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Russian Strategy in the Chechnya Wars

1. Introduction

Three and a half years ago, in August 1996, the previous Russian invasion of Chechnya ended in disaster. A determined force of 5,000 Chechen rebels suddenly invaded the Chechen capital Grozny that was occupied by the Russians in February 1995 and had a garrison of 10,000 Russian Interior Ministry (MVD) soldiers. The rebels managed to split the garrisons of Grozny into several dozen small pockets of resistance. They also managed to beat back and decimate several Russian armored army brigades that tried to oust the rebels and help the besieged MVD troops.

The surprise rebel counteroffensive in August 1996 came after 20 months of intermittent fighting and after the Russian authorities claimed once and again that all organized Chechen rebel resistance was “wiped out”. The Russian authorities in 1996 also claimed that the Chechen population had “turned away from the separatists” and supported Russian rule. In the 1996 presidential election Boris Yeltsin comfortably won in Chechnya. (Independent observers claimed that the 1996 presidential election in Chechnya was totally rigged.)

Still, after sustaining repeated ground attacks and aerial bombardments the Chechen rebels not only managed to keep intact a hard core of Professional fighters, but also commanded enough support within the Chechen population to quickly assemble a multithousand effective fighting force for the final battle of the war.

In 1996 Russian generals insisted that they could “liberate” Grozny only by totally destroying the city with massive heavy gun and aerial bombardments, but such an indiscriminate attack was not approved by the Kremlin. In 1996 the Russian public, the Russian military and the Russian political elite were fed up and opted to withdraw Russian troops. Anyway a destruction of Grozny in August 1996 was hardly a

reasonable option: Thousands of MVD troops were trapped in the city and would have most likely perished together with the Chechens.

Today heavy bombs and guns are used against Chechen towns and villages without limitation. When the Russian troops crossed into Chechnya in October 1999, Russian generals and Kremlin leaders claimed that the lessons of the previous war were learned and that the new war would be very different, that lives would be saved and that Chechen “terrorists” would be annihilated quickly, cleanly and efficiently.

Today’s number two in the Russian military hierarchy – the Chief of General Staff general of the army (4 star) Anatoly Kvashnin – was the two star general that lead the Russian army into the disastrous New Year's attack on Grozny on December 31, 1994. After the Russian forces eventually managed to capture Grozny in February 1995, Kvashnin, as 3 star general, became commander-in-chief of the North Caucasian Military District (NCMD) that is responsible for Chechnya.

In 1997 Kvashnin was promoted to Moscow to become Chief of General Staff, but most of the generals that are today in charge of the war in Chechnya are Kvashnin’s comrades in arms that fought with him in the first Chechen war of 1994-1996 and later served together in the NCMD. These “pro-Kvashnin” zealots believed that the first Chechen war was lost because Moscow politicians restrained the Russian military from using all the firepower it had assembled during the Cold war. In the 1994-1996 war in Chechnya the Kremlin from time to time restrained the use of air power against Chechen towns and villages, as well as forbidding fully the use of ballistic missiles and some other mass-destruction weapons.

Since 1997, when Kvashnin became Chief of General Staff, the Russian armed forces and, especially, the NCMD were preparing a revenge war against the Chechen rebels that humiliated Russian generals in 1996. The main innovation in the new Russian strategy was: To assemble a much larger fighting force, than in 1994-1996 and to use

all available firepower without any limitations to bombard Chechen armed rebels and civilians into submission. The same First World War type of strategy – victory through heavy indiscriminate bombardment – was used by the Yugoslav/Serb forces during the siege of Vukovar, Sarajevo and other cities during the wars in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s. But, of course, the firepower superiority the Russian forces have against the Chechen rebels is total, fully out of comparison to what the Serbs ever had.

The 1994-1996 campaign in Chechnya was a strategic improvisation. It began as a covert operation to overthrow the rebellious Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev with the help of Chechen opposition forces. The Russian army was deployed for action in December 1994 only after the covert Operation failed and the “opposition” forces were exposed as Russian proxies.

2. The first Chechen campaign

The first Chechen campaign should have been a showcase of rapid deployment and success by “mobile forces” created by Russia’s Defense Minister from 1992 to 1996 general Pavel Grachev. It was planned that Russian troops would copycat Western lightning success during the ground offensive phase of the Gulf campaign in 1991.

But the “mobile force” attack turned into a disaster. After the collapse of the Soviet Union all tank Russian and motor-rifle divisions were reduced to near cadre state so they could not be used in combat Operations as whole units. The Russian armored columns that moved on Grozny on December 11, 1994, were in essence salami-type combined task forces hurriedly put together from small bits and pieces of different army and airborne units. Many of the soldiers never fought or trained together. The Chechen fighters were much better motivated and knew the country they were fighting in.

The Russian Defense Ministry also failed to gather sufficient forces that could have overwhelmed the rebels by sheer numbers. By December 11, 1994 the task force of army, MVD and “mobile force”

airborne units assembled for war consisted of 23.700 men (19.000 – MOD, 4.700 – MVD), 80 tanks, 208 ACVs, 182 guns and mortars. By December 31, 1994 the Russian forces assembled near Grozny numbered 38.000 men, armed with 230 tanks, 454 ACVs, 388 guns and mortars. (Grachev’s official Statement at February 28, 1995 Chechen operation assessment meeting in the Defense ministry in Moscow. “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”, March 1 1995, p. 1). The overall strength of Russian forces in Chechnya never exceeded 45,000 during the 20 months of the 1994-1996 war.

The present Chechen campaign was – in contrast to the first – pre-planned. In an interview to “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”, published on 14 January 2000, former Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin announced that Russian authorities actually decided to take military action against Chechnya as early as March 1999. At that time Stepashin was Russia’s Interior Minister and says that he personally was in charge of military preparations. Later, in an interview to “Frankfurter Rundschau” Stepashin stated that the final decision to invade Chechnya was taken in July 1999, when he was Russia’s Prime Minister.

Stepashin says that a full-scale invasion of Chechnya by Russian troops was planned for August-September 1999. Stepashin insists that a major invasion of Chechnya would have taken place no matter what, “even if there were no explosions in Moscow.” Stepashin also insists that Russia’s acting president Vladimir Putin, as director of FSB (the KGB successor security agency) knew all along that an invasion of Chechnya was secretly planned and prepared.

To fight the new war in Chechnya Russia’s Defense and Interior Ministries assembled a much bigger force than anytime in 1994-1996. Official Kremlin spokesman on the war, Putin’s aid Sergei Yastrzhembsky put the number of troops serving in the North Caucasus region in the end of January as: 57.000 from the MOD and 36.000 from the MVD (a total of 93.000). Russian MOD officials say that 90.000 to 100.000 is nearly all Russia can field today for combat without a mobilization of the reserve.

After the fiasco in the first Chechen war and in preparation for possible combat in the Caucasus, the Russian MOD since 1997 was creating “permanent readiness” army brigades and divisions that should be almost fully manned and ready for deployment to deal with local conflicts. To create these “permanent readiness” forces the overall number of formations and units has been drastically cut, enabling fuller manning of those that remain. But still, manpower problems forced the Russian General Staff to send combined marine battalions from the Northern, Pacific and Baltic Fleets to fight in the Chechen mountains in 1999-2000.

The number of servicemen in the Caucasus in the fall of 1999 was two times higher, than at the height of the 1994-1996 war, but the basic quality of the troops did not change dramatically. In October, 1999 the Russian Defense Ministry officially announced that 93 percent of all privates and sergeants in Chechnya were conscripts – teen-aged former school kids.

Despite all attempts to create “permanent readiness” units, they could not be moved to the front as full-strength brigades and divisions. In combat in Chechnya in 1999-2000 Russian staffs were forced to use combined “operational groupings” instead of a traditional system of divisions, regiments, brigades and battalions. Combined tactical groups were formed, often built around battalions with strong reinforcements, especially of artillery (Michael Orr: Some Provisional Notes on Current Russian Operations in Dagestan & Chechnya. Conflict Studies Research Centre, UK Ministry of Defence, December 3, 1999).

Michael Orr believes that such a system of tactical groups “will represent a significant modernization of the cumbersome Russian command system, but it will require much higher professional skills than have so far been seen in the average Russian officer at battalion level.” However, Russian generals bemoan their inability to use traditional units. They believe that well-trained, full-strength divisions

and brigades would have performed much more efficiently than the “tactical groups” they are forced to use today.

Russian forces invaded Chechnya in October, 1999 lacking good infantry units capable to swiftly encounter Chechen fighters at their weakest moment without massive air and heavy artillery support. Instead of seizing the initiative to exploit suddenly appearing opportunities Russian unit commanders tend to continue to execute battle plans approved in advance by their superiors.

The Russian army and Interior Forces units in Chechnya are badly trained and badly commanded. On January 18, 2000 Russian army general Mikhail Malofeyev tried desperately to lead personally Interior troops that did not want to go forward. The troops not only did not follow, but actually fell back, leaving the general to his fate (Malofeyev’s body was found only a week later).

To compensate the low quality of its fighting units in Chechnya Russian military chiefs designed a strategy that tried to copycat NATO’s actions in the Balkans in 1999: Bomb till victory and win without heavy casualties. During the first Chechen war Russian forces tended to go into Chechen settlements with infantry and armor. Air power and artillery was mostly used to support infantry in town fighting. Today all is different: The military use their firepower superiority to the hilt to avoid infantry engagements as much as possible and pound the enemy into submission from a distance.

3. The strategy

The strategy of victory by bombardment has inevitably resulted in massive war crimes, as the Russian military bombarded Chechen town and cities with indiscriminate heavy weapons, killing civilians in total disregard of international treaties on the conduct of war that Russia signed and ratified.

There is ample evidence, including TV footage not only of the indiscriminate use of conventional heavy guns and aerial bombardments of

civilian areas, but also the use of TOS-1 multiple launchers against Grozny, its suburbs and other Chechen towns. TOS-1 rockets are filled by an inflammable liquid that causes terrific aerosol explosions at impact, killing people, destroying property and causing fires (TOS means “heavy fire-throwing system”). The third protocol of the 1980 Geneva convention (signed and ratified by Russia) strictly forbids the use of such “air-delivered incendiary weapons” even against military targets in populated areas.

In reprisal attacks on Chechen towns and villages, Russian forces also use “Tochka-U” ballistic missiles that can fly 120 km and can cover up to 7 hectare (17.3 acre) with cluster shrapnel on impact. The use of such mass-destruction weapons as aerosol (fuel) explosives and ballistic missiles against civilian targets was authorized by the Kremlin and this implicates Putin, as well as his top military chiefs in war crimes.

However, such indiscriminate massive attacks did not make the second Chechen war a “low casualty” engagement. The latest official casualty figures of “servicemen lost in the course of the anti-terrorist Operation in Dagestan and Chechnya” speak of almost 1,900 dead and 5,000 wounded. Unofficial casualty rates from the non-governmental Soldiers Mother’s committee put the death toll of Russian servicemen at more than 3,000. Unofficial estimates of wounded are 6,000 to 7,000 at the end of February 2000. The number of seriously sick soldiers is not reported by the Russian authorities.

Of course, the figures I mention change every day. As the relentless war continues, despite all official Russian claims of victory, the death toll grows.

It may be assumed that the number of dead, sick and wounded in the ranks of the MOD and MVD forces in the Caucasus is approaching 10 % of the overall force of approximately 90,000 men. In fact the official Propaganda slogan of a “low casualty war” was dropped after the battle for Grozny where Russian forces lost up to a 1,000 dead.

(The official death toll grew from 400 in mid-December, when the Grozny battle began, to 1,500 in mid February).

High casualties and the need to replace conscripts that have completed compulsory military Service is already straining the manpower capabilities of the Russian armed forces. Colonel-general Arkady Baskayev – the commander of the Moscow MVD military district that has sent 5,000 men to fight in Chechnya – told me in late January, 2000 that replacement is becoming an acute problem and that in several months he will simply have no one to send to the front. Baskayev believes the Chechen conflict will continue for several years and that Russia should immediately begin to form an all-volunteer, professional corps of 30 to 50 thousand men (half-Interior Ministry and half-Defense Ministry troops) to fight it out with the rebels after the inefficient conscript army totally runs out of steam. Baskayev's position is supported by the MVD high brass.

In an attempt to keep troop manpower strength high in Chechnya, the Russian military have already begun a massive campaign to recruit volunteers. A member of the Russian lower house of parliament (the Duma) Defense Committee from the liberal Yabloko fraction Alexey Arbatov visited Russian troops in Chechnya together with a Duma delegation in the end of February, 2000. Arbatov was told by Russian commanders in Chechnya that in March, 2000 up to 40 percent of Russian soldiers and sergeants of the MOD and MVD units in the battle zone will be contract professionals.

Today soldiers in Chechnya “performing combat duties” are paid well according to Russian standards (800 Rub per day or approximately \$28), so many enlist as “contractniki”, but the quality of these “professionals” is questionable. Contract soldiers serving today in Chechnya are recruited from two different sources. Some are conscript soldiers and sergeants that volunteer to continue to fight on in Chechnya after their term of compulsory military Service is over (or are supposed to volunteer – there could be some pressure coming from the authorities to keep the best-trained manpower from going home).

Russian officers say that these young war veterans make good fighters.

The other source of contract soldiers are volunteers recruited in different Russian provinces from the ranks of Russia's vast pool of military reservists. In fact these contract soldiers are quite often men from the general public that served in the Russian army a decade or more ago and had no military training since. Many local Russian newspapers (including some in Moscow) today carry recruitment ads calling for "men aged from 20 to 40" to volunteer for contract service in Chechnya. It's reported that these "contractniki" are sent to Chechnya without any proper screening or training. Russian officers complain that such "contractniki" are highly unreliable in battle and badly disciplined.

Many of these volunteers are drunks, bums and other scum. Russian generals lament that these contract soldiers are even less well trained or disciplined than teen-age conscripts. The Russian armed forces still do not have a professional sergeant's corps. Actually, 90 percent of Russian sergeants today are 19-year old conscripts promoted after attending a three-month sergeants school. The solidifying of the rapidly expanding volunteer army in Chechnya into a disciplined force seems an almost insoluble problem.

There have been numerous reports that contract soldiers are the main perpetrators of many instances of shootings of civilians, rape and marauding by Russian troops in Chechnya. Constant war crimes by Russian generals and atrocities committed by increasingly undisciplined troops can, of course, only increase the number of new recruits willing to join Chechen rebel forces to revenge the death of relatives and destruction of property. Present Russian actions in Chechnya are self-defeating and can only perpetuate the conflict.

It is obvious that once again Russia entered Chechnya without a capable, professional army and also – without modern military equipment that is most needed to fight low-intensity anti-guerrilla wars. For ten years the Russian Defense Ministry has been only talking of

creating a corps of professional sergeants to begin to form the backbone of a Professional army. Since 1997 the Russian Defense Ministry has been spending all its procurement money on buying new ICBMs – SS-25 and SS-27.’

4. The Russian forces

The Russian forces in Chechnya have no radar-equipped attack planes or helicopters, capable of providing close air support in fog or at night. In the first week of March, 2000 a company of paratroopers (84 men) from the 76th Russian Airborne division based in Pskov was wiped out by the Chechen rebels in the mountains of southern Chechnya. The Russian high command announced that this military disaster happened, “because fog did not allow to deploy attack aircraft”.

In fact in the 1990s Russian arms industry has developed prototypes of night/fog capable attack aircraft. But the Russian Defense Ministry deliberately channelled funds to buy ICBMs. Now, when the war in Chechnya has fully exposed Russian military deficiencies, attempts are made to reverse the Situation. First deputy chief of the Russian general staff Valery Manilov told me recently that modified MJ-24N (Hind) attack helicopters with radar have been ordered by the Russian army and the Rostov helicopter factory is making them. The Russian military hopes that several Mi-24Ns will be fully operational in several months. But it might take much longer, as often happens with new weaponry. A full regiment of 24 Mi-24N helicopters will hardly be operational before 2003. Until then, Russian forces in “liberated” Chechnya will either have to stay put at night or in bad weather, or risk being ambushed by rebels.

The Russian forces entered Chechnya in October, 1999 without well trained professional forces, without modern armaments that could have given them an upper hand in encounters with guerrillas and also – without a clear strategic plan of how to win quickly and efficiently.

Stepashin says that the original war plan for Chechnya was: To occupy the northern half of the renegade province and establish a solid defense line on the Terek river that divides Chechnya from west to east, or, maybe, to take up positions on the line of hills that lie just south of the Terek. Northern Chechnya was for centuries inhabited by Russian Cossacks. The population in the north is a bit more loyal to Russia than in the southern Chechen mountains. The Russian authorities believed that providing law, order and jobs in the north would create an alternative Chechnya. It was expected that the majority of the population would eventually also move north, depriving the warlords in the south of support and manpower. The Russian armed forces, while maintaining a solid defense line on the perimeter of the rump warlord-controlled Chechnya, would also harass rebel positions with air attacks and commando raids. The anti-Russian rebels would be slowly strangled and defeated.

If fully and efficiently executed, such a strategic plan could have at least partially succeeded in containing the most extreme Chechen separatists and Muslim extremists. Also, while firmly blockading Southern Chechnya, the Russian authorities could have begun negotiations with more moderate rebel leaders on finding a political solution to Chechen problems. A high-ranking EU official told me that during the EU-Russia summit in Helsinki, Finland, in mid October 1999, Putin actually assured European leaders that Russian troops would not go into Southern Chechnya. But this promise was almost immediately broken.

In October 1999, Kvashnin, backed by a group of aggressive Russian generals from the NCMD, insisted that Russian forces abandon the initial war plan and cross the Terek river. The occupation of Northern Chechnya by Russian troops was carried out without heavy losses and relatively swiftly. The way to Grozny was open. Chechen rebels fell back without putting up serious resistance and the local population, though not exactly friendly, was also not overly hostile. In the fall of 1999 many ordinary Chechens were indeed fed up with rebel Muslim extremists, unruly warlords, banditry and overall lawlessness in the breakaway republic. Two powerful Chechen warlords – the

Yamadayev brothers that virtually controlled the second largest Chechen city Gudermes – indicated that they would not oppose advancing Russian troops.

Kvashnin and his supporters insisted that time was ripe for a final solution of the Chechen problem. Stepashin states that the generals told Kremlin officials: “If we stop at the Terek we will simply freeze the Situation for 10, 20 or 40 years. But in the end we will have to go forward anyway.”

The Russian forces poured into central Chechnya, surrounding Grozny. At the same time paratroop units began an advance into the southern Chechen mountains from bases in Dagestan. The strategic idea of this “final” Russian anti-Chechen winter offensive in 1999-2000 was to surround and press together the rebels in Grozny and in southern mountain hideouts before the snow melted and leaves appeared on the trees, giving the rebels cover from Russian aerial surveillance. The Russian high command wanted to keep the strategic initiative by a relentless winter offensive, break the rebel’s moral and prevent the war from deteriorating into a costly guerrilla campaign.

This was a reckless plan that did not work. The deeper the Russian troops penetrated rebel territory, the stiffer the resistance became. The siege of Grozny turned into a bloodbath that lasted two months. Russian casualties grew and with them the ferocity of Russian reprisal attacks. Today Russian military policy in Chechnya is: Any town or village that provides help, food or shelter to rebels will be razed to the ground by heavy artillery and air attacks. But in fact such indiscriminate reprisals only prolong and intensify the guerrilla war.

In the end of February, 2000 Russian generals declared victory in Chechnya. The last major Chechen town held by the rebels – Shatoi, in the mountains south of Grozny – was captured. Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev announced that “organized rebel resistance has been broken”. However, in 2000, as in 1995, the Russians soon found that victory claimed is far from victory achieved. In Chechnya

today, as in 1995-1996, the rebels do not control any large territory or major town, but they still fight on with efficiency and determination.

After declaring overall victory, Russian troops in Chechnya lost in one week nearly 200 men. A company of paratroopers from the 76th Russian Airborne division was wiped out in the mountains of southern Chechnya. A column of elite Interior Ministry OMON paramilitary soldiers was mowed down inside “liberated” Grozny (more than 50 dead and wounded). An elite special unit of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian General Staff (32 men) was massacred in the mountains of southern Chechnya.

All these disasters happened with elite units of the Russian MOD and MVD. Of course, the Russian forces in Chechnya are not yet broken, as in 1996. But the writing is on the wall: The best Russian elite units are no match for the rebels when fighting on their own. Also, the overall command structure of Russian forces in Chechnya is so cumbersome and the morale of troops is so low that trapped units under attack do not get relief on time, if ever.

The OMON unit in Grozny was under attack by the rebels for four hours just several kilometers from the Russian high command headquarters in Chechnya, only several hundred meters from a Russian MVD fortified checkpoint, but no help came. The Russian military authorities report that the paratroopers of the 76th division fought surrounded by rebels for four days, but no help came. The Pskov paratroopers were not even parachuted far behind enemy lines. They were moved into position by their superiors in infantry formation. Fellow servicemen were only a 100 or so meters away. Still, the 90.000-strong Russian joint task force in Chechnya, with thousands of tanks, guns, helicopters and warplanes, did not manage to do anything to save them in four days!

5. Conclusion

It is increasingly obvious that Russian troops are not ready for intense guerrilla warfare. The combat equipment of Russian forces in Chechnya today is essentially the same as in Afghanistan in the mid 1980s. Russian troops do not have night-capable attack planes or helicopters, modern communication or positioning equipment. On the company level, rebel and Russian units are armed with basically the same infantry weapons. But the rebels are usually more experienced and much better motivated, which often gives them the upper hand.

Russian Afghan war veterans that serve as officers in Chechnya complain that the morale of the troops is much worse today. In Afghanistan, relieving trapped comrades was considered essential. In Chechnya, Russian garrisons and columns attacked by guerrillas are often left without help for days.

Discipline in the Russian armed forces has seriously declined following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Also, from the beginning of the recent Chechen campaign, Russian soldiers avoided pitched battles and waited for bombers to clear the rebels out of position; this has depleted morale still more.

Today, Russian soldiers are not ready to go against determined rebel opposition even to save comrades. A few rebels with handarms can keep back a Russian brigade for days. When the Chechens eventually withdraw, the Russians capture one more ruined village and report that they have killed a thousand rebels (in fact, mostly civilians are killed). Russian generals award each other medals, and the war continues unabated.

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