

Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics within the Russian Military

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Introduction

Vladimir Putin's government is a closed and personalistic regime where relationships matter more than bureaucratic hierarchy. This also extends to the military leadership, with certain qualifications. The minister of defense has almost absolute power and is subject to one person's will: the president of Russia. The Russian command-and-control system is heavily reliant on its officers and vertical command structure. The officers have the highest degree of authority over their subordinates.

There is little surprise, then, that military reforms in Russia are heavily personalized. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian military has undergone "Grachev's reform," "Rodionov/Baturin's reform," "Sergeev/Kokoshin's reform," "Ivanov-Kvashnin's reform," "Serdyukov-Makarov's reform" and, finally, "Shoygu-Gerasimov's period." The reforms were named after the military minister of defense or after the civilian minister and the chief of the general staff (except Baturin and Kokoshin, who had been leading the now defunct Defense Council under Yeltsin). The military leadership has had to overcome a set of traditional obstacles in Russian civil-military relations: the general reluctance of the military to reform; military clans based on service branches pursuing their organizational interests; a weakness of feedback mechanisms within the lower ranks; the special political status of the military-industrial complex and the resulting politicization of military procurements; and the lack of societal motivation to serve as enlisted soldiers in the military (and as officers before 2011).

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Russia's Ministers of Defense

Since 2000, Russia has had three ministers of defense: Sergei Borisovich Ivanov, Anatoly Eduardovich Serdyukov, and Sergey Kuzhugetovich Shoygu—who is currently serving. These people have been the main transmitters of the president's will in the military. Consequently, their ability to communicate with the military generals and coordinate with other governmental branches and departments are the two leading factors contributing to the development of the Russian military.

SERGEY IVANOV (2001–2007)

Sergei Ivanov met Vladimir Putin in the early period of his service in the KGB. He finished his foreign intelligence service in the late 1990s when he was **appointed** as the deputy head of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and had to report directly to the future president. Ivanov was more successful in the intelligence service than Putin because he had served in “the capitalist block” (Finland and Kenya). They started their careers in the '70s, the gold period of the KGB under Yuri Andropov. On the one hand, Soviet foreign intelligence officers witnessed better living standards in the West. On the other, the organizational culture of the KGB left Ivanov with a sense of superiority and exclusiveness that affected his future career. Ivanov is a typical hawkish post-Soviet politician with **cautious** personal manners. In 2000, he reportedly **claimed** that Russia had to show “reasonable national egoism,” making “neighbors respect our national interests” regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion and protection of ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics. However, as a political appointee, Ivanov **became** party to the military bureaucracy instead of asserting his authority over it. He **preferred** stable relationships with the generals, and chose to abstain from internal conflicts and concentrate on coalition building. Under his leadership from 2001 to 2007, the Russian military largely failed to make itself more effective as a fighting force, as evidenced publicly by the conflict in Georgia in 2008.

Ivanov's hawkish values and his lack of military experience **played** poorly for the development of the Russian military. The military kept preparing for a large-scale conflict under the ideological umbrella of restoring a great power's might. Ivanov seemingly supported this position, which naturally reduced prospects for structural changes aimed at, first and foremost, making a mobile and compact fighting force instead of the old mass Soviet military. He argued against parliamentary involvement in military affairs, isolating policy processes from any independent oversight. This made it easier for the military bureaucracy to manipulate the budget and reform programs, bypassing civilian goals. For example, the military financially inflated the experiment that was supposed to make Russia's Airborne Forces (VDV) division in Pskov an all-volunteer force. It included infrastructural, logistical, and vehicle maintenance costs that the government planned to cover after forming the all-volunteer division. The experiment failed, and the delegated money was spent on organizational purposes.

ANATOLY SERDYUKOV (2007–2012)

Ivanov's successor Anatoly Serdyukov was drastically different. He had served in the military but allegedly **was** connected to the KGB while working for the furniture store Dresden, which imported goods from

the German Democratic Republic. Serdyukov's administrative career began in 2000 after he married the daughter of Viktor Zubkov, a politician close to Putin. A year after he started his government service, Serdyukov became Zubkov's successor in the Saint Petersburg Federal Tax Service office. In 2004, he became the head of the Federal Tax Service, and his father-in-law Zubkov was appointed as the head of the Federal Service of Financial Monitoring. Serdyukov's first political achievement was the criminal case of Yukos oil company, which led to its bankruptcy. On February 15, 2007, Vladimir Putin appointed Serdyukov as the minister of defense, five days after his infamous Munich Security Conference speech in which he announced an end to Russia's attempts to integrate with the West and a year before Dmitry Medvedev became the president of Russia.¹ Putin **introduced** the new minister as a person with significant experience in financial audit who could deal with "rational spending of the budget's money." The goal was pragmatic—since 2000, the Kremlin had **quadrupled** the military budget but had seen no increase in military prestige and combat effectiveness.

Serdyukov built a personally loyal and effective coalition. Serdyukov desired to make the military akin to a private enterprise but with military weapons and equipment. He used reform proposals from the 1990s and 2000s to build a mobile and effective military with the civilian Ministry of Defense, Western-style NCOs corps, and market-oriented procurements.² His general distrust toward the military, the lack of allegiance to the military culture, and lack of general military knowledge alienated military groups and the military-industrial complex. Ultimately, the military counterintelligence directorate of the FSB **built** a criminal case against Serdyukov. Its head allegedly reported directly to the previous minister Sergei Ivanov. Serdyukov was ousted in 2012 and charged with offenses over corruption schemes.

SERGEI SHOYGU (2012–PRESENT)

Current minister Sergei Shoygu strikes a balance between the cautious nature of Ivanov and the more radically reform-minded Serdyukov. Shoygu had served as a minister of emergency situations for more than 20 years, was one of the founders of the Kremlin's United Russia party, and assumed the leading defense office in November 2012. Shoygu **was** exceptionally popular in the 1990s but decided not to run for president against Vladimir Putin. As a minister of defense, Shoygu seemingly chose to reconsider the radical changes of his predecessor, but in fact, the general policy orientation has remained the same. At the beginning, Shoygu **restored** historical Kantemirovskaya and Tamanaskaya tank divisions, brought military cadets back to the Victory Day parade, halted the implementation of property cuts, and reduced procurement of foreign armaments. However, he has not yet reversed the structural changes introduced under Serdyukov, such as operational-strategic commands, brigade-based formations and strategic rearmament plans. Putin personally ordered the ministry to stop "scurrying around" and begin "fine grinding of all mechanisms of the military machine." However, Shoygu has quickly **remilitarized** the Ministry of Defense by appointing military generals to senior positions. His most visionary decision was to select General Valery Gerasimov as the chief of the general staff. The Russian general staff has traditionally been the brain of Russia's military development. Gerasimov has transformed the staff into an adaptable and forward-looking leading military center that showed its effectiveness in Ukraine and Syria.

Both as a minister of emergency situations and of defense, Shoygu valued public relations and opinion-making. The Ministry of Defense invigorated the military TV channel Zvezda's social network presence, created or reformed international military forums, and revitalized early military education (syvorovtsy and

1. Putin said in the Munich speech: "One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?"

2. The share of civilians working at the Ministry of Defense had increased from 16 percent to 46 percent under Serdyukov. Most of them were from the Federal Tax Service.

kadety) and socialization (patriotic military youth movement, YunArmiia). His daughter Kseniia has [been](#) organizing mass sport and cultural events with active military involvement.

The Ministry of Defense under Shoygu has been actively seeking to create an ideological identity. The construction of the Main Cathedral of the Armed Forces is a vivid [example](#) of an attempt to blend Soviet heterodoxy with contemporary Russian neoconservative narratives as it seeks to reconcile prerevolutionary Russian and Soviet legacies. It is now normal for the Russian soldiers to praise Soviet military heroes and legendary Imperial soldiers and officers. The underlying idea behind it is to overcome artificial ideological cleavages and emphasize the primary purpose of the Russian military: to serve the homeland. This change is strategically important—there are almost no senior officers socialized in strict Soviet ideology anymore who could be averse to this ideologic change. The new Russian military gradually becomes “Russian” again—rooted in centuries of complicated but rich political, military, and social history.

Public relations and the militarization of the Russian foreign policy brought unprecedented praise for the military. Independent criticism and assessment have become primarily discouraged. A journalist was [fired](#) for harsh criticism of the ministry at the beginning of Shoygu’s tenure. The intervention in Syria, rearmament efforts, masterful public relations, and the recognized improvement in military effectiveness has made the Russian armed forces the most trusted [institution](#), surpassing President Putin.

Whether the ideological change of the military fits well with general social change is a question. Russia may face the same problem that the U.S. armed forces have to solve today: the widening divide between predominantly conservative troops and an increasingly progressive society. There is already a serious epistemic divide today; the Russians know little about the military, and military veterans struggle with reintegrating into the civilian labor market after discharge. There are numerous instances when senior experienced military officers in reserve work as physical education teachers at schools and private security personnel. These officers however should be eligible for at least mid-level managerial positions.

Chiefs of General Staff

The chief of the General Staff is the top-ranked military officer in the Russian armed forces. Apart from strategic and operational command, the chief is the central “interpreter” of the military’s needs for civilian leadership. The relationship of the general with the minister of defense is one of the pillars of Russian civil-military relations. The efficacy of contemporary Russian military leadership depends on the link between the minister and the chief. The former has to balance out the military requests and civilian demands and limitations to achieve civilian objectives, while the latter has to effectively couple military needs with the minister’s orders.

ANATOLY KVASHIN (1997–2004)

Anatoly Kvashin has served as the chief of the General Staff from 1997 to 2004. During his service, the Russian military experienced two reforms, the rise of Vladimir Putin and the Second Chechen War. General Kvashnin finished an engineering ROTC in 1969, an unusual start of the military career for a Russian general. He joined the military and later finished an armored forces academy and the Academy of the General Staff. He gathered extensive command experience in the Turkestan military district, one of the toughest districts in terms of living standards in the Soviet Union. He served in commanding positions in Chechnya from the outset of the war in 1994 until 1997. Before him, several commanders [refused](#) to lead the military in the breakaway region, citing the unpreparedness of the troops. Indeed, his tenure began with the disastrous assault on Grozny, where dozens of Russian tanks were destroyed or captured on the city’s streets. As a commander in Chechnya, he [reportedly](#) harshly criticized civilian authorities for

abandoning weapons and armaments in Chechnya before the war and for signing the Khasavyurt Accord. Kvashnin was an energetic and decisive officer, a rare trait in Russia in the 1990s.

His personal traits had not played well for the Russian military. Apart from the military defeats in the First Chechen War, General Kvashnin willingly **executed** ideas that had to be backtracked later. During the first military reform, the General Staff merged Space Forces with Strategic Missile Forces, dismissed Infantry Headquarters, and decided to decrease the number of strategic missiles. The ministry subsequently rolled back all these changes. Kvashnin also approved the Pristina Airport advance in Kosovo in 1999, which reportedly lacked proper logistic support. During the first four years of Putin's tenure, General Kvashnin was responsible for implementing Ivanov's reforms and developing the special federal program for the transition to the all-volunteer force. Both arguably failed. For example, the transition to the all-volunteer force began with an experiment with the Pskov 76th Airborne **division**. The test proved unsuccessful, although Russia had already had an all-volunteer 201st **division** in Tajikistan back at the beginning of the 2000s. General Kvashnin was an operationally decisive and politically power-craving officer. He seemingly had influence over Minister Ivanov who could poorly guide his chaotic energy. He **attempted** to make the General Staff a powerful quasi-Ministry of Defense, though unsuccessfully. Kvashnin was a meticulous combat officer but a narrow-minded politician. Being a chief of the General Staff in the early days of post-Soviet Russia required attempts to bridge an unprecedentedly vast civil-military divide. Kvashnin misunderstood civilian public affairs—including Putin's goal to consolidate power—which led to both poor military development and his ouster in 2004.

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YURI BALUYEVSKY (200–2008)

Yuri Baluyevsky had been the chief of the General Staff from July 2004 to June 2008. He had served in the military since 1966 and joined the General Staff during the Soviet period. General Baluyevsky served in the western parts of the Soviet Union, East Germany, Georgia, Armenia, and the North Caucasus. As a senior general, he was **vocal** about his **anti-NATO** views but expressed **support** for the economic integration with the European Union. As the head of the Main Operation Directorate of the General Staff, he planned the 1999 Pristina Airport advance. Baluyevsky represented the last generation of senior post-Soviet military officers whose allegiance to the Kremlin's decisions was not always guaranteed. He dared to speak up **against** radical changes in the military. He publicly criticized Serdyukov's and even Putin's decisions—for instance, the relocation of the navy headquarters to Saint Petersburg and Putin's **idea** to leave the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Baluyevsky was a prominent **supporter** of nuclear deterrence as a pillar of international stability, which shaped his views regarding U.S. missile defense systems in Europe and arms control agreements.

General Baluyevsky supported changes that were later introduced during the Serdyukov period. He **argued** in favor of the dynamic brigade-based formation of the military, the outsourcing of non-military functions,

and the size of the military of one million service members with a majority of all-volunteer soldiers. General Baluyevsky also **supported** greater transparency by publishing annual reports about the state of the Russian military development. At the same time, he was **vocally** anti-American, seeing the U.S.-led global order as a threat to Russian national security and political stability. He thought beyond the military domain and advocated for formalizing U.S.-Russia relations based on trust-building measures in missile defense, space, nonproliferation, and terrorism. However, his innovative ideas and general engagement had not resulted in the substantial rise of combat readiness. This clearly illustrates the type of relationship Baluyevsky had with Minister Ivanov. They had **cooperative** relations mainly because both of them **were** non-conflictual individuals with **similar** views on international and military affairs. However, it was different with Serdyukov, whom General Baluyevsky disliked for radical, non-harmonized changes and the civilianization of the Ministry of Defense. He was dismissed two months before the war in Georgia, which showed the disastrous state of the Russian military.

NIKOLAI MAKAROV (2008–2012)

Nikolai Makarov was appointed as the chief of the General Staff in June 2008 after serving as the head of the armament directorate for more than a year. General Makarov is known as the executor of Anatoly Serdyukov's defense reform, which radically transformed the Russian military. Allegedly, he willingly executed Serdyukov's demands and orders and had not attempted to stop even the most unprecedented and criticized decisions. Indeed, in replacing a vocal and less obedient chief of the General Staff, General Makarov successfully served his full term and was ousted only in 2012 following Minister Serdyukov's departure.

Nikolai Makarov had a long career as an infantry officer in the Soviet and Russian armed forces. He became a general in 1989 and commanded the staff of the peacekeeping forces in Tajikistan after the Soviet Union's dissolution. He was an innovative commander. In 2005, as the commander of the Siberian Military District, he **supported** parents' committees within the military regiments and organized an online meeting answering questions from the public audience. As a chief of the General Staff, Makarov supported importing foreign armament for subsequent domestication of its technologies. He **criticized** the Russian military-industrial complex and publicly commented on its inability to provide better crew protection and smaller production costs.

General Makarov was actively participating in international events and visits as a chief of the General Staff. He frequently **visited** EU and NATO member states to enhance trust, sign new international armament deals, and **object** to the missile defense system of NATO in Europe. In 2012, nine months before his dismissal, he **claimed** that the Russian military was structurally reformed and was ready to start a full-scale rearmament program. This program occurred during his successor's tenure, General Valery Gerasimov.

VALERY GERASIMOV (2012–PRESENT)

Valery Gerasimov joined the General Staff in December 2010 as general Makarov's deputy. He was promoted to the chief of the General Staff in November 2012 under Defense Minister Shoygu. Unsurprisingly, Putin **emphasized** stable relations with the military-industrial complex and rearmament efforts, both of which were emphasized in Gerasimov's appointment. Gerasimov has extensively **worked** on increasing intra-military jointness and effectiveness of civil-military disaster and warfare response. Under his guidance, the General Staff became the main body responsible for coordinating multiple federal and regional civilian agencies (previously under Shoygu) and incorporating defense and security agencies. This underscores the relationship of Shoygu with Gerasimov. The chief of the General Staff commands the military and proposes changes in line with civilian demands. The minister lobbies for resources and coordinates with other civilian branches but meticulously channels Putin's strategic priorities into military guidelines.

Gerasimov became popular in the West after his [speech](#) at the Academy of Military Sciences, a military think tank in Moscow. The address was infamously called the “Gerasimov Doctrine,” which, in fact, was a concise summary of Russia’s official views over the blend of nonmilitary and military means of warfare. However, as an army officer, Gerasimov has achieved much more than being mistakenly quoted for the doctrine.

General Gerasimov is an exceptionally skilled officer. He was born in Kazan, where he finished cadet courses and attended three military universities (two military armored forces institutions and the General Staff Academy). Gerasimov [served](#) all over the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, withdrew forces from Estonia, and headed the staff of the 58th Army during the war in Chechnya, serving at first under well-known airborne general Shamanov, whom he later replaced in 2001. Gerasimov is [reportedly](#) a reader of Alexander Suvorov, a revered Russian military leader of the eighteenth century who had never lost a single battle. He has [advocated](#) for a rigorous evidence-based approach toward Russia’s military build-up, combining strategic military forecasting with a dynamic response. Crucially, Gerasimov publicly [emphasized](#) the importance of developing an overwhelming military superiority over any threat, both known and unknown, instead of preparing for a single type of warfare.

Implications

Under Putin, the Russian military leadership has gradually become more subordinate to the Kremlin, more pragmatic, and more innovative in military development. The odds of seeing a high-ranking military officer criticizing or publicly commenting on the Kremlin’s decisions without its sanction are marginal today. However, political subordination is a major challenge to effective monitoring and evaluation of the military. The Ministry of Defense and the Kremlin operate with skewed information that generally overstates the status of armed forces due to the lack of independent parliamentary oversight and nascent internal evaluation mechanisms. Should the Kremlin ever seek a more functional and autonomous military system, future military leadership should focus on decoupling the military police and attorneys from the military command structures and reforming military-civilian integration in science and education. The Military University of the Ministry of Defense and Academy of Military Sciences are well-positioned for expanding their studies in “soft” areas, such as command and control, economics, sociology, specialized higher education, and peacebuilding.

Today, the military is one of the most trusted institutions in Russia and a functional foreign policy tool. However, the system is not yet institutionalized. The relationship of the minister with the chief of the General Staff is decisive within this system and its future efficacy depends in great part on the political strength (connection with Putin) and bureaucratic savviness of the minister, who, if history is any guide, either asserts authority over the chief of the General Staff or is manipulated by the military.

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In case of future political transition, the Russian military would remain independent. The Kremlin created the National Guard for domestic use because the military is deeply averse to any organizational

interference in politics. However, Russia's military leadership will be particularly sensitive to any attempt by foreign governments to exploit domestic turmoil in Russia, which is particularly important for contested areas, such as Crimea. The Russian military would be placed on high alert on the premise of defending Russia from any foreign intervention that would seek change of status.

However, the change of highest leader—the president—will be decisive for a subsequent direction of Russia's military development. This person will inherit, on the one hand, personalized civil-military relations without broader civilian control and, on the other, a military that can either obey decisive presidential guidance or shirk and decay in the lack thereof. ■

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