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DEFENSE INDUSTRY HAS PASSED THE ‘POINT OF NO RETURN.’

DEFENSE INDUSTRY HAS PASSED THE ‘POINT OF NO RETURN.’ (By Aleksandr Khranchikhin, deputy director of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Nov. 2, 2009, p. 4. Complete text:) In the late Soviet era, there was a joke about how the cruiser Aurora was the most powerful warship in history: “It fired a single shot in 1917, and for 70 years now, everything has been falling apart.” It appears that we’ve managed to create a no less powerful weapon in the post-Soviet period – the Bulava missile.

Its effectiveness has turned out to be downright stunning. The missile has not gone into serial production, and it never will, yet it has already sunk the Russian Navy. Almost all the funding allocated for the Navy’s development has been spent on this crazy, dead-end program. Anyone who has some idea of the real state of affairs is well aware that in a few years the Russian Navy as a whole, as well as all four of its individual component fleets, will cease to exist. That is absolutely inevitable; the situation can hardly be rectified even by massive purchases of warships abroad. In this light, it is especially amusing to watch the fierce “battle for Sevastopol.” What use will we have for Sevastopol after 2017? Why pay Kiev huge amounts of money to lease empty berths? At best, all that will remain of the Black Sea Fleet by that time will be the Novorossiisk Special Water Area Brigade. As for the discussion of whether we need an oceangoing fleet or whether a coastal fleet is enough, it looks like an outright farce. Now we aren’t even going to have a coastal fleet; the most that our “fleet” will be able to do in another 10 years is directly defend a few main naval bases. All because we have been forging the Bulava [“mace”].

It wouldn’t be so bad if they were only making the missile, but they’re also building three whole submarines for it! The colossal amounts of money that have already been spent on the Bulava and the Borei [submarines] have simply been thrown to the winds. The worst thing is that it looks as if the madness will continue, and money will keep going down the drain.

Of course, it is psychologically very difficult to acknowledge failure. Money has been thrown away and the Navy has been ruined. And most importantly, Russia is losing the naval component of its strategic nuclear weapons. However, it is time to admit the obvious, because the situation is actually getting worse: Whereas before, the Bulava at least flew, albeit poorly, this time (during testing on Oct. 29) it never even left the launch tube.

Unfortunately, the Bulava story is not unique – it is simply the most conspicuous. It and other similar stories suggest a number of conclusions.

The state, as represented by the Defense Ministry, should formulate requirements for the development of new weapons and military hardware – specifications, quantity and price – and solicit bids to meet those requirements, and foreign companies should be allowed to submit bids too.

Manufacturing companies should build a prototype at their own expense. The state would compensate the winning bidder for its development costs and would issue a production order. No other arrangement is acceptable; the practice of paying for years of research and development from the federal budget must be stopped immediately.

Strategic and nuclear weapons, of course, have to be produced inside the country (here, foreign participation is unacceptable). But there still has to be competitive bidding. If there is only one company in some field, it should evidently be artificially split up. Or a second company should be created from scratch. The insanity of creating defense-industry conglomerates must also be immediately terminated, and the reverse process initiated.

Furthermore, it is critically important to institute strict liability for officials and company executives for failure to fulfill a contract. Both financial and criminal liability. It would be highly appropriate to start with the developers of the Bulava.

At present, our defense industry is in a situation where there is neither competition nor accountability. It is very strange to expect that we will have any weapons at all. But it is even stranger to expect the situation to change. After all, the foundation of our state is a corrupt vertical chain of command that involves wholesale merging of the state and business, total monopolization of the latter and a total lack of accountability on the part of officials/businessmen. Especially since we have a monopoly situation not only in business but also in politics.

There is yet another sad circumstance. Even if all appropriate organizational measures are taken, we still won't see any weapons, except perhaps some individual prototypes. Because research and manufacturing have already passed the "point of no return," and they simply aren't able to provide the country with weapons, no matter what sort of liability may be instituted.