Resurgent Russia?
A Still-Faltering Military

By Zoltan Barany
In the past few years Moscow’s increasingly assertive foreign policy posture has been underscored by signs of improvement in the military realm. Several pundits have argued that the Russian army is “back,” that it is once again an effective force, having endured humiliating conditions through much of the post-Soviet period. Some recent developments have undoubtedly supported this contention. After all, in 2007 alone Russia resumed regular long-range bomber missions after a 16-year hiatus, conducted a military exercise with the People’s Republic of China and other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (a.k.a. “The Dictators’ Club”) that included 6,500 troops and over 100 aircraft, increased defense spending by more than 30 percent, announced a new rearmament program, and began planning the reclamation of the old Soviet naval base at Tartus, Syria in order to reestablish a Mediterranean naval presence.

These events are in concert with the longstanding Soviet-Russian tradition of emphasizing the armed forces as the state’s most important foreign policy instrument while designating lesser roles to diplomatic, economic, and other means. Still, those familiar with the magnitude of the Russian defense establishment’s post-Cold War privations cannot but wonder whether it could have recovered quite so quickly. To be sure, the military’s situation has improved in some respects in the past several years. At the same time, reversing the army’s decline and regaining its former might will take many years, and the Russian armed forces will not be able to challenge America’s military supremacy for decades. Indeed, my main argument here is that reports of the Russian army’s imminent resurgence, like those of Mark Twain’s death nearly a century ago, have been greatly exaggerated.

I will focus on three closely related aspects of Russian defense policy — reform, manpower, and expenditures — under Vladimir Putin’s reign to show that the U.S. and the West have no cause for alarm in the foreseeable future. Before proceeding further, it ought to be acknowledged that reality remains often at odds with the propaganda emanating from the Kremlin. “Soviet statistics” was an oxymoron, as “hard data” originating from the USSR were notoriously unreliable. Though matters have improved somewhat since then, Russian figures, particularly on defense and security issues, should still be treated with caution. A recent example should suffice. In a January 11, 2006 Wall Street Journal article then-Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov boasted that in the armed forces “the number and level of large-scale exercises [had] grown to more than fifty” in 2005. In fact, only 31 of these were held at the regimental level and just one involved an entire division, even though the Russian military contains more than 20 divisions and hundreds of regiments.1 The point is that, given the authorities’ full control of television — the news source for most Russians — and their expanding grip on radio and print media, the information for domestic public consumption, let alone that intended for foreign audiences, is routinely manipulated and distorted.

The contradictions of defense reform

Sixteen years after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian military remains fundamentally unreformed. The critical problem of defense policy is that the failure of political and military elites to sort out what type of conflicts the country should prepare for inevitably prevents the formulation of a consistent grand strategy and doctrine. In other words, politicians and generals seem not to have reached a solid consensus on who their enemies are and how to fight them in a potential future war. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Russia’s top brass and many leading

1 Aleksandr Golts, “Saber Rattling Sans Saber,” Moscow Times (January 17, 2006).
politicians are stuck in Cold War mode and continue to insist that the main threat to their country remains the United States. (Curiously, both political and army leaders seem to be bothered little by the rapidly increasing military power of neighboring China.) Consequently, the generals oppose the abolition of conscription because they want to retain the capability of raising large armies with a deep pool of reservists. They have, time and again, rejected the idea of creating a relatively small (600,000- to 800,000-strong), mobile, well-trained and appropriately equipped force to fight in local and regional conflicts while countering others with nuclear deterrence.

Official documents on doctrinal matters often lack internal logic. On the one hand, they claim that Russia’s is a defensive doctrine, that the country does not have a specific strategic enemy, that the main challenges to its security are fundamentalism, armed separatism, terrorism, smuggling, and other “soft” security threats. On the other hand, the doctrine maintains that Russia needs a large army along with heavy armaments, global capabilities, and a generous budget. The problem is rooted in a basic conflict between a government that needs to tailor defense according to the international security environment and fiscal realities and the General Staff, which does not want to part with its massive army. For instance, the first two parts of a new doctrinal document the General Staff deliberated in October 2003 were insightful analyses of political and strategic-operational issues prepared by the Ministry of Defense (MoD). The third part — concerned with manpower, weapons, and budgets — however, squarely contradicted the first two sections. This part was formulated by the General Staff, still operating from its Cold War mentality. The changing power balance between the MoD, the General Staff, and the Security Council occasionally spawns discussions of the doctrine’s impending modification, but until the fundamental questions are put to rest, consistency between the plans and implementation will be lacking.

Boris Yeltsin demanded two things from the armed forces — manpower reduction and the speedy withdrawal of troops from Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet republics. In return, he permitted army leaders to run the army as they saw fit (and to get away with corruption and criminal behavior on a shocking scale). Vladimir Putin — astounded by the military’s appalling performance in Chechnya — came to power determined to radically transform the armed forces. Already as acting president in 2000, he identified defense reform as a top priority. As time went by, however, his resolve diminished, for numerous perfectly sensible reasons — the absence

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of real reformers on his team and his disinclination to enforce unpopular decisions on a key institutional support base, to mention just two. The most important factor delaying substantial reform, however, has been the generals’ steadfast opposition to it. In March 2001, Putin appointed his friend and political ally, Sergey Ivanov, to head the defense ministry and the effort to transform the military into a modern, effective fighting force. Nearly six years later, Ivanov left his post having failed in his task. This is not to say that nothing has been done or even that what has been accomplished is unimportant; rather, the point is that the post-Soviet armed forces desperately needed to undergo a comprehensive reform that, 16 years on, has yet to be implemented.

What has been done? First of all, the military has shrunk drastically since the fall of the USSR, when roughly 3 million men wore its uniform. The MoD’s manpower has hovered around 1.1 million to 1.2 million uniformed personnel plus 875,000 civilians for nearly a decade. The exact figure may not be known to anyone. Commanders routinely inflate the staffing levels of their units. That way, if the MoD orders additional personnel cuts, they can be easily “implemented” by scrapping vacant slots. In addition, overstating the number of troops enables officers to collect food and equipment rations as well as salaries and benefits allocated to nonexistent personnel which can then be used to alleviate the unit’s financial difficulties or, more likely, to line the officers’ own pockets. Russia’s is currently the world’s fourth largest military in personnel, after China (2.4 million), the U.S. (1.5 million), and India (1.3 million). In 2000, Putin pledged to reduce manpower by 365,000 officers and soldiers and 120,000 defense ministry employees. But this initiative — like so many others — has not only not been implemented but, in fact, it has been explicitly abandoned. In any event, it is important to recognize that decreasing the army’s size does not equal reform. Force reduction enhances neither the effectiveness nor the combat-readiness of the armed forces; it just makes them smaller.

Second, various parts of the armed forces have been repeatedly reorganized since 1991 — occasionally reversing the previous “reform.” This pattern suggests the absence of a serious master plan or conceptual design. Reorganizations have included the abolition of the Ground Forces Headquarters, the merging of the air defense branch into the air force, and the reduction of the number of military districts to six with the amalgamation of the Siberian and Trans-Baikal districts and the Volga and Ural districts. (Actually, the headquarters of the former Volga Military District were redesignated the headquarters of the Second Army, and thus no units were disbanded). Both the Ground Forces Headquarters — their importance is
underscored by the several armed conflicts on Russia’s borders — and the space forces were re-established as independent entities. There are now three main services (army, navy, and air force) and three separate branches (strategic rocket forces, space forces, and airborne forces). The result of all these reorganizations and reversals is that the structure of the current armed forces is actually not very different from what it was in the Soviet era.

Third, the 1996 Defense Law granted the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff fundamentally equal status, which virtually ensured that they would compete for decision-making authority. In 2004, however, in response to the protracted conflict between the two institutions, the Duma (the legislature’s lower house) modified the Defense Law and formally established the defense minister and the ministry’s superiority over the general staff and its chief. The amended version of the law entrusts the MoD with the administrative and operational command and control of the armed forces. Although the Defense Law omits all references to the role of the GS, it may become a research institute or think tank, the “brains of the army,” charged with preparing threat assessments and doctrinal documents for the ministry to review. This was potentially the most important defense-related legislation in recent years, and it codified the GS’s worst-case scenario. I say “potentially” because laws passed by a mostly rubber-stamp legislature can mean very little in Russia: They can be open for varying interpretations or rewritten as changing circumstances demand. Actually, since then, the GS, led by its capable chief, Yury Baluyevskiy, has maintained its traditional role, which was only confirmed following the February 2007 appointment of Anatoly Serdyukov as defense minister.

Serdyukov, the first bona fide civilian to head the MoD, has no military background other than conscript service. Nor did he demonstrate any interest in defense issues prior to taking his new job. Nonetheless, as the former head of the Federal Tax Service, he might possess the skills that the armed forces most need. Ivanov was unable to eradicate the culture of corruption that took root in the military and the extensive hazing of conscripts that has gradually emerged as an important societal concern. Given the absence of real civilian oversight, how monies are actually spent remains a mystery to all but a few in the ministry. Serdyukov vows to “improve the financial efficiency of the military’s activities to ensure that they don’t spend a single ruble needlessly and so that the army suffers no losses.” He intends to change the approach to planning defense spending and reporting procedures in order to tighten the ministry’s control, and to oversee the devel-

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opment of new technology that would allow the MoD to track all financial activity in the armed forces. Serdyukov has called on officers to embrace more accountability and has pledged to root out the pervasive criminality.

Inadequate human resources

The Russian armed forces are staffed by officers and noncommissioned officers most of whom enjoy few alternative career options, and by conscripts who are too inept or poor to escape the draft. The most important question of the future of the Russian military is whether its manpower is going to be based on volunteers, conscription, or some combination of the two. Responding to the widespread public aversion to the draft, Yeltsin famously promised in the 1996 presidential campaign to abolish mandatory military service and create a fully professional army by 2000. This has not happened, even though until 2003 there were still opposition parties in the legislature with sound reform proposals aimed at the creation of an all-professional force. In fact, conscription has been expanded.

One of the main problems surrounding the draft is that only a small proportion of young men (9 percent to 11 percent) actually serve. There are many ways to legally avoid military service, and those who cannot avail themselves of one often bribe the appropriate officials. About 40,000 a year — a sufficient number to staff three and a half divisions — simply dodge the draft. The military ends up with the least desirable men of their cohort. Data on the 2005 conscription cycle show that 70 percent of those called up for service were medically unfit, 45 percent had never held a job or studied at the postsecondary level, 5 percent had criminal records, 25 percent had not finished high school, nearly one-ninth were alcoholics and/or regular drug users, and some were illiterate. For tens of thousands of youths every year, the way to evade conscription is to enroll at a civilian college or university where military training (in so-called “cadet departments”) is available. This allows students to qualify as reserve officers without actually serving in the armed forces. In recent years these departments have produced about 150,000 to 180,000 reserve officers annually, about ten times more than needed.

In 2005, the number of civilian institutions of higher education where this option was available was reduced from 229 to 35. The remaining institutions are being upgraded to orient them toward students who genuinely want to serve in the military, and they will have to do so as contract officers for a period of five or six years, depending on military specialty.

This change was in line with a key provision of the Defense Ministry’s

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2003 reform proposal, which expanded conscription and simultaneously shortened the draft period. Reducing the number of deferrals for conscripts, another important step in this direction, was accomplished in 2006, when nine of the 25 draft deferment categories were abolished. Rural doctors and teachers, athletes, artists and cultural workers, young men with pregnant wives or very young children, and those caring for elderly parents are no longer exempt. The new restrictions will come into effect in 2008 together with a halving of the length of military service. The latter is actually going to be a two-step process. Under the terms of the 2006 bill the period of military service will be reduced to 18 months starting in 2007 and to 12 months from 2008 for men between the ages of 18 and 27. The MoD’s hope is that the outcome of these reforms will significantly improve the size and quality of its conscript pool.

The right of draft-age young men to opt for civilian service instead of conventional military duty was already enshrined in the 1993 constitution. This right, however, was not only unguaranteed by proper legislation for nearly a decade, but, in fact, individuals who intended to choose alternative service were hauled off to jail as recently as 2000. A 2004 law specified that alternative service must be performed away from the individual’s permanent residence. This stipulation creates new opportunities for corruption (i.e., influencing the decision of where civilian service might be performed) and makes it an expensive substitute for regular duty because those electing alternative service must pay for their accommodations. A recent MoD directive reduced the period of alternative service from 36 months to 18 months. Still, in January 2007, only 51 draftees out of a total of 123,000 selected this option of national service, even fewer than in the spring 2005 conscription cycle (186 out of about 155,000).5 There are many reports of military commissioners demanding bribes even to accept applications for alternative service.

Once in the service, draftees are commonly treated as serfs, and brutal hazing drives thousands to desertion, suicide, or violent crime annually. Low morale breeds poor discipline, which in turn causes frequent mishaps. According to the MoD 262 servicemen died in the first half of 2007: 37 in combat in Chechnya, 7 as a result of hazing, and 147 committed suicide (often provoked by hazing). In 2006 6,700 soldiers were victims of battery; 33 of them died.6 The chief military prosecutor, Sergey Fridinsky, announced that 994 soldiers were the victims of bullying and

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harassment in the first three months of 2007 while, in 2006, crime had continued to grow among officers (11 percent), warrant officers (19 percent) and by contract enlisted personnel (more than doubling from 1,439 cases in 2005 to 2,892 in 2006). It bears mentioning that these statistics refer to reported and registered instances; it is widely believed that the real numbers are several times higher. Not surprisingly, opinion polls show growing public opposition to the draft, especially when the respondent’s close relative is the putative conscript (74 percent in 2002, 77 percent in 2004). 

Conscription must be expanded, nevertheless, as long as Russia does not commit itself to an all-volunteer army. This is especially so given the recent reduction in the term of service and, more important, owing to the dire demographic situation recently identified by Putin as the most serious problem facing the country. Demographers predict that by 2050 Russia’s current population (about 142 million) will decline to between 122.6 million and 77.2 million. At present, the population decreases by about 800,000 annually, a trend that is unlikely to be soon reversed given Russians’ life expectancy (the shortest in Europe at 58 years for men and 72 for women) and relatively low birthrate (9.95 per 1,000 people). 

The MoD has seen at least part of the solution in establishing and expanding contract-based military service. In March 2006, according to then-Defense Minister Ivanov, there were 60,000 professional soldiers and sergeants on active duty. The ministry has not been fully satisfied with the quality and discipline of the recruits — one-third of those deployed to Chechnya left the army ahead of schedule — and most of them, in turn, have not found the terms of service attractive enough to renew their contracts. In late August 2006, the army was said to be in a “feverish state over the mass cancellations” of service contracts by soldiers and sergeants. An MoD document noted that no more than 19 percent of contract soldiers reenlisted, due to low wages and poor living conditions. Still, the ministry’s plans call for 72 permanent readiness all-volunteer units with some 130,000 contract soldiers and an additional 130,000 contractors to serve in other units by the end of 2007. It is difficult to be optimistic about the fulfillment of these targets, particularly because the MoD did not create a

At 58 years for men and 72 for women, life expectancy in Russia is the shortest in Europe.

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8 “We Love the Army, But in a Strange Way,” Vremya Novostei (February 22, 2002); and “Most Russians Do Not Want Relatives To Serve in Army,” Rosbalt (February 24, 2004).
9 Nicholas Eberstadt, “Russia, the Sick Man of Europe,” Public Interest 158 (Winter 2005); and Otto Latsis, “Russia Faces Demographic Disaster,” Moscow News (September 7, 2005).
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As a professional recruiting service, in fact, as an independent Russian defense expert contends, “most of the contract soldiers are recruited by unit commanders from conscripts who often are forced by longer-serving soldiers to sign contracts while undergoing hazing.”

Problems plague the corps of noncommissioned officers, who should be the backbone of the armed forces. Unlike in Western armies, where noncommissioned officers constitute a highly-trained, effective, and competent middle-managerial cadre, they remain the most underutilized human resource in the Russian military. They seldom receive specialized training, hold minimal independent decision-making powers, and command little respect from officers and soldiers alike. Owing to meager wages, inadequate living conditions, and antiquated equipment, tens of thousands of noncommissioned officer positions are vacant. Since 1991 more than 450,000 officers have quit military service for similar reasons.

Salaries, though repeatedly raised under Putin, remain very low: Full colonels are often paid less than bus drivers, and there are still tens of thousands of officers without proper dwellings. Most of those possessing a skill-set that permits alternative employment long ago left the armed forces. At the same time, the rank structure remains top-heavy, with more than 800 generals (about 200 in the MoD central staff alone), who often remain in rank even after their positions are reclassified to colonel status. Though the Russian army is about 20 percent smaller than the U.S. armed forces, it employs twice as many officers.

The quality of military training and education on all levels remains inferior. Conscripts are ordinarily trained by longer-serving draftees given the shortage of noncommissioned officers and junior officers. Many military training institutions (three out of four colleges and academies) have been abolished because of the army’s reduced size, lack of funding, streamlining of specialized schools, and the dearth of lecturers. The instructors who remain, like their students, are seldom the best and brightest Russia has to offer. Particularly expensive training programs, such as those for pilots, have suffered disproportionately. In 2003 air force pilots flew just 12 to 44 hours a year, a fraction of the regulation 160 to 180 hours (abided by their Indian and Chinese colleagues); little wonder that pilot errors caused seven of the eight aviation accidents in the first 10 months of that year. Conditions since then have improved — pilots flew an average of 25 hours in 2005 and 40 hours in 2007 — but their training still has a long way to go before it approaches Western standards.

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12 “Military Unready To Face Threats, Says Putin,” Moscow Times (November 19, 2003).
The military profession was considered one of the most highly esteemed and rewarding in the USSR. Since then the social prestige of the uniform has plummeted owing to — among other things — the army’s active involvement in the August 1991 coup attempt and the October 1993 shelling of the White House in Moscow, the widespread corruption that accompanied the withdrawal from Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the weak performance in the Caucasus, the seemingly unending brutal hazing of fresh conscripts, and a multitude of avoidable accidents that have claimed hundreds of lives annually. Quite simply, even with the recent infusion of funds into the defense sector, it is hard to see why the kind of people the MoD would like to attract would want to become professional officers, NCOs, or soldiers.

Growing budgets, misguided spending

Russia’s military outlays have increased steadily since the low point of 1998 and precipitously (by more than 10 percent annually) since 2000. The 2005 defense budget, at $18 billion, signified a 28 percent increase compared to 2004, and the 2006 budget a 20 percent boost over 2005 (although at $20 billion it was nonetheless smaller than that of Saudi Arabia). Defense outlays for 2007 increased faster yet, but at just under $28 billion they were less than 5 percent of the U.S. defense budget. In 2006 Russia spent $3,800 per soldier; the American figure was $190,000, the British $170,000, the German $94,000, and the Turkish $12,700. Still, defense and security expenditures have increased by nearly 500 percent during Putin’s presidency. Another useful perspective is that Moscow’s military spending is several times greater than its appropriations for health care and education combined.

The MoD’s goal is to split funds evenly between maintenance and development by 2011, and by 2017 this ratio should be 30 percent to 70 percent — that is, precisely the reverse of the 2001 spending pattern. Much of the recent windfall is going to be devoted to new weapons systems. In 2007 about 40 percent of defense spending (about $11 billion) are earmarked for research and development, the purchase of new armaments, and the maintenance of existing weapons. In December 2006 Putin announced a new $200-billion seven-year (2007–2015) rearmament program with great fanfare, but it is useful to recall that similarly ambitious initiatives (such as the last one for 2001–2010) have been introduced before and quietly abandoned some time later without realizing most objectives.

The Russian Army inherited the bulk of the Soviet Army’s arsenal, consisting of 635 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), 22,800 main bat-

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13 “Russia’s Defense Spending Declines Faster Than for Other Nations,” Interfax-AVN (Moscow, March 10, 2006).
tanks, 30,000 artillery pieces, 14 strategic and 37 tactical submarines, 600 bombers, 900 fighter jets, 7,800 operational nuclear warheads (4,400 strategic warheads and 3,400 tactical nuclear weapons), among a plethora of other equipment.\textsuperscript{14} Supplying the military with new armaments was not a priority for the Kremlin in the 1990s, but the MoD has been able to complement its arsenal in recent years. Spending on new weapons has drastically increased, by 50 percent in 2006 over the year before, for instance. The most important acquisitions are 36 SS-27 (Topol-M2) ICBMs, each with 6–10 launchers, by the strategic rocket forces; the S-400, the world’s most powerful air defense rocket systems; several diesel submarines and anti-submarine ships by the navy; the new Iskander tactical theater missile system by the army; and the recently developed Mi-28N (“Night Hunter”) helicopter by the air force. A whole range of ships is being designed, including an aircraft carrier. Many are already under construction, and new nuclear-powered submarines will soon join the navy, armed with SS-NX-30 (Bulava) ballistic missile systems. In 2007, Moscow announced the successful development of an aviation vacuum bomb with destructive potential comparable to nuclear weapons — though, according to U.S. claims, it is inferior to the new 14-ton American superbomb publicized the next day.

The recently proclaimed long-term armament program could mean a major improvement in Russia’s arsenal, but there are profound problems regarding the kind of weapons that have been and are to be purchased by the MoD. The primary cause of these shortcomings is rooted in the enduring confusion about the type of challenges Russia faces and can expect to face in the future. The idea behind the new program is that Russia should be able to fight one global war, one regional war, and several localized wars simultaneously. There are internal contradictions in this notion — for instance, fighting a global war requires colossal mobilization, while local wars demand mobile professional forces — that remain unaddressed. And this is quite apart from the consideration that if Russia has had a difficult time defeating Chechen separatists, it is hard to foresee Russia fielding an army that could even come close to meeting the challenges assigned to it in the foreseeable future.

At a time when the American and British militaries are increasingly relying on unmanned vehicles, airplanes, and robotics preparing for noncontact wars, the Russian defense industry continues to produce upgraded versions of weapons that were designed in the 1970s and 1980s and are less suited for future wars. About 60 percent of the funds provided by the new pro-

Program are to be spent on the purchases of 1,400 tanks, thousands of infantry vehicles, heavy artillery pieces, and new generations of missiles and planes. These weapons might be in line with the preferences of the generals who anticipate fighting World War III, but they are hardly going to be useful in localized conflicts or anti-terrorist operations. Many of the funds are designated for the modernization of old weapons whose usefulness, even if modified, is questioned by experts. A presidential aide recently acknowledged that “the share of modern armaments and military hardware is only 10–20 percent [of the total],” that the armed forces had “over 40,000 weapons that [can] hardly ever be used and whose storage costs a lot,” and that “the number of useless weapons still exceeds the number of new weapons commissioned by the government.”

The vast majority of Russian armaments are obsolete and poorly maintained. For instance, the tank and aircraft inventory remains mostly unchanged since the Afghan war. Owing to inadequate funds for maintenance and due to sheer negligence, a great deal of easily salvageable expensive equipment just rusts away. Submarines sink because of corrosion (as in 1997 and 1999), vehicles and machines leak dangerous fuels, and personnel are forced to cannibalize weapons for spare parts unavailable elsewhere. According to the MoD’s statistics released in 2005, 60 percent of deployed ICBMs are past the service life planned for them; about half the tanks require major repairs and only 20 percent meet modern requirements; and no more than 30 percent of fighter planes are combat ready.

Not a credible threat — yet

The Russian military at present is far more frightening on paper than in reality, but even on paper it is not a force that could pose a credible threat to the U.S and its NATO allies in the foreseeable future. As was widely noted, a significant shortcoming of Putin’s first term was the failure to carry out his pledge to comprehensively rebuild the Russian armed forces. Nearing the end of his second term and the 16-year mark after the Soviet collapse, the radical reform the military needs has not been implemented.

Nevertheless, the period of deterioration and stagnation seems to have ended and the recovery has begun. Even if all the new defense minister achieves is curbing corruption and rooting out hazing, he will have surpassed his predecessor’s lackluster record in transforming the military and will have increased both societal support for and the prestige of the armed forces.

16 “Demands for Military Reform,” RIA Novosti (July 12, 2005)
In the meantime, Western supporters of NATO expansion may congratulate themselves for prevailing in the face of opponents’ arguments throughout the past decade that Russia was unable and disinclined to threaten the countries on its western borders. Thanks to the recent rounds of the Atlantic Alliance’s expansion, the nations suppressed by the Soviet Union for half a century no longer need to face an aggressive Russia on their own. Little wonder that they are the most enthusiastic American allies in Europe.

As for the United States, it is time to focus on Russian deeds rather than words. Notwithstanding its frequent declarations of cooperation and partnership, the Kremlin’s actions show that it has, for quite some time now, viewed Russian-American relations as a zero-sum game: Whatever is bad for the U.S. must be good for Russia. There are many examples. A rift develops between the United States and some of its NATO allies following the 2003 invasion of Iraq? Moscow steps into the fray to forge new ties with France and Germany. The U.S.— and the West— strongly objects to Iran’s nuclear program? Russia insists on continuing to supply Iran, even though an unstable nuclear power on Russia’s border might not be the wisest policy. Hamas — an organization that openly repudiates Israel’s right to exist and with whose leaders the U.S. refuses to bargain — wins the Palestinian elections? Russia is quick to hold talks with its leaders in Moscow. Venezuela’s virulently anti-American president, Hugo Chávez, wants to re-arm to “deter or repel any invasion by U.S. forces”? Russia is happy to oblige with a sale of 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles, a new Kalashnikov factory, and 24 Sukhoi-30 fighter jets. Calling Putin “our friend” does not alter the fact that Moscow considers Washington its primary potential enemy.

Still, despite the recent infusions of resources, Russia’s army remains a pale shadow of its former self. If it is, indeed, on the road to recovery, it has a very long way to go considering its present condition, confusion about its future direction, and the enormous advances the U.S. armed forces have made since the Cold War.