent. Many in the U.S. government tended to underestimate how difficult it would be and how much time would be required to change these perceptions. This miscalculation resulted in a dynamic where people “state the objective and the strategy; pursue it, all enthusiastically; and then get frustrated and get turned off and change 180 degrees.”<sup>12</sup>

Because of the difficulty in engaging the Russians since the spring of 1999, many on the U.S. side had become too exhausted to take advantage of opportunities when they did present themselves.<sup>13</sup> Reports of unhappy episodes, including one involving a Marine attaché who waited for hours at Moscow’s Sheremetevo Airport in the summer of 2001 for a delegation that never arrived (he was to accompany the delegation to the United States to participate in a program that had taken months to put together), disheartened everyone. No one from the delegation even bothered to call to say that the Russians would not be going to the United States. “Literally thousands of man-hours ... [were] wasted” trying to get programs up and running, complained another attaché in Moscow.<sup>14</sup> The view from Washington was no better. Staff at the Pentagon confessed, “We start questioning ourselves: why are we doing this?”<sup>15</sup> If officers in the Russian military were looking cautiously at their U.S. counterparts, plenty on the U.S. side were doing the same.

### **THE ROLE OF PERSONALITIES**

When the comprehensive study of U.S.-Russian post-Cold War relations is written, the role of personalities will feature prominently. In dozens of interviews, Perry’s impact as secretary of defense comes through as the “guiding light” behind attempts to reshape the U.S.-Russian military relationship in the mid-1990s. His relationship with his Russian counterparts was good, and it was (relatively) easy for each side to contact the other by phone because they had set up an approximation of a hot line.<sup>16</sup>

In cases where progress was made, energetic, enthusiastic, and entrepreneurial personalities were the key to success. For example, Gen. George Joulwan’s relationship with Gen. Leontiy Shevtsov was critical in getting Russian troops to serve with NATO troops in Bosnia. Gen. Eugene Habiger’s relationship with both Gen. Igor Sergeev and Gen. Vladimir Yakovlev proved necessary to increase cooperation and lessen misperceptions between the U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons complexes. Little in the collective past of any of these individuals suggested that they would be particularly good at, or interested in, advancing this relationship.

Yet one finds a remarkably similar approach on the part of both sides, one based on mutual respect among soldiers and an effort to pursue transparency in order to build trust. One only hopes that those professionals stewarding military relations in the years to come have the same commitment to advancing the relationship.

Lessons learned from the failure to institutionalize the successes in Bosnia and with nuclear weapons also point to the role of personalities. The actions and decisions of the U.S. and Russian policymakers and their senior military successors illustrate how fragile, if not fleeting, the advances actually had been. With plenty of blame to go around, neither Russian nor U.S. military or civilian leaders have rewarded those individuals who advanced this relationship; they also have not punished those who impeded it. In the case of the Russian military, the disincentives for getting close to the West have only increased over time.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Practicalities of Cooperation**

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Beyond individual influence, the U.S.-Russian relationship has suffered from structural problems, including a “funnel system” that the Russians insist on maintaining, whereby nearly any and all contact with active-duty military personnel must go through one office and one person in the Russian Ministry of Defense. The gatekeeper’s intention is to restrict, not encourage, contact. Prior to the September attack on the United States, the contact procedure had been described as the equivalent of trying to get past a strict parent in order to pick up your date. Sometimes you did not make it through; sometimes your date did not even know you were trying to get in; and sometimes, alas, your date had no interest in you. All three scenarios happened over and over again to U.S. representatives who pursued a relationship with the Russian military.

If the United States and Russia hope to achieve more sustainable and serious military cooperation, the funnel system on the Russian side must be eliminated. Greater transparency, such as allowing Russian military officers access to the Internet or creating an e-mail list for joint projects with their U.S. counterparts, would substantially cut through the bureaucratic tape and would help develop better relations between U.S. and Russian officers. If either side places a priority on this relationship, each needs to develop organizational ways to reward those who work hard at advancing relations. Why is the development of a positive relationship with Russia not considered an important component of what the commander in chief of Strategic Command or the supreme commander of Allied Forces Europe does? Multiple sources suggest that, at present, the idea plays no role in the U.S.

military's thinking about good candidates for these jobs. If the U.S. military is not geared to give priority to this relationship—given that the impetus to work on the relationship has consistently come from the United States—no one should be surprised that the Russian military does not reward its own.

### **CLEANING UP PEACEKEEPING**

In the months or years to come, one can suppose that the United States and Russia, along with other members of the international community, will engage in additional peacekeeping efforts, perhaps even in Afghanistan. Before this happens, though, ongoing U.S.-Russian joint peacekeeping needs a renewed commitment and focus. One place to start would be in Bosnia, where the United States has particular leverage because its military serves shoulder-to-shoulder with Russian troops there.

Although considered the most successful example of U.S.-Russian military cooperation, these joint peacekeeping operations in Bosnia have encountered substantial problems with corruption. Human rights groups, the International Organization of Migration, and United Nations (UN) officials have detailed information that the trafficking of women into Bosnia (and Kosovo) increased dramatically following the deployment of the peacekeepers.<sup>18</sup> Former U.S. peacekeepers deployed with the Russian troops in Bosnia describe encountering Ukrainian and Russian college-educated women who had thought they were applying for secretarial jobs in Hungary only to end up as hostages, without passports, “servicing” soldiers in the military district called Multi-National Division North, which is under U.S. military authority. Russian soldiers frequented brothels there, sometimes bringing along U.S. troops who were on patrol with them.<sup>19</sup>

At least some U.S. and NATO senior officials have known for some time that the Russians have engaged in the trafficking of women. Officials do not deny that trafficking has occurred, but they shrug their shoulders over what to do about it. “Boys will be boys,” suggested one high-ranking military commander. Another, when told about these women, not only did nothing but also urged one soldier not to repeat the story. This type of response is not restricted to NATO or to the experience in Bosnia. When asked about the possibility of pursuing a protocol for soldiers who had sexual encounters with these captive women, the lead UN-appointed authority in Kosovo explicitly insisted to a U.S. official that he considered it a “right” of soldiers to have sex with these women.<sup>20</sup>

**C**ounterterrorism had been one of the least successful areas of military cooperation.

The U.S. military should adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward trafficking in humans and should encourage the Russian military to do the same. The same networks that traffic in humans often traffic in guns and narcotics; these types of networks also help finance terrorists. Any soldiers who are serving with the U.S. military abroad and engage in the trafficking of women should be sent home, and commanding officers should be informed. Trafficking rings should be broken up, and the atmosphere of permissive compliance must cease. It is not just an ethical issue; it is now more clearly a security issue as well.

Such a response has precedence. Several years ago, when Russian peacekeepers serving with UN troops in eastern Slavonia (now Croatia) were found to be trafficking in humans, the UN special representative, Jacques Paul Klein, flew to Moscow and spoke with the Russian General Staff. When Klein threatened to go public with the information, the General Staff withdrew the Russian soldiers and sent in more professional and better-trained troops.

### **TAKING ON TERRORISM?**

The assumption that September 11 and the war against terrorism, a clear and present danger to both the United States and Russia, may transform military cooperation between the two is somewhat logical. No one state alone can successfully fight the multitudes of networks that wind through porous borders, exporting mad terrorists who freely kill civilians as well as themselves. After September 11, many in the United States and Russia argue that Washington now understands what Moscow has confronted in Chechnya all these years. Indeed, members of al Qaeda, the group responsible for the September 11 attack, have been in Chechnya for several years.

Thus it is especially unfortunate that neither country had sufficiently addressed either the actual terrorist problem that Russia faced or the perils of how Russia pursued terrorists. In September 2001, the Bush administration found itself scrambling to assemble a policy on the Chechen war. Russia found itself mired down in yet another predicament, no closer to tracking down the terrorists than it had been two years before when the “counterterrorism” war began.

Instead, this second war in Chechnya, like the first, has not only killed thousands of Russian troops, tens of thousands of civilians, and created large refugee populations as well as the type of desperate environment in which terrorists could find recruits, but it has also damaged nearly every fragile democratic institution that had developed in post-Soviet Russia.<sup>21</sup> Russian and Western non-governmental organizations documented atrocities that Russian troops committed, in the name of fighting terrorism, in

Chechnya and detailed Russian involvement in various forms of corruption. Russian federal forces routinely ransomed captured civilians, tortured civilians, engaged in looting and pillaging, and even sold their own troops for vodka and their weapons for money.<sup>22</sup> According to most accounts, and contrary to Russian press reports, life inside Chechnya was anything but normal; it had become in fact life in a failed state.

For the United States to have had a policy and a program to engage the Russian military but no policy that addressed what the Russian military was doing to its own population or to itself (torture of conscripts is highly institutionalized in Russia, for example) suggests that the policy of engagement was, at a minimum, flawed. Talking points prepared for the secretary of defense routinely included comments condemning the war, but over time even those were dropped. One Pentagon official in the summer of 2001 complained that there was no “juice in our points. We didn’t have a national policy ... about ... the conduct of the war, the indiscriminate use of force, and the breadth of the use of force.”<sup>23</sup>

**Both sides are suspicious of intelligence sharing.**

Because of the war in Chechnya, those officials tasked with the U.S.-Russian military relationship both in the Russian ministry of defense and in the Pentagon had been deeply ambivalent about working together on counterterrorism. Prior to September 2001, this area had been one of the least successful in terms of military-to-military cooperation. At an October 1999 meeting of a U.S.-Russian working group on counterterrorism, the Russian proposals presented at the end of the meeting amounted to requests that the U.S. government help shut down a Chechen Web site and that senior U.S. officials include highly critical comments about Chechens in their speeches. U.S. policymakers declined.

Several months later, officials at the Pentagon offered to share the methodology the United States had developed after the Khobar Towers bombing that assessed force vulnerabilities; the Pentagon also offered to send a team to conduct a vulnerabilities assessment (VA) of one of Russia’s bases. This time, Russian military officers declined, reportedly saying, “We can never let you guys do a VA, because every base commander of every Russian military base has certified to the minister of defense that his base is invulnerable to terrorist action, and if your methodology were to show that that is not the case, then somebody gets burned.”<sup>24</sup>

Even in terms of intelligence sharing, presumably one of the most likely areas of cooperation against terrorism, both sides might have reason to be suspicious of each other. In the most recent war in Chechnya, the Russians

have never managed to find and arrest the major rebel leaders, Shamil Basaev and Khattab. Yet Western journalists are on record conducting interviews with these men.<sup>25</sup> This apparent contradiction suggests either that Russian intelligence in Chechnya was bad or that Russian federal forces fighting in Chechnya had no interest in arresting these leaders. Either conclusion does not represent good news. Also, Russia could well wonder why NATO forces roam around Bosnia but do not arrest war criminals, especially when troops have information about the location of these people.

**Old issues need to be addressed before one can expect real cooperation.**

At the other end of the spectrum, and posing yet a different set of policy problems, some members of the U.S. military may be sympathetic to the argument that a war on terrorism should be unbridled and that the Geneva Convention or the Laws of Armed Conflict should not constrain a military's actions. "Given the task they have been given, there are only so many tools available," observed a U.S. officer who had

worked with the Russians for several years, speaking about the Russian military in Chechnya. For example, he said that "they have to use [mines] for denial, for flank protection, funneling. So we find common ground. ... And again, looking at it as a military person, you want a job done, and you have been told to do X, and there are only so many tools to get the job done."<sup>26</sup> This military officer neglected to consider that farming has almost entirely come to a halt in Chechnya because of the way mines have been used. If U.S. military personnel working with the Russian military widely share this viewpoint, one can imagine that the Russians may be receiving implicit, if not explicit, signals from the United States that its soldiers are sympathetic to the "job" they have before them. Sentiments like these may only increase in the foreseeable future.

### **Worth Doing Right**

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Both the United States and Russia should recognize the new impetus for restructuring what has been of late an unhappy and dysfunctional U.S.-Russian military relationship. The way forward, however, is extremely tricky and will require high-level attention and nurturing on the part of top civilian and military leaders in both countries. In the past, when innovative and attentive leadership accompanied the commitment to changing the relationship, all parties reaped the benefits. When the situation was otherwise, the relationship stalled and was later reversed. Threats to the national security

of both countries mean that this relationship should acquire a new priority, but policymakers will find some old issues that need to be addressed before one can expect real cooperation.

The fallout from NATO's war in Kosovo was still fresh in the minds of the Russian military before the September 11 attack. The tragedy that befell the United States may not entirely extinguish these negative feelings; moreover, these feelings may intensify, depending on how the United States responds to the attacks. In addition, although everyone likes to think that many good values and goals are shared all around, on many issues these areas of agreement constitute only a thin veneer that is likely to be stripped away at the slightest difficulty. Alternatively, some of the values and goals that are actually shared may not all be good. Finally, even the most casual observer of Russian operations in Chechnya can see the additional work needed on developing common practices and procedures before we can hope to work together successfully to counter terrorism. That said, with multiple fronts and elusive soldiers who wear no visible uniforms, neither Russia nor the United States can afford to fight this battle alone. Resolving differences in a timely fashion and restructuring military cooperation has once again become a national security imperative. The first decade of U.S.-Russian military cooperation shows that individual leaders are necessary for real, not symbolic, changes in the relationship.

## Notes

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4. Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), pp. 375–403.
5. Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, telephone interview by author, September 9, 2001 (Sherwood-Randall is a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia); see also Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999).
6. Perry interview.
7. Ibid.
8. Col. Robert Boudreau, interview by author, Washington, D.C., June 19, 2001 (Boudreau is chief of J-5, Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia Division).
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10. Masha Lipman, "Will Russia Join the War of the West?" *Washington Post*, September 19, 2001.
11. Starr interview.
12. Former U.S. embassy official, interview by author, Washington, D.C., August 2001.
13. Capt. Robert Brannon, interview by author, Moscow, June 10, 2001 (Brannon was, at the time, the naval attaché); Capt. Jonathan Laahs, interview by author, Moscow, June 4, 2001 (Laahs was an assistant air attaché at the time of the interview).
14. Laahs interview.
15. Starr interview.
16. Perry interview; see also Carter and Perry, *Preventive Defense*, p. 27.
17. Ashton Carter, interview by author, Cambridge, Mass., April 25, 2001 (Carter is a former assistant secretary of defense); Maj. Rich Choppa, interview by author, Washington, D.C., December 29, 2000 (Choppa is a staff member of the Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia office in the Pentagon); Gen. Eugene Habiger (Ret.), interview by author, San Antonio, Tex., August 15, 2001.
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19. Maj. Steven Sabia, interview by author, Newport, R.I., August 8, 2001 (Sabia served in Bosnia from August 1997 through December 1997).
20. Former senior U.S. diplomat, e-mail communication, September 7, 2001.
21. Sarah E. Mendelson, "The Power of Human Rights? Getting Away with Norms Violations in Russia," *International Security* 26, no. 4 (forthcoming, spring 2002).
22. See Human Rights Watch, *Welcome to Hell: Arbitrary Detention, Torture and Extortion in Chechnya* (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 2000); Elizabeth Rubin, "Down the Dark Hole of Chechnya," *New York Times Magazine*, July 8, 2001.
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24. Ibid.
25. Anne Nivat, *Chienne De Guerre: A Woman Reporter behind the Lines of the War in Chechnya* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001).
26. U.S. military officer, interview by author, Washington, D.C., June 2001.