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Mason Clark

THE RUSSIAN MILITARY: FORECASTING THE THREAT

ISW
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR

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A Russian T-80 tank takes part in the 'Vostok-2022' military exercises at the Uspenovskyi training ground (Sakhalin Island) outside the city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on the Russian Far East on September 4, 2022. The Vostok 2022 military exercises, involving several Kremlin-friendly countries including China, takes place from September 1-7 across several training grounds in Russia's Far East and in the waters off it. Over 50,000 soldiers and more than 5,000 units of military equipment, including 140 aircraft and 60 ships, are involved in the drills. (Photo by Kirill KUDRYAVTSEV / AFP) (Photo by KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV/AFP via Getty Images)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Mason joined ISW in 2018 and led ISW's Russia Team from July 2020 to December 2023. In this role, Mason designed and led ISW's standard-setting coverage of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. In addition to writing and managing the production of hundreds of ISW's daily updates, Mason has published multiple ISW reports on Russian military learning and thinking. He has published externally with *Foreign Affairs, Chatham House*, and others, and has been extensively quoted in leading international media coverage of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Mason regularly briefs senior military and civilian decision makers in the United States, NATO allies, Ukraine, and other partner states.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

ISW is a non-partisan and non-profit public policy research organization. It advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. It is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve the strategic objectives of the United States around the globe.

Learn more about Mason Clark

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Table of Contents

THE RUSSIAN MILITARY: FORECASTING THE THREAT

Executive Summary

The Russian military has undergone a rapid and comprehensive transformation since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 by optimizing itself to fight a positional war. The Russian military has made a virtue of necessity in that optimization, but its degraded force is now likely incapable of effective maneuver warfare at scale. The Russian military has revised the structure, equipment, and tactics of its units at every echelon from group of forces to company to enable itself to fight a positional war with low-quality personnel, insufficient stores of armor and advanced munitions, and poor command and control. The current Russian military can *only* conduct positional offensive operations to support its theory of victory — outlasting Western support for Ukraine and sustaining grinding territorial advances that Ukraine cannot reverse — and cannot currently conduct significant operational maneuver.

The Russian military cannot and will not simply recreate its pre-2022 force structure and capabilities following the negotiated end or suspension of major combat operations in Ukraine. Western efforts to forecast the medium-term Russian military threat to NATO will be dangerously flawed if they are not based on a thorough understanding of Russian military culture; the Russian military's current capabilities in Ukraine (rather than pre-2022 assessments); and the structural factors and variables that will shape the Russian military's lessons learned efforts and reconstitution processes.

The Russian military will very likely attempt to reconstitute a force capable of some form of mechanized maneuver. Institutional dishonesty and cultural constraints will impede — but not completely invalidate — Russian efforts to design and implement an effective reconstitution plan. Russian military reconstitution efforts through 2030 will combine elements of the Russian military's pre-2022 force structure, its current adaptations for positional warfare, and aspirational precision strike capabilities into a hybrid force, and will not pursue any one of these pathways to the exclusion of the others. Combat experience in Ukraine will shape the next generation of Russian officers, and the Russian military will integrate learning from Ukraine to some degree despite institutional constraints on honestly discussing lessons learned. A partially or inefficiently reconstituted Russian military can still threaten NATO and US interests, however. Western forecasts must not assume that Russian forces will not be able to threaten NATO in the short-term because they currently cannot conduct operational maneuver against the highly effective Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) in Ukraine. **NATO must update both its pre-2022 assessments of Russian capabilities and its preparations to deter or defeat future Russian aggression against Europe.**

Russian Conventional Military Capabilities as of 2025

The Russian military's initial performance in Ukraine was a deviation from the way the Russians intended to fight, rather than a direct manifestation of an inherently flawed Russian way of war. The Russian, and before it the Soviet, way of war centers on deliberately offsetting a lower quality of individual personnel with relative tactical inflexibility to enable effective operational-level campaigns designed with the tactical limitations of the force in mind. Russian units memorize and relentlessly drill a playbook of battle orders (боевой приказ, *boyevoy prikaz*) from which tactical officers select a chosen plan with minimal alterations to meet the situation at

hand, rather than using the formal Western approach of creating a bespoke plan with staff support for each situation. This system enables senior commanders to achieve operational complexity and effectiveness through the aggregate effects of numerous individually simplistic but rapidly executable and predictable tactical actions. The modern Russian military continues to implement the Soviet optimization of centralizing decision-making authority at the army echelon and above to make the most of a limited pool of qualified officers in large-scale conventional war.

This Russian and Soviet way of war *can* be highly effective when well executed, as in the closing years of WWII, and the Russian military continues to draw on the Soviet experience in WWII as an aspirational model of effective conventional maneuver warfare. The deeply ingrained popular idea of the "Russian steamroller" and the idea that the Soviet Union — and by extension modern Russia — wins wars by simply outlasting its opponents is inaccurate and directly shapes flawed perceptions of contemporary Russian capabilities. Three primary factors enabled the Red Army to leverage its mass effectively to achieve operational and strategic effectiveness, especially at the end of World War II.

- First, the Red Army developed excellent operational art over time and concentrated on effectiveness at the operational level over skill at the tactical level of war.
- Second, the Red Army was not simply a large but low-quality force by the end of the war — the Soviets fielded high-quality breakthrough and exploitation formations in addition to large numbers of line rifle divisions.
- Third, the Soviet Union fully mobilized a truly massive base of manpower and material to fight an existential total war (unlike the mobilization in support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as much as the Kremlin tries to portray its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine as an existential war) and received substantial international support through the Lend-Lease program.

The Russian military is *not* effectively emulating this Soviet model in Ukraine, however. The already relatively low quality of Russian personnel and officers has declined precipitously; Russian orders processes have broken down; and Russian operational art is a far cry from Russian pre-war intent and from the Soviet practice on which the Russian military ostensibly models itself in conventional war. The Russian military's *aspirational* views of modern war have directly shaped the adaptations Russian commanders have made in order to fight a positional war in Ukraine with degraded capabilities, however.

The Russian military has adapted its strategic and operational command structures to fight a positional war in Ukraine and is cementing its wartime adaptations into planned practice in a future war. Putin appointed Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov as theater commander on January 11, 2023, a position he has held since then. Gerasimov has commanded five to seven groups of forces (equivalent to Soviet front or Western army group commands), each controlling subordinate field armies and other independent units. This current command structure is in line with the intended structure of Russian command in a large-scale war in pre-2022 doctrine, though heavily compressed through the deployment of up to seven groups of forces to a theater of operations covered in peacetime by two military districts. The Kremlin issued a directive in February 2025 formalizing the groups of forces as new General Staff Directorates and restructuring the military districts as strictly administrative structures for force generation rather than joint headquarters, codifying its de facto structure in Ukraine and returning to the historical Soviet approach to military districts and wartime front-level headquarters. The Russian military has largely transformed armies and corps into static headquarters assigned to fixed sectors of the front line since 2022, an optimization for fighting a positional war with decreased C2 capabilities. Russian divisions are likewise predominantly operating as combined arms army headquarters in microcosm — commanding their depleted organic battalions as well as attached "independent regiments" and various other detachments on fixed axes. This force structure is effective in a positional war, but Russian field armies would very likely struggle to maneuver as cohesive entities in any future period of mobile warfare without extensive reconstitution and reformation.

The Russian military has transformed itself at the battalion and company level since 2022 into a force optimized for slow offensive operations in a positional war, functionally abandoning the ability to conduct mechanized maneuver warfare and accepting a system relying on high casualties for limited gains. The Russian military abandoned the theoretically flexible but highly brittle mechanized Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) it used in the 2022 invasion after heavy early losses. The Russian military's decision to invade Ukraine with over a hundred BTGs rather than mobilizing and fielding its brigades and regiments at full strength effectively locked the Russian military into a degraded force structure well into 2023 and even 2024. The Russian military successfully adapted to these limitations throughout 2023 and 2024, however, abandoning the BTG model and optimizing its tactical unit structures and tactics for a slow positional war. The Russian military's current tactical approaches are an effective adaptation to its degraded command and control capabilities and the positional nature of the current war. The Russian military remains relatively flexible and iterative at the *tactical* level, within the constraints of its degraded force structure. Russian forces have developed specialized sub-tactical unit structures and assault tactics relying on speed and dispersed movement to bypass or assault Ukrainian positions disrupted by fires or perceived to be weak points. This approach is deeply inefficient in lives and can only enable slow advances, but the Russian military appears to assess that its loss rates are sustainable and that its slow rates of advance meet its strategic requirements.

The Russian military has developed a minimally sufficient form of operational art that can enable very slow operational successes against overstretched Ukrainian defenses, but Russian offensive approaches do not translate effectively to maneuver warfare at scale and will not produce a rapid Ukrainian collapse in the short- to medium-term. The Russian military likely developed and disseminated an operational approach to facilitate steady advances by early 2025, modeled on the capture of Avdiivka in early 2024. Russian forces have demonstrated the ability to find and exploit tactical weak points in Ukrainian positions (most often the seams between unit boundaries or attacking during Ukrainian unit rotations), interdict Ukrainian lines of communication, and slowly envelop key settlements to force Ukrainian forces to withdraw to avoid encirclement. This limited operational art *does* support the Kremlin's grinding theory of victory in Ukraine, though at great cost to Russian men and material and at a very slow pace. **The Russian military cannot conduct rapid operational maneuver, however, and discussions of *relatively* effective Russian operational art must not be extrapolated and compared either to the modern Russian military's intended capabilities in a major conventional war pre-2022 or to the effective *Soviet* operational art that the contemporary Russian military continues to use as a model.**

The Russian military's series of decisions since February 2022 to optimize its forces for a positional war will shape and constrain Russia's ongoing and future reconstitution efforts. Senior Russian military officials have repeatedly stated their intent to rebuild a force capable of large-scale war with NATO, and the degraded force the Russian military fields as of August 2025 will be the starting point of this effort — not the Russian military's non-existent intended capabilities from before 2022. The Russian military's willingness to acknowledge and work *with* — rather than *through* — its current status as a positional force will heavily shape the coherence of Russian reconstitution efforts and affect the rate at which Russian forces can constitute a limited but serious challenge to NATO frontline states.

Russian Military Reconstitution

The Russian military's reconstitution efforts will draw on elements of three pathways, each focused on an intended primary method of conventional warfighting.

- Attempting to restore mechanized maneuver through a combination of restoring the Russian military's pre-2022 capabilities and structure; revisiting Soviet concepts of mass mechanized formations; and developing new adaptations to make armor survivable on the modern battlefield.
- Investing further in the capabilities and tactical techniques that the Russian military developed in

Ukraine to enable offensive operations in a positional war, such as dismounted infantry tactics and precision tactical fires using drones — many of which will be part of efforts to restore mechanized maneuver in a modern, rather than a pre-2022, framework.

- Revisiting the Russian military's aspirational efforts to field advanced and operationally significant precision strike capabilities, which the Russian military pursued (in order to conduct "non-contact war") but did not fully develop and field prior to 2022.

The Russian military will not pursue any one of these reconstitution pathways to the exclusion of the others, nor will it attempt to rebuild its pre-2022 force structure, and forecasts of Russian military reconstitution should concentrate on assessing *what balance* among these three pathways the Russian military will pursue in the medium term.

The Russian military's conceptual approach to studying the lessons of past and ongoing wars to inform future capabilities development — which heavily derives its methods and forms from Soviet military thought — will shape the way it studies potential lessons from its invasion of Ukraine. Russian military professionals approach military science as a field based on rigorous investigation and evolution over time that leads to the discovery of objective *laws* of war. The Russian military retains the Soviet focus on innovative and creative thought on the changing character of war and the strategic threat environment that Russia faces. Russian and Soviet military thinking heavily integrates the study of military history into its preparation for future war and does so arguably more — or at least in a more systematic fashion — than in Western militaries. The Russian military will use the post-WWII Soviet learning effort as a model of an effective effort to rapidly assess lessons learned from a major conventional war and disseminate learning and adaptations throughout the force. **Western analysts must assess Russian discussions of lessons from Ukraine and ongoing Russian reconstitution efforts in the context of Russian military thought, rather than mirror imaging Western concepts.**

The Russian military's assessment of the likely character of modern war prior to 2022 heavily shaped the Russian military's performance in Ukraine and will continue to drive Russian reconstitution efforts — despite the positional character of much of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Russian military retained arguably a greater focus on large-scale conventional warfare than NATO in the 21st century, despite the prominence of Russian thinking on irregular or hybrid war in Western discussions of the Russian threat. The Russian military anticipated that precision fires and fragmented, mobile land operations would dominate the next major conventional war, but Russian forces were unable to effectively implement pre-war theoretical approaches in Ukraine. The Russian military is a technologically forward-looking institution, but poor resourcing and R&D limitations (compared to NATO militaries) have historically limited the Russian military's ability to implement its desired technologically focused force design and doctrine development. The Russian military's technological innovation in Ukraine is unsurprising, however, and Russian reconstitution efforts will very likely attempt to revise pre-2022 Russian conceptions of modern war in some fashion.

The Russian military is highly unlikely to accept, through the medium term, that it is *only* a positional warfare force and double down on its current capabilities in Ukraine. Militaries do not often prepare for types of wars they do not want to fight — and the Russian military did not intend to fight a positional and attritional war in Ukraine. Russian military discussions prior to 2022 emphasized the need to fight fragmented mobile battles without cohesive front lines and to quickly win a war with NATO through a combination of rapid mechanized maneuver and potential nuclear escalation, *not* wearing NATO down in a protracted conflict. The Russian military's continued exaltation of the Red Army in World War II; its historical focus on speed and mass at the operational level; and the desire to avoid a future positional war will all push the Russian military to attempt to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver — even if it faces limitations on its ability to do so.

The Russian military will almost certainly attempt to reconstitute a force capable of conducting mechanized maneuver in some capacity.

The Russian military will likely continue to wrestle with the same contradictions it faced before 2022 between its desire to field concentrated Soviet-style mass formations and the correctly assessed need for dispersal and mobility on the modern battlefield. The Russian military, at bare minimum, will attempt to develop capabilities — such as improved electronic warfare (EW), kinetic counter-UAV systems and new armor, and refined tactical doctrine — to make armor more survivable at the tactical level and will likely attempt to reassess its operational art as well. The Russian military can hardly fail to realize that the scaled and pervasive lethality of the modern battlefield makes a straightforward return to its pre-2022 idealized force structure and doctrine suicidal. **The Russian military certainly may revisit elements of its pre-2022 force structures or past Soviet practice as components of a reconstituted force, but any Russian efforts to restore maneuver will incorporate elements of both pre-2022 practices and new innovations.**

The Russian military's adaptations to conduct positional warfare are effective in their own right and could, and almost certainly will, be *integrated* into Russian efforts to restore mechanized maneuver. The Russian military can and will integrate individual adaptations that it initially implemented to fight a positional war into its future reconstitution efforts, without necessarily embracing positional war as a desirable approach. The next generation of Russian officers will have come of age in this war, and at least some of them will push to integrate adaptations that they used relatively effectively in Ukraine into future Russian capabilities. Even Chief of the General Staff Army General Gerasimov and other relative "traditionalists" in the Russian military likely recognize the importance of drones and other innovations.

The Russian military's current culture of self-deception and tendency to punish failure will undercut the Russian military's historically good learning processes. The Russian military's tendency to punish independence and honest reporting of failure, as well as sometimes actual failure, incentivizes Russian officers to follow orders, report progress, and keep their heads down. The officers most likely to shape the Russian military's lessons learned processes from Ukraine will be those who kept their heads down, said, "yes sir," reported good news, and did not directly challenge their superiors. The Russian military's obfuscation of the actual battlefield situation and suppression of bad news will constrain reconstitution efforts by preventing Russian commanders from accurately assessing the strength and capabilities of Russian units and writing an accurate history of the war. Putin, Gerasimov, and other senior Russian officials' sensitivity to criticism and desire to suppress politically inconvenient but effective commanders will likely limit honest discussion of Russian decision-making at the strategic level. If the Russian military does not ask the right questions at the right levels, it will either fail to adapt or will implement adaptations that do not improve its effectiveness. These constraints will not wholly invalidate the Russian military's post-war learning efforts but will prevent them from being *maximally* effective.

The Russian military will likely design and implement an incoherent reconstitution plan by designing an inefficient force mix, overreaching its own reconstitution capacity, and/or acting on inaccurate lessons learned. All militaries risk implementing adaptations based on poorly identified or inaccurate lessons from major combat operations, but the Russian military's dishonest inputs and political constraints increase this risk for Moscow. The Russian military may downplay the necessity of substantial changes and fall back on rhetorical tropes of inherent Russian effectiveness and determination. The Russian military might also face a gap between its interest in responding to identified lessons and its ability to internalize those lessons and implement adaptations. The Russian military may design a reconstitution plan that upholds traditional views rather than fully addressing the Russian military's weaknesses. The Russian military may design an overly optimistic reconstitution plan intended to provide the Russian military the capabilities to fight the war it *wants* to fight and not the war it *needs* or is *able to* fight. The Russian military will need to institutionally recognize, accept, and build on its degraded force structure and capabilities to effectively plan and implement a reconstitution pathway, rather than ignoring hard lessons and planning an aspirational but unimplementable reconstitution plan and future doctrine. It is not clear that it will do so.

Russian military culture will not solely impede Russian reconstitution, however, and the Russian military will likely demonstrate some creativity and institutional rigor in its efforts to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver. The Russian military has adapted to fight a positional war in Ukraine and may be forced to do so again, but Russian military culture and historical institutional pressures will very likely push it to attempt to *avoid* positional conflicts and win wars quickly through a reconstituted mechanized force, rather than optimizing itself to intentionally fight a future positional war. The Russian military is responding to the positional character of war in Ukraine by using the Russian military's consistent approach prior to 2022: responding to the changing character of war with technological solutions to operational and tactical challenges. The Russian military is actively investing in innovative solutions — such as centralized drone units and improved counter-UAV systems — and even the traditionalists in the Russian military will likely embrace considerable innovation.

Implications for Western Analysts and Policymakers

Western analysts attempting to assess current Russian military capabilities and forecast the Russian military's future reconstitution efforts face several potential analytical pitfalls and traps.

- **Western analysts must manage their expectations of accuracy and fidelity when forecasting future Russian capabilities.** Western analysts risk producing overly narrow and easily falsifiable forecasts if they overly focus on predicting specific Russian force mixes and timelines for aggression against NATO without adequately assessing the broader context of Russian military culture, intent, and possible reconstitution efforts.
- **Western analysts must be careful to avoid mirror imaging Western concepts onto the Russian military and must adequately understand the cultural factors driving Russian decision-making.** Western analysts must assess the Russian military's observed practice (which significantly differs from Western expectations prior to 2022), not what a Western observer assesses would be the smart or obvious choice.
- **Russian decisions that seem poor or illogical to a Western audience are important to understand within their context — as even Russian adaptations or force design choices that a Western analyst views as subpar can pose a major threat if NATO is unprepared for them.** Western analysts must understand Russian military culture and how the Russian military views itself in order to accurately assess the Russian military's possible decisions, however illogical they may seem to a Western observer.
- **Western analysts should not assess the Russian military along the binary axes of being 1) degraded or reconstituted, and 2) incapable or capable of offensive action against NATO.** Assessments that the Russian military will not be able to threaten NATO until a certain date risk providing a false sense of security, and NATO cannot assume the Russian military will not take offensive action before what Western analysts might characterize as "completing" its reconstitution efforts.
- **Finally, Western analysts should not impose more coherence on Russian military thought and Russian reconstitution efforts than the Russian military is demonstrating.** Western analysts must carefully assess what the Russian military says it will do; what it actually does; and the implications for Russian military effectiveness of the gap between stated intent and actual implementation.

The Russian military will most likely attempt to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver by rebuilding large mechanized formations and providing them with counter-drone capabilities, investing in operationally significant precision strike capabilities, and integrating some of its adaptations in Ukraine into future capabilities. The Russian military's current status as a force optimized for positional warfare will shape Russian reconstitution efforts, whether the Russian military wants it to or not, but the Russian military is unlikely to institutionally refocus itself on positional warfare in the medium term despite its experiences in Ukraine. The Russian military is unlikely to conduct a *maximally* effective lessons learned and reconstitution

process. The Russian military is attempting to expand, reorganize, and re-equip its forces simultaneously. Any one of those tasks is difficult enough for a peacetime military, much less one still fighting an unexpectedly protracted war. The Russian military's suppression of bad news, political constraints on learning, and current command culture will impede Russian learning. The Russian military is still a learning institution, however, and is slowly ascending to the mean of historically effective Russian and Soviet learning after its disastrous performance in 2022. The Russian military's institutional tendencies to leverage new technologies to solve operational problems and to conduct thorough lessons learned efforts will increase the effectiveness of Russian military reconstitution. The Russian military will make mistakes, and its choices may seem illogical to a Western observer. Even a somewhat incoherent and inefficient Russian reconstitution effort will create a force capable of threatening NATO interests and European security, however.

This report's assessment that the current Russian military is highly degraded and sub-optimized for positional warfare should not be misconstrued as an argument that the Russian military is not a threat. The Russian military remains capable of achieving some form of military victory in Ukraine, particularly if the West cuts material support to Ukraine. The Russian military cannot threaten significant offensive action against NATO while committed to major operations in Ukraine, but existing Russian forces could very likely conduct limited offensive action against a NATO member state — and NATO's ability to fight the current Russian military, not solely a reconstituted Russian military in five years or more, is worthy of study. A partially or inefficiently reconstituted Russian military can still threaten NATO and US interests. **Russian military reconstitution is a process, and what the Kremlin assesses is "good enough" for offensive action against NATO may significantly differ from what NATO would consider a reconstituted military.**

Western forecasts must also recognize that the primary obstacle to rapid Russian advances is the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), and that NATO frontline states currently lack the capacity to field equivalents of the UAF at scale. Ukrainian forces have also optimized themselves for defensive positional warfare. Their officers and many of their soldiers have nearly four years of active combat experience, prepared defensive positions that frontline units constantly adapt, and a technological-tactical-industrial integration process that no NATO state can currently match. **Western analysts must avoid the trap of imagining that Russian forces cannot pose a meaningful short-term threat to frontline NATO states because they can hardly gain ground in Ukraine today.**

The Russian military will draw on multiple possible reconstitution pathways, will experiment with new technologies and operational concepts, and will conduct a partially incoherent reconstitution effort — increasing the difficulty of forecasting Russian capabilities and the Russian threat to Europe. The Russian military currently has many vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and Russian reconstitution efforts will alter but not eliminate these vulnerabilities. NATO should study Russian military culture and Russian reconstitution efforts to identify these changing vulnerabilities, rather than assuming either that the Russian military is unstoppable or that it will simply rebuild its pre-2022 structure and doctrine. **Careful and continuous analysis of the Russian military's evolving reconstitution process will enable NATO to exploit Russian vulnerabilities and create a force capable of deterring — and if necessary, defeating — the next round of Russian aggression against Europe.**

Introduction

The Russian military has undergone a rapid and comprehensive transformation since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Russian military has adapted itself to fight a positional war in Ukraine and has developed unit structures, tactics, and operational concepts that enable a slow but effective form of foot-pace maneuver — though it is currently incapable of conducting mechanized maneuver. The Russian military will conduct a deliberate lessons learned and reconstitution effort following the end of major combat operations in Ukraine. The Russian military cannot and will not simply recreate its pre-2022 force structure and capabilities, and NATO must update its pre-2022 assessments of Russian capabilities. Western efforts to forecast the medium-term Russian military threat to NATO will be dangerously flawed if they are not based on a thorough understanding of Russian military culture; the Russian military's current capabilities in Ukraine (rather than pre-2022 assessments); and the structural factors and variables that will shape the Russian military's lessons learned efforts and reconstitution processes.

This report is intended to provide Western analysts with a framework for assessing Russian military reconstitution efforts and to shape future research on the Russian military threat to Europe. This report uses the expression military reconstitution to refer to "a process of regaining combat functions, proficiency, and capabilities that will allow a force to execute various types of combat missions."[1] The Russian military will very likely attempt to reconstitute a force capable of some form of mechanized maneuver. Russian military reconstitution efforts through 2030 will combine elements of the Russian military's pre-2022 force structure, its current adaptations for positional warfare, and aspirational precision strike capabilities into a hybrid force, and will not pursue any one of these pathways to the exclusion of the others. This report assesses the Russian military's institutional culture, which will shape the type of force the Russian military will attempt to reconstitute and how effectively it will do so. This report also assesses the Russian military's capabilities in Ukraine as of August 2025, as the Russian military's current capabilities differ significantly from pre-2022 Western expectations and will become the baseline of the Russian military's reconstitution efforts. This report concludes by assessing likely constraints on Russian reconstitution efforts and presenting a framework for forecasting Russian military reconstitution.

The Challenges of Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Reconstitution Efforts

Western analysts attempting to assess current Russian military capabilities and forecast the Russian military's future reconstitution efforts face several potential analytical pitfalls and traps. This introduction presents several common but flawed analytical tropes and potential mistakes Western analysts should avoid, and provides context for the rest of this report's approach to assessing current Russian military capabilities and forecasting Russian reconstitution efforts.

Western analysts must manage their expectations of accuracy and fidelity when forecasting future Russian capabilities. Assessing the capabilities and effectiveness of a military fighting a major war is extremely difficult using both open sources and classified information. The information environment around Russia's invasion of Ukraine is complex, despite (and because of)

Western efforts to forecast the medium-term Russian military threat to NATO will be dangerously flawed if they are not based on a thorough understanding of Russian military culture.

the wide variety of available sources. Producing actionable assessments of the Russian military's structure, strength, and tactics based on fragmentary and often anecdotal evidence is difficult. Assessing the future wartime capabilities of a peacetime military presents a different challenge. Analysts must not only assess an adversary's intent but additionally analyze the difference between the adversary's stated intent and its likely capabilities in practice. This task is even more difficult when studying a military rife with internal contradictions and false reporting — as seen in the gap between Western assessments of Russian capabilities pre-2022 and the Russian military's demonstrated performance in Ukraine, since it is difficult to accurately forecast that a military will fail to implement its own doctrine and operational concepts. Finally, forecasting the character and most likely parameters of a future war presents a substantial challenge, a challenge facing NATO efforts to forecast Russian military capabilities in a future war between Russia and NATO. Western analysts attempting to forecast Russian military reconstitution must combine these three difficult lines of effort: we are assessing the capabilities of a wartime military in order to forecast its potential capabilities in the next war — without knowing how the current war ends, the scenario of the *next* war, or Russian reconstitution priorities. Western analysts risk producing overly narrow and easily falsifiable forecasts if they overly focus on predicting specific Russian force mixes and timelines for aggression against NATO without adequately assessing the broader context of Russian military culture, intent, and possible reconstitution efforts.

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Western analysts must be careful to avoid mirror imaging Western concepts onto the Russian military and must adequately understand the cultural factors driving Russian decision-making. Any assessments asserting that "the smartest option for the Russian military is to…" or "it would be illogical for the Russian military to…" require further interrogation. Western analysts should not assume that the Russian military will make what *a NATO military* would assess to be the correct decision. There is a lasting narrative in Western military and analytical discussions that the Russian military made numerous mistakes in Ukraine but will simply reconstitute itself and "fight properly" in a direct war with NATO, dismissing its performance in Ukraine as an aberration. The Russian military made numerous mistakes in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and temporarily deteriorated as a learning organization. The Russian military is steadily regaining its coherence and effectiveness as a learning organization despite several limitations assessed throughout this report, however. Western analysts must assess the Russian military's observed practice (which significantly differs from Western expectations prior to 2022), not what a Western observer assesses would be the smart or obvious choice.

This report was shaped in part in response to a conference in late 2024 focused on forecasting future Russian military capabilities. An experienced expert on the Russian military in attendance (the conference was held under the Chatham House rule) stridently argued that Russia will institute a fully centralized and planned economy and rebuild a military modeled on the Soviet military of the 1980s because (he asserted) it would be stupid to fight a major war in Europe without doing so. This expert said that he had seen no evidence that the Kremlin would take this path, but argued that the Kremlin will eventually institute a fully Soviet-style planned economy and conduct full mobilization to field a fully mechanized force because it *must* do so. Circular arguments such as this one are far more common in Western discussions than they should be. Too often, assertions that the Russian military will make the "correct" decision actually mean "the Russian military will fight the way NATO previously expected it to." Russian decisions that seem poor or illogical to a Western audience are important to understand within their context — as even Russian adaptations or force design choices that a

Western analyst views as subpar can pose a major threat if NATO is unprepared for them. It goes without saying, of course, that the large majority of discussions on this topic are better-grounded and much more thoughtful. This incident merely highlighted one of the traps even expert forecasters can all too easily fall prey to.

Western analysts must also avoid falling into the related trap of assessing that the Russian military would make a theoretically "correct" or "effective" decision that would be antithetical to how the Russian military views its own capabilities and its cultural assumptions. Historians often face this challenge, and contemporary analysts must understand it as well. Williamson Murray and Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh illustrate an excellent example of this fallacy in their book, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War.*[2] They argue that the Confederacy's likely best strategy to achieve a favorable negotiated peace with the United States that accepted secession would have been to acknowledge the Confederacy's relative military weakness compared to the United States; assume a defensive strategy; and attempt to induce war weariness in the Union in the hopes of enabling a Democrat willing to end the war and accept secession to defeat Abraham Lincoln in the 1864 presidential election. Murray and Hsieh rightly note that the Confederacy would have needed to abandon its deeply held feeling of military superiority over the United States and its leading generals' lasting belief in the possibility of waging a decisive, war-winning battle if it were to adopt such a strategy — and therefore never would have honestly considered this strategy as an option. Western analysts must understand Russian military culture and how the Russian military views itself in order to accurately assess the Russian military's possible decisions, however illogical they may seem to a Western observer.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the adaptations the Russian military has implemented to fight a positional war have profoundly reshaped the Russian military. The Russian military cannot and will not directly reconstitute its pre-2022 structure and capabilities, and forecasts of Russian reconstitution efforts must take as their starting point the Russian military's current capabilities, not the Russian military as it was in 2021 or as its doctrine says it would like to be. The Russian military will almost certainly attempt to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver in some form but will incorporate its learning and adaptations from Ukraine into its reconstituted force. The Russian military remains a learning organization despite its flaws and is unlikely to reject the potential learning from over three years of war in Ukraine. Combat experience in Ukraine will shape the next generation of Russian officers, and the Russian military will integrate learning from Ukraine to some degree. A January 2025 RAND report accurately noted that "although U.S. allies are closely tracking Russia's reconstitution efforts, their focus is on the speed of reconstitution rather than the nature of the reconstituted Russian military."[3] Detailed forecasts of when the Russian military will reconstitute its pre-war force structure and capabilities put the cart before the horse, and Western analysts should orient themselves on forecasting *what kind* of force the Russian military will reconstitute and how it will differ from pre-2022 NATO expectations of Russian capabilities.

Western analysts should not assess the Russian military along the binary axes of being 1) degraded or reconstituted, and 2) incapable or capable of offensive action against NATO. The Russian military is highly degraded and has optimized itself for a positional war in Ukraine but is relatively effective in its current state and is rebuilding its competence. The Kremlin remains committed to its revisionist and aggressive policies in Europe, and the Russian military will learn and likely improve from its invasion of Ukraine — even if it does not do so maximally effectively. This report's arguments that the Russian military is degraded and will likely conduct a partially incoherent reconstitution process are not intended to downplay the Russian threat, but instead to argue that the Russian military will have vulnerabilities that NATO can target and exploit. The Russian military's reconstitution efforts will be a *process,* not a single endeavor with a defined beginning and end. Western analysts and

The Russian military will almost certainly attempt to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver in some form but will incorporate its learning and adaptations from Ukraine into its reconstituted force.

NATO policymakers must avoid framing assessments of the Russian threat around binary assessments of whether the Russian military is reconstituted or by specifying a date by which the Russian military could conduct offensive operations against NATO. A partially or inefficiently reconstituted Russian military can still threaten NATO and US interests, and what the Kremlin assesses as "good enough" for offensive action against NATO may significantly differ from what NATO would consider a reconstituted military. Assessments that the Russian military will not be able to threaten NATO until a certain date risk providing a false sense of security, and NATO cannot assume the Russian military will not take offensive action before what Western analysts might characterize as "completing" its reconstitution efforts.

Finally, Western analysts should not impose more coherence on Russian military thought and Russian reconstitution efforts than the Russian military is demonstrating. The Russian military system's coherence and idealized doctrine broke down in 2022, and the Russian military is still stitching it back together. The Russian military has not functioned as it intended to in Ukraine and will continue to deviate from its stated intent in the medium term. The Russian military's wartime adaptation efforts in Ukraine appear relatively incoherent (though they are still effective), and post-war Russian learning efforts will similarly include internal contradictions and distortions. Western analysts must carefully assess what the Russian military *says* it will do; what it *actually* does; and the implications for Russian military effectiveness of the gap between stated intent and actual implementation.

Structure and Methodology

This report assesses the factors that will shape the Russian military's reconstitution processes through 2030. It consists of three chapters: Russian Military Culture, Russian Military Capabilities in 2025, and Forecasting Russian Military Reconstitution.

The first chapter assesses Russian military culture — defined for the purposes of this report as the Russian military's shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms that guide its approach to studying the character of war and actively conducting combat operations. The Russian (and previously Soviet) way of war is deliberately optimized around lower quality personnel than is the norm in Western militaries and is intended to leverage tactical rigidity to enable operational effectiveness. The Soviet Union's warfighting in WWII remains misunderstood in the West, a fact that often leads Western observers to downplay the factors that enabled the Soviet Union to use mass effectively. A clear picture of how the Red Army effectively leveraged its mass is essential to understanding that the contemporary Russian military is *not* leveraging its mass maximally effectively. The Russian military's adaptations to fight a positional war in Ukraine must be assessed in the context of the Russian military's intended approach to fighting a major conventional war prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The idealized Russian approach to war presented in the first chapter is essential to understanding the Russian military's *practical implementation* of these principles (assessed in the second chapter) and to contextualizing how the Russian military's intended way of war will shape its future reconstitution efforts (assessed in the third chapter).

The second chapter assesses the Russian military's conventional land capabilities as of August 2025. The Russian military has made a virtue of necessity by optimizing itself to fight a positional war in Ukraine and can conduct a foot-pace form of limited operational maneuver, but its degraded force is now likely incapable of effective mechanized maneuver warfare at scale. The Russian military has revised the structure, equipment, and tactics of its units at every echelon from group of forces to squad to enable itself to fight a positional war with low-quality personnel, insufficient stores of armor and advanced munitions, and poor command and control. The Russian military's series of decisions since February 2022 to optimize its forces for a positional war will shape and constrain Russia's ongoing and future reconstitution efforts and ability to threaten NATO, and the Russian military's current capabilities, assessed in the second chapter, will serve as the baseline of the Russian reconstitution processes forecasted in the third chapter of this report. This second chapter can also be utilized by Ukrainian and NATO warfighters and policymakers as a largely standalone assessment of current Russian land capabilities as of August 2025.

The third chapter provides two intellectual frameworks for further research and analysis of the Russian military and Russian reconstitution: 1) the Russian military's likely efforts to reconstitute a force capable of maneuver warfare will combine elements of three possible pathways depending on the Russian military's lessons learned from Ukraine, rather than pursuing one discrete reconstitution pathway; and 2) NATO can exploit the likely inefficiencies and contradictions in Russia's learning and reconstitution efforts. This chapter argues that the Russian military will most likely attempt to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver by rebuilding large mechanized formations and providing them with counter-drone capabilities; investing in operationally significant precision strike capabilities; and integrating some of its adaptations in Ukraine into future capabilities. This chapter assesses the factors that will shape the Russian military's self-evaluation of its performance in Ukraine, and forecasts how different Russian self-assessments will shape the Russian military's chosen reconstitution path. This chapter additionally assesses the constraints that the Russian military's current command culture and the inherent challenges of conducting a lessons learned effort will impose on its ability to design and implement a coherent reconstitution plan. Russian military culture will not solely impede Russian reconstitution, however, as there are now positive institutional pressures that will continue to drive innovation and adaptation into and possibly through a reconstitution effort. Finally, the chapter concludes with an initial forecast of the Russian military's most likely reconstitution pathway and with indicators of discrete Russian reconstitution efforts to shape further research and analysis.

This report draws on primary Russian and Ukrainian sources on Russian capabilities and the Russian invasion of Ukraine; ISW's extensive library of daily assessments and standalone publications on the Russian invasion of Ukraine; the extensive secondary literature of reports on the Russian military published by other Western analytical organizations; and the author's discussions with Ukrainian and NATO military and civilian personnel. Sourcing for individual data points are included in the endnotes at the end of this report. The report also includes an extensive bibliography of the existing Western literature on Russian military capabilities used during the research and writing of this report. The author and other ISW analysts additionally discussed current Russian military capabilities and Russian reconstitution efforts with multiple Ukrainian and NATO military personnel and civilian officials during the research and writing of this report. All data and assessments in the text are derived from open sources and are cited in the endnotes, but the author used insight derived from off-the-record or Chatham House conversations to add context and inform several of the arguments in the text.

Chapter 1:

RUSSIAN MILITARY CULTURE

Introduction

Forecasting Russian military reconstitution and accurately assessing the Russian military's current capabilities in Ukraine requires understanding the Russian military's theoretical approach to studying war; the Russian military's idealized way of war; and the Soviet legacy on which the Russian military has modeled itself.[1] The Russian military's performance in Ukraine was a deviation from Russian intent, rather than a direct manifestation of an inherently flawed Russian way of war. The Russian military's idealized way of war — and the Soviet heritage that continues to shape the modern Russian military — will heavily shape Russian reconstitution efforts.

This chapter assesses Russian military culture — an expression used here to mean the Russian military's shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms that guide its approach to studying the character of war and actively conducting combat operations. The Russian (and previously Soviet) way of war is deliberately optimized around lower quality personnel than is the norm in Western militaries and is intended to leverage tactical rigidity to enable operational effectiveness. The Soviet Union's warfighting in World War II is often misunderstood in the West, a fact that often leads Western observers to downplay the factors that enabled the Soviet Union to use mass effectively. A clear picture of how the Red Army effectively leveraged its mass is essential to understanding that the contemporary Russian military is *not* leveraging its mass effectively, as discussed in the second chapter of this report. Finally, the Russian military's adaptations to a positional war in Ukraine must be assessed in the context of the Russian military's intended approach to fighting a major conventional war pre-2022. This chapter discusses Russian military culture and the Russian military's *idealized* way of war. The rest of this report assesses the Russian military's *practical implementation* of these principles and forecasts how the Russian military's continuing desire to implement its idealized way of war will shape ongoing and future Russian military reconstitution efforts.

The Russian Military's Approach to Studying War

The Russian military's conceptual frameworks for studying the nature and evolving character of war underpin its approaches to command and control, force design, and conducting lessons learned processes. Western analysts have produced an extensive literature assessing Russian military thought and its differences from Western frameworks, included in the bibliography of this report. The following section outlines how the Russian military approaches the study of war; the contemporary legacy of Soviet military thought; and the Russian and Soviet militaries' historically rigorous lessons learned processes.

Contemporary Russian military thought heavily derives its methods and forms from Soviet military thought, which produced an innovative and detailed body of work on modern and future war.[4] Soviet and Russian military thought is grouped into a descending hierarchy of concepts: national Military Doctrine; military science; and military art. The Russian military's conceptual approach to studying

I The contemporary Russian and historical Soviet militaries differ in multiple key areas, and it is inaccurate to refer to the Red Army in WWII or the Soviet military during the Cold War as the "Russians." The modern Russian military's approach to personnel policies and decision-making is rooted in its post-Soviet legacy, however. This report refers to the shared post-1991 Russian and historical Soviet approaches to personnel policies; tactical decision-making processes; and focus on the operational level of war as the "Russian way of war" for ease, to avoid awkward repeated references to "the modern Russian way of war, which is derived from and builds on the Soviet way of war."

the lessons of past and ongoing wars to inform future capabilities development will shape the way it studies potential lessons from its invasion of Ukraine.

Clarity about the meaning of the expression *Russian doctrine* is a critical starting point. Russian doctrine can refer to: 1) Russia's official national security strategy; 2) the cultural guiding principles and practical implementation of the Russian military's approach to war; or 3) Russian tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) as laid out in published field manuals. These are three distinct things that at best overlap one another imperfectly — and sometimes overlap very little.

"Russia's Military Doctrine" used as a proper noun should refer to a specific document last updated in 2014 that articulates the Kremlin's views of the character of war and lays out Russian national security strategy, which the Kremlin writes in close coordination with the Russian Ministry of Defense.[5] Russia's Military Doctrine defines the state's officially accepted system of thought on the character of modern war; its assessment of the global security environment and Russia's subsequent security requirements; and guiding principles for preparing the armed forces to meet those security requirements. Russian (and previously Soviet) military thinkers stress that Russian doctrine must be *scientifically* derived, and much as the Soviet Union asserted that its doctrine was objectively derived from immutable socialist principles, Russia's Military Doctrine is framed as the *objectively true* state of the global security environment and the character of war.[6] Western militaries are culturally reticent to discuss grand strategy and the social and political elements of war as part of official military doctrine, rightly seeking (from the point of view of active-duty military professionals) to not include aspects of policymaking that are traditionally under civilian control in Western democracies as part of military thinking and planning. Russia's Military Doctrine does not maintain this divide and instead addresses both the social-political and military-technical aspects of state security.[7]

NATO defines military doctrine in general as the "fundamental principles by which military forces guide their actions in support of objectives."[8] Military doctrine is not static, and all militaries alter their doctrine over time — particularly during active conflicts. Military doctrine is also flexible in application, with room for varied implementation by various personnel in differing situations. All militaries deviate from their stated doctrine during wartime as a natural response to changing battlefield situations and as part of in-stride capabilities development. There is, therefore, often a gap between doctrine *as articulated by a military* and doctrine *as observed in practice* in warfighting, with the practical implementation of often unstated cultural principles shaping military capabilities far more than written doctrine.[II]

Russia's Military Doctrine defines the state's officially accepted system of thought on the character of modern war; its assessment of the global security environment and Russia's subsequent security requirements; and guiding principles for preparing the armed forces to meet those security requirements.

Western discussions of "Russian doctrine" in Ukraine most often refer to a narrower definition of doctrine as a military force's tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) in specific combat situations. The United States Army defines these elements covered in field manuals (FMs) and army techniques publications (ATPs) as a *component* of doctrine, but Western analytic discussions often use the parent term "doctrine" to refer solely to this subset of guidance documents.[9] This is the definition of doctrine implied when Western analysts describe Russian actions in Ukraine as "non-doctrinal," accurately

II The Russian military is currently grappling with the challenge of deviating from its written doctrine and intended approach to warfighting without fully *acknowledging* these deviations. The concluding chapter in this report addresses the challenges imposed by this gap between doctrine as written and doctrine as implemented, as well as the risk the Russian military faces of writing formal doctrine untethered from what it can implement in practice.

framing them as at odds with published pre-2022 Russian TTPs. Ongoing NATO discussions of how the Russian military will change its "doctrine" following its invasion of Ukraine heavily focus on written Russian TTPs. Russia's lessons learned efforts will certainly culminate in the (internal) publication of new field manuals laying out altered TTPs for Russian forces. The Russian military has already begun this process through the publication of interim field manuals captured by Ukrainian forces.[10] There is nothing wrong with this definition, and Western understanding of the Russian military is certainly improved by the study of these published doctrinal manuals. This series of reports does not assess current written Russian doctrine, however, because examples available in the open source are partial and limited and because it aims instead to consider Russian doctrine in the broader and more general sense.

The rest of this report thus assesses "Russian doctrine" as a non-proper noun in line with the NATO definition of the term, covering the observed guiding cultural principles and methods of the Russian military as they are implemented in practice. The Russian military has made many aggregate changes to its capabilities and TTPs that have not yet been formalized or integrated into written doctrine, and the fundamental cultural principles that guide Russian military thinking (but are not part of written doctrine) will heavily shape Russian reconstitution pathways. The term "Russian doctrine," as used in this report, refers to the aggregate guiding principles of the Russian way of war as practiced — not to Russia's high-level national Military Doctrine or to any collection of discrete field manuals.

Military science is the highest level of Russian military thought. The Soviet Military Encyclopedia defines it as "a system of knowledge about the current nature and laws of war; the preparation of the armed forces and nation for war; and the means of conducting war."[11] This concept includes a diverse array of subjects such as economics, history, geography, political science, education, and psychology. The Russian military emphasizes the study of military science in the context of wider human activity, largely due to the Soviet legacy of viewing the laws of war as inextricably linked to the laws of socialism.[12] Western militaries often study war as a distinct phenomenon due to the commendable desire to avoid impinging on areas of policy reserved for civilian decision-makers in Western democracies — a distinction that neither the Soviet nor the Russian military makes. The term *science* is additionally crucial, as Russian military professionals approach military science as a field based on rigorous investigation and evolution over time that leads to the discovery of objective *laws* of war. The fundamental Russian view that there are objectively correct laws of war that can be discovered and followed to achieve the best possible result impacts the Russian military's approach to battlefield decision-making, discussed further below.

The Soviet Military Encyclopedia defines military art as the "theory and practice of preparing for and conducting military operations on the land, at sea, and in the air," which includes strategy, operational art, and tactics.[13] Unlike the supposed universal nature of military science, the Russian military frames military art as state-specific — military science describes the immutable nature and current character of war, and *Russian* military art determines how Russia fights.[14] Russian military thinkers (and current Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov in particular) stress that military art relies on creatively drawing on theoretical study; historical examples; and verification through practical experience to develop effective approaches to modern and future war.[15]

The Russian military retains the Soviet focus on innovative and creative thought on the changing character of war and the strategic threat environment that Russia faces. Most Russian discussions and major speeches by Gerasimov since the mid-2010s about the need for military creativity and initiative refer to creativity in military science and art at their highest levels, and only secondarily to operational creativity or tactical battlefield initiative. Russian discussions commonly stress the necessity of assessing each war in the context of its own unique circumstances, rather than preparing to fight stereotyped "types" of wars.[16] These contemporary discussions are a deliberate correction to past Russian and primarily Soviet thinking, which too often prepared the Russian military for only one type of war at a time. The Soviet Union, for example, almost exclusively

prepared for a large-scale conventional and nuclear war with NATO after WWII.[17] Gerasimov and other senior figures in the MoD perceive that the Russian military overcorrected during the late 2000s "New Look" reforms, which were premised on the idea that the Russian ground forces no longer needed to prepare for large-scale conventional war and should instead reorient on smaller conflicts in Russia's "near abroad" (the former Soviet space).[18] Russian military thought prior to 2022 emphasized the need to prepare for different types of wars, drawing on the experience of the 2008 war with Georgia; its initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014; and Russia's intervention in Syria to become a flexible force capable of conducting limited global expeditionary operations and better integrating irregular means.[19] Throughout these changes, however, the Russian military continued to conceive of itself as primarily a force to fight large-scale conventional wars.

Russian and Soviet military thinking heavily integrates the study of military history into its preparation for future war and does so arguably more — or at least in a more systematic fashion — than in Western militaries.[20] The Soviet experience in WWII (or the "Great Patriotic War") remains a major touchstone for the contemporary Russian military. The Soviet military treated the closing years of WWII as *the* source for lessons on high-intensity conventional warfare, even after the introduction of nuclear weapons and other changes throughout the 20th century, and the Russian military continues to emphasize the need to integrate the lessons of WWII into modern warfighting.[21]

Russian military thinking has historically been — and continues to be — remarkably insular, with key Russian developments occurring in dialogue with *older Russian and Soviet theories*, rather than engaging with Western thinking.[22] Russian military theorists rarely refer to Western or other non-Russian theoretical works, instead mining the rich vein of past Soviet and Russian thinking. Even the most forward-looking Russian thinkers predominantly root their writing in the shared Soviet and Russian literature (with the notable exception of those writing about hybrid or network-centric warfare, both seen by the Russian military to have originated as Western concepts). There is little reason to expect that Russian discussions of lessons from Ukraine will deviate from these roots in past Russian discussions on the changing character of war, and it is essential for Western analysts to assess current and future Russian military thought in this context, rather than mirror imaging Western concepts.

The Soviet military was a highly effective learning institution, and the contemporary Russian military continues to draw on the Soviet model of institutional lessons learned processes.[23] The Russian military will use the post-WWII Soviet learning effort as a model of an effective effort to rapidly assess lessons learned from a major conventional war and disseminate learning and adaptations throughout the force. The Soviet military established a General Staff directorate to conduct a thorough but rapid lessons learned effort immediately after the end of WWII to build on and cement learning from the formal after action reviews (AARs) it held after every major campaign during the war.[24] The Soviet military conducted discussion conferences, sponsored papers and lectures, and facilitated discussions between veterans and new personnel to capture the history of the war, evaluate Soviet performance, and transfer knowledge between veterans and the next generation of personnel. The Soviet military particularly emphasized the importance of writing an accurate military history of the war and interviewing veterans while memories were fresh. The dialectical, scholarly approach at the heart of the Russian and Soviet study of war enabled the Soviet military to discuss its successes and failures with a remarkable degree of candor.[25]

The post-Soviet Russian military has conducted similar lessons learned efforts on a smaller scale after its conflicts in Chechnya, Georgia, the Donbas and Crimea, and Syria. The Russian military learned numerous tactical lessons from its wars in Chechnya, which particularly informed later urban warfare tactics in Syria and Ukraine.[26] The 2008 Russo-Georgian War — a Russian victory that was nonetheless viewed internally as a disastrous performance by Russian forces — spurred the Russian military to accelerate force structure reforms and rethink the types of wars the Russian military needed to be prepared to fight.[27] The Russian military effectively *identified* lessons learned from its intervention in Syria but did not fully *implement* these lessons prior to its 2022

invasion of Ukraine.[28] Russian forces in Ukraine are actively and effectively adapting at the tactical and operational levels as part of wartime learning (within the constraints created by the Kremlin's demands for relentless offensive operations and pressure for constant reports of forward progress), and the Russian military will conduct a similar comprehensive lessons learned effort following the conclusion of major combat operations.[III]

The (Idealized) Russian Way of War: Tactical Rigidity Enabling Operational Effectiveness

Understanding the Russian military's performance in Ukraine as a deviation from its intent — rather than simply a direct manifestation of a poor Russian way of war — is essential to making sound assessments of current Russian capabilities and how Russia will approach reconstituting its forces. The Russian, and before it the Soviet, way of war centers on deliberately offsetting a lower quality of individual personnel with relative tactical inflexibility to enable effective operational-level campaigns designed with the tactical limitations of the force in mind. This chapter discusses the Russian military's decision-making processes and intended approach to operational warfighting prior to 2022 in the present tense. We have no basis to assess that the Russian military has changed its formal decision-making processes, education pathways, or expectations for combat commanders, even though they likely diverge from many but not all of these practices in the war in Ukraine as they are now fighting it.

Understanding the Russian military's performance in Ukraine as a deviation from its intent — rather than simply a direct manifestation of a poor Russian way of war — is essential to making sound assessments of current Russian capabilities and how Russia will approach reconstituting its forces.

The Russian military command system — when implemented to its fullest extent — enables fast decision-making cycles employing relatively rigid but "good enough" plans at the tactical level, which the Russian military intends to help it get inside an opponent's decision cycle by executing simpler plans faster. Senior Russian commanders leverage the aggregate effect of numerous rapidly executed but individually inflexible tactical actions to enable operational effectiveness. The Russian military's ideal approach to personnel and officer training accepts a lower quality standard of individual soldiers and junior officers and is optimized to make the most of individually less effective personnel. This section assesses the three primary components of the Russian way of war: a relatively top-heavy personnel system that accepts a lower quality of individual personnel and junior officers; the Russian approach to tactical decision-making based on relatively inflexible, templated actions; and the theoretical Russian (and previously Soviet) focus on effectiveness at the operational level of war.

The Russian Military Personnel Model Before 2022

The Russian and Soviet militaries have — over a century of relatively continuous development — deliberately optimized their command processes and force

III The final chapter of this report assesses the likely impediments that the modern Russian military's culture of punishing failure and suppressing bad news will impose on efforts to replicate the degree of honest self-assessment that made the post-WWII Soviet learning effort maximally effective.

structures for a lower quality of individual personnel than those that serve in most Western militaries. Individual conscript personnel are only trained to reach a minimum standard of effectiveness, and in the modern Russian military are buttressed by a cadre of better trained professional soldiers. Russian officer education is far more narrowly focused on training junior battlefield commanders than on producing well-rounded leaders. The pre-2022 Russian military steadily increased its standards of training over time and grappled with the desire to field a NATO-style volunteer force in whole or in part, but the modern Russian military retains many continuities with its Soviet forebear.

The Red Army's already relatively low pre-war standard of training dropped precipitously in the first six months of WWII, when numerous formations of undertrained and underequipped troops were thrown together to plug gaps in the line and support overambitious and costly counteroffensives.[29] The Soviet state could not take the time to train new personnel and junior officers to a higher standard in late 1941 and early 1942 due to the high rates of losses inflicted by a combination of German effectiveness and the Soviets themselves squandering large formations. Effective units learned by doing or were destroyed, while the senior command steadily and painfully learned better operational art.[30] Standards of training (particularly in Guards and tank formations) increased somewhat throughout the war, and first-echelon Soviet formations became quite tactically competent by the time Soviet forces captured Berlin due to sheer experience and better officers, but overall training standards among rifle and second-echelon formations remained poor until the end of the war.

The Soviet military continued to rely on conscripts throughout the Cold War to maintain the large mobilization reserve that the Soviet Union saw as essential for large-scale maneuver war with NATO. The Soviet military recognized by the 1980s that it needed to provide soldiers more training in specialized technical skills beyond what could be imparted to a typical conscript due to the increasing complexity of military technology in the latter half of the 20th century, however, but made little progress before the USSR collapsed.[31] The Russian Federation's personnel policies in the 1990s and 21st century have continued to grapple with two competing considerations: the goal of creating a smaller, flexible, and more technically advanced military of volunteer professionals (as epitomized by the maximalist objectives of the abandoned 2008 "New Look" reforms); and the desire to retain the Soviet capability of generating large conscript forces for large-scale conventional warfare with NATO.[32]

By the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian military had settled on a hybrid system of long-service professional enlisted men and a legacy Soviet-style cadre-and-reserve system of conscripts serving one-year terms on a semi-annual cycle, built around a professional officer corps.[IV] The bulk of Russian manpower came from former conscripts who entered the mobilization reserve after serving their one-year conscription periods.[33] The professional officer corps and the *kontraktniki* — professional soldiers holding key technical and "trigger-puller" positions in Russian units provided the peacetime skeleton of Russian formations, with conscripts filling out rifleman and rear area roles.[34] All Russian formations utilized a mix of conscripts and *kontraktniki*, but relatively elite formations such as Airborne Forces (VDV) or Naval Infantry formations had a higher proportion of *kontraktniki*, reflecting both their higher quality and their role as rapid reaction forces theoretically able to deploy during peacetime without mobilizing reservists to reach sufficient strength.[35]

Training for both conscripts and *kontraktniki* focused on strict combat readiness rather than generalized soldiering skills, but the quality of training varied heavily

IV The Russian military has severely upended its recruitment and training processes since 2022. The Russian military now relies on minimally trained volunteers and has eroded the previous definition of *kontraktniki* to include far less qualified personnel who sign up for high salaries and fill roles that would have been filled by reservists in a full-scale mobilization. Several aspects of Russian training processes discussed in this section (such as the Russian military's focus on discrete combat tasks rather than generalized soldiering skills and emphasis on live fire training where possible) remain valid, but the Russian military's wartime training processes significantly differ from this historical peacetime model. It is not yet clear if the Russian military will attempt to return to this training model after the conclusion of major combat operations in Ukraine, or if it will reform its pre-2022 training pipelines. The second chapter in this report discusses the impact of declining personnel standards on the Russian military's capabilities as of 2025. ISW will publish a forthcoming report assessing the Kremlin's approach to force generation throughout the war in Ukraine and ongoing changes to the Russian military personnel model.

between different formations.[36] The steady churn of conscript turnover, as well as lower-than-desired retention rates among *kontraktniki*, meant that Russian officers spent much of their garrison time and energy training new individual personnel rather than teaching advanced skills and building unit cohesion. Russian training was heavily focused on strict combat drills (to support the orders process discussed below) and included a high emphasis on live fire exercises. The lower education standard of new conscripts, the focus on instilling regimented battle drills rather than teaching creative individual soldiering skills under the guidance of NCOs, and the safety concerns hindering realistic live fire exercises rendered this training less effective, however, and it was in many ways less realistic than NATO force-on-force training not using live fire.[37] Russian peacetime force generation was intended to produce a massive mobilization reserve of former conscripts who can (with only a brief refresher course or no refresher at all) slot into combat units as minimally effective riflemen, with long-service *kontraktniki* who are experts in their assigned role as weapons or technical experts providing the bulk of the unit's effective combat power.[38]

Russian officer education is more strictly focused on creating experts within a given specialty than Western officer education systems, which teach a broader spectrum of warfighting functions.

Russian officer education is more strictly focused on creating experts within a given specialty than Western officer education systems, which teach a broader spectrum of warfighting functions.[V] Russian junior officer education (regardless of the specific educational institution) produces specialist leaders ready to take command of platoons or the equivalent element within their branch as soon as they graduate, rather than providing the university education of US officer training. The Russian military does not have a US-style NCO corps to provide junior leadership.[VI] Instead, Russian officers take on many of the training and small unit leadership roles performed by NCOs in many NATO militaries.[39] Russian units are both smaller and have a higher proportion of officers than Western units to reduce the span of control of individual officers and to bridge the missing gap of small unit leader NCOs.[40] Russian officers in combat arms units are professionally focused on meeting discrete combat challenges at their echelon and little else, and move through a standardized promotion pattern of deputy commander and then commander at the platoon, company, and battalion echelon.[41]

Maneuver officers attend one of several combined arms colleges before being accredited to command brigades or regiments, which the Russian military considers the smallest true combined arms formation.[VII] A typical officer will then steadily climb the ranks within their branch and specialty, alternating between chief of staff and commander positions at each echelon.[42] These promotion pathways are relatively strict, and unlike in the United States, there are very few interbranch rotations or opportunities to attend separate schools and training programs. Rising senior maneuver officers then follow one of two pathways: either an education at the General Staff Academy before promotion to general officer rank (and a subsequent similar promotion path alternating

V It is unclear from open sources if the Russian military has adjusted its officer education processes from this standard since 2022, but it is unlikely to have significantly done so. The Russian military has retained its core military decision-making processes and the tasks it assigns to junior officers, in contrast to the Russian military's significant changes to its conscript and *kontraktniki* personnel model prior to 2022. The Russian military has certainly shortened the length of junior officer education courses since 2022 and has likely updated the tactical problems officers are trained to solve, but the Russian military likely maintains — and will continue to maintain — the core approach to officer education discussed in this section.

VI The Russian military does have *kontraktniki* NCOs, but these personnel are more akin to highly trained specialists on a given weapon or technical system responsible for training their unit on the use of *that system alone*, rather than providing general small unit leadership. The Russian military has experimented off-and-on since the late 1990s with minor reforms increasing the small unit leadership role of some NCOs, but the Russian military remains reliant on junior commissioned officers rather than NCOs for small-unit leadership.

VII The Russian military is conducting battlefield promotions in Ukraine which likely bypass some of these steps. The Russian military is certainly deviating from the strict peacetime promotion pathway and likely allows officers in Ukraine to bypass elements of the schooling requirements discussed in this section, though the Russian military will likely attempt to return to this education model after the end of major combat operations, and there is no indication it will substantially reform its network of combined arms colleges and general officer academies.

chief of staff and commander roles from the division to military district level); or a transfer to the General Staff itself to become a professional planning and capability development officer.[43]

The Russian Version of the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP): Tactical Simplicity Enabling Speed and Operational Effectiveness

The Russian military has optimized its MDMP process around this system of lower quality individual servicemen and highly branch-focused junior officers operating with minimal staff support.[VIII] Russian units memorize and relentlessly drill a playbook of battle orders (боевой приказ) from which tactical officers select a chosen plan with minimal alterations to meet the situation at hand, rather than using the formal Western approach of creating a bespoke plan with staff support for each situation (although Western militaries also train and use battle drills to accelerate this process at the tactical level). Russian officers are trained to keep their orders short and direct, with little room for interpretation or subordinate initiative so that commanders know exactly what their subordinates will do. This system is intended to trade the drawback of tactical rigidity and inflexibility for the advantages of a theoretically faster tactical decision-making cycle than a NATO force has (although well-trained NATO militaries can conduct very rapid tactical decision-making), as well as enabling senior commanders to achieve operational complexity and effectiveness through the aggregate effects of numerous individually simplistic but rapidly executable and predictable tactical actions.

The formal Russian MDMP process, in brief, proceeds as follows: a Russian officer receives orders from his senior commander; analyzes the mission at hand and conducts reconnaissance; assesses the correlation of forces and means (discussed below); makes minimal alterations as needed to one of the templated battle orders; and issues a final order that his unit mechanically and rapidly executes due to long hours of drill.[44] The commander's small staff supports him by assessing the combat environment and controlling his various assets (EW, reconnaissance, etc.), but the commander is responsible for developing courses of action (COAs) and writing or verbally transmitting orders himself.[45] There is no direct equivalent to the NATO formal staff process of a commander providing intent to his staff; his staff generating several possible COAs; and the commander selecting one for the staff to then draft as an executable plan.

Crucial to this process of developing battle orders is the "correlation of forces," a mathematical analysis of the capabilities of friendly and opposing forces.[46] Russian officers are taught to calculate these correlations not solely as an aid to planning and decision-making, as all militaries do. The Russian system instead emphasizes the use of correlation of forces calculations to provide a commander with *the single correct "answer" to a military problem*. This analysis is done heavily at the tactical level, and commanders learn a methodology to mathematically determine the relative combat power of their own and the enemy's forces to generate (theoretically ironclad) outputs of the results of specific combat actions.[IX]

This process is explicitly intended to create a faster decision cycle at the tactical level, prioritizing "good enough" plans now over better-tailored plans later.[47] Russian officers are trained to make their orders short and direct, avoiding any possible ambiguities in interpretation or the exercise of individual initiative. Commanders unambiguously state what conditions would fulfill a given combat

VIII The Russian military does not use the term "Military Decision-making Process" to describe its own orders process, and Russian military publications strictly use the term MDMP to refer to NATO processes. The Russian military certainly has a rough equivalent to the MDMP, however — the decision-making algorithm and checklist involved in the formal procedure of battle order development discussed in this section. This report thus refers to the Russian tactical military decision-making process as the Russian MDMP for clarity. For a detailed look at the Russian military's orders process as of 2020, see: Roger McDermott and Charles Bartles, "The Russian Military Decision-Making Process & Automated Command and Control," *German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies*, October 2020, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Hot-Spots/docs/Russia/GIDSresearch2020_02_McDermott_Bartles%20(2).pdf.

IX It is unclear from open sources to what degree Russian officers have conducted battlefield correlation of forces analysis in Ukraine or if the Russian military has adapted its tactical planning processes. The Russian military is highly unlikely to abandon the historical process of correlation of forces analysis as an aspirational approach to battlefield decision-making, however.

order with no room for initiative within intent, and subordinate units carry out those orders. The Russian military structures training courses for both enlisted personnel and junior officers around this orders process. Russian trainers hammer a limited playbook of drills into new conscripts until they can execute them mechanically. Junior officer training is similarly centered around assessing discrete battlefield problems and selecting the correct battle order to solve them, not around mastering broader warfighting functions.[48] This approach to training is intended to ensure that a small unit commander can issue a basic order without extensive staff support, and his entire unit, no matter how stressed, tired, and temporally distant from their initial training (in the case of called-up reservists who may not have undergone training for years), can execute a textbook sub-tactical action. The Russian military considers this tactical simplicity and rapidity as particularly essential in the chaotic conditions of modern maneuver war, and the Russian military assesses that complex staff processes relying on numerous personnel and fragile communications networks are easily disrupted.[49]

The skill and personalities of Russian commanders have a large impact on the effectiveness of individual units due to this orders process. Russian tactical commanders hold near-sole responsibility for the orders process and choosing a battle order, rather than being supported by a staff and controlling subordinates operating under intent. The process of inputting battlefield data to find the objectively "correct" solution and selecting from the available menu of battle orders places a large burden on the commander, and less skilled or simply task-saturated Russian commanders do not have staffs to fall back on and are not in the habit of doing so in any event.[50] The Russian military deemphasizes building small-unit cohesion and instead assumes that a commander can effectively control any minimally effective unit that knows its playbook of battle orders. The effectiveness of a Russian unit at each echelon often lives or dies with the skills and personality of its commander, rendering the Russian military vulnerable to officer casualties and declining standards of officer training.

Tactical simplicity achieved through simple, replicable battle orders is intended to enable complex and effective operational-level warfighting, the hallmark of the Soviet (and theoretically Russian) military system. The Soviet military was an early innovator in what became known as "operational art" in the interwar period and continued to focus on developing operational-level warfighting concepts during WWII and beyond.[51] Soviet and Russian military expert David Glantz defines operational art as "the theory and practice of preparing for and conducting combined and independent operations by large units (fronts, armies) of the armed forces."[52] Soviet military theorists differentiated between the skills required from tactical and operational commanders as initiative (инициатива) and creativity (творчество), respectively.[53] The Soviet military asserted that creativity at the operational level "comprised both the intellectual ability to compete with the challenges posed by the abstract aim, and the faculty to assemble the numerous tactical events into a coherent contingency, leading to achievement of the aim."[54] Marshal Mikhail Tukashevsky and other Soviet theorists in the 1930s accepted that the majority of Soviet officers lacked operational-level creativity and were incapable of defining an abstract operational aim.[55] Soviet military thinkers decided that the best response to the growing speed and complexity of mechanized warfare was to *simplify* the command burden on tactical commanders so that they could "select out of the common inventory of tactical precepts a specific formula and implement it effectively" using their bounded tactical initiative, rather than reforming the Russian command system around commander's intent.[56] Modern Russian officer training continues this approach, and the

Tactical simplicity achieved through simple, replicable battle orders is intended to enable complex and effective operational-level warfighting, the hallmark of the Soviet (and theoretically Russian) military system.

Russian military sees what a Western military would criticize as overly narrow junior officer training and the lack of delegated intent as reducing the cognitive load on tactical officers.

The modern Russian military continues to implement the Soviet optimization of centralizing decision-making authority at the army echelon and above to make the most of a limited pool of qualified officers in large-scale conventional war. The Russian military intends operational-level commanders to use their creativity to create operational complexity out of a wide number of individually simple and standardized tactical actions. Operational-level commanders can trust that their subordinates commanding tactical-level units *will not deviate from higher-echelon orders and plans,* leaving creativity solely at the operational level. The Red Army responded to its "shortage of able officers [by] concentrating competence at the top, at army level, a drastic simplification which made a virtue of necessity," and the modern Russian military continues to implement this adaptation.[57] Highly centralized battlespace management, as practiced by the Russian military, is not inherently flawed despite its abnormality to a Western military ethos.[58] Centralized control allows for the better allocation of units and rare assets such as precision fires, preventing overlap between assets and services. A centralized HQ with sufficient situational awareness can make highly informed trade-off decisions on the use of rare assets and scarce reserves. Finally, remote command allows senior commanders to be (relatively) safe from the direct threats and distractions of the battlefield. This Russian and Soviet way of war is not inherently a flawed system and can be highly effective when well executed, as it was in the closing years of WWII.

Misperceptions of the Soviet Use of Mass in WWII

One of the most often discussed — and most often misunderstood — elements of the Russian and previously Soviet way of war is its use of "mass," popularly discussed as Russia's supposed overwhelming numbers and ability to replace catastrophic losses from bottomless manpower reserves. The simplistic picture of Russia relying *solely* on its greater potential manpower reserves than its opponents does not accurately characterize how the Red Army fought WWII or what the contemporary Russian military is attempting to do in Ukraine. The Red Army used effective operational art; high-quality mobile formations to exploit breakthroughs achieved by infantry; and an extensive mobilization base supported by international aid to make the most of its military potential. The apogee of the Soviet way of war — which the Russian military is attempting to match in Ukraine with limited success — was the Red Army's ability to *effectively* leverage its mass to achieve operational results beyond the sum of its individual tactical actions. The contemporary Russian military views Soviet operations in the closing years of WWII as *the* exemplary model of large-scale conventional war.[59] Understanding how the Soviet Union effectively leveraged its mass is imperative to understanding the modern Russian military's intended approach to large-scale conventional war, and to seeing where Russian forces in Ukraine are falling short of this intent, as discussed in the second chapter of this report.

The deeply ingrained popular idea of the "Russian steamroller" and the assumption that Russia can inherently militarily outlast Ukraine, or any other potential opponent, largely stems from outdated German perceptions of the Red Army in WWII. German officers held flawed views of how the Red Army fought due to a mixture of arrogance, racism, and a refusal to acknowledge Soviet military effectiveness. Memoirs written by German officers and captured German military records heavily shaped early NATO perceptions of the Soviet threat and the early historiography of the Eastern Front due to the absence of access to Soviet records and the desire to draw on German lessons to prepare to fight the Red Army in the early Cold War.[60] To be sure, the work of numerous historians (such as

David Glantz and Jonathan House, who are cited throughout this report) in the years since the end of WWII and the partial opening of Soviet archives has greatly increased the West's understanding of how the Red Army fought and partially debunked many of the myths discussed below. Early inaccurate perceptions continue to shape perceptions of the Soviet and Russian way of war to the present day, however, and directly shape flawed perceptions of contemporary Russian capabilities.

At their core, German accounts typically oversimplify and dismiss Soviet effectiveness at the operational and strategic levels and focus solely on Soviet inflexibility and sheer numbers at the tactical level. The Soviet approach to war often appeared to German defenders as endless waves of Soviet personnel launching frontal attack after frontal attack with little variation, particularly at the tactical level.[61] There is some truth to these perceptions, as Soviet tactics were highly simplistic early in the war (and throughout the war among second-echelon Soviet units).[62] Many German discussions of Soviet practice reflected an inability or unwillingness to fully recognize Russian operational skill beyond this tactical rigidity, however. Major General F.W. von Mellenthin admitted in his memoir *Panzer Battles* that several senior Soviet commanders were highly effective by the end of the war and noted that the Soviets were excellent at massing attacking divisions on narrow sectors, rapidly replacing depleted formations, and crucially making the most out of a lower individual quality of soldier. Mellenthin consistently downplayed Soviet successes throughout his memoir despite briefly acknowledging these capabilities, however, and framed the Red Army as effective almost in spite of itself.[63] He claimed that "there is no way of telling what the Russian [sic] will do next" and that "in many cases the Russians [sic] relied on instinct rather than tactical principles… at first their measures might seem incomprehensible, but they often turned out to be fully justified."[64] Mellenthin and other officers' memoirs commonly demonstrate an inconsistent appreciation of operational art between themselves and the Soviets and only grant agency to German commanders, framing the Soviets as an endless and faceless enemy. When the Wehrmacht rushed a panzer corps to plug a gap in the nick of time or drove deep into Soviet rear areas, it showed German skill and flexibility. When the Soviets surprised German commanders with their ability to mass multiple field armies at crucial points undetected and conduct excellent deep penetrations with mechanized formations, however, German writers brushed it off as solely due to Soviet numbers or simply the obvious thing to do. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, for example, egregiously claimed that "not very much genius was required on the Soviet side" to launch Operation Uranus in late 1942 (which encircled and destroyed multiple German and Romanian field armies in whole or in part) and that other than around Stalingrad "the Soviet command never managed to coordinate strength and speed when hitting a decisive spot," which is demonstrably untrue.[65]

Three primary factors enabled the Red Army to leverage its mass effectively to achieve operational and strategic effectiveness. First, the Red Army developed excellent operational art over time and concentrated on effectiveness at the operational level over skill at the tactical level of war, as discussed previously. Second, the Red Army was not simply a large but low-quality force by the end of the war — the Soviets fielded high-quality breakthrough and exploitation formations in addition to large numbers of line rifle divisions. Third, the Soviet Union fully mobilized a truly massive base of manpower and material to fight an existential total war (unlike the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as much as the Kremlin tries to portray its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine as an existential war) and received substantial international support through the Lend-Lease program.

The Red Army's successful efforts to develop excellent operational art throughout WWII are well documented, though arguably still underappreciated.[66] In 1941, the Red Army threw personnel into the meatgrinder of German advances, and new rifle formations led by inexperienced officers were created and obliterated at a blinding rate.[67] The Soviets suffered a monumental loss rate during the first 6 months of the war, and the Germans captured almost 3 million prisoners and inflicted millions of battlefield casualties by October 1941 in repeated encirclements due in large part to Soviet

inflexibility.[68] From December 1941 onwards, however, the Red Army steadily developed effective operational art to make the most of relatively less effective individual units through the expert use of military deception; the careful planning of simultaneous and sequential campaigns; and creating overwhelming localized force ratios. The Red Army's ability to flexibly mass personnel, armor, and artillery to achieve overwhelming local superiority for decisive offensives while conducting economy of force operations elsewhere in the theater was core to later Soviet operational success. Axis forces outnumbered the Red Army until December 1941, and the Soviet Union achieved a net 2:1 manpower advantage over Axis forces by February 1943, which only increased to 3:1 in the closing months of 1944.[69] Soviet operational art enabled the Red Army to achieve far higher *localized* force ratios in key sectors and to rapidly rotate depleted formations out of the line for reconstitution, however. German defenders perceived this localized superiority and skillful rotation of depleted formations as endless waves of Soviet troops, giving rise to the perception that German forces were perennially heavily outnumbered throughout the theater and that Soviet reserves were endless.

The Red Army's successful efforts to develop excellent operational art throughout WWII are well documented, though arguably still underappreciated.

The Soviets additionally heavily iterated their force structure at all echelons and did not simply rely on poorly trained and equipped infantry formations.[70] The "steamroller" of the Red Army was *not* the rifle armies in the first echelon of major offensives or holding static sectors of the line, but rather the massed artillery that created gaps and the highly mobile tank armies and cavalry/mechanized groups that exploited those gaps to drive into German rear areas. The first Soviet counteroffensives in 1941 and early 1942 lacked this punch, and the Red Army was a steamroller with no real steam until it could develop true mobility and exploitation capabilities.[71] The Red Army possessed both quantity (in the form of numerous rifle formations) and quality (in the form of tank armies and guards formations) by mid-1943.[72] The Red Army iterated its force structure throughout the war, and by 1945 fielded numerous highly effective tank armies and mechanized corps fully capable of outfighting the remaining German panzer divisions, not simply overwhelming them with numbers.[73]

Finally, the Red Army was sustained by the incredible wartime mobilization of the Soviet Union and Western Lend-Lease aid—yet still did not have a bottomless well of manpower and material. The Soviet Union possessed physical and human resources at a scale modern Russia cannot match, and it mobilized them to a far greater degree.[74] The Soviet Union fought an existential total war and mobilized itself to meet this challenge, far beyond the Kremlin's current partial mobilization and concurrent efforts to prepare Russian society for a long war without asking too much of it. The US and other Western allies additionally heavily supported the USSR through Lend-Lease shipments. American-provided trucks functionally motorized the Red Army, for example, with fully 427,000 of the 665,000 motor vehicles the Red Army fielded at the end of the war coming from Lend-Lease rather than domestic production.[75] The Red Army additionally paid for its losses and could not have indefinitely supported its casualty rates. The exact numbers will never be conclusively determined, but the Soviet Union suffered at least 25,000,000 military and civilian casualties during WWII.[76] The Soviet Union fully mobilized women and children to maintain its industrial production and maximally used all of its available military manpower. Soviet unit strengths dropped throughout the war, and Soviet commanders could not be as profligate with their forces in 1945 as they were earlier in the war, however, and the Red Army steadily revised its unit tables of organization throughout the war to make up for manpower deficiencies with artillery firepower and automatic weapons.[77] Soviet formations in 1945 were regularly staffed to the end strength of units an entire echelon

below their (already low) doctrinal end strength, and Soviet commanders only sustained many front-line formations to the end of the war through the immediate forcible conscription of personnel in recently recaptured territories or combining the remnants of multiple shattered units into ad hoc groups.[78] The Red Army was certainly still a massive and highly effective force in 1945, but it could not have continued replacing its losses indefinitely.

The modern Russian military continues to draw on the Soviet experience in WWII as an aspirational model of effective conventional maneuver warfare, and the desire to emulate Soviet practice will shape Russian reconstitution efforts. After a period of focus on the single option of nuclear war in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Soviet theorists resumed integrating lessons from WWII into efforts to modernize Soviet land capabilities throughout the Cold War.[79] The modern Russian military continues to discuss how contemporary Russian forces can emulate the effectiveness of the Red Army.[80] The subsequent chapters of this report assess how the Russian military failed to leverage its mass in Ukraine as effectively as the Soviet Union; the results of Russia's inefficient use of mass; and the implications of the Russian military's lasting desire to emulate the 1945 Red Army and field a force capable of maneuver warfare at scale for Russian reconstitution efforts.

Russian Views of Modern Conventional War Pre-February 2022

The character of Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reflected many Russian expectations of modern war but heavily diverged from others — such as the breakdown of Russia's pre-invasion typology of conflicts and the Russian military's poor use of precision fires — and the eventual positional and protracted nature of the war sharply diverged from many Russian expectations. The Russian military retained a greater focus on conventional war than the United States has in the 21st century, in parallel with Russian discussions of irregular means and "next generation warfare." The Russian military anticipated that precision fires and fragmented, mobile land operations would dominate the next major conventional war, but Russian forces were unable to effectively implement pre-war theoretical approaches in Ukraine.

Russian Military Doctrine lays out a typology of conflicts defining the possible circumstances under which Russia could conduct military actions, each with a set scale of participating actors and the kinds of objectives sought by each combatant.[81] These typologies are regularly referenced in Russian discussions and shape Russian planning.

- ***Military Danger:*** A period of heightened interstate tensions that could escalate but does not yet involve any military conflict.
- ***Military Threat:*** A state of interstate relations characterized by a high degree of military readiness among states, terrorist organizations, and other armed groups and the high possibility that a military conflict will occur.
- ***Armed Conflict:*** Active conflict at a limited scale between either two individual states (international armed conflict) or opposing sides on the territory of a single state (internal armed conflict).
- ***Local War:*** A war of higher intensity than armed conflict in which actors pursue limited military-political goals solely impacting the interests of participating states, and combat occurs solely within the borders of the combating states.
- ***Regional War:*** A war with the participation of several states from one region led by either national or coalition (i.e. NATO or CSTO) armed forces, with both sides pursuing significant military-political goals.

- ***Large-Scale War:*** War between coalitions of states or the largest global states (superpowers) in which the combatants pursue radical military-political goals with global impact and fully mobilize their militaries and societies for war.

These terms do not directly map onto the Western concept of "large-scale war" or the term "large-scale combat operations" as defined in the US Army's FM 3-0: Operations.[82] The Russian military strictly reserves the term "large-scale war" for wars on the scale of the World Wars and defines conflicts as expansive as the Vietnam War; the Arab-Israeli Wars; and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as local or, at most, regional wars — even though these wars included what the US military would consider large-scale combat operations.[83]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine — and particularly the way in which Russian propagandists and military officials have discussed it publicly — does not cleanly map onto these typologies either, and it is unclear how (if at all) the Russian military is adjusting these frameworks. The Kremlin and the Russian military have simultaneously downplayed Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a local war not requiring full societal mobilization while exaggerating it as a global struggle with the West on par with WWII for the survival of the Russian civilization to spur voluntary mobilization and maintain social support for the war effort. The Kremlin initially sought to frame its invasion of Ukraine as a low-level conflict between Russia and Ukraine and steadfastly refused to call the "special military operation" a war.[84] Russia's invasion of Ukraine has several commonalities with higher orders of conflict as defined by Russian Military Doctrine, however. Russia is fighting as a coalition: Belarus has been a full belligerent in the war from its outset due to its provision of territory and resources to Russia despite the fact that Belarus did not deploy its own forces in combat; North Korea has deployed troops in combat in Russia since November 2024 and is providing large amounts of military support to Russia; and Iran has previously deployed personnel to facilitate Russian drone operations in addition to providing other material — at minimum making the conflict a regional war in the Russian typology. The Russian military's manpower and resources are nearly fully engaged in Ukraine despite the Kremlin's failure to fully mobilize Russian society and the Russian economy. The scale and intensity of combat operations in Russia's invasion of Ukraine certainly go beyond the scope of an armed conflict or local war in the Russian typology and are as close to the Russian definition of large-scale war as any war could be below the threshold of a full-scale Russian invasion of a NATO state. Russian objectives are certainly not "limited" to the scale of a local war either, as the Kremlin seeks to destroy Ukraine as an independent state and rewrite European security architecture by forcing NATO to withdraw forces from its eastern member states and provide Russia a de facto veto over new members.[85] Russian propagandists, finally, routinely discuss the war in the language of a global large-scale war, repeatedly claiming that Russia is fighting the combined military might of NATO and must societally mobilize to match the level of Soviet efforts in WWII.[86]

The Russian military leadership and the Kremlin appear to have violated a key precept of Russian Military Doctrine and sound military practice by separating the aims of the war from the means of fighting it and from the expected scale of combat.

These distinctions are not purely semantic, and the way in which the Russian military defines its invasion of Ukraine will shape how it learns lessons from the war and assesses its own future force reconstitution requirements. It is unlikely that senior Russian military personnel (and certainly not foreign observers) expected Russia to fight a multi-year war involving nearly the entire Russian conventional military in active combat operations without fully mobilizing Russia's population and economy, in direct contravention of its formal doctrinal approach to large-scale conventional war. The Russian military likely categorized its intended

rapid occupation of Ukraine as a local conflict, but it rapidly took on the characteristics of a regional war as defined by the involved states and a *large-scale war* in terms of Russian rhetoric, the war's impact on Russia's economy and society, and the character of fighting. Russian objectives as the Kremlin defined them in 2021 and repeatedly since the full-scale invasion were never local, moreover. The Russian military leadership and the Kremlin appear to have violated a key precept of Russian Military Doctrine and sound military practice by separating the aims of the war from the means of fighting it and from the expected scale of combat. It is unclear if the Russian military can admit this initial mistake, how (if at all) the Russian military will account for these disparities, and how the Russian military might change its existing typology of wars.[X]

The Russian military retained arguably a greater focus on large-scale conventional warfare than NATO in the 21st century, despite the prominence of Russian thinking on irregular or hybrid war in Western discussions of the Russian threat.[87] The Russian military certainly has heavily discussed the increasing importance of information warfare, the use of irregular means, and the growing importance of non-state actors in recent years.[88] The 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, and Russia's intervention in Syria drew the Russian military's focus to the possibility of information-focused and localized conflicts, away from the historical Soviet emphasis solely on large-scale war with NATO. The Russian military's concrete modernization efforts in the last two decades, however, focused on improving conventional warfare capabilities, and Russian officer training and major military exercises remained heavily focused on major conventional war.[89] The Russian military's modernization efforts in the last decade included an (intended) growing flexibility to fight in local conflicts, the ability to conduct limited expeditionary actions, and the increasing coordination of kinetic actions with information operations and irregular means — but Russian military command culture at its core remains focused on conventional warfare.

Russian military writers have uniformly stressed the increasing primacy of precision fires over close combat in kinetic conflict in the 21st century. The Soviet military was a famously fires-heavy force, relying on artillery, airpower, and, in theory, nuclear fires to punch through enemy defenses and enable rapid maneuver.[90] The modern Russian military has retained this focus, balancing it with an increased focus on precision rather than massed unguided fires. Russian writing before 2022 often focused on the need to increase the precision of fires at all levels of war — from the tactical use of UAVs to strategic strikes against enemy military industry and critical infrastructure — and better integrate joint fires to achieve operational effects.[91] Cutting-edge Russian writing additionally discussed the increasing use of non-kinetic fires such as EW and information operations to achieve kinetic effects as part of a coordinated strike plan. At its highest manifestation, Russian thinkers discuss this phenomenon as "sixth generation" or "non-contact" warfare, in which combat is predominantly conducted through information operations and over-the-horizon conventional and nuclear precision weapons, with only the limited employment of traditional ground forces.[92] The Russian invasion of Ukraine has certainly borne out the importance of precision fires, and as of early 2025 the proliferation of drones has led to a limited form of non-contact war at the tactical level, but Russian forces have been unable to fight the sixth-generation war that Russian military thinkers aspired to conduct.

Russian discussions of maneuver war before 2022 heavily noted the increasing speed and fragmentation of land operations. The Russian army increasingly assessed that any conventional war would be fought as a series of fluid battles with open flanks and rapid maneuver rather than with coherent front lines.[93] Russian thinkers accurately assessed that pervasive drones and ISR would render the battlefield largely (but not entirely) transparent, increasing the difficulty of concentrating mass and making small,

X The concluding chapter of this report assesses the possible frameworks through which the Russian military could view its invasion of Ukraine, such as seeing it as either a predictor of — or aberration from — the types of wars Russia will fight in the future.

flexible tactical units essential. The Russian military assessed that this increasing pace of maneuver would place growing burdens on commanders to operate in a networked information environment and make decisions at a faster rate.[94] The Russian military assessed that the increasing range and lethality of weapon systems would expand the physical battlefield while shrinking it temporally.[95] The Russian military assessed that the possibility of mechanized groups conducting independent deep raids and widespread strike into the operational and strategic rear would erode the concept of "front" and "rear" entirely, and, although some Russian officers maintained the possibility of a modern maneuver war temporarily stabilizing on a fixed front, the Russian military broadly did not anticipate the possibility of a protracted positional war.[96]

The Russian military's assessment of the likely character of modern war prior to 2022 heavily shaped the Russian military's performance in Ukraine and will continue to drive Russian reconstitution efforts — despite the positional character of much of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Russian military is a technologically forward-looking institution, but poor resourcing and R&D limitations (compared to NATO militaries) have historically limited the Russian military's ability to implement its desired technologically focused force design and doctrine development. The Russian military's technological innovation in Ukraine is unsurprising, and Russian reconstitution efforts (assessed in the concluding chapter of this report) will very likely attempt to revise these pre-2022 conceptions of modern war in some fashion.

Conclusion

The Russian military has not been able to fully implement the idealized way of war discussed in this chapter in Ukraine. The already relatively low quality of Russian personnel and officers has declined precipitously; Russian orders processes have broken down; and Russian operational art is a far cry from Russian intent and from the Soviet practice on which the Russian military ostensibly models itself in conventional war. The Russian military's *aspirational* views of modern war, as discussed in this chapter, have directly shaped the adaptations Russian commanders have made in order to fight a positional war in Ukraine with degraded capabilities, however, and the Russian military's cultural approach to military learning will drive Russian reconstitution efforts — as discussed in the subsequent chapters of this report.

Chapter 2:

RUSSIAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES IN 2025

Introduction

The Russian military has made a virtue of necessity by optimizing itself to fight a positional war in Ukraine, but its degraded force is now likely incapable of effective maneuver warfare at scale. The Russian military has revised the structure, equipment, and tactics of its units at every echelon from group of forces to company to enable itself to fight a positional war with low-quality personnel, insufficient stores of armor and advanced munitions, and poor command and control. This force is sufficient to support the Kremlin's current theory of victory in Ukraine. The Kremlin assesses that if the Russian military can sustain grinding territorial advances that Ukraine will be unable to reverse with counteroffensives, then the Kremlin can outlast Western support for Ukraine and achieve its strategic objectives. The current Russian military can *only* conduct positional offensive operations to support this theory of victory and cannot conduct significant operational maneuver, however. The Russian military's series of decisions since February 2022 to optimize its forces for a positional war will constrain Russia's ongoing and future reconstitution efforts and ability to threaten NATO, although Russia will likely be able to conduct limited attacks on NATO forces using modifications of this positional warfare approach. The Russian military of today is thus very different from that of 2021, and Russia's leadership is unlikely to try to discard its current force structure and composition in a sudden return to its pre-invasion form. Forecasts of future Russian military capabilities must therefore begin with an accurate picture of Russian capabilities as of August 2025, not the Russian military's intended capabilities pre-2022.

The Russian Military in Ukraine and the Levels of War

This report assesses the Russian military's capabilities to fight a major conventional war as of August 2025 at each level of war, oriented around the structure and capabilities of the Russian echelon active at each level. The relationship in Russian forces between echelons and levels of war in Ukraine differs both from pre-2022 Russian doctrine and common Western understandings of the relationship between levels of war and echelons in a major conventional war.

The Russian military separates war into five levels: strategic, operational-strategic, operational, operational-tactical, and tactical.[97] The Russian military typically mapped these levels of war to echelons in major conventional war pre-2022 as follows: the strategic level as the entire state's efforts; the operational-strategic level as the actions of Operational Strategic Commands (OSKs) and groups of forces (equivalent to Soviet "fronts" or Western army groups); the operational level as the actions of field armies; the rarely discussed operational-tactical level as the actions of army corps; and the tactical level as the actions of units at the division echelon and below. Modern Russian military thought stresses the importance of determining the level of war at which a particular combat action occurs based on the scope of the mission assigned to a unit, rather than the unit's size, and these levels are somewhat flexible. Russian military writers, for example, state that a brigade subordinated to an Army headquarters in a major maneuver war is a tactical asset, whereas a

This report highlights the modern Russian military's practical lack of formations capable of effective operational-level maneuver and degradation into a narrowly specialized force capable of offensive action at the battalion level.

brigade fighting independently in a more localized conflict (such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian War) could be considered an operational or even strategic "war winning" asset, depending on its assigned mission.[98] This report discusses each echelon of the Russian ground forces in terms of its practical use, not its theoretical purpose — highlighting the modern Russian military's lack of formations capable of effective operational-level maneuver and degradation into a narrowly specialized force capable of offensive action at the battalion level. Russian echelons currently relate to levels of war as follows: the General Staff operates at the strategic level; Russia's theater command in Ukraine and groups of forces operate at the boundary of the operational and strategic levels; formations and units from field armies down to regiments and brigades function at the tactical level; and battalions and companies operate as the primary offensive unit of action at the lower tactical level.

Russian units in Ukraine usually have combat strength equivalent to Western units of the next lower echelon — e.g., field armies are the size of NATO corps or at times large divisions, and line battalions are the size of companies. The Russian military's strategic and operational command structures are additionally compressed from their pre-2022 structures designed for a maneuver war with NATO, with operational-strategic headquarters controlling relatively narrow frontages and army headquarters most often deployed as fixed tactical units rather than as flexible operational-level assets. Definitions of levels of war and understandings of unit echelons drawn from Western formations and the Red Army's structure in World War II — which remains the current Russian military's canonical reference for the type of major conventional war it *wants* to be fighting — obfuscate the smaller scale and limited flexibility of Russia's force structure in Ukraine.

The Russian military has structured its forces in Ukraine at the operational-strategic level into six "groups of forces" predominantly formed on the basis of peacetime military district headquarters, each of which is responsible for a defined geographical area of the front in Ukraine. The groups of forces report directly to Russia's theater command in Ukraine and thence through the General Staff to the Minister of Defense and President Vladimir Putin. Russian groups of forces are roughly equivalent to army groups or Soviet "fronts" in size, controlling multiple army headquarters and their subordinate units. Pre-2022 Russian doctrine intended OSKs (and therefore groups of forces) to operate on a "strategic direction" corresponding to a peacetime geographical area of responsibility — the Southern and Western (at the time) OSKs were supposed to cover the Ukrainian border, for example.[99] The Russian military converted all its peacetime OSKs to active groups of forces and established two further groups of forces as the war evolved, however. Each group of forces operates on a far more compressed frontage than the Russian military had intended before 2022. The Russian military's form of operational art used in Ukraine is concentrated on slow campaigns conducted by one or more groups of forces, rather than on more complex and rapid operations conducted with greater independence by their subordinate field armies as intended in pre-2022 doctrine. This report, therefore, discusses the Russian theater command structure and the groups of forces together as forming the basis of command and control at the operational-strategic level of war in Ukraine.

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Russian field armies function in Ukraine as stationary tactical headquarters rather than as flexible formations capable of maneuver at the operational level. The divisions and independent regiments subordinated to the army headquarters are similarly fixed on positional axes, rotating individual battalions between standing division headquarters. This pattern is a notable departure from pre-2022 Russian doctrine, which intended armies to operate as operational

maneuver assets commanding divisions and independent brigades as the primary maneuver elements at the tactical level. This report therefore assesses Russian armies as, in practice, tactical headquarters alongside regiments and brigades coordinating the actions of individual battalions, collapsing the intended pre-2022 differences in scale of operations of field armies and divisions.

Russian regiments and brigades field specialized companies and battalions (often far below their doctrinal end strength) as their total combat power capable of offensive missions. Each peacetime Russian brigade or regiment fielded *at most* two (usually understrength) battalions as its maneuver elements at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, and by early 2025 the effective combat power of Russian units had been concentrated further into specialized assault companies fielded by each regiment or brigade. Pre-2022 Western studies of Russian conventional capabilities focus on the use of armies, divisions, and brigades as the most important units of action.[100] Most Russian innovations and effectiveness are now concentrated in the tactics employed by battalions and companies, and this report heavily concentrates on their use instead of that of higher-echelon formations.

Strategic Level: The Ministry of Defense and the General Staff

The Security Council

The Kremlin's Security Council is the highest formal organ of Russian security policymaking. The Security Council is formally intended to manage the planning and implementation of Russian security policy at the strategic level and to advise the Russian president.[101] Russian President Vladimir Putin chairs the Security Council, and its current secretary is former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who replaced longtime secretary Nikolai Patrushev in May 2024.[102] Its permanent membership consists of several key ministers (including the prime minister and the foreign and defense ministers); the director of the foreign intelligence service (SVR); and other key aides. The Security Council additionally includes several non-permanent members who do not necessarily attend every formal meeting — the most important of which for military operations is the Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov.

The Security Council acts as the broker of Russian security policy discussions and decisions conducted by key individual stakeholders and arbitrated by Putin himself, rather than acting as a cohesive planning and management body. Putin makes most of his decisions through individual interactions with primary stakeholders. Key decisions are most often planned and executed in ad hoc small group meetings, rather than in the large and heavily regimented formal Security Council meetings.[103] The most hawkish members of the Security Council reportedly heavily influenced Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022, and key individual members have central roles in strategic policymaking, such as mobilization decisions and international affairs.[104] The Security Council likely has little to no input on operational military decision making as a coherent body, however.

Structure of the Russian Armed Forces

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) administratively and operationally controls the Russian armed forces, with active warfighting commanded by the General Staff.[105] The MoD Collegium serves as a planning staff and advisory board for the Minister of Defense and is the MoD's highest-level administrative body. The Collegium's membership includes Deputy Defense Ministers, the heads of each General Staff Directorate, armed service and branch commanders, and military district commanders. The Deputy Ministers of Defense hold portfolios covering

several key areas of strategic war planning and production, including financial support, international military cooperation, military-technical support for the armed forces, political-military affairs, and training. The MoD does not exert peacetime control over several other uniformed Russian security forces that contribute to Russia's conventional combat power, including Rosgvardia and the FSB Border Guards. Putin appointed Andrei Belousov, an economist and former First Deputy Prime Minister, as Minister of Defense in May 2024, replacing Sergei Shoigu (November 2012 – May 2024), who became Secretary of the Security Council.[106] Putin appointed Belousov with the goal of rationalizing Russian wartime production and tackling corruption, in parallel with the MoD's efforts since late 2023 to recentralize its control over Russian security forces following the proliferation of irregular forces in 2022 – 2023 and the Wagner Group mutiny. Shoigu previously exerted dominant influence over Russian military planning and likely warfighting in the early months of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and is a close confidant of Putin. Belousov's influence on the future evolution of the MoD remains unclear at this time.

The Russian military is comprised of three "service branches" equivalent to US armed services: the Ground Forces, Aerospace Forces (VKS), and the Navy.[107] Russia also has two "separate branches of troops" that are considered independent services but are not considered equal to the three service branches: the Strategic Rocket Forces (that control Russia's nuclear weapons, which are beyond the scope of this report) and the Airborne Forces, commonly referred to as the VDV. Finally, the Special Operations Forces (SSO) and the logistical support service (MTO) are independent structures reporting directly to the MoD but are not considered services or separate branches.

The Ground Forces, more commonly referred to as the Army, have long held pride of place at the center of the Russian (and formerly Soviet) armed forces and are first in the Russian military's hierarchy.[XI] The Army is split into several branches of arms, including motorized rifle (infantry), tank, artillery, logistics, and several specialized branches such as reconnaissance, signals, and electronic warfare. Branch commanders are responsible for the organization and force design of their combat arm, but do not have any operational control over these units.

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The Aerospace Forces (VKS) comprise Russia's air, strategic air defense, and space forces. The VKS is closely tied to supporting the Army and is similarly structured into air armies, divisions, and regiments, with each military district fielding an Air and Air Defense Forces Army. The VKS's primary role pre-2022 was intended to be denying NATO air superiority and supporting Russian ground forces with fires. It was not meant to function as a key offensive asset as in NATO militaries.

The Navy currently plays a largely defensive role in Russian military planning, oriented on maintaining superiority along Russia's coasts and critical sea lanes and supporting littoral ground operations, such as in the Black Sea. The Russian Navy has desired throughout the 21st Century to modernize and expand into a more global force capable of supporting expeditionary operations, but shipbuilding and funding have not kept up with this ambition.[108] In terms of the Russian ground capabilities assessed in this report, the Russian Navy acts as a limited element of Russian strategic strike capabilities and directly contributes to and controls ground forces in two respects. First,

XI This service branch is officially titled the "Ground Forces." However, this report uses the capitalized "Army" (its most commonly used name in English) to refer to this service branch and the lower case "ground forces" to refer to all of Russia's land combat power — including the formal Ground Forces, ground forces controlled by the Navy, the VDV, and the menagerie of non-MoD regular and irregular forces which at certain stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have comprised a large proportion of Russia's conventional combat power.

the Navy controls Russia's Naval Infantry formations — Russia's equivalent of Marines, which are directly subordinate to the Navy rather than being an independent combined-arms service as in the United States. Second, Russian Fleets (including the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets) previously operated as combined arms headquarters roughly equivalent in echelon to the Army's combined arms army headquarters. The Black Sea and Baltic Fleet headquarters both directly controlled army corps (the 22nd and 18th, respectively) that fielded regular motorized rifle (not Naval Infantry) units pre-2022, and the Black Sea Fleet headquarters likely controlled Russian ground forces in combat in Ukraine, much like an army headquarters, prior to the formation of the Dnepr group of forces in early 2023.[109] The Kremlin restructured fleet headquarters to solely control naval assets as part of a February 2025 decree that revised command relationships between Russian services, military districts, and groups of forces, however, which is discussed further below.

The VDV are an independent service rather than a branch of the army in the Russian military. The VDV has an elite reputation in the Russian and formerly Soviet militaries, selecting the physically toughest recruits, maintaining a higher proportion of *kontraktniki* (professional volunteer soldiers), and having a reputation for aggressive action. The Russian military intended pre-2022 to use the VDV as the General Staff's quick reaction force and strategic reserve. VDV units were theoretically intended to conduct "vertical envelopments" of defending enemy forces in offensive operations as part of Russian (and formerly Soviet) deep battle concepts.[110] VDV formations were fully mechanized and relatively heavily equipped prior to the invasion of Ukraine and subsequent losses. The Red Army was an early innovator of airborne operations in the 1930s, but the VDV's limited heliborne operations in Ukraine, such as the seizure of Hostomel airport at the beginning of the invasion, met with high casualties, and the VDV has not attempted airborne operations since the earliest days of the invasion.

The Logistical Support of the Russian Armed Forces is the unified system of logistical and technical support for all service branches of the Russian Armed Forces.[111] The Russian military relies heavily on its railway network due to a limited high-speed road network, and railway troops organized under the MTO are a crucial enabler of Russian logistics. The MTO concentrates Russian logistics and sustainment at higher echelons than in Western militaries, as with many other elements of the Russian military. Group of forces and field army headquarters field discrete MTO brigades and battalions that support combat units rather than divisions and brigades fielding internal subunits at scale, and the Russian supply system relies on central depots pushing supplies out to combat units on centralized schedules rather than responding to requests for supplies from combat units.

The Special Operations Forces were established in 2012 and are a strategic-level asset designed for various unconventional missions. SSO units played a crucial role in the Russian annexation of Crimea and the Russian deployment to Syria.[112] They have at times played a traditional SOF role in the invasion of Ukraine, but are regularly improperly used as elite light infantry tasked with operations suited to mechanized formations.[113] The SSO are distinct from the much more well-known GRU Spetsnaz. The term "Spetsnaz" (a syllabic acronym for "special purpose") can refer broadly to any number of specialized forces across the Russian Armed Forces, Rosgvardia, police, and other Russian security organizations. Spetsnaz most commonly refers to the GRU Spetsnaz, elite units subordinated directly to the General Staff and designed for unconventional operations and long-range reconnaissance and sabotage in the enemy rear and deep rear. Like all of Russia's relatively elite infantry and special forces units, Spetsnaz units have been heavily degraded in Ukraine as line infantry, and as of August 2025 the title "Spetsnaz" is often simply branding to connote relative eliteness, rather than an indicator of a unit possessing any specialized unconventional capabilities.

The General Staff and the National Defense Management Center

The Russian General Staff has historically been the core of Russian and previously Soviet warfighting. A prestigious and highly empowered body, it is emblematic of the Russian military ethos of centralized, top-down decision making and a scientific approach to the study of war. The General Staff serves in peacetime as the main body for forecasting Russia's defense requirements and preparing its forces to meet them, and in wartime is the operational planning heart of the Russian military. The General Staff has served as Russia's operational-strategic military command body for the war in Ukraine since Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov's appointment as theater commander in January 2023, and ongoing reforms are further increasing its role in future Russian warfighting.

Russian law states the Russian General Staff's main task is to "conceptualize and operationalize the military requirements to prepare for the state's 'adequate defense'" — forecasting the defense requirements of the Russian state and organizing the MoD's resources to meet those requirements.[114] The General Staff has sixteen formally defined "main tasks," largely split into the two main categories of assessing Russia's security environment at the strategic level and planning for warfighting at the operational level.[115] The Russian General Staff is responsible for much of the long-term military planning conducted in the United States by the office of the Secretary of Defense and unified Combatant Command (COCOM) commanders, in addition to doctrine and capabilities development. The General Staff's planning includes both the global military-political

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situation (what adversaries Russia will face) and trends in the changing character, methods, and means of warfare. In Russian military terminology, the General Staff is responsible for using military science to achieve "foresight" about future war, as in Gerasimov's 2013 speech "The Value of [Military] Science Is in the Foresight," a speech intended to shape the General Staff's research priorities, which was inaccurately dubbed the Gerasimov Doctrine.[116] The General Staff additionally has a large role in military acquisitions planning (deciding if systems meet the needs of the armed forces) and shaping training in concert with other Russian MoD structures, providing overall guidance to individual military districts.

General Staff personnel are selected at the ranks of major and lieutenant colonel and, once selected, typically serve as staff officers for the rest of their careers, much as in the Prussian/German General Staff system.[117] This system contrasts with the US model in which officers rotate between command and staff positions, gaining experience in both. Russian maneuver officers can obtain high level general staff positions (such as serving as the heads of directorates and as Chief of the General Staff, a role typically held by a career maneuver commander), but the personnel within each specialty directorate predominantly spend their entire careers in that path. This system imposes a clear divide between staff work and maneuver command, although there is no stigma in the Russian military against a career in staff work. The General Staff is organized into several "directorates," all subordinated to the Chief of the General Staff.[XII]

Gerasimov's long tenure and ability to survive the public opinion firestorm and Putin's anger at the Russian military's poor performance in Ukraine are remarkable.

The Chief of the General Staff serves as the senior operational planner of the Russian Armed Forces and is heavily responsible for shaping the development of the Russian military by overseeing and shaping the research and planning work of the General Staff. Gerasimov, a career tank commander, has served as Chief of the General Staff since November 2012 — by far the longest tenure of any post-Soviet Chief of the General Staff.[118] Gerasimov's long tenure and ability to survive the public opinion firestorm and Putin's anger at the Russian military's poor performance in Ukraine are remarkable. Putin has rewarded Gerasimov's consistent loyalty despite the decidedly mixed results of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Gerasimov's primary role was shaping the culture and development of the Russian military and steering Russian military scientific work on preparing for future war.[119] Gerasimov has focused throughout his tenure on the need for the Russian military to develop new forms and methods of warfare while maintaining the Russian military's traditional focus on major conventional maneuver war. The largely discredited Western image of Gerasimov as the *sole* mastermind of modern Russian war is inaccurate, but Gerasimov has heavily shaped Russian development through his long tenure and directives in major annual speeches. There is no public indication that Putin will relieve Gerasimov as Chief of the General Staff in the short term, and Gerasimov will continue to heavily shape the Russian military's reconstitution and capabilities development.

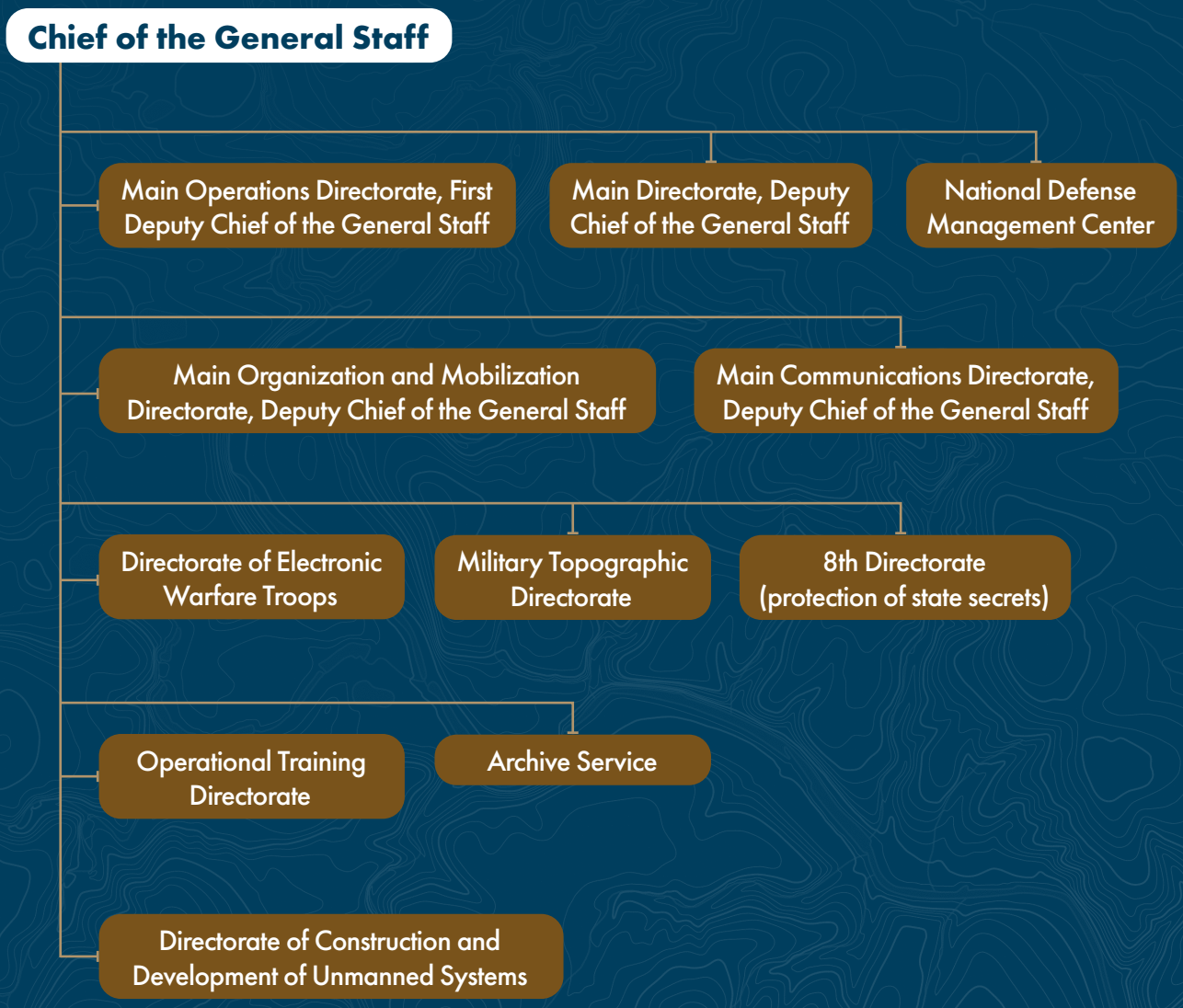
XII These directorates are the Main Operations Directorate; the Main Directorate or GU (though still commonly referred to by its former acronym GRU for "Main Intelligence Directorate"); the Main Organization and Mobilization Directorate; the Main Communications Directorate; the National Defense Management Center; the Operational Training Directorate; the Directorate of EW Troops; the Military Topographic Directorate; the Directorate for Construction and Development of Unmanned Aerial Systems; the 8th Directorate (devoted to the protection of state secrets); and the Archive Service. This report briefly discusses the Operations Directorate and discusses the General Staff's other directorates in the context of their practical functions. For a detailed look at the Russian General Staff, see Alexis A. Blanc, Alyssa Demus, Sandra Kay Evans, Michelle Grisé, Mark Hvizda, Marta Kepe, Natasha Lander, and Krystyna Marcinek, "The Russian General Staff: Understanding the Military's Decisionmaking Role in a 'Besieged Fortress'," *RAND Corporation,* May 15, 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1233-7.html; and Julian G. Waller and Dmitry Gorenburg, "The Central Brain of the Russian Armed Forces: The Modern Russian General Staff in Institutional Context," *Center for Naval Analyses*, October 4, 2024, https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/10/the-central-brain-of-the-russian-armed-forces.

The Main Operations Directorate is the General Staff's organ for active warfighting, typically led by the first deputy Chief of the General Staff.[120] The Directorate is responsible for "operational command and control of troops in peacetime and wartime" and coordinating with the rest of the Russian government to achieve wartime objectives. Russian doctrine pre-2022 stated the Directorate would embed specialist officers with field units as liaisons with the General Staff, though these have not been directly observed in Ukraine in open sources. The Operations Directorate translates decisions from the President and the Minister of Defense into executable combat orders and communicates them to force groupings through the National Defense Management Center (discussed below). The head of the Main Operations Directorate is typically a veteran maneuver commander, unlike the heads of other General Staff directorates, and former heads of the Main Operations Directorate are often promoted to military district or service branch command.

Russian military decision making and communication at the strategic and upper operational levels is facilitated by a single central body: the National Defense Management Center, abbreviated either from its Cyrillic transliteration as NTsUO or from an alternate English translation as the NDCC (National Defense *Control* Center).[121] The MoD established the NTsUO in 2014 to serve as the integrated nerve center of Russian military management in peacetime and wartime. The NTsUO is not a command element, and NTsUO personnel do not make decisions. The Russian military rather intends the NTsUO to act as the hub through which all elements of Russian military *and civilian* power related to warfighting communicate, and through which the General Staff disseminates orders to combat troops. Russian state and military media made much of the use of the NTsUO during the peak of the Russian military intervention in Syria from 2015–2018, with the MoD announcing that it enabled officers in Moscow to seamlessly communicate with Russian forces in Syria in real time and successfully coordinated whole-of-government Russian efforts.[122] It is unclear from open sources how the NTsUO is functioning during the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Russian General Staff has likely functioned largely as intended in pre-2022 Russian doctrine since early 2023, but strategic Russian command processes in Ukraine are unclear from available open sources. Putin likely sidelined the General Staff in early 2022, and reportedly ran the initial stage of the invasion directly through several military district headquarters without appointing an overall commander or fully leveraging the General Staff.[123] Putin appointed Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov as theater commander of Russian forces in Ukraine in January 2023. Gerasimov likely took steps to recentralize Russian command structures as intended in pre-2022 doctrine following his appointment and is likely spearheading ongoing reforms to further centralize Russia's operational-strategic headquarters under the General Staff, discussed in the following section.

RUSSIAN GENERAL STAFF DIRECTORATES



Operational-Strategic Level: Theater Command and Groups of Forces

Russia's Theater Command Structure in Ukraine

The Russian military's theater command structure in Ukraine has been relatively stable since January 2023, following an initial period of rapid change in 2022.[124] Putin did not appoint an overall military commander in February 2022, likely due to the Kremlin's anticipation of an easy military victory and rapid transition to occupation and at most counter-insurgency operations. Putin belatedly appointed a theater commander in April 2022 (who was dual hatted as the commander of one of Russia's district-based groups of forces) but then cycled through three theater commanders in the latter half of 2022 before appointing Valery Gerasimov as sole theater commander in January 2023. Gerasimov has served since January 2023 as theater commander and the direct superior of the several Russian groups of forces responsible for operational directions in Ukraine, most (but not all) of which are the operationalized headquarters of peacetime military districts in line with pre-war Russian doctrine. This section briefly outlines the evolution of Russia's theater command structure in Ukraine to set the stage for assessments of the structures of the individual groups of forces and subordinate formations discussed in the following sections.

First Phase: No Appointed Theater Commander, February 24, 2022 – April 7, 2022. The Kremlin did not appoint an overall commander of Russia's initial invasion force on or before February 24, 2022. Russia mobilized forces from all five of its military districts and likely partially or fully activated each peacetime military district headquarters into wartime Operational Strategic Commands (OSKs). The Kremlin assigned the forces of each military district to the following axes, clockwise from the north: the Eastern Military District (EMD), (with Northern Fleet elements acting as a holding force in Western Belarus) advanced south from Belarus towards Kyiv; Central Military District (CMD) forces advanced in northeastern Ukraine towards Chernihiv; Western Military District (WMD) forces advanced towards Sumy and Kharkiv; and Southern Military District (SMD) forces (including the then-nominally independent forces of the Donetsk People's Republic [DNR] and Luhansk People's Republic [LNR]) attacked both west out of DNR and LNR territories in the Donbas and north out of Crimea. Each military district effectively ran its own war, and early reports indicated district commanders competed for central resources.[125]

Second Phase: Turnover of Theater Commanders, April 8, 2022 – January 11, 2023. Putin appointed SMD commander Army General Alexander Dvornikov (who simultaneously retained his group of forces command) as theater commander on April 8, 2022, following the Russian withdrawal from Kyiv. Putin saddled Dvornikov with the wildly over-ambitious objective of capturing the Donbas by May 9 (Victory Day), 2022. Putin relieved Dvornikov as theater commander by early June 2022, though Dvornikov retained his position as commander of the SMD for several more weeks. Putin then appointed Colonel General Gennady Zhidko, at the time head of the Military-Political Directorate, as both theater commander and EMD commander (replacing Colonel General Alexander Chaiko, likely due to his disastrous command of the Russian forces assigned to capture Kyiv). Dvornikov and Zhidko were each dual hatted as military district (and therefore group of forces) commanders as well as theater commanders, stretching their span of control and fundamentally placing them as "first among equals" among the five military district commanders, rather than true theater commanders.

Putin appointed Army General Sergei Surovikin as the first non-dual hatted theater commander of Russian forces in October 2022.[126] Surovikin previously served as commander of the VKS from 2017 to 2023 and commanded the Southern Group of Forces from June to October 2022.[127] Putin appointed

Surovikin to take command of Russian forces in the aftermath of Ukraine's successful Kharkiv and Kherson counteroffensives, which shocked the Russian information space.[128] The Kremlin increased its reliance on Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group and other irregular forces in late 2022, and Surovikin's close professional ties with Prigozhin made him well suited to command during this phase of the war. Putin additionally likely sought to secure the support of the pro-war ultranationalist community by appointing their preferred candidate, Surovikin, to the position of overall theater commander. Surovikin reportedly persuaded Putin to accept the reality that Russian forces faced a longer-than-expected war and would temporarily have to go over to the defensive on certain areas of the front. Surovikin convinced Putin to approve the withdrawal of Russian forces from positions in right-bank Kherson — which an effective Ukrainian strike campaign rendered untenable — and Surovikin ordered the construction of the extensive fortifications in southern Ukraine that would later impede the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive.[129] The expanding influence of Surovikin and Prigozhin unnerved many within the Kremlin and the MoD, however, especially as Prigozhin increased his public criticism of the two institutions.

Third Phase: Appointment of Gerasimov and Consolidation of Command Structures, January 12, 2023 – present. Putin finally appointed Gerasimov as theater commander on January 11, 2023, a position he has held to date. Russian insider sources reported that Gerasimov convinced Putin to reinstall him and the MoD "old guard" to run the war in Ukraine following the Kremlin's dissatisfaction with the growing prominence and pugnaciousness of the Wagner Group and the slow progress achieved by Surovikin's offensives in late 2022.[130] Putin retained Surovikin as Gerasimov's deputy and commander of the VKS alongside General Oleg Salyukov as ground forces commander and Colonel General Aleksei Kim as naval commander, though Putin later removed both Surovikin and Salyukov.[131]

Gerasimov initially focused on formalizing and centralizing Russian command structures, both to rationalize increasingly fragmented command and control (C2) structures and to combat the anti-MoD faction within Russian high command. This struggle continued throughout 2023, culminating in the Wagner mutiny and subsequent further MoD efforts to regain central control over Russian combat power in Ukraine.[132] Gerasimov likely restored the General Staff to its intended role as the coordinating body of all Russian forces. The MoD's announcement of Gerasimov's appointment stated the change was necessary due to "the expansion of the scale of tasks" posed by the invasion of Ukraine and the need to improve interbranch coordination in the Russian military, belatedly recognizing that Russia faced a full-scale war and required a centralized command structure to match.[133]

The Russian military has retained this command structure since January 2023. Gerasimov acts as theater commander, likely using the General Staff Operations Directorate as his staff and communicating with the groups of forces through the NTsUO. Gerasimov has commanded five to seven groups of forces (equivalent to Soviet front or Western army group commands), each controlling subordinate field armies and other independent units. This current command structure is in line with the intended structure of Russian command in a large-scale war in pre-2022 doctrine, though heavily compressed through the deployment of six groups of forces to a theater of operations covered in peacetime by two military districts.

Putin has directly influenced Russian military decision-making down to the tactical level throughout the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, bypassing strategic and operational commanders. Political imperatives from the Kremlin have driven many offensive efforts, and Putin and Kremlin-affiliated media have repeatedly bestowed political and informational importance on the capture of individual towns far beyond their significance as military objectives. The Russian military's incorporation of political and informational considerations into military planning is not an inherent deficiency of Russian decision-making, and political considerations impact military planning in all conflicts. Kremlin directives have repeatedly constrained Russian military decision-making in two ways, however: by elevating relatively inconsequential towns to strategic importance for informational purposes; and by establishing arbitrary deadlines unrelated to the battlefield situation. The Kremlin

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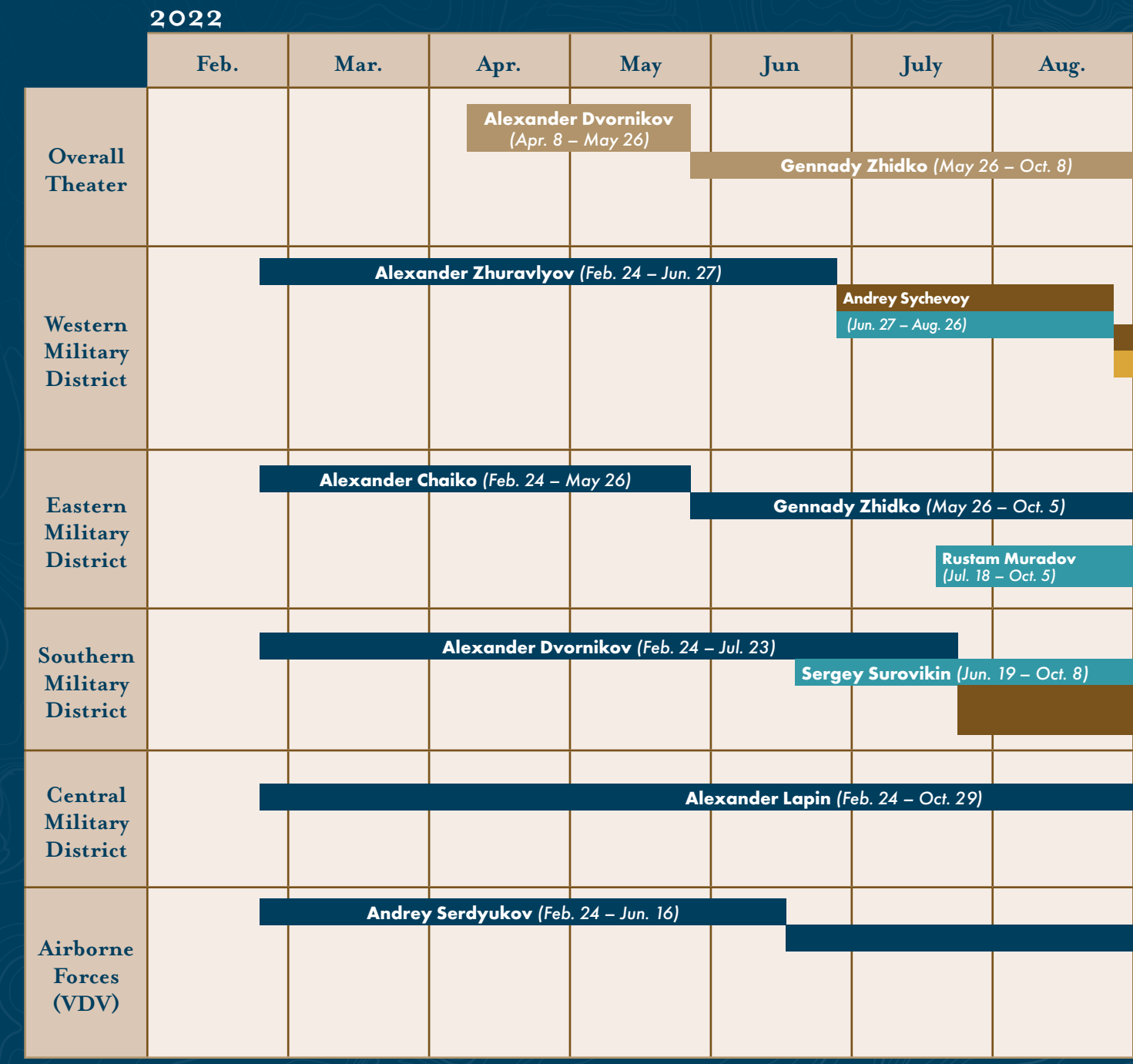
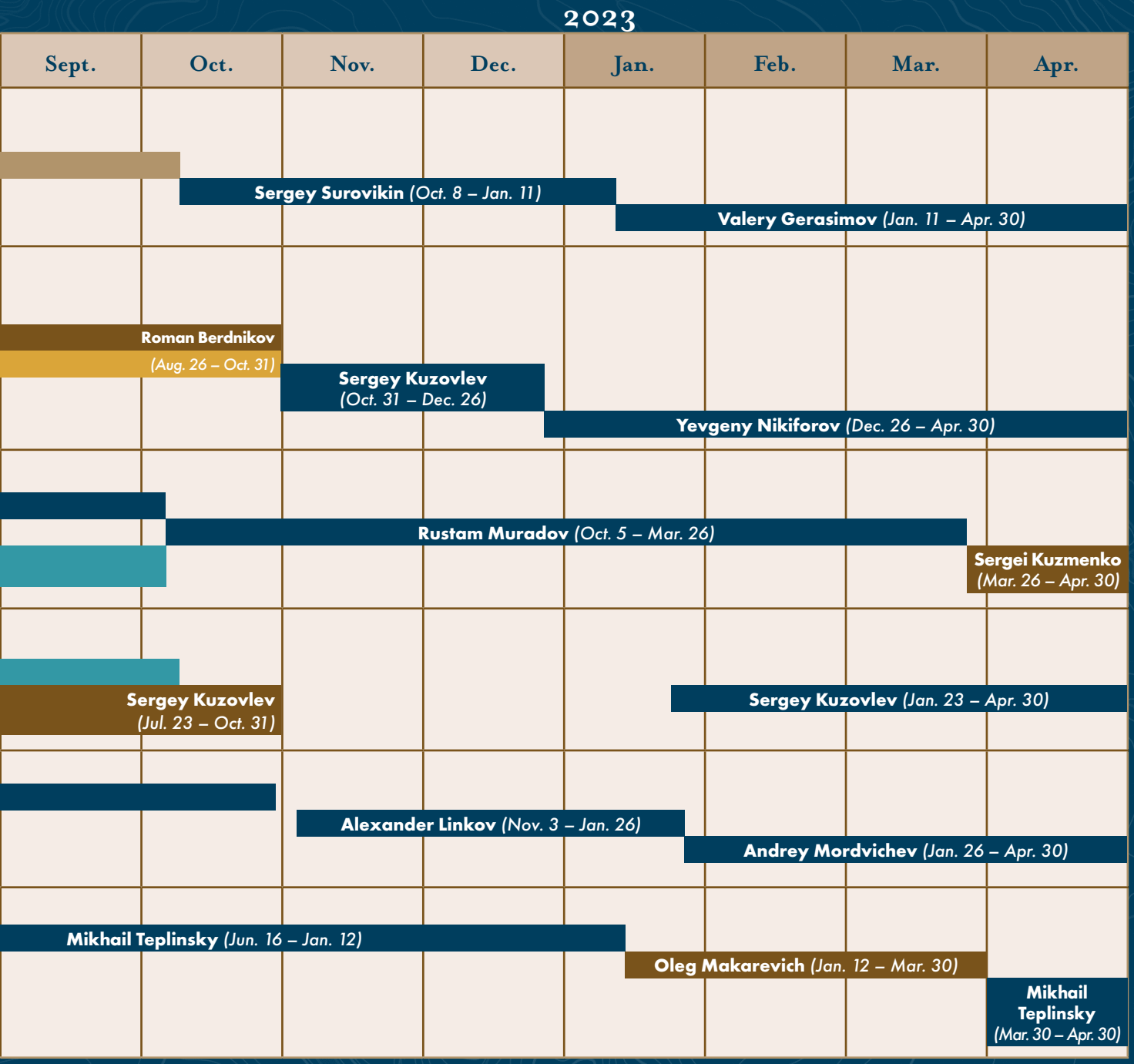
EARLY WAR RUSSIAN COMMAND CHANGES, FEBRUARY 2022 TO AP



Key:

- Confirmed District Commander
- Confirmed Grouping of Forces Commander
- Unofficial Theater Commander
- Speculated District Commander
- Speculated Grouping of Forces Commander

PRIL 2023



Riley Bailey and Kateryna Stepanenko, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 30, 2023," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 30, 2023, https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment_30-18/.

and Russian state media have placed inordinate rhetorical focus on capturing or retaining specific towns throughout the war, forcing tactical commanders to waste personnel and material.[134] Putin repeatedly ordered Russian forces to achieve unrealistic operational objectives by certain dates (most often the February 24 anniversary of the invasion or Victory Day on May 9), prompting Russian commanders to squander forces to meet arbitrary deadlines.[135] Putin reportedly micromanaged military decisions in the early months of the invasion down to the battalion level.[136] Putin previously involved himself in tactical military planning at the height of the Russian intervention in Syria in early 2016, and Gerasimov later reported that Putin spoke with Gerasimov twice a day and directly involved himself in target selection.[137] Putin may have relaxed his involvement in tactical decision-making throughout the invasion of Ukraine, particularly following the elevation of Gerasimov to true theater commander at the start of 2023, and his involvement in granular decision-making as of August 2025 is unclear from open sources.

Military Districts, OSKs, and Groups of Forces

Russia's primary operational-strategic formations in Ukraine and future major conventional wars are the groups of forces, army group-level formations controlling subordinate divisions, brigades, and other attached tactical units. The Russian military operationalized its five peacetime military district headquarters into "joint strategic commands" (OSKs) at the start of its full-scale invasion (as intended in pre-2022 doctrine) and referred to these OSKs as "groups of forces."[XIII] The Russian military steadily transitioned the groups of forces in Ukraine into semi-freestanding headquarters throughout the first year of the full-scale invasion, at times appointing battlefield commanders who did not command the group of forces' home military district and establishing two groups of forces (the Dnipro and Kursk groups of forces) not based on any military district. This decision to separate active groups of forces from their parent peacetime military districts is a deviation from pre-2022 Russian doctrine but follows historical *Soviet* practice in a large-scale conventional war. The Kremlin issued a directive in February 2025 formalizing the groups of forces as new General Staff Directorates and restructuring the military districts as strictly administrative structures for force generation rather than joint headquarters, codifying its de facto structure in Ukraine and returning to the historical Soviet approach to military districts and wartime front-level headquarters.

The Russian military is structured at the strategic level around military districts; peacetime administrative structures responsible for the organization, maintenance, and training of forces based within a specified geographical area of Russia. Military districts exercised administrative control over all military forces under their geographical area of control, other than select strategic assets such as the VDV and nuclear forces, prior to February 2025; but only control Army formations since February 2025. The Russian military currently has five military districts: Moscow, Leningrad, Southern, Central, and Eastern, a reversion to the pre-2010 district structure.[XIV] From 2010 to February 2024 the current

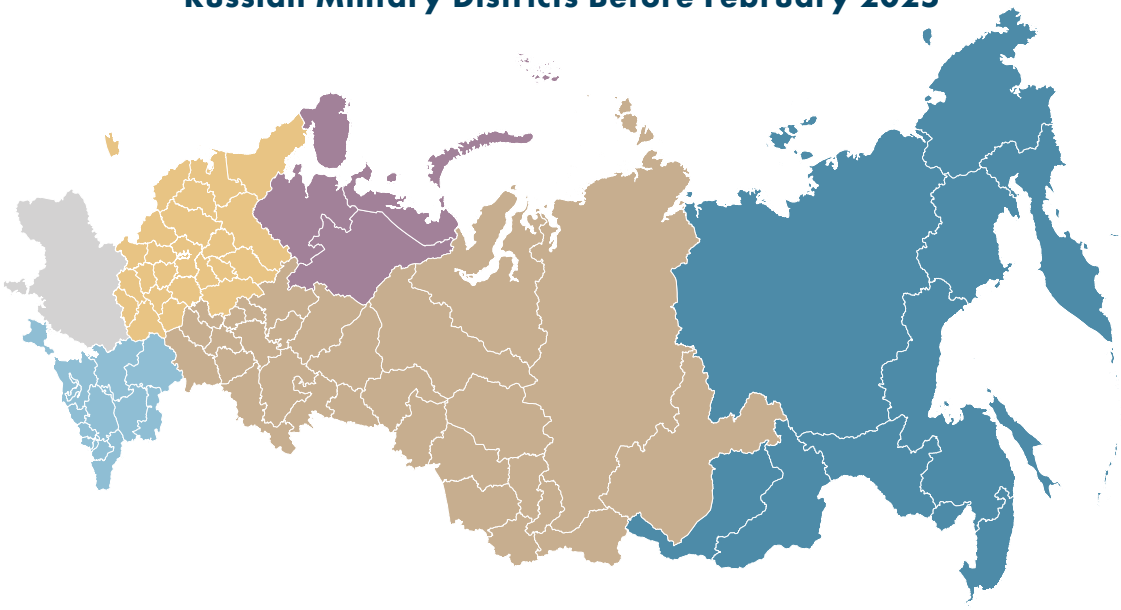
XIII The term "OSK" in this report refers to the pre-2022 doctrinal Russian command structure of operationalized military district headquarters, which Russian forces employed in the early months of the full-scale invasion prior to reorganizing the OSKs into specialized groups of forces. "Group of forces" refers to Russian operational headquarters in Ukraine from mid-2022 onwards and the formalized command structures based on the wartime groups of forces created in February 2025.

XIV This report refers to the correct name of a military district or group of forces as of the event in question. Discussion of Russian operations in Ukraine in the first two years of the war will refer to the Western Military District and Northern Fleet, but all discussion of future Russian planning and warfighting refers to the Leningrad and Moscow Districts. However, the Russian military continues to refer to the groups of forces in Ukraine now predominantly comprised of formations from the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts as the Western and Northern Group of Forces, respectively.

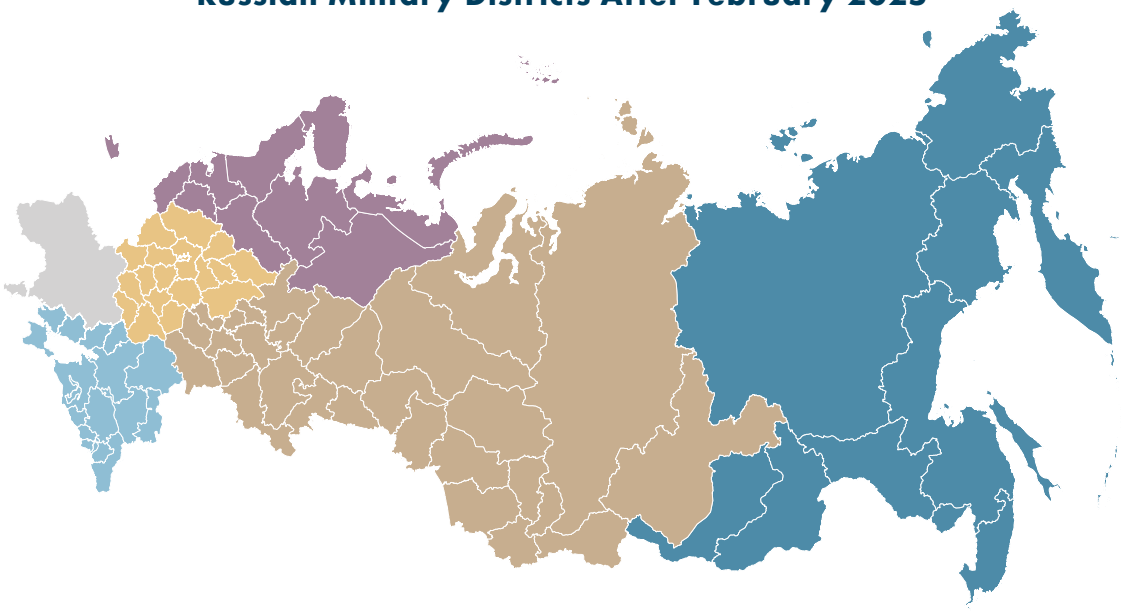
This current command structure is in line with the intended structure of Russian command in a large-scale war in pre-2022 doctrine, though heavily compressed through the deployment of seven groups of forces to a theater of operations covered in peacetime by two military districts.

RUSSIAN MILITARY DISTRICTS BEFORE AND AFTER FEBRUARY 2025

Russian Military Districts Before February 2025



Russian Military Districts After February 2025



Military District (MD) Color Key:

- Eastern MD
- Northern Fleet *(renamed Leningrad MD after Feb. 2025)*
- Western MD *(renamed Moscow MD after Feb. 2025)*
- Central MD
- Southern MD
- Ukraine

Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts were encompassed by the Western Military District and secondarily the Northern Fleet, which the Russian military maintained in a gray area in which all military districts were equal, but the Northern Fleet was less equal than the others.[138] The Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts are now both coequal districts, and the Northern Fleet is no longer a joint headquarters and strictly commands naval assets.

Military district headquarters pre-2022 were intended to operationalize in wartime into "joint strategic commands" (OSKs), flexible headquarters capable of conducting independent strategic operations. Russian military sources most commonly refer to these headquarters in Ukraine as the "[district title] group of forces," such as "Western Group of Forces." Russian military districts correspond to geographical areas of *Russia* and the units based in those areas, not areas of the globe like US Combatant Commands. The Russian military intended OSKs operationalized from military districts to be deployable for operations beyond their immediate border areas — as in the deployment of all five OSKs to the Ukrainian border in early 2022. OSKs had three key traits.

- First, each OSK was designed to take command of forces attached from any other Russian military district, as well as units outside the Military District structure such as VDV and GRU Spetsnaz units. The SMD headquarters (which did not publicly activate as an OSK but likely functioned as one) controlled units from eight of Russia's (at the time) ten field armies from all four military districts in eastern Ukraine in 2014–2015, for example.[139] Each OSK controlled forces from its own district in the early months of Russia's invasion in 2022, and current groups of forces derived from OSKs predominantly command units from their parent military district, but the Russian military routinely shifts units away from their parent OSK.
- Second, OSK headquarters were "interservice," the Russian equivalent of a Western "joint" headquarters. The OSKs were based on peacetime Army headquarters but were intended to control attached Navy, VKS, and VDV formations.
- Third, OSKs were "interdepartmental," referring to their ability to take command of Russian security forces outside of the MoD such as Rosgvardia, FSB Border Service troops, and even local police. The Russian MoD considers these non-MoD security forces to be full components of Russia's available forces for conventional warfighting, *not* paramilitary or irregular forces, and they conducted major independent peacetime military exercises and participated in the MoD's centerpiece annual exercises.[140] The surprising aspect of Rosgvardia or FSB Border Service units conducting unsupported advances against Ukrainian regular units as part of Russia's conventional invasion force in February 2022 was *not* the inclusion of these forces in conventional operations, but rather their *misuse* in roles better suited for Army formations.[141]

The Russian military altered the pre-2022 structures and command processes of OSKs to integrate a wide array of regular and irregular units and meet the specific circumstances of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, transforming them into specialized groups of forces. The exact capabilities and structures of these headquarters are unclear from open sources, however. It is unclear from open sources to what degree Russian headquarters personnel are directly assigned to groups of forces rather than to military districts — the Russian military regularly deploys individual units away from their parent group of forces headquarters and may do so for individual officers as well. Most Russian commanders of groups of forces in Ukraine simultaneously command the group's parent military district, but the Russian military has split these two functions for some groups throughout the war. ISW first observed two officers holding the separate roles of groups of forces commander and military district commander for the Eastern and Southern groups of forces/districts in June and July 2022, for example.[142]

Each group of forces remains based on the structure and staff of its pre-invasion parent military district, but the Russian military has codified the groups of forces in Ukraine as semi-permanent battlefield headquarters separate from the rear-area military district headquarters. Russian forces suffered high casualties, and chains of command quickly became ad hoc throughout the first year of the invasion. Rapid turnover in Russian officers

due to casualties and dismissals disrupted pre-war command relationships among district staffs and battlefield commanders.[143] Group of forces commanders also needed to rapidly integrate newly formed irregular formations, which likely stretched the intended pre-war "interdepartmental" capabilities of the OSKs. Russian senior commanders likely formed specialized battlefield headquarters reporting to the theater commander (Gerasimov) by early 2023. The Russian military likely assessed that requiring group of forces commanders and staffs to simultaneously command troops in combat and manage the force generation requirements of their parent district overly stretched their bandwidth. The Kremlin codified this split in February 2025 as a permanent change to Russian military structures, discussed below.

The Russian military additionally fielded two groups of forces at various points in the war *not* originally based on district OSKs, as noted above: the Dnepr and Kursk groups of forces. Russian forces had created the Dnepr Group of Forces not later than April 2023 to command Russian forces along the Dnipro river line near Kherson, an area previously covered by the overstretched Southern Group of Forces.[144] The Dnepr Group of Forces was likely initially staffed primarily by SMD and VDV personnel, and its first two commanders were VDV officers, but its exact structure is unclear, and by late 2023 the group of forces commanded elements of two fleets, three military districts, and the VDV.[145] The Kremlin established an FSB-led "counterterrorism operation" on August 9, 2024, in response to the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast, which functionally operated as a group of forces headquarters.[146] The Kremlin initially appointed FSB head Alexander Bortnikov to lead the counterterrorism operation, which commanded both Russian internal security forces, such as Rosgvardia and FSB Border Troops, as well as regular Russian MoD units and eventually North Korean formations. The creation of an FSB-led headquarters for major combat operations on Russian territory is not necessarily a new development. Russia used a similar command structure in the Second Chechen War, with an FSB headquarters nominally commanding operations on the territory of the (now defunct) North Caucasus Military District.[147] The Kremlin referred to this headquarters as the "Kursk Group of Forces" in the transcript of a meeting between Putin and Gerasimov on March 12, 2025, but did not publicly name a commander of this group, and integrated it into the existing Northern Group of Forces by the summer of 2025.[148]

Requiring group of forces commanders and staffs to simultaneously command troops and manage force generation likely overly stretched their bandwidth.

The ad hoc and malleable nature of Russian groups of forces in Ukraine is a feature, not a bug. The Russian military's establishment of semi-permanent groups of forces in Ukraine has a long heritage in Soviet/Russian military thinking and is not itself surprising. The Russian military has an established practice of creating either "temporary" or "standing" joint combat groupings at different echelons, such as the headquarters in Syria that began as an ad hoc headquarters and formalized over time.[149] The Red Army was similarly flexible with operational-strategic headquarters, forming and disbanding fronts during World War II as needed. The scale of these headquarters in contemporary Ukraine is different, but the principle remains the same.

The Russian MoD is currently restructuring the relationships between Military Districts, armed services, and the General Staff to cement the command structure the Russian military has used in Ukraine and further centralize operational-strategic command and control under the General Staff. Putin signed a decree on February 5, 2025, implementing several structural changes first discussed by the MoD in June 2024.[150] The decree had three main components:

1. Military districts have been stripped of their inter-service status, returning them to their pre-2010 status as Army headquarters and returning peacetime control of naval and VKS formations to their respective service commanders. This change rolls back a key element of the late 2000s Russian military reforms and may indicate a successful push by the Navy and VKS to claw back independent service prerogatives from the Army-focused military district structure.

2. Military districts are now explicitly tasked with helping Russian citizens enter the "mobilization manpower reserve" of the Russian military. The MoD was previously responsible on paper for overall recruitment, and military districts were responsible for training newly assigned personnel within their units. A menagerie of irregular formations and institutions largely operating at a regional level have carried out this function throughout the invasion of Ukraine, however, and the MoD likely seeks to formalize the management of recruitment — not just training — at the regional (rather than national) level.

3. The Russian military's command structure in Ukraine is likely being codified into permanent General Staff Directorates. Putin's decree replaces the joint OSK of each district with a permanent joint headquarters "directorate." These directorates will retain the three primary traits of OSKs discussed above: their ability to command units from multiple peacetime military districts; their joint (interservice) status; and their interdepartmental status. The exact structure of these directorates is unclear from the decree, but they will likely administratively function as General Staff Directorates (reporting to the Chief of the General Staff) rather than MoD Directorates (reporting to the Minister of Defense).

These changes codify Russia's command structure throughout the war in Ukraine — joint operational-strategic groups of forces commanding troops in combat, and rear area Military District headquarters managing force generation and training — as the Russian military's model for future conflicts. This reform echoes previous Soviet structures, which distinguished between military districts that generated forces and separate front headquarters that held operational control in wartime. It is unclear from open sources how extensively the changes in the decree have been practically implemented to date, as the intended permanent headquarters remain actively deployed in Ukraine, and the medium-term structure of Russian operational-strategic headquarters will likely remain unclear until after the end of major combat operations in Ukraine.

The Russian military will likely continue to disaggregate the peacetime and wartime functions of the military districts, bringing back the Soviet split between special and regular military districts. The Soviet Union's military districts at the start of World War II were labeled either standard districts (located in the center and east of the Soviet Union), which strictly generated formations, and "special military districts" on Russia's western borders that transformed into front headquarters — the equivalent of current groups of forces — in wartime.[151] The Soviet Union retained as many as 16 military districts on Soviet soil responsible for force generation during the Cold War, with permanent groups of forces stationed in Warsaw Pact nations intended to serve as the primary headquarters in a conventional war with NATO.[152] Russia's new permanent joint headquarters, organized under the General Staff, will likely serve a similar role to these Cold War groups of forces, with formations generated by peacetime districts assigned to standing operational headquarters in wartime. The Russian military may further revive Soviet structures by dividing its current five military districts into smaller regional structures, but there are no public indicators of such an initiative at this time.

The ad hoc and malleable nature of Russian groups of forces in Ukraine is a feature, not a bug.

Upper Tactical Level: Armies to Regiments/Brigades

Army and Corps Headquarters

The Russian military's primary operational level formation is the "army group" (армейская группа), a term for combined arms army, tank army, and army corps formations.[XV] Russian armies fill a role close to that of contemporary US or Ukrainian corps, serving as a bridge between tactical divisions and brigades and the operational-strategic groups of forces.[153] The Russian Army fielded 12 armies prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[XVI] Russian armies do not have standardized orders of battle, with some directly controlling only two or three under-strength brigades and possessing the strength of a weak division; and the largest pre-invasion armies (the 1st Guards Tank Army and 8th Combined Arms Army) controlling two or more divisions each with multiple subordinate regiments. Each army has a set peacetime order of battle of divisions and brigades that are intended to be its primary forces in combat. Army headquarters are intended to be flexible and capable of taking command of any division or brigade from other field armies, strategic assets such as thermobaric artillery batteries held at the military district level, or units from other services such as the VDV.

The Russian military will likely continue returning the Soviet split between special and regular military districts.

The Russian military centralizes most enablers at the army level.[154] Armies support their tactical maneuver units with separate artillery; air defense; engineer; bridging; nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC); and logistics (MTO) brigades. Russian divisions and their subordinate regiments lack the inherent assets to sustain an independent high intensity fight and heavily rely on enablers held at the army level. Motorized rifle brigades are theoretically intended to be capable of fighting independent mobile battles without army support for limited periods, but the distinction between regiments and brigades has heavily eroded since 2022, and all Russian units now increasingly rely on centralized army assets.

The Russian military does not currently use corps as a permanent echelon of command between army headquarters and divisions or brigades. Pre-2022 Russian corps functioned as small army headquarters in independent coastal areas such as Kaliningrad and Crimea. The Russian military has created several new corps structures since 2022, and the distinction between the intended uses of corps and small combined arms armies is unclear. Some recently formed corps are assigned to relatively isolated geographic areas like those of Russia's pre-war corps, e.g. the 44th Army Corps intended to cover the Finnish border. Other corps, such as the 3rd and 40th Army Corps, may have been operationally controlled by combined arms army headquarters in Ukraine but appear indistinguishable in function from small army headquarters controlling a handful of brigades.[155]

The Russian military has largely transformed armies and corps into static headquarters assigned to fixed sectors of the front line since 2022, an optimization for fighting a positional war with decreased C2 capabilities. The pre-2022 Russian (and prior Soviet) ground forces likely intended to fight major conventional wars with successive echelons managed at the army level, fielding cohesive divisions supported by attached army-level fires and other capabilities for major operations before rotating them off the line to be rebuilt by the MTO elements held at the army level, rather than their own inherent sustainers. A RUSI report published in February 2025 indicated

XV Армейская группа does not correspond to the Western definition of an "army group" as a multi-army formation. The Russian military uses the term "group of armies" (группа армий) for this echelon, which is equivalent to Soviet fronts and contemporary Russian groups of forces.

XVI The 1st Guards Tank Army (now subordinated to the MMD and formerly the WMD) is the Russian military's sole "tank" army, but pre-February 2022 it did not differ in composition and role from Russia's relatively fully staffed combined arms armies like the SMD's 8th CAA.

RUSSIAN MILITARY DISTRICTS AND OPERATIONAL-STRATEGIC HEADQUARTERS

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Military District

Operational Joint Headquarters

Russian Doctrine Prior to 2022

Military District (peacetime)

- Ground forces headquarters with **administrative control** over navy and air force formations
- Not responsible for recruitment

Operationalizes into →

Joint Strategic Command (OSK)

- Led by the peacetime Military District Commander and staffed by the District
- **Only active when operationalized in wartime,** not a permanent headquarters

Ad Hoc Wartime Headquarters 2022–2024

Military District (wartime)

- On-paper operationalized as an OSK/Group of Forces, with Military District commanders leading Groups of Forces
- Likely used **in practice as an ad hoc force generation structure** led by the Deputy Commander of the Military District or another officer

Operationalized as →

Group of Forces

- Initially based on operationalized OSK headquarters but expanded over time into **semi-independent structures**
- Closely linked to parent Military District, but at times commanded by a different officer
- **Ad hoc and malleable** wartime headquarters

February 2025 Reforms

Military District (reformed)

- Ground forces administrative headquarters
- **No control over other services**
- Responsible for staffing the "mobilization manpower reserve" and other force generation tasks

Provides forces and support to →

Joint Headquarters Directorate

- **Permanent operational joint headquarters** subordinate to the General Staff
- Strictly a warfighting headquarters, no administrative responsibilities

that Russian forces increasingly leave both armies *and* divisions in place on the line, however, rotating individual battalions instead of divisions.[156] Russian army headquarters additionally rarely redeploy with all their constituent units as of August 2025, and army headquarters and the enablers they directly control are likely increasingly tied to set geographical areas. Russian armies would very likely struggle to maneuver as cohesive entities in any future period of mobile warfare without extensive reconstitution.

Divisions, Regiments, and Brigades

The Russian military intended to use a mix of divisions controlling subordinate regiments and independent brigades as its primary upper tactical units in a conventional war, but has not done so in Ukraine.[157] Russian divisions are instead predominantly operating as combined arms army headquarters in microcosm — commanding their depleted permanently assigned battalions as well as attached "independent regiments" and various other detachments on fixed axes. Details on Russian operations at this echelon are limited in the open source, but most Russian divisions have likely ceased to be capable of maneuvering as cohesive formations, and the battalion has become the Russian military's primary tactical unit of action.

The Russian military temporarily eliminated divisions as part of the "New Look" reforms beginning in 2008 and restructured the Army around brigades — motor rifle and tank units with organic enablers, intended to be flexible tactical units commanded by army group headquarters without an intermediate division or corps echelon.[158] The Russian military began reintroducing divisions controlling multiple (four in full strength divisions but often fewer) subordinate regiments in 2016, assessing that a force solely structured around independent brigades lacked the mass necessary for a protracted conventional war with NATO. Russian regiments are slightly smaller than brigades and crucially lack brigades' organic enablers, instead relying on the division for fires, sustainment, and other functions. This mixed force structure was intended to give the Russian military a balanced force posture at the time of the 2022 full-scale invasion: independent brigades were kept at a slightly higher readiness level in peacetime and were intended to be capable of fighting local conflicts in Russia's near abroad or conducting independent mobile missions in a major conventional war; while the more cumbersome divisions would provide Russia's main combat power in a conventional war with Ukraine or NATO.

The Russian military has largely transformed armies and corps into static headquarters assigned to fixed sectors of the front line since 2022.

The Russian military deployed divisions and brigades interchangeably in the first year of the war. Russian regiments and brigades each generated one or two Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs, discussed below) for deployment to Ukraine. Division and brigade headquarters controlled these BTGs in combat but never fought as cohesive, fully staffed units due to the Kremlin's decision not to fully mobilize reservists to fully staff its ground forces prior to the invasion. The war quickly assumed a positional character by late 2022, and the intended mobile missions independent brigades were designed for became impossible to conduct. Divisions and brigades functionally only differed in terms of the number of BTGs they generated by early 2023.

Russian divisions and brigades as of August 2025 are predominantly understrength motorized rifle units capable of holding defensive positions and conducting dismounted infiltration operations or at most positional battalion-level assaults, but the quality of individual Russian units varies widely. Russian unit effectiveness varied heavily prior to 2022 due to Russian training practices.[159] The US military provides recruits with basic and technical training at dedicated training centers before assigning personnel to their units, whereas Russian units are almost entirely responsible for training their own personnel at their permanent bases, not at dedicated military-wide training centers. Relatively well-resourced units (particularly in the Western and Southern Military Districts) led by more active commanders were far more effective

than other theoretically equivalent units. The breakdown and irregularization of Russian recruitment and training pipelines have only exacerbated the unpredictability of the quality of individual Russian units. Some motorized rifle and tank units remain mechanized, but many Russian regiments and divisions are increasingly unmechanized and are at most partially motorized with civilian vehicles, motorbikes, and ATVs.

Russia's previously relatively elite units have been almost uniformly reduced to at best relatively effective infantry lacking their intended specialized capabilities, regardless of each unit's official designation. VDV and Naval Infantry units previously served as the Russian military's elite, fielding the best trained, best equipped, and highest motivated personnel in the Russian military and a higher percentage of *kontraktniki* than line units. The Russian military has overtasked these units with offensive operations throughout the invasion of Ukraine, however, and lower training standards among replacements and the integration of nearly untrained *mobiks* into their ranks have reduced their capabilities.[160] The mid-level and senior officers commanding these brigades and regiments are the most combat experienced officers in the Russian military as of August 2025, however. These officers likely retain a higher standard of quality than the personnel that staff their units. The VDV and Naval Infantry will require extensive reconstitution if the Russian military intends to restore their airborne and amphibious capabilities. VDV and Naval Infantry units do field specialized company-sized assault detachments capable of more deliberate assaults than the section- and platoon-scale attacks of most Russian line units, discussed in the following section. Select units such as the 76th Air Assault Division and the Russian Naval Infantry brigades tasked with clearing Ukraine's Kursk incursion remain relatively more effective than Russian line units, but they are only "elite" in comparison to the bulk of the Russian military. The Russian military often deploys VDV or Naval Infantry divisions and brigades as groups of several service-segregated divisions or brigades assigned to priority axes — such as VDV formations in eastern Ukraine in summer 2024 and Naval Infantry formations during Russian efforts to clear Ukraine's Kursk incursion.[161] The VDV and Naval Infantry both lack formal corps or army headquarters above the division or brigade level, however, and the Russian military may create new command echelons if it continues to deploy VDV and Naval Infantry formations as relatively elite line formations in service-segregated groupings.

The Russian military elected by late 2024 to fix division headquarters to certain sectors of the line and rotate their subordinate regiments and battalions rather than adhering to the pre-war intent to move divisions as cohesive entities, seemingly accepting that divisions are no longer cohesive mobile formations.[162] Russian commanders have deployed regiments and even individual battalions separate from their parent divisions throughout the war, with Russian offensive actions at times conducted by individual battalions from multiple divisions.[163] The Russian military has established new permanent regiments under pre-2022 division headquarters, and the Russian military has additionally established numerous "independent regiments."[164] The independent regiments do not have a precedent in the pre-2022 Russian military. They are indicated with IXXX unit designations (e.g. 1154th, 1455th) and are likely understrength and predominantly non-mechanized infantry units subordinated to existing division headquarters to hold defensive positions. Russian divisions were designed pre-2022 to command a set order of battle of subordinate regiments, not ad hoc collections of battalions. Army headquarters *are* intended to be able to assume control of divisions and brigades from other armies when necessary — but the Russian military intended for those divisions and brigades to attach to a new army headquarters with their own staffs and enablers. The Russian divisions currently deployed in Ukraine are highly unlikely to be capable of cohesive offensive actions as full and independent formations without extended periods of reconstitution after the cessation of major combat operations.

Lower Tactical Level: BTGs and Assault Groups

The Russian military has transformed itself at the battalion and company level since 2022 into a force optimized for slow offensive operations in a positional war, functionally abandoning the ability to conduct mechanized maneuver warfare and accepting a system relying on high casualties for limited gains. The Russian military abandoned the theoretically flexible but highly brittle mechanized Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) after heavy early losses. The Russian military's decision to invade Ukraine with over a hundred BTGs rather than mobilizing and fielding its brigades and regiments at full strength effectively locked the Russian military into a degraded force structure well into 2023 and even 2024. The Russian military compounded the breakdown of tactical unit structures caused by the early losses of officers and key personnel through protracted offensive operations in 2022 and early 2023. The Russian military successfully adapted to these limitations throughout 2023 and 2024, however, abandoning the BTG model and optimizing its tactical unit structures and tactics for a slow positional war. The Russian military's current tactical approaches are an effective adaptation to its degraded command and control capabilities and the positional nature of the current war. The Russian military remains relatively flexible and iterative at the *tactical* level, within the constraints of its degraded force structure. These tactical approaches rely on large numbers of expendable personnel to preserve scarce well-trained personnel, however, and the Russian military's self-optimization for a positional war has come at the cost of *operational* flexibility and maneuver capabilities.

The Failure of Battalion Tactical Groups

The Russian military structured its initial invasion force around the Battalion Tactical Group, or BTG.[165] The BTG was a task organized reinforced battalion generated by a parent brigade or regiment intended for limited independent operations in a local war or supporting missions in a large-scale war — *not* for use as the Russian military's primary tactical unit in a protracted large-scale conventional war. The Russian military's decision to have each regiment and brigade generate BTGs for the initial invasion of Ukraine rather than to deploy full regiments and brigades staffed by conscripts locked the Russian military into a degraded force structure for well over a year, since the loss of key elements of BTGs rendered not just the BTG but its entire parent formation combat ineffective. The Russian military did not structure its units as BTGs past late 2022, but a brief overview of their structure and deployment is essential to assessing the eventual evolution of Russian tactical units.

Each Russian brigade or regiment was intended to be able to "generate" two BTGs (though many units could only generate one) from its standing four battalions by combining the most effective officers and personnel from its four standing battalions, and attaching combat and combat support elements held at the regiment or brigade level. The Russian military considers these attachments to be what makes the BTG a "tactical group," transforming a tank or motorized rifle line battalion into a combined arms battalion tactical group capable of limited independent action without the support of its parent regiment or brigade.

The Russian military's use of BTGs pre-2022 was an adaptation to the inflexibility of its conscript-heavy force in limited operations. Russian formations are manned in peacetime by a cadre of professional officers and *kontraktniki*. The Russian military intended regiments and brigades to be capable of deploying one or two BTGs staffed by officers and permanent *kontraktniki* personnel on short notice, concentrating the combat power of the four partially manned standing battalions into one or two combat-ready combined arms units. This system enabled the Russian military to generate combat power rapidly without the callup of reservists necessary to staff all four of its battalions to their full end strength, providing the Kremlin the option to deploy conventional combat power below the threshold of a national callup — a use case that the previous Soviet system focused almost entirely on a large-scale war with NATO struggled to meet.

BTGs effectively filled a critical niche when used in the local conflicts or specialized missions they were designed for. The Russian military decided to leverage BTGs at scale in 2022 due to misunderstanding the type of war it would face in Ukraine, *not* because it assessed BTGs were the most effective force structure for large-scale conventional war. The Russian military effectively utilized BTGs in eastern Ukraine from 2014–2015, enabling Russian brigades and regiments to deploy their peacetime complement of *kontraktniki* and officers as task-organized BTGs sufficient for localized fighting without requiring the full mobilization and deployment of peacetime Russian military formations. The Kremlin incorrectly assessed that it could rapidly conquer Ukraine in 2022 without needing to fully mobilize the Russian military for a protracted conventional war. The Russian concept of operations only envisioned a limited period of combat characterized by mobile units driving through limited Ukrainian resistance to occupy key objectives — a perfect mission for the BTG, under the Russian military's wildly incorrect planning assumptions.

Russian divisions currently deployed in Ukraine are highly unlikely to be capable of cohesive offensive actions as full and independent formations without extended periods of reconstitution.

Russian BTGs lacked the maneuverability and precision fires advantages that pre-war Russian military thinkers stressed would make smaller, flexible units effective. The Russian military intended BTGs to be well suited for the local engagements relying far more heavily on fires than infantry combat power that the Russian military anticipated would be dominant in a modern war. The Russian military's effective operations in eastern Ukraine 2014–2015 (where they could effectively leverage superior fires and tactical flexibility against relatively unprepared Ukrainian units) reinforced Russian perceptions of the utility of BTGs. The Russian military failed to account for how conducive to the success of BTGs its relatively limited operations in 2014–2015 were, however, and this period did not expose the Russian military's inability to effectively use BTGs in *mobile* operations under degraded C2. US Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Amos C. Fox aptly describes the Russian military's over-emphasis on the utility of BTGs in 2014–2015 as projecting lessons from a "war in a fishbowl" in the Donbas in 2014 to a "war in a pond" in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[166] BTGs were highly effective in the small, self-contained theater of eastern Ukraine, where they relied on short and uncontested supply lines back into Russia; close proximity to peacetime rear-area headquarters; limited Ukrainian fires; and the ability to maneuver at will against relatively static frontlines — all of which the Russian military lacked in February 2022.

BTGs were unable to give Russian forces the flexibility they were intended to provide in the rapid local war Russia expected — and sapped their parent formations of the manpower advantages and weight of fires they intended to leverage in a large-scale conventional war, such as the one they rapidly faced. Russian commanders additionally found BTGs difficult to control. The absence of supporting brigade and regiment staffs and the practice of combat support elements reporting directly to the BTG commander meant that these commanders were often task saturated, controlling their units as they took on tasks intended for an entire brigade or regiment.[167] BTGs were intended to fight independently from their parent formations for limited periods, but the Russian military quickly found itself conducting the strange half-measure of relying on parent formations to sustain nominally independent BTGs on an ad hoc basis.[168] Russian BTGs lacked sufficient riflemen, and most lacked even their full complements of *kontraktniki* and officers. The peacetime Russian military as a whole was staffed at between 70 and 90 percent of intended manning levels in February 2022; the Russian military reduced the standing size of motorized rifle battalions shortly prior to the invasion; and the BTGs themselves were only partially manned. Many BTGs intended to deploy with 700–900 personnel but instead deployed with as few as 350 personnel.[169] BTGs thus often lacked the infantry strength necessary to dismount and clear

Ukrainian positions that they could not destroy with fires or simply bypass.

Finally, BTGs were very brittle in sustained combat. Russian brigade or regiment commanders often directly controlled the one or two BTGs their formation generated, exposing relatively senior officers to high casualties.[170] Each brigade concentrated its best officers and most of its combat support elements into its BTGs. The loss of key personnel or supporting elements attached to a single BTG therefore rendered the entire parent formation combat ineffective, even if it on-paper fielded two or three additional uncommitted line battalions. The loss of a significant proportion of the permanent cadre of officers and *kontraktniki* of a brigade or regiment could additionally render a unit incapable of receiving and training replacements, as Russian units rely on junior maneuver officers to conduct most of their training of new recruits in-unit.

Russian commanders exacerbated these deficiencies by keeping degraded BTGs in combat well into 2022 and by treating BTGs as interchangeable, despite their varied capabilities and intended temporary status. The Russian military maintained a place for BTGs in large scale conventional warfare prior to 2022, but strictly as task-organized units deployed for specific missions such as advance guard, flanking detachments, or mobile exploitation forces.[171] The Russian military, and the Soviet military before it, have long leveraged task-organized tactical units for discrete missions in conventional operations in this manner, such as the Red Army's highly effective task-organized detachments for major urban combat.[172] These task-organized units were always intended to be temporary and designed for specific missions, however. Russian commanders instead reportedly treated all BTGs as comparable units of action, without considering their respective capabilities.[173] The Russian command dug itself deeper into this hole by combining degraded BTGs — at times from completely different parent formations — into new amalgamated BTGs at (nominal) full strength.[174] This approach exacerbated C2 and unit cohesion challenges and created massive logistical tangles, as amalgamated BTGs drew sustainment from multiple parent formations.

The deficiencies of the BTG model were apparent in the first weeks of the invasion, as the Russian military failed to achieve its objectives and BTGs faced mounting losses of critical personnel. To correct this initial deployment error, the Kremlin would have needed to order a lengthy pause in combat operations in Ukraine; withdraw some or all its major formations into Russia; order a full mobilization of reservists; and take a significant period to rebuild formations to their doctrinal strength around shattered officer and *kontraktniki* cadres. Only then could the Russian military have recommitted its formations to combat as they were intended to fight in a major conventional war pre-2022 — as full regiments and brigades capable of maneuver at scale fielding all four component battalions and staffed with reservists. The Kremlin instead doubled down on the use of BTGs in an attempt to rapidly capture at a minimum eastern Ukraine in 2022 before the arrival of significant Western aid and without needing to fully mobilize Russian society. Russian forces failed to achieve even this reduced objective, and by early 2023 the Russian military began to take the only other option available to rebuild its offensive capabilities: reshaping its remaining heavily depleted BTGs, emerging irregular formations, and available manpower base of barely trained personnel into a force optimized for a slow, protracted, positional war.

Optimization for Positional Warfare: Assault Groups

The Russian military successfully developed a tactical approach by early 2025 that enables slow and steady territorial gains by leveraging a combination of expendable troops and specialized assault detachments, narrowly optimizing itself for the circumstances of the positional war the Russian military faces in Ukraine. Individual Russian units heavily iterated the structure and tactics of assault detachments throughout 2023 and 2024, and several Ukrainian and NATO member state analytical organizations have published reports (often drawing on captured Russian documents) outlining the evolution of these detachments.[175] Russian tactical capabilities are minimally sufficient to support the Kremlin's theory of victory in Ukraine based on slow advances

and outlasting Western support for Ukraine. The Russian military can no longer conduct rapid operational maneuver against an adequately resourced defender, however, and the force structure changes made since 2022 will constrain the Russian military's available near- and medium-term force reconstitution pathways.

Russian commanders rely on skirmishing by expendable troops to identify weak points between non-continuous Ukrainian defensive positions susceptible to infiltration or later deliberate assaults.[176] Russian commanders push squads or sections of poorly trained expendable troops (predominantly on foot but occasionally mounted on vehicles) towards assessed Ukrainian positions to draw fire, regularly threatening to execute these skirmishing personnel if they refuse to advance. Once Ukrainian defensive positions reveal themselves by firing on the skirmishers, Russian commanders order forward further expendable detachments to identify boundaries between defending Ukrainian units through which Russian units can infiltrate and to assess possible favorable lines of approach for deliberate assaults. Russian units then engage positively identified Ukrainian positions with direct fires from specialized detachments fielding grenade launchers and ATGMs, as well as higher echelon fires such as artillery, FPV drones, and glide bombs. These daily skirmishing efforts maintain constant pressure on Ukrainian troops and enable Russian commanders to identify potential weak points for later deliberate assaults by specialized units when Russian troops cannot infiltrate past Ukrainian positions, though at the cost of significant but acceptable casualties among low-quality troops.

Russian forces have developed assault tactics relying on speed and dispersed movement to assault Ukrainian positions disrupted by fires or perceived to be weak points. Pervasive Russian and Ukrainian FPV and fiber optic drones have created an extensive contested grey zone between frontline positions, with Russian and Ukrainian forces in places separated by 15–20km.[177] Russian commanders regularly attempt to infiltrate squad- and platoon-sized units through gaps in Ukrainian defenses, but Russian forces have not yet solved the problem of developing small infiltrations into significant breakthroughs.[178] Russian units began prioritizing sheer speed of advance over deliberate fire and movement in platoon- or company-sized assaults by late 2024. Once Russian commanders identify a perceived weak point in Ukrainian defensive positions, Russian troops advance in groups of 3–5 personnel and seek to cross contested grey zones and dig in adjacent to (or actually enter) Ukrainian positions as quickly as possible, relying on supporting artillery and FPV drones for fires rather than conducting their own fire and movement. Russian units increasingly rely on motorbikes, buggies, and other light motorized vehicles over armored APCs, assessing that all systems are vulnerable to Ukrainian drones and prioritizing speed and maneuverability over protection to reach Ukrainian positions and go to ground rapidly.[179] Russian troops go to ground in cover adjacent to or in between Ukrainian positions after crossing the contested gray zone, waiting for additional Russian forces to arrive rather than immediately assaulting Ukrainian positions. If the initial Russian rush towards Ukrainian positions and supporting fires do not force Ukrainian troops to withdraw, Russian commanders deploy specialized detachments of better trained and equipped Russian troops held at the company level to clear Ukrainian positions. After these assault detachments clear the Ukrainian position, the rest of the Russian battalion moves forward to occupy the newly captured position and rapidly dig in — and the next day begins the process again, sending forward foot skirmishers

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to identify the next line of Ukrainian positions. This rhythm of expendable skirmishers conducting reconnaissance by drawing Ukrainian fire, enabling Russian units to engage Ukrainian positions with fires, and identifying weak points for subsequent assaults or attempts to infiltrate Ukrainian positions, constitutes the steady rhythm of positional warfare Ukrainian defenders face.

Russian units are heavily task organized to support this templated tactical approach at the platoon and squad level, rather than fielding flexible units capable of both fire and movement. Infantry can be functionally categorized as expendable foot skirmishers, motorized attacking units, direct fire crews equipped with support weapons, primarily defensive troops intended to rapidly dig into newly captured positions, or the scarce well-trained and -equipped detachments capable of clearing Ukrainian positions in close combat.[180] As of August 2025 regular Russian line units — not solely irregular formations — deploy minimally trained personnel as expendable manpower and separate their line units into specialized detachments. The Wagner Group was the first Russian formation to iterate this tactical approach with the deployment of expendable convict manpower. Other Russian units adopted similar tactics, such as using Storm Z/Storm V units and former DNR/LNR irregular units as expendable personnel. The Russian military has effectively "Wagnerized" itself over time, institutionalizing the use of expendable personnel and stratified tactical roles for the near future throughout both regular and irregular formations. Russian skirmishing and assault tactics as of August 2025 do *not* use the same tactics as the Russian attacks in 2023 and 2024, often characterized as "meat assaults" or "human waves," though this term was a misleading name for Russian tactics at this time as well.[181] As of August 2025, Russian commanders use expendable Russian troops to identify sectors of the Ukrainian line that Russian commanders assess are vulnerable to infiltration tactics by more effective assault groups, rather than to overwhelm Ukrainian defenders with a mass of humanity.

Russian units are heavily task organized to support this templated tactical approach at the platoon and squad level, rather than fielding flexible units capable of both fire and movement.

Numerous militaries, including the Russian and Soviet militaries, have historically created similar specialized assault detachments for positional or urban warfare — but the current Russian military has reshaped its *entire force* to use these tactics. The Soviet and Russian militaries have long formed specialized assault detachments, such as Russian urban tactics in Chechnya and Syria, and Soviet assault detachments for urban warfare in World War II.[182] The basic elements of current Russian assault detachments — deploying task-specific sections of two or three personnel instead of larger squads; the strict delineation of detachments into fire and movement elements; holding the best equipped assault units in reserve; and the overall practice of line battalions generating specialized assault groups — are directly drawn from the Soviet example in World War II. These assault detachments were limited adaptations to increase Soviet effectiveness in the narrow circumstances of positional urban combat rather than the sole capability of these formations, however — whereas the contemporary Russian military is *only* capable of conducting slow offensive action with these specialized detachments.

Russian units use armor as armored taxis to bring troops to the front, inefficient artillery, and at times as assault guns in support of limited attacks as of August 2025, after repeated failed mechanized assaults decimated the Russian armored fleet in the first two years of the war. The Russian military heavily emphasized developing the capability to use armor as a powerful exploitation element pre-2022 (as did the Soviets in World War II), but Russian forces were unable to achieve operational breakthroughs after the first week of the invasion, and Russian armor-heavy BTGs never acted as a true exploitation element.[183] Russian tank units achieved mixed successes in mobile battles with Ukrainian armor in the early weeks of the invasion, but did not achieve a decisive overmatch against outgunned and outnumbered Ukrainian armor.[184]

Russian commanders then attempted to use massed armor and mechanized infantry as their primary breakthrough (rather than exploitation) force in 2022 and 2023 with little success, losing entire battalions at a time in multiple ill-conceived frontal assaults.[185] High losses in these failed attacks rapidly depleted Russia's available stocks of its most modern and modernized tanks (such as the T-90, T-80, and T-72B3), forcing Russian units to carefully husband their available armor since late 2023 — though Russia is reportedly slowly increasing its production rate of modern tanks and is holding many newly built tanks in reserve rather than deploying them to Ukraine.[186]

The threat of Ukrainian drones and precision artillery munitions (when available) has forced Russian units to disperse armor, and as of August 2025 Russian units most often use tanks as relatively inefficient self-propelled indirect artillery or to transport infantry to the front line for subsequent dismounted assaults.[187] Russian units use tanks equipped with advanced optics and ATGM-equipped BMPs in a long range direct fire role, though armor is vulnerable to Ukrainian drones and artillery when used in this manner. Russian units occasionally deploy armor in an assault gun role to support the infantry assaults discussed previously, particularly in urban terrain where shorter sight lines enable armor to approach Ukrainian positions more safely. Russian commanders periodically order renewed attempts at mechanized assaults that are often defeated by Ukrainian units, but it is unclear from open sources what conditions prompt Russian commanders to order these attacks.[188] The older T-55s and T-62s Russian forces predominantly field in these roles are not necessarily obsolete in the current war, where they rarely face enemy tanks.[XVII] Particularly when modernized with effective sights, these dated platforms can still effectively act as inaccurate artillery or assault guns; are more effective than BMPs and other APCs in these roles; and are more expandable than Russia's modern tanks that are equally vulnerable to destruction by Ukrainian precision artillery and accurate FPV drones.[189] Russian armor units have lost their ability to fill their previously intended exploitation role by optimizing for positional warfare, however. Dated Russian platforms; declining quality among tank crews; the dispersion of armor among small infantry assault detachments; and a likely continuation of the unsolved challenges Russian armor faced in the early mobile weeks of the invasion mean the Russian military now lacks the armored units necessary to exploit any breakthroughs Russian forces could potentially achieve, or to exploit a potential sudden collapse of an operationally significant portion of the Ukrainian line. The Russian military has seemingly accepted that, in the near term, it will not achieve operational breakthroughs and does not need armored forces to exploit them.

Russian units have been highly effective in defensive operations when Ukrainian forces cannot isolate them or achieve operational surprise. The Russian military can leverage its entire force in such operations and construct effective fortified positions, rather than relying on the narrow slice of units capable of offensive action. Russian prepared defensive positions have been well constructed in line with pre-2022 Russian doctrine throughout the war, not only along the heavily prepared "Surovikin line" seen in southern Ukraine in 2023, but also in routine defensive positions across the line of contact as well.[190] Russian units are adept at rapidly constructing new fighting positions, regularly fortifying newly captured positions within 12 hours of capturing them. Russian defensive lines include a well-concealed first line of fighting positions supported by multiple fallback positions. Russian units routinely conduct prompt counterattacks to contest the frontline defensive positions, trading casualties rather than space to slow Ukrainian attacks. Russian forces additionally deploy exceptionally effective minefields, leveraging a mixture of antitank and antipersonnel mines in densities far beyond those specified in pre-war doctrine to slow attacking forces and canalize them into prepared ATGM firing lanes. Russian units can conduct effective defensive operations using an updated form of their pre-war doctrine against Ukraine's current capabilities. Ukrainian forces have only achieved offensive successes since 2023 when they gained operational

XVII Older Russian armor would *not* be survivable in tank-on-tank engagements against a NATO military equipped with modern tanks, however, assuming Russian and NATO forces could keep tanks alive against enemy drones, airpower, and precision strike.

surprise against second-tier Russian forces, as in the early stages of the 2024 Kursk incursion.[191] Russia's main line formations have not needed to conduct defensive operations against a significant Ukrainian counteroffensive for nearly two years, however, and the Russian military's defensive capabilities against a well-planned and sufficiently resourced Ukrainian offensive — let alone NATO counterattacks in a near-term future war — are unclear.

Russian units in Ukraine endure high losses due to the threat of violence from above and the promise of significant payouts to the families of wounded or killed personnel but lack small unit cohesion. The Wagner Group's use of convict personnel as disposable infantry has spread throughout the Russian military. Wagner commanders routinely threatened convict personnel with execution if they returned from assaults unwounded, and Ukrainian forces reportedly once intercepted a Wagner officer receiving orders to execute another commander in front of his men and take over his unit.[192] Russian soldiers (not only in convict units) routinely abandon their wounded comrades without attempting medical evacuation. The Kremlin's decision to entice individual recruits with high salaries rather than order large-scale involuntary mobilization to sustain its invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated the breakdown of unit cohesion across the Russian military. Most Russian personnel are in effect fighting in Ukraine solely for money as of 2025, seeking wages far higher than what they could earn in Russia's domestic economy or the promise of a massive payout to their families upon their death.[193] Soviet units in World War II similarly demonstrated a high tolerance for losses and an at times brutal culture, but the character of World War II as a truly existential struggle for survival against an openly genocidal opponent instilled a degree of morale and cohesion that the modern Russian military lacks in its war of choice against Ukraine.[194]

Russian battlefield commanders and the Kremlin's senior leadership likely see the degradation of morale and unit cohesion as an acceptable cost of Russia's current approach to positional war. Tactical unit cohesion requires a deep level of trust among comrades, which almost all militaries seek to inculcate. Every soldier must be able to move and fight knowing that if he is wounded, his unit will at least attempt to evacuate and treat him. Russian personnel cannot rely on this trust and cohesion. The average Russian soldier clearing a trench or under attack from Ukrainian drones knows in the back of his mind that if he is wounded, his unit will leave him behind to die. Officers do not form bonds with their men and treat them as expendable. There is no public indication that the Russian MoD sees this brutal culture as a problem or intends to address these issues to rebuild force cohesion. The Russian military will likely remain "Wagner-ified" in the medium term: small cadres of relatively elite personnel will possess a minimal level of small-unit cohesion, but Russian units will be predominantly staffed by personnel who *know* they are expendable.

The Russian military's current tactical system is effective at enabling the slow offensive operations that the Russian military command appears to be satisfied with in the current war in Ukraine. The Russian military continues to iterate its tactical approaches, and Russian units regularly implement micro adaptations and achieve tactical successes in the ongoing offense-defense innovation race across the theater.[195] The Russian military is preserving its scarce numbers of well-trained personnel and high-end systems, optimizing its tactical approach to use relatively abundant (but not inexhaustible) expendable manpower. This approach is deeply inefficient in lives and can only enable slow advances, but the Russian military appears to assess that its loss rates are sustainable and that its slow rates of advance meet its strategic requirements.

Other Capabilities

Tactical Fires

The Russian military is largely unable to implement its pre-2022 concept of the "reconnaissance strike complex" — the integration of advanced sensors and long-range precision fires to achieve operational-level effects — but has created a highly effective tactical fires system incorporating some long-range strike capabilities.[XVIII] Russian forces concentrated their artillery into centralized detachments held at the army level and relied on weight of fire in late 2022 and early 2023. The vulnerability of munitions depots and an increasing emphasis on precision have prompted the Russian military to disperse its artillery, though the Russian military has not abandoned its desire to leverage massed artillery fires. Russian drone units have been highly effective throughout the war, and newly institutionalized drone formations will continue to be an area of Russian strength, though the MoD's heavy-handed approach to centralization may impede the ability of Russian units to rapidly iterate in combat. The Russian military and other effective forces will continue to leverage artillery and drones as complementary fires capabilities, and drones are not rendering artillery obsolete. This section, therefore, discusses Russian artillery and drone capabilities in turn and concludes with an assessment of the respective use cases of drones and artillery and a forecast of future Russian fires capabilities.

Russian doctrine and theoretical discussions before 2022 stressed the importance of using surface-to-surface missile systems and aircraft-delivered smart munitions to achieve operational-level effects in modern war, but the Russian military has been unable to do so at scale in Ukraine. The Russian military defined an idealized system coordinating precision fires with active ground operations to achieve operational-level effects as the "reconnaissance strike complex," a term with roots in late Soviet thinking.[196] The Russian military has been unable to implement this concept in Ukraine to its planned pre-2022 extent. Russian forces lack the effective intelligence and reactive targeting to hit mobile Ukrainian military targets in the operational rear; cannot produce sufficient numbers of precision munitions to create consistent battlefield effects; and have not yet demonstrated the ability to design strike campaigns in close coordination with major offensive operations.[197] The Russian military has instead used its available operational/strategic precision strike capabilities (including ground- and air-launched ballistic and cruise missiles as well as several types of drones) to conduct a strategic bombing campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure throughout the war. Russia's strike campaign has badly strained Ukrainian air defenses through the iterative use of varied strike packages and impacted Ukrainian civilian infrastructure. It has not been strategically decisive or achieved the Kremlin's aim of forcing Ukraine to capitulate, however.[198] A similar strike campaign could threaten static NATO targets in a future war, particularly if NATO does not move rapidly to decentralize as well as to harden centralized facilities, but it is unclear if or how the Russian military can develop flexible and effective operational fires in the near term. The Russian military has instead focused on developing its artillery and drone fires capabilities to achieve tactical effects.

Russian units heavily centralized their artillery batteries to mass fires in mid-2022 following the initial poor performance of BTG-level artillery, though targeting cycles remained slow and unresponsive to dynamic tactical situations. Russian BTGs deployed to Ukraine with one or two directly attached artillery batteries but were largely unable to leverage this artillery effectively in the initial weeks of the war due to insufficiently reactive sensors and fire control processes.[199] The BTG structure itself severely hindered the traditional Russian/Soviet massing of artillery by

XVIII ISW's report "Ukraine and the Problem of Restoring Maneuver in Contemporary War" provides a framework for understanding the mass precision fires fielded by Ukrainian and Russian forces at the tactical level, which ISW has dubbed the "tactical reconnaissance-strike complex," and discusses possible measures to neutralize it and restore operational maneuver. Fredrick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, et al. "Ukraine and the Problem of Restoring Maneuver in Contemporary War," *Institute for the Study of War*, August 12, 2024, https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-and-problem-restoring-maneuver-contemporary-war.

breaking up divisional artillery concentrations and distributing batteries to individual BTGs. Following the Russian withdrawal from Kyiv and the Russian military's prioritization of offensive operations in eastern Ukraine, the Russian military centralized the artillery batteries initially deployed at the BTG level. Russian units concentrated their artillery into brigade-size tactical groups controlled by army headquarters, which were highly effective at supporting deliberate Russian frontal assaults, despite shortages of trained fire controllers.[200] These fires were only responsive to Russian units that operated their own UAVs and maintained direct links to artillery commanders outside of normal chains of command, however. Centralized fire control headquarters simply added strikes requested through standard channels to the bottom of a queue, leading to the repeated phenomenon of Russian artillery precisely striking a requested target 48 hours after receiving the request, far beyond the tactical need for the fire mission.[201] In prepared offensive operations, however, Russian units effectively leveraged sheer weight of fire in protracted bombardments to blast through Ukrainian positions through an at times 10:1 advantage in rounds fired over Ukrainian forces, and Russian artillery was the primary killer on the battlefield for much of 2022 and 2023.[202]

Ukrainian forces' increasing ability to target the concentrations of ammunition and guns necessary for sustained massed fires by late 2022 disrupted the Russian military's use of centralized artillery. Individual Russian batteries could shoot and scoot, and individual guns regularly possessed dispersed protective hide positions, but the large stores of munitions required for sustained fire could not be hidden or moved rapidly. The Ukrainian military began to field High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), guided rounds for 155mm artillery, and increasingly effective domestically produced drones by late 2022 that could accurately strike these depots.[203] Increased Western intelligence support, coupled with the Ukrainian military's own effective intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), enabled Ukrainian forces to use these precision fires to repeatedly destroy major Russian ammunition depots. Russian advantages in numbers of artillery systems meant little once Russian units were unable to stockpile the ammunition necessary for protracted massed fires within range of Ukrainian precision fires.[204] The profligate use of munitions in 2022 and 2023 additionally burned through the majority of Russia's pre-war shell stockpiles and outpaced domestic production, and as of May 2025, Russian forces were reportedly relying on North Korean munitions for 40% of their shell requirements.[205]

Russian forces successfully adapted to the threat of Ukrainian strikes by dispersing individual guns and increasing their use of precision munitions where possible by mid-2023.[206] Russian artillery units now commonly deploy guns in individual concealed positions, rather than in concentrated batteries. Russian units have reduced the size of munitions caches and concealed them in locations away from firing positions, slowing the possible rate of fire of Russian guns but protecting available munitions. Russian units have successfully improved their tactical reconnaissance-fire systems, and individual Russian guns are far more accurate and responsive to dynamic targeting than earlier in the war. Russian units are also increasingly leveraging precision munitions such as the Krasnopol laser guided shell, but production numbers of these munitions are limited, and they remain vulnerable to disruption by Ukrainian EW.[207]

Ukrainian and Russian drone development and use at the tactical level have largely mirrored each other throughout the war, providing both forces with distributed precision strike.[208] Russian and Ukrainian forces use drones for a variety of roles, most commonly to provide pervasive observation and tactical strike. Russian units field a mix of purpose-built military drones, FPV drones built on civilian quadcopter chassis, and, more recently, fiber optic drones resistant to electronic warfare (EW). Most Russian drone units throughout the war have been ad hoc, established by individual Russian units outside of formal force structures. Some Russian drone detachments are independent volunteer units of irregular personnel, while others are created by regular Russian officers and informally staffed with military personnel contributing to drone operations in parallel to their assigned specialties.[209] The capabilities of individual Russian drone units are highly varied due to these diverse inputs.

The Russian MoD seeks to formalize drone unit training, doctrine, and organization, much as it sought to centralize control over irregular formations writ large following the Wagner mutiny. The MoD began pressuring tactical Russian commanders to disband the currently ad hoc network of irregular Russian drone units in 2024, forcing commanders to reassign their manpower to assault units or transfer specialists to centralized MoD-led drone detachments.[210] These MoD directives created a coercive and oppositional dynamic by late 2024, with tactical Russian commanders fighting to keep drone personnel in their units against pressure from above to withdraw them to join centralized drone detachments — or cease working on drone operations entirely and serve as assault infantry. The MoD's centralization effort has some merit and may enable the Russian military to rationalize unit structures; create a full accounting of off-the-books drone detachments; centralize learning efforts to instill best practices throughout the force; and free up more assault power by reassigning underqualified specialists to infantry roles. The MoD's efforts will likely be an overcorrection, however, and many milbloggers rightly note that tactical level drone adaptation will be harmed and personnel with valuable skills will be wasted as frontline infantry.[211]

The Russian military is in the process of establishing an unmanned systems branch of arms and will likely construct standardized drone formations held as centralized assets at different echelons similar to its pre-2022 artillery force structures. The Russian General Staff has fielded a "Directorate for the Construction and Development of Unmanned Aerial Systems" since 2013 responsible for coordinating aerial UAV development and training, but the MoD clearly assesses that this directorate is insufficient for its current needs.[212] The MoD established the "Rubikon" center in August 2024 to both facilitate drone development and to deploy "Rubikon detachments," which are now assigned as operational assets to each major operational direction.[213] Defense Minister Andrei Belousov additionally announced on December 16, 2024, that the Russian MoD will stand up a new "Unmanned Systems Forces" branch by Q3 2025.[214] The exact structure of this new branch remains unclear, but the Russian military will likely establish it as a cross-service branch of arms similar to the way in which the army, VKS, and navy currently all field air defense units — rather than being established as a separate branch of troops like the VDV.[215] The Russian military will likely create centralized drone units analogous to Russia's pre-2022 artillery force structure and modeled on the specialized "Rubikon" detachments. The Russian military could, for example, establish drone battalions at the division level (like current artillery divisional artillery units); drone regiments or brigades held as district-level assets (like current thermobaric and rocket artillery brigades commanded at the district level); and create permanent units to formalize its current structure of controlling strategic drones, such as Shaheds, at the General Staff level. The Russian MoD is undertaking a large-scale overhaul of its unmanned systems force and procurement structure during wartime, restructuring units currently committed to the front in Ukraine and creating centralized bureaucratic, training, and procurement structures during active combat operations. Drone operations appear to be the most effective area of Russian learning from Ukraine to date, and Russian forces began to achieve some effects of Battlefield Air Interdiction (BAI) using drones by August 2025.[216] These centralization efforts will likely further increase the effectiveness of Russian drone units in the medium term despite the near-term costs of disbanding currently effective irregular drone units.

The Russian MoD's ongoing effort to centralize the development and production of Russian drones will likely enable standardized production at scale in the medium term but will impede battlefield effectiveness and iteration. The Russian MoD intends to reform its currently ad hoc drone development and construction pipelines to produce a smaller variety of standardized types of drones at greater scale.[217] This is the Russian military's traditional approach to weapon systems development and production, and will likely achieve the traditional results — the Russian military will produce a smaller selection of standardized "good enough" systems at scale and may outpace Ukrainian forces in the development of more advanced systems such as fiber optic drones due to centralized R&D, but Russian iteration cycles will slow down and will be far less responsive to changing battlefield demands. A centralized approach to drone development and

production is very likely a mistake for Russia and any other modern military.[218] The battlefield iteration cycles of the drone/counter-drone race far outpace the development cycles of other defense systems, and the most effective Russian and Ukrainian drone units are currently those that can implement micro-adaptations and directly alter their platforms *in unit*, rather than relying on traditional centralized development cycles and returning platforms to maintenance centers in the rear for upgrades. The Ukrainian military is responding to this challenge in a far more effective (though certainly not perfect) manner by providing centralized learning support and demand signals to individual innovators while allowing units to engage producers directly — rather than wholly centralizing development and production.

Drones have not and will not render artillery obsolete, and the Russian military will leverage both capabilities synthetically.[219] Drones provide tactical units with omnipresent reconnaissance assets and distributed mass precision strike, often fielded as low as the company level. Skilled FPV drone operators are highly accurate, capable of striking infantry inside bunkers and buildings as well as killing armored vehicles. Widespread reconnaissance drones have markedly increased the transparency of the battlefield and enabled rapid and accurate indirect fires. Only artillery can currently provide massed fire at scale to suppress or destroy large defensive positions and break up large-scale assaults, however. Artillery is also highly effective against mounted infantry in concert with FPV drones, with FPV drones disabling APCs before artillery kills the dismounting occupants. Artillery systems firing advanced munitions are far more effective against armor than large numbers of FPV drones. Finally, artillery can fire in adverse weather and wind conditions that often impede aerial drones. It is essential, therefore, to see Russian artillery and drone use as two components of a unified tactical fires system.

The Russian military needs to further adapt to its inability to keep its traditional massed artillery intact and will likely prioritize fielding drones and dispersed artillery using precision munitions in the medium term. The current dynamics of the positional war in Ukraine have prompted Russia and Ukraine to create roughly similar fires systems relying on increasing numbers of drones and prioritizing precise fire from individual artillery systems rather than massed unguided fires. The Russian military (and the Soviet military before it) has historically desired to increase the precision of its artillery fires and has successfully done so in response to battlefield pressures in Ukraine, but Russia's currently limited ability to rapidly produce precision munitions at scale constrains this capability.[220] The Russian and Ukrainian militaries would both continue to leverage massed artillery *if* they could nullify their opponent's ability to target concentrated artillery and munitions depots but have been unable to do so. Ukrainian personnel reported to RUSI analysts in early 2025 that they heavily rely on drones because they lack enough precision artillery munitions and cannot keep traditional massed artillery alive, not because they think drones are more effective than traditional artillery in all scenarios.[221] The Russian military likely faces a similar dynamic and would re-emphasize the use of massed artillery fires if it could produce or acquire sufficient numbers of shells and keep munitions depots safe from enemy fires. The Russian military does not have any near-term prospects to make its artillery survivable, however, and will likely continue its shift away from massed unguided fires in the medium term.

Air Power

Russian air power currently provides Russian ground forces an effective area bombardment capability sufficient for positional warfare, but the Russian air force (VKS) would be far less effective in a mobile battle or in more highly contested airspace. Russian air defenses — both ground- and air-based — remain highly capable against Ukraine and will likely disrupt future NATO air operations. The VKS likely retains latent offensive capabilities it could use effectively if Russian forces could suppress Ukrainian (or, far less likely, NATO) air defenses.

Russian suppression/destruction of enemy air defenses (SEAD/DEAD) missions achieved only mixed successes in the first week of the war, and VKS aircrews struggled to provide Russian ground forces with close air support in contested airspace.[222] Russian planners effectively mapped out Ukraine's air defense network and accurately struck static sites in the first

hours of the war, but advance notice from Western intelligence enabled mobile Ukrainian batteries to relocate hours before the beginning of the Russian invasion. VKS battle damage assessment and dynamic retargeting processes were very poor (much like Russian ground-based fires), and Russian forces were unable to fully destroy Ukraine's air defense network as intended. This failure effectively curtailed VKS efforts to provide close air support to Russian forces, and Russian aircraft suffered serious losses in the first two weeks of the war. Some Russian aircraft achieved limited successes supporting Russian ground forces, but the VKS functionally ceased attempts to penetrate Ukrainian airspace by April 2022. The VKS was not prepared or intended to provide responsive close air support to mobile Russian ground forces to the same extent as a NATO air force is intended to, however.[223] Pre-2022 Russian air doctrine and funding priorities heavily prioritized denying NATO airpower the ability to operate effectively and conducting stand-off strikes, rather than conducting low altitude close air support in contested air space, as the Russian military intended for ground-based fires to fill many of the roles NATO air power is intended to fill in a conventional war.

Russian air power currently provides Russian ground forces an effective area bombardment capability sufficient for positional warfare.

Ukrainian and Russian air defenses (both ground based and aerial) achieved parity by April 2022, and neither air force can safely operate in airspace over enemy lines. Russian fighters and long-range SAMs were highly effective against the Ukrainian air force early in the war and continue to prevent Ukraine from using Western aircraft such as the F-16 in an offensive role.[224] Ukrainian air defenses likewise heavily degraded the VKS in the early weeks of the war and continue to prevent Russian airpower from conducting more widespread operations in Ukrainian air space. The VKS lost substantial numbers of airframes and more critically experienced crews early in the war, and Russian air commanders have preserved their remaining capabilities since April 2022.[225]

The VKS acts as a standoff battlefield interdiction and bombardment force in Ukraine. The Russian military's mass use of glide bombs beginning in 2024 temporarily provided Russian forces with a highly effective capability against static defensive positions, but Ukrainian forces have largely nullified this capability with EW jamming by mid-2025. Russian fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft conduct suppressive fire missions by lofting unguided rockets from well behind the frontline. Russian fixed wing aircraft occasionally conduct precision bomb strikes on key Ukrainian targets from outside the range of Ukrainian air defenses, but the VKS does not field substantial stores of these advanced munitions. Russian rotary wing aircraft were highly effective in a defensive role during the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive as aerial ATGM platforms operating on prepared firing lanes, but have been less effective supporting Russian offensive operations due to the Ukrainian military's effective use of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS).[226] The Russian military began using glide bombs in early 2024 as a highly effective capability to bombard Ukrainian positions with relative impunity. Glide bombs are simple, mass-producible guidance kits attached to Russia's large stores of unguided bombs launched by fixed wing aircraft from 30–90km behind the line of contact.[227] Russian forces first effectively used glide bombs at scale during the capture of Avdiivka and have increased the accuracy of glide bomb kits over time, using data from early inaccurate strikes.[228] Glide bombs have sufficient explosive yield to blast through prepared Ukrainian fortifications and are highly demoralizing to Ukrainian defenders, as Ukrainian personnel perceive that they have no effective countermeasure.[229] Ukrainian forces responded to glide bombs by dispersing their defensive positions and developing effective EW countermeasures, however, and largely nullified the impact of glide bombs by mid-2025.[230] The Russian military began prioritizing the use of Geran- 2 and 3 (Russian analogues of the Iranian Shahed-136) to fill the role of glide bombs in June 2025, and the VKS likely faces a period of reevaluating its ability to support positional offensive operations in Ukraine.[231]

The VKS likely retains the ability to conduct more extensive offensive air operations than it has conducted since early 2022 if the Russian military can successfully suppress Ukrainian (or future NATO) air defenses and/or accepts the risk of higher losses. The VKS effectively demonstrated in Syria that it is highly effective as an offensive force when operating at medium altitude in a permissive air defense environment.[232] VKS fast air likely could penetrate Ukrainian air space and inflict significant damage if the Russian military committed it at scale, though the VKS would suffer heavy losses in the process.[233] If the Russian military could neutralize Ukrainian air defenses, either by directly destroying Ukrainian systems or by exhausting Ukrainian munitions through the ongoing Russian strategic bombing campaign, it could open a window of opportunity for renewed VKS operations at a much lower cost. The VKS now acts akin to an aerial "fleet in being," a term for a force (traditionally naval but applicable to other domains) which influences enemy decision-making without ever leaving its bases.[234] If the fleet in being sallied out of port, it could *potentially* achieve decisive effects but would risk destruction, which would deprive the force of its ability to shape enemy decision-making. If the fleet in being remains in port (or on protected airbases, in this case) and cannot be destroyed, however, the enemy must plan around its potential future deployment. The VKS currently shapes Ukrainian decision-making in this way, forcing Ukraine to keep scarce air defense systems on the line of contact instead of protecting Ukrainian cities and critical infrastructure from Russia's strategic bombing campaign. Unlike the Russian army's wholesale conversion into a positional war force incapable of mechanized maneuver after running its initial BTG-focused invasion force into the ground by the end of 2022, the VKS changed tactics to preserve some of its pre-2022 capabilities and force structures despite heavy early losses. The VKS poses a latent threat to Ukraine, but its capabilities in a direct war with NATO (and particularly its ability to contest US airpower) are beyond the scope of this report.

C2 and Battlefield Initiative

The Russian military has heavily centralized its C2 and reduced the complexity of its tactics and operational art since 2022. The Russian military is effectively adapting to degraded C2 technologies and declining standards of officer training by simplifying C2 to make the most of the limited tactical capabilities discussed previously. The Russian military's current C2 structures and processes are sufficient for the Russian military's current heavily templated operations by formations fixed to set axes, but the Russian military is vulnerable to command paralysis when surprised by enemy forces and lacks the fast and flexible decision-making and tactical initiative required for effective maneuver warfare.

Russian military modernization efforts before 2022 heavily prioritized the creation of secure, networked communication systems.[235] The Russian military framed its development priority as the creation of "automated control systems (ACS)" — networked command systems enabling commanders at all echelons to operate in a shared data space using secure digital communication platforms.[236] The Russian military assessed that its C2 technologies lagged behind NATO capabilities and required extensive development to enable rapid and secure communications between highly dispersed mobile units. The Russian military intended ACS development to culminate in the creation of literally automated and possibly AI-driven systems capable of mathematically processing battlefield data to calculate the "correct" decision for a commander to take in any situation — the logical endpoint of the Russian military's mathematical and scientific approach to the study of war.

Russian units have struggled to field secure and rapid communications throughout the invasion of Ukraine and were unable to use their existing C2 systems effectively. The Russian military's deployment of BTGs as the initial invasion force fragmented normal Russian C2 structures, and many Russian communications intercepted by Ukrainian forces in the early weeks of the war consisted of senior Russian commanders attempting to find the locations of their own troops, not issuing commands.[237] The Russian military's deployment of individual BTGs separate from their parent formations and its practice of combining depleted BTGs together meant units often lacked shared communications equipment or the encryption keys to use them. Newly created irregular formations often lacked C2 systems more advanced than civilian

radios, further exacerbating communication breakdowns. The breakdown of pre-2022 force structures and integration of newly created irregular formations forced much of Russian C2 onto private civilian cellphones and Telegram by late 2022. The Russian Duma (lower house of parliament) briefly passed a law backed by the MoD in July 2024, imposing harsh penalties for the use of personal cellphones in Ukraine — before withdrawing the law due to widespread milblogger objections (very likely reflecting complaints the milbloggers received from the front) that restricting cellphone use would severely compromise battlefield C2.[238] Current Russian C2 systems are minimally sufficient for positional warfare but are vulnerable to Ukrainian interception and would heavily impede mobile operations.

The Russian military has centralized its decision-making processes and further reduced its already low pre-2022 standards of tactical flexibility throughout the invasion of Ukraine, despite Russian efforts to inculcate lower-level initiative throughout its military culture before 2022. Russian military command structures are historically top-down organizations and rely on granular battlespace management by centralized commanders. The modern Russian military paid lip service pre-2022 to a stated desire to develop greater tactical initiative but failed to give tactical officers the training or flexibility needed to deviate from centralized orders. The Russian military heavily discussed the need for creativity and initiative as one of the main lessons of the Russian deployment to Syria and claimed to promote commanders who showed natural battlefield creativity and tactical initiative.[239] Russian military thinkers discussed the need to improve creativity and initiative for large-scale maneuver war as well, correctly assessing that C2 structures would rapidly break down in a high-intensity conventional war and that junior officers would need to be able to show initiative without direct senior guidance.[240]

The Russian military wholly failed to address this accurately assessed gap between its stated intent to promote flexibility and initiative throughout the force and its in-practice rigidity and centralization in Ukraine. Russian units are highly susceptible to decision making paralysis in information-poor environments or with degraded communications. Russian tactical commanders typically wait to make decisions until they have gathered all possible data and can be slow to act when their reconnaissance assets are interdicted or unavailable.[241] The Russian military's centralized structure and command culture further means that when battlefield conditions change, Russian units tend to freeze or continue mindlessly executing their prior orders until they receive clarification or new guidance from senior commanders, a dynamic repeatedly observed by Ukrainian forces.[242] The Russian military faces a huge gulf between stated intent and practice, which the Soviet military struggled with as well; as shown by Marshal of the Soviet Union Semyon Timoshenko (the Soviet Union's People's Commissar for Defense at the beginning of World War II) stating in 1940 that "we [the Red Army] are all for individual initiative," a claim which suffice to say did not match reality in 1941.[243]

The Russian military has not solved the inherent tension between its desire for centralized control of all battlefield operations and the need to increase delegated authority to enable continued action when C2 connections are degraded or lost entirely. The Russian military would like initiative "to be something that can be turned on and off like a tap," desiring centralized control over most operations while simultaneously requiring tactical units to demonstrate initiative and flexibility.[244] Insecure and unreliable communications and unempowered subordinates are a particularly bad match for a poorly trained force whose senior commanders desire complete centralized awareness of friendly unit dispositions and tight control from above. Jack Watling's *Arms of the Future* includes an anecdote from an American tactical commander reflecting on the constraints his higher headquarters' demand for constant situational awareness imposed on his deployments in a major exercise.[245] The tactical commander noted that he did not know exactly where his own units were and did not *want* to know, since "finding out would have forced [his units] to keep on terrain where they had communications with me." In response to constant demands for information from his superiors, the commander positioned a non-commissioned officer in the rear to feed upwards whatever information he could — which made his headquarters "feel like they knew what was going on," even though the information provided

was incomplete and out of date. The Russian military faces this exact problem on a far greater scale. Senior commanders do not trust junior commanders with delegated intent, but Russian units lack the systems to enable constant centralized awareness of the battlefield at the tactical level in mobile operations.

Russian command structures and processes are sufficient for slow offensive operations by formations on fixed axes that leverage templated tactical actions but will require significant reformation before the Russian military can conduct effective operational maneuver. The Russian military has reduced the size of units at each echelon in part due to span of control issues and concentrated primary decision making at the group of forces level rather than by army groups or independent divisions and brigades, as discussed previously in this report. The Russian military's decision to fix headquarters at the division echelon and above on specific axes mitigates the impact of many Russian C2 challenges seen in early 2022. The slow pace and templated planning of current offensive operations lessen the requirement for rapid and secure communications. Simple tactics additionally ease the burden of equipping new units — newly mobilized personnel ordered at gunpoint to skirmish forward until killed to identify gaps between Ukrainian positions do not require communications equipment, allowing available systems to be concentrated in more effective assault detachments. The Russian military's current offensive concept requires commanders to possess a minimum standard of military competence to accurately identify Ukrainian weak points through probing attacks and exploit perceived gaps with assaults on subsequent days, but this skill does not require rapid decision making or creativity under pressure. Successful Russian defensive operations (such as during the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive) demonstrated reactivity and flexibility to respond to Ukrainian assaults and conduct rapid counterattacks, but these successes were obtained by relatively effective Russian formations that had been able to prepare themselves and rehearse their defensive maneuvers for months in the complete absence of Ukrainian surprise.[246] Defending Russian formations have struggled to react when surprised at the operational level, as in the initial days of Ukraine's Kursk incursion in 2024 or during Ukraine's Kharkiv counteroffensive in 2022.[247] There are no indications from open sources that the Russian military has successfully *addressed* the causes of its poor C2 seen in early 2022. It has rather reshaped its structures and concepts of operations to *adapt* to poor standards of C2 that are far less effective than the networked technical systems and cultural emphasis on tactical initiative that the Russian military itself assessed were necessary for modern maneuver war at scale.

Conclusion: December 1941, not June 1944

The contemporary Russian military's evolution since February 2022 roughly mirrors the Red Army's evolution between June 1941 and December 1941, as it adapted to calamitous early losses and created a force capable of its first major offensive of the war to push the German military back from Moscow. The Red Army developed groundbreaking doctrine and theoretical approaches to large scale maneuver warfare in the 1930s, but it was wholly unable to put these approaches into practice during the early months of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.[248] The modern Russian military has similarly

The Russian military's current C2 structures and processes are sufficient for the Russian military's heavily templated operations, but the Russian military is vulnerable to command paralysis when surprised and lacks the decision-making and tactical initiative required for effective maneuver warfare.

been almost completely unable to match its holistic and effective assessments from before 2022 of the capabilities necessary to fight modern maneuver war at scale. Each military respectively made the best of a bad hand in late 1941 and 2023–2025, but the modern Russian military has in large part locked itself into its current structure and capabilities for the near term — unlike the Red Army, which rapidly developed into a highly effective force capable of maneuver warfare at scale.

The Red Army adapted to astronomically high early losses and the near collapse of its pre-war officer corps by restructuring its remaining formations and raising new formations to optimize for its small pool of qualified officers and low-quality tactical units. The Red Army eliminated the corps level between armies and divisions, instead using small and highly centralized armies directly controlling divisions as its main upper-tactical formation.[249] Armor and artillery were concentrated under higher-echelon control, rather than being distributed to individual divisions. The Red Army reduced the size of units at each echelon to make the span of control of each commander more manageable.[250] Soviet operational art and particularly tactics at this early stage of the war were intentionally simplified, abandoning many of the complex offensive plans discussed pre-1941. These adaptations made the most of Soviet limitations — at the cost of rigid tactics below the army level and individually weak and inflexible units, the Red Army achieved a minimally effective offensive capability against the overstretched German military and enabled the Soviet winter counteroffensive in late 1941, even with relatively poor Soviet operational art and Stalin's overambitious objectives.[251]

The Red Army moved beyond the force structure and operational art of late 1941 as soon as it was able to do so, however, reintroducing the corps echelon and creating flexible tank and mechanized formations.[252] The Red Army that Stalin committed to offensive operations in December 1941 was neither the force that Soviet military theorists wanted before 1941 nor the highly effective force that the Soviet Union would develop by June 1944 and Operation Bagration. It was deeply inefficient and made the best out of a highly degraded force to secure operational successes (at a huge cost in casualties) that the Kremlin found acceptable but *far* below its best-case-scenario objectives.

The contemporary Russian military has similarly created a force that is good enough for the Kremlin's current strategic theory of victory in Ukraine — but it will face substantial challenges in attempting to move *beyond* being a force solely optimized for positional warfare in Ukraine to one capable of large-scale mechanized warfare with NATO. The contemporary Russian military has leveraged the historical Russian and Soviet practice of effective task organization to optimize itself for the conditions it faces in Ukraine, but has calcified the positives of task organization into large-scale inflexibility across the force. Establishing specialized formations intended for positional warfare backed by more effective maneuver formations, or alternatively temporarily restructuring maneuver formations to fight a particular positional campaign, are both effective military adaptations. The Russian military has not taken either of these approaches. Russia's military leadership has instead reshaped its *entire* force in Ukraine to fight a positional war. Apart from the possible exception of the VKS, the Russian military is not choosing to not employ capabilities in Ukraine that would be effective in a maneuver war — it simply does not possess those capabilities as of August 2025.

The Russian military has developed a minimally sufficient form of operational art that can enable very slow operational successes against overstretched Ukrainian defenses, but Russian offensive approaches do not translate effectively to maneuver warfare at scale and will not produce a rapid Ukrainian collapse in the short- to medium-term. The Russian military likely developed and disseminated an operational approach to facilitate steady advances by early 2025, modeled on the capture of Avdiivka in early 2024.[253] Russian forces have demonstrated the ability to find and exploit tactical weak points in Ukrainian positions (most often the seams between unit boundaries or attacking during Ukrainian unit rotations), interdict Ukrainian lines of communication, and slowly envelop key settlements to force Ukrainian forces to withdraw to avoid encirclement. Russian forces have redeveloped the basic ability to coordinate multiple groups of forces after a protracted period of limited shared learning across different groups of forces. This limited operational art *does* support

the Kremlin's grinding theory of victory in Ukraine, though at great cost to Russian men and material and at a very slow pace.

The Russian military cannot conduct rapid operational maneuver, however, and discussions of *relatively* effective Russian operational art must not be extrapolated and compared to either the modern Russian military's intended capabilities in a major conventional war pre-2022 or to effective *Soviet* operational art. The Russian capture of Avdiivka, a notable Russian offensive success by the standards of its invasion of Ukraine, consisted of Russian forces from a single group of forces taking four months to close a gap 12–15 kilometers wide in order to force Ukrainian units to withdraw from a city with a pre-war population of 32,000 — which Ukrainian forces successfully did without being encircled.[254] Ongoing Russian offensive operations to advance roughly 50 kilometers and capture the "fortress belt" in eastern Ukraine will likely take several years, barring a major and unexpected Ukrainian collapse.[255] The most successful Soviet offensive operations in World War II advanced hundreds of kilometers in a matter of weeks and encircled hundreds of thousands of Axis troops. Soviet armies and at times divisions regularly conducted battalion-size attacks as limited probing and reconnaissance efforts up to five days prior to major offensives — which at times advanced 5 kilometers in a day.[256] If a contemporary Russian group of forces (fielding multiple army headquarters) in Ukraine conducted multiple battalion-sized attacks in a single day, with each attack penetrating Ukrainian defenses to a depth of 5 kilometers, it would be the most consequential Russian single-day advance since February 2022 and would be discussed as a partial collapse of Ukrainian lines.

This report's assessment that the Russian military is highly degraded and sub-optimized for positional warfare should not be misconstrued as an argument that the Russian military is not a threat. The Russian military remains capable of achieving some form of military victory in Ukraine, particularly if the West cuts material support to Ukraine. The Russian military cannot threaten significant offensive action against NATO while committed to major operations in Ukraine, but existing Russian forces could very likely conduct limited offensive action against a NATO member state — and NATO's ability to fight the current Russian military, not solely a reconstituted Russian military in five years or more, is worthy of study. Current Russian capabilities are far from the worst-case scenario for Ukraine and NATO, however, and Ukraine and its partners can militarily defeat the current Russian threat.

The Russian military's series of decisions since February 2022 to optimize its forces for a positional war will shape and constrain Russia's ongoing and future reconstitution efforts. Senior Russian military officials have repeatedly stated their intent to rebuild a force capable of large-scale war with NATO, and the degraded force the Russian military fields as of August 2025 will be the starting point of this effort — not the Russian military's non-existent intended capabilities from before 2022. The Russian military now faces the challenge of fitting a square peg into a round hole — reconstituting a highly degraded military wholly optimized for a specific set of battlefield circumstances in a positional war into a force capable of meeting the Kremlin's desired intent to go toe-to-toe with NATO forces in a mechanized maneuver war.

Chapter 3:

FORECASTING RUSSIAN MILITARY RECONSTITUTION

Introduction

The Russian military will seek to reconstitute a conventional land force capable of some form of mechanized maneuver by synthesizing elements of its pre-2022 intent to conduct mechanized maneuver; its current force optimized for positional warfare in Ukraine; and further investment in aspirational precision strike capabilities but will likely design and implement a semi-incoherent reconstitution plan. Russian military reconstitution efforts through 2030 will combine elements of the Russian military's pre-2022 force structure, its current adaptations in Ukraine, and aspirational precision strike capabilities into a hybrid force, and will not pursue any one of these pathways to the exclusion of the others. The Russian military will not seek simply to reconstitute its pre-2022 force structure. The Russian military's pervasive false reporting and other institutional pressures will impede Russian efforts to design and implement a cohesive and effective reconstitution path, but positive institutional characteristics will also drive the Russian military to effectively integrate new technologies and some of its adaptations in Ukraine into its reconstitution planning. The Russian military — even in its present form optimized for positional warfare — currently poses a larger and more imminent threat to NATO and European security than some reports suggest, and the Russian military will improve its capabilities following the end of major combat operations in Ukraine. Russia's military culture, inherent power limitations, and likely sub-optimal learning efforts will, however, perpetuate and create vulnerabilities that Ukraine and NATO can and must exploit.

The Russian military's reconstitution efforts will draw on elements of three pathways, each focused on an intended primary method of conventional warfighting.

- Attempting to restore mechanized maneuver through a combination of restoring the Russian military's pre-2022 capabilities and structure; revisiting Soviet concepts of mass mechanized formations; and developing new adaptations to make armor survivable on the modern battlefield.
- Investing further in the capabilities and tactical techniques that the Russian military developed in Ukraine to enable offensive operations in a positional war, such as dismounted infantry tactics and precision tactical fires using drones — many of which will be part of efforts to restore mechanized maneuver in a modern, rather than a pre-2022, framework.
- Revisiting the Russian military's aspirational efforts to field advanced and operationally significant precision strike capabilities, which the Russian military pursued (in order to conduct "non-contact war") but did not fully develop and field prior to 2022.

The Russian military will not pursue any one of these reconstitution pathways to the exclusion of the others, and Russian wartime adaptation and force reconstitution efforts since 2022 have already drawn on elements of all three of these pathways. Forecasts of Russian military reconstitution should concentrate on assessing *what balance* of these three pathways the Russian military will pursue in the medium term, rather than focusing on the Russian military's timeline for rebuilding its pre-2022 force structure, a project it is very unlikely to pursue.

The Russian military's evaluation of its invasion of Ukraine will shape its chosen force reconstitution pathway. The Russian military's lessons learned from Ukraine will depend on how it frames its performance: will it assess that its pre-2022 doctrine and concepts of operation were fundamentally sound but poorly implemented, or will it assess that the character of its invasion of Ukraine exposed gaps and flaws in Russian doctrine and force structure

that the Russian military must rectify through institutional reforms? These two frameworks are not mutually exclusive, and the Russian military will assess discrete periods and aspects of its invasion differently. The Russian military will additionally evaluate the character of the war in Ukraine as a predictor of future war or an aberration, which will determine what characteristics of the war and Russian capabilities as of 2025 it will treat as worthy of consideration and what it assesses it can discount.

The Russian military's severe internal tensions will likely impede Russian efforts to *conceptualize and plan* a reconstituted force, as well as Russian efforts to *implement* its chosen reconstitution plans. The Russian military may develop an ineffective or illogical force structure due to ineffective and internally inconsistent lessons learned efforts and a cultural desire to field a large, mechanized military. Institutional dishonesty and overambitious force generation plans may additionally prevent the Russian military from effectively implementing its chosen reconstitution path. Russian military culture will not solely impede Russian reconstitution, however, as there are now positive institutional pressures that will continue to drive innovation and adaptation into and possibly through a reconstitution effort. The Russian military will likely demonstrate creativity and institutional rigor in its efforts to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver. The Russian military will likely continue to demonstrate its historical focus on leveraging new technologies and operational concepts to solve operational challenges imposed by the changing character of war.

Reconstitution is a process of regaining combat functions, proficiency, and capabilities that will allow a force to execute various types of combat missions.

This report will not offer a specific forecast of Russian reconstitution, as it is premature to do so while the Russian military remains primarily focused on achieving Russian President Vladimir Putin's war aims in Ukraine. It is intended, rather, to provide two intellectual frameworks for further research and analysis of the Russian military and Russian reconstitution: 1) the Russian military's likely efforts to reconstitute a force capable of maneuver warfare will combine elements of three possible pathways depending on the Russian military's lessons learned from Ukraine, rather than pursuing one discrete reconstitution pathway; and 2) NATO can exploit the likely inefficiencies and contradictions in Russia's learning and reconstitution efforts. It is intended to shape future research efforts by ISW and other research organizations and concludes with potential indicators of discrete Russian reconstitution pathways.

Defining Reconstitution and Time Horizons

This report uses Dara Massicot's definition of reconstitution from her September 2024 report on Russian military reconstitution: "reconstitution is a process of regaining combat functions, proficiency, and capabilities that will allow a force to execute various types of combat missions."[257] The Russian military will replenish its formations with new personnel and equipment, but reconstitution is not limited to regenerating individual units to their pre-war structure and capabilities. Russian military and civilian officials will make decisions about training processes, equipment procurement, and new doctrine to achieve a defined combat mission. Russian military reconstitution thus encompasses doctrinal development and force design in addition to direct regeneration efforts.

ISW assesses that the Kremlin is actively preparing for direct conflict with NATO, and this report focuses on the Russian military's efforts to reconstitute a force capable of large-scale conventional war in Europe.[258] The Russian military has numerous options for *how* it will prepare for large-scale conventional war, and the three reconstitution pathways proposed in this chapter all support Russian efforts to fight a conventional war. Western analysis of Russian reconstitution efforts should not bifurcate into assessing if the Russian military is preparing for large-scale conventional war or not. A Russian military designed for large-scale war with NATO will also support renewed aggression against

Ukraine, power projection into non-NATO members of the former Soviet Union, or limited aggression against NATO. This report thus focuses on the most pressing and broadest scenario NATO must consider: the maximalist Russian reconstitution objective of creating a force capable of fighting and winning a conventional war with NATO.[XIX]

This report considers the *process* of Russian reconstitution efforts through 2030. This rough target date includes enough time for the Russian military to begin its institutional lessons learned effort drawing on its invasion of Ukraine and for it to begin to reshape doctrine and acquisitions processes but is a short enough time horizon to be realistically forecastable. This report assesses the possible pathways of the process of Russian *reconstitution* (an ongoing effort) through 2030 and does not forecast the structure and capabilities of a *reconstituted* (a completed effort) Russian military as of 2030. The Russian military is not in a binary reconstituted or unreconstituted state and will pose a threat to US and NATO interests throughout its reconstitution process. Russian efforts to conceptualize and generate a new force will be an extension of wartime reconstitution efforts already underway and the adaptations discussed in the second chapter of this report, rather than a peacetime force generation and reform effort like the 2008 "New Look" reforms. The three reconstitution pathways proposed in this report characterize aspects of the potential Russian reconstitution process, rather than hard-and-fast distinctions between chosen force designs or end points — this report does not attempt to define at what point the Russian military will have "reconstituted" a mechanized maneuver force, for example.

This report assumes that major combat operations in Ukraine end on lines not significantly worse for Ukraine than the current lines within 1 – 2 years, and that the Russian military remains on a wartime footing rather than demobilizing. The variables assessed in this chapter will impact Russian reconstitution regardless of the outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however. Russia could end active combat operations due to a ceasefire. The Kremlin could alternatively elect to reduce the intensity of its offensive operations and accept a static front line without a ceasefire in order to accelerate its reconstitution efforts to prepare either for offensive action against NATO or a renewed major invasion of Ukraine. A substantial increase in Western support to Ukraine or future successful Ukrainian counteroffensives would require a reevaluation of the assessments in this report and would refocus the Russian military on wartime regeneration and adaptation efforts rather than preparing for the next war. A Ukrainian military collapse and a substantial Russian victory would also alter the assessments in this report, likely by prompting the Russian military to view its invasion of Ukraine as more of a success than it currently does and accelerating Russian efforts to prepare for a major conventional war with NATO. Neither of those scenarios would invalidate the core frameworks offered in this report, however. The Russian military will reconstitute a force drawing on elements of the three proposed pathways in the medium term, regardless of the exact course of the war in Ukraine through 2030.

The Russian military has another option sooner than the 2030 time horizon of this report: conducting a limited attack against one or more eastern NATO states within 1 – 2 years of the end of major combat operations in Ukraine without demobilizing or taking substantial time to advance the reconstitution efforts forecasted in this report. Most ongoing NATO discussions and work by other analytical organizations (and this current report) focus on Russian reconstitution efforts in the medium term, but NATO must be prepared for the possibility of a limited Russian offensive against a NATO member state with capabilities roughly equivalent to the current Russian force in Ukraine. The Russian military's current and near-term capabilities are dangerous despite their optimization for positional war (a kind of war for which NATO is emphatically not optimized), and NATO should not discount the immediate Russian threat. ISW will assess the near-term conventional Russian threat to Europe and provide policy recommendations to prepare NATO to defeat it in a separate forthcoming project.

XIX This report does not assess the Russian nuclear force, its maritime capabilities, or the Kremlin's future use of irregular or hybrid means.

The Russian Military's Possible Reconstitution Pathways

This report considers three developmental pathways, each focused on an intended primary method of warfighting, that the Russian military's chosen reconstitution plan will combine into a hybrid model likely intended to restore mechanized maneuver in some capacity. These pathways describe the possible focuses of Russian reconstitution efforts, not concrete options proposed by Russian military and civilian officials. The Russian military will not design and implement a reconstitution plan strictly following one of these pathways. The Russian military's assessment of its performance in Ukraine and the possible limitations of Russian learning and reconstitution efforts discussed below will shape what combination of attempting to restore mechanized maneuver; investing further in the Russian military's wartime adaptations to fight a positional war; and investing in operationally significant precision strike (as described above) the Russian military will pursue.

RAND published a valuable report in January 2025, "Russia's Military After Ukraine: Potential Pathways for the Postwar Reconstitution of the Russian Armed Forces."[259] This RAND report proposes four conceptual Russian reconstitution pathways which combine elements of Russian objectives, political circumstances, and force design choices: The Shoigu Plan; Revisiting Old Models; A New, New Look; and A New Operational Model.

- "The Shoigu Plan" and "Revisiting Old Models" both posit that the Russian military could reconstitute a force similar to the pre-2022 Russian military by creating a large force capable of mechanized maneuver war.[260] RAND characterizes "The Shoigu Plan" as a slight increase in the size of the Russian military (which then-Defense Minister Shoigu announced his intent to implement in January 2023) and select qualitative improvements to remedy deficiencies in Russian capabilities in the initial stages of the full-scale invasion.[261] The RAND report characterizes "Revisiting Old Models" as a further reversal of the 2008 New Look reforms, a major increase in the size of the Russian military with few corresponding qualitative improvements, and an expansion of Russia's nuclear capabilities. The Russian military had already reversed large portions of the New Look reforms before 2022, however, and Shoigu's stated plans to create new formations and expand the Russian ground forces *already* revisit older Soviet models — so the development of Russian ground forces in these two pathways largely overlap. The two pathways additionally do not offer different Russian approaches to conventional warfare, focusing rather on the size of the Russian military and scale of equipment modernization instead of doctrine, and neither pathway accounts for the approach Russian forces have implemented in Ukraine since the war assumed a positional character (which occurred prior to March 2024, the RAND report's data cutoff date).[262]
- "A New, New Look" posits that the Russian military could make a second attempt to implement the 2008 New Look reforms by shrinking the Russian force and investing further in a flexible brigade structure and improved precision fires.[263] Russian officials have given no indication that they intend to shrink the post-war Russian military or implement the abandoned personnel policy changes of the New Look reforms, however. The Russian military likely will attempt to develop improved precision fires, but these capabilities would support both a mechanized maneuver and a positional warfare force whether or not the Russian military takes the unlikely path of returning to a lighter brigade-based force structure, so Russian investment precision fires should be disaggregated from a return to the New Look reforms.
- Finally, "A New Operational Model" posits that the Russian military could completely reject previous Soviet and Russian models and reorganize itself from the ground up.[264] The RAND

report rightly notes that the Russian military is unlikely to pursue such radical reforms absent a devastating loss in Ukraine or regime change. The current Russian military will likely struggle to implement even smaller-scale institutional reforms, much less a complete overhaul, as discussed further in this chapter.

This report instead proposes a structure of reconstitution pathways centered on three possible developmental focuses for Russian conventional warfighting. None of the four pathways proposed in the RAND report account for further Russian investment in capabilities optimized for positional warfare. The Russian military is *not* a fully mechanized force as of 2025 (as discussed in the second chapter of this report), and any Russian reconstitution effort will have to take this factor into account. The Russian military is rebuilding some of its mechanized capabilities (at least in terms of vehicle production) and will likely seek to restore mechanized maneuver, but forecasts of Russian reconstitution should not ignore the possibility of future Russian focus on non-mechanized units and further development of the Russian military's optimizations for positional warfare — some of which can be adapted to support greater maneuver. The RAND report additionally integrates possible future Russian capabilities beyond the conventional Russian military into its forecast of Russian reconstitution. "A New, New Look" synthesizes an increasing Russian use of private military companies (PMCs) and irregular means into its assessment of the conventional Russian military's possible return to the New Look reforms, for example.[XX] "Revisiting Old Models" similarly frames investments in Russian nuclear capabilities as a package deal with a substantial quantitative expansion of the Russian ground forces. The Kremlin's possible security policies writ large are important and these considerations in the RAND report are worthy of study, but this report narrowly focuses on Russia's efforts to reconstitute its regular military for conventional warfighting.

The Russian military will almost certainly attempt to reconstitute a force capable of conducting mechanized maneuver in some capacity. The Russian military is most likely to emphasize restoring maneuver if it assesses that the fundamentals of its pre-2022 doctrine and capabilities were sufficient and that its *implementation* of these fundamentals and Ukrainian adaptations led to Russian failures, rather than assessing that Russian doctrine was fundamentally flawed or that modern battlefield conditions preclude mechanized maneuver — and there are no indications to date that the Russian military is comprehensively rejecting its pre-2022 concepts. All modern militaries are grappling with the challenge of keeping armor (or any vehicles) alive on the modern battlefield to enable operationally significant maneuver. The Russian military will likely continue to wrestle with the same contradictions it faced before 2022 between its desire to field concentrated Soviet-style mass formations and the correctly assessed need for dispersal and mobility on the modern battlefield. The Russian military reversed much of the New Look reforms' creation of a lighter force centered on brigades prior to 2022. At the division echelon and above, the Russian military will likely reconstitute an increased number of divisions intended to fight sustained maneuver warfare, but will likely attempt to adjust doctrine and develop new capabilities to enable these formations to conduct maneuver. The Russian military, at bare minimum, will attempt to develop capabilities

XX The Kremlin will continue to use irregular means in future conflicts, to be sure, but the Kremlin has decisively rejected its previous use of PMCs following the Wagner Group mutiny. The Russian Ministry of Defense took steps to centralize control over irregular formations and integrate them into MoD structures throughout 2023 and 2024, and the Kremlin now maintains a tighter leash on its remaining irregular formations, such as the Africa Corps. The Russian military is unlikely to field irregular formations outside the auspices of the MoD in a future conventional conflict.

The Russian military will likely continue to wrestle with the same contradictions it faced before 2022 between its desire to field concentrated Soviet-style mass formations and the correctly assessed need for dispersal and mobility on the modern battlefield.

— such as improved electronic warfare (EW), kinetic counter-UAV systems and new armor, and refined tactical doctrine — to make armor more survivable at the tactical level and will likely attempt to reassess its operational art as well.

Western analysis should not conflate the Russian military's efforts to restore mechanized maneuver with a possible Russian return to a force strictly based on pre-2022 doctrine and capabilities or to a Soviet-style mechanized force. The Russian military can hardly fail to realize that the scaled and pervasive lethality of the modern battlefield makes a straightforward return to its pre-2022 idealized force structure and doctrine suicidal. The Russian military certainly may revisit elements of its pre-2022 force structures or past Soviet practice as components of a reconstituted force, but any Russian efforts to restore maneuver will incorporate elements of both pre-2022 practices and new innovations. The Russian military has a broad range of reconstitution options and potential adaptations under the broad heading of "restoring mechanized maneuver," and Russian efforts to reconstitute a mechanized force should not be inherently described as a return to Soviet practice.

The Russian military's current positional warfare-focused capabilities will impact its medium-term reconstitution efforts to some extent, and the Russian military faces the choice of whether to incorporate its adaptations willingly or be constrained by them unwillingly. The Russian military has implemented adaptations in Ukraine that it would be foolish to discount. There is no evidence that the Russian military is currently contemplating discounting them, and it is instead taking steps to institutionalize several of its adaptations, discussed later in this chapter. The Russian military developed a slow but effective form of foot-pace operational maneuver after its early failure to conduct mechanized maneuver in Ukraine, as discussed in the second chapter of this report. The Russian military revived historical responses to positional warfare such as specialized assault detachments and dismounted infiltration tactics that are effective against Ukrainian forces — and that NATO has not yet prepared itself to counter. The Russian military has also developed genuinely effective new capabilities in Ukraine, such as the "Rubikon" drone complex and its detachments, fiber optic drones, artificial intelligence and machine learning-powered drones, dispersed artillery firing precision munitions, and excellent EW and air defense systems.

The Russian military's adaptations to conduct positional warfare are effective in their own right and could, and almost certainly will, be *integrated* into Russian efforts to restore mechanized maneuver. The Russian military can and will integrate individual adaptations that it initially implemented to fight a positional war into its future reconstitution efforts, without necessarily embracing positional war as a desirable approach. The next generation of Russian officers will have come of age in this war, and at least some of them will push to integrate adaptations that they used relatively effectively in Ukraine into future Russian capabilities. The Russian military could leverage adaptations such as pervasive tactical strike using drones; infiltration tactics; specialized assault detachments for urban terrain; and motorized (not mechanized) light infantry as part of a force intended to conduct mechanized maneuver, and the Russian military could reconstitute an only *partially* mechanized force integrating its adaptations from Ukraine. The Russian military's adaptations additionally constrain reconstitution efforts — the Russian military cannot simply reverse the changes to its force structure, training, equipment, and organizational culture it has implemented to fight a positional war at the drop of a hat. The Russian military's willingness to acknowledge and work *with* — rather than *through* — its current status as a positional force will heavily shape the coherence of Russian reconstitution efforts.

Finally, the Russian military will attempt to improve its operational-level precision strike capabilities, but this developmental pathway will support other efforts, and the Russian military is unlikely to make precision strike its primary developmental focus. The Russian military's ability to conduct operationally significant precision strike has not lived up to the Russian military's intent prior to 2022 or its expectation that modern war would be primarily "non-contact."[265] The Russian military is unlikely to completely abandon its perceived lessons from Syria on the potential effectiveness of precision strike,

however. The Russian military's tactical precision fires are very effective in Ukraine, it is developing effective intermediate-range precision strike as well, and it will likely attempt to scale up its current drone- and artillery-based fires at all levels of war. The Russian military will likely further invest in drones as a means of achieving operational- and strategic-level effects, such as the Russian military's ability to achieve limited battlefield air interdiction (BAI) effects with drones as of August 2025 and its use of long-range Shahed-type drones to conduct a form of strategic bombing.[266] The Russian military has largely limited the manned elements of the VKS ("Aerospace Forces," the Russian Air Force) to a strategic strike campaign against Ukrainian rear areas and standoff fires against static positions in Ukraine but is unlikely to abandon its historical goal of tightly integrating manned aviation with ground maneuver. The Russian military will likely retain elements of its pre-2022 aspirations to conduct "non-contact warfare," but will likely view precision strike as an enabler of land forces rather than the primary means of defeating enemy forces.

The primary variable shaping the Russian military's chosen reconstitution path will be the Russian military's self-evaluation of why its initial invasion failed and why it had to sub-optimize for a protracted positional war. The Russian military could assess that its pre-2022 doctrine and concepts of operation were fundamentally sound but poorly implemented, or it could assess that the character of its invasion of Ukraine exposed fundamental gaps and/or flaws in Russian doctrine and force structure that the Russian military must rectify. The Russian military will additionally evaluate the character of the war in Ukraine as a predictor of future war or an aberration, which will shape what characteristics of the war and Russian capabilities as of 2025 it will treat as worthy of consideration and what it assesses it can discount. The Russian military as a whole will not assess either of these variables (effective vs ineffective pre-2022 Russian doctrine and Ukraine as a predictor of or aberration from the character of future war) as binary switches. Individual Russian officers and military officials will disagree with each other throughout the Russian military's learning process, and this section considers the aggregate lenses through which the Russian military could view its invasion of Ukraine.

Militaries that consider themselves to have won a war do not tend to rapidly innovate — but the Russian military will not view its invasion of Ukraine as an unqualified success if it ends or is suspended on anything like the current lines, and the war will prompt self-reflection and learning. The Russian military is historically a smart and learning institution, as discussed in the first chapter of this report. Russia's disastrous initial invasion of Ukraine shocked the Russian military and impeded wartime adaptation and honest self-assessment in 2022, but the Russian military has begun a slow process since late 2023 of returning to the mean of its historical institutional effectiveness. The Russian military is rife with false reporting and self-deception, discussed later in this chapter, but senior Russian military officials and the Kremlin cannot paper over the fact that Russia's invasion plan went catastrophically wrong. Even if the Russian military achieves all of the Kremlin's maximalist objectives in Ukraine due to a Ukrainian military collapse, those gains will have come at an inordinate cost, and such a complete Russian victory could limit lessons learned.

The Russian military's learning efforts after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War provide a rough analogue to the Russian military's likely evaluation of its invasion of Ukraine. The Russian military (and outside observers) characterized the Russo-Georgian war as a near-disaster despite Russia's victory, and it exposed crippling flaws in Russian capabilities. Russian ground-air coordination was poor; communication systems often failed to function properly; most Russian units, aside from airborne (VDV) and specialized troops, were relatively ineffective; and Russian logistics were insufficient to support five days of combat operations in a geographically confined theater of war.[267] The Russian military agreed that the war illustrated the need for capabilities development, and the Russian MoD accelerated its implementation of the "New Look" reforms that were in their planning stages prior to the war. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is several orders of magnitude more consequential than the Russo-Georgian War — Russia has more expansive objectives, the scale and duration of the

war is incomparably greater, and the pre-2022 Russian military was functionally destroyed and has been reconstituted since 2022.

The Russian military could assess that its doctrine and force structure as of February 2022 were fundamentally sound, and that the core structure of the pre-2022 Russian military (with relatively minor alterations to integrate lessons from Ukraine) would be sufficient to threaten NATO and enable mechanized maneuver warfare in a future conflict. The Russian military did not follow its own written doctrine for large-scale conventional war in 2022, as discussed in the second chapter of this report. The Kremlin instead declined to fully mobilize and invaded with an amalgamation of battalion tactical groups (BTGs) intended for local conflicts rather than fully staffed formations. Russian forces additionally faced numerous challenges in Ukraine that reflected gaps in Russian capabilities writ large, rather than vulnerabilities created by the Russian military's poor invasion plan and initial force structure.[XXI] These challenges include the vulnerability of armor to drones and precision artillery; insufficient coordination between tactical commanders and supporting operational fires; the need for a greater number of UAV units than was anticipated before 2022; the inability of Russian units to effectively maneuver cross-country; the Russian military's failure to suppress or destroy Ukrainian air defenses to enable maximally effective VKS (Russian air force) operations; and others, as discussed in the second chapter of this report. This assessment would lead the Russian military towards attempting to rebuild a mechanized force along the lines of the pre-2022 Russian military, and the Russian military's lessons learned process would shape the exact capabilities of this force. The Russian military could assess that it accurately predicted the dominant character of future war (as discussed in the first chapter of this report) — small, dispersed mechanized units conducting mobile operations and relying on precision fires rather than direct assaults to destroy enemy units — but failed to effectively implement the BTG model. It could alternatively assess that its invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the need for greater mass on the modern battlefield and prioritize adaptations to keep massed armor (at the brigade and regiment echelon and above) alive.

The Russian military could, on the other hand, assess that the problems of concentrating mass and keeping armor alive that rendered its invasion of Ukraine a positional war are challenging enough that the Russian military would be better suited by *working around* its inability to employ mechanized units at scale and (at least temporarily) accepting its current status as a positional force. This assessment would likely lead the Russian military to institutionalize its assault group unit structures and tactics; to invest further in motorizing infantry with motorbikes and small vehicles rather than attempting to re-mechanize its infantry; accepting standoff unguided fires such as glide bombs as sufficient for positional war; and reworking its operational art around advances at foot pace rather than mechanized maneuver. A Russian reconstitution pathway centered on fighting and winning positional wars does not preclude simultaneous efforts to reconstitute mechanized units, to be clear. The Russian military in Ukraine continues to field mechanized units and uses armor to support infantry-led assault tactics, and the Russian military could intend for reconstituted mechanized units to *support* successful positional warfare and provide limited exploitation capabilities.

The Russian military is highly unlikely to accept through the medium term that it is *only* a positional warfare force and double down on its current capabilities in Ukraine. Militaries do not often prepare for types of wars they do not want to fight — and the Russian military did not intend to fight a positional and attritional war in Ukraine, as discussed in the first chapter of this report. The Soviet military in the Cold War fielded large mechanized formations so that Soviet commanders could concentrate combat power at key points and rapidly relieve degraded mobile formations and rotate forwards fresh formations to exploit breakthroughs, *not* to fight and win a static, positional war through sheer

XXI The Russian military could alternatively assess that its pre-2022 force structure and capabilities were *completely* sound and that all the errors of its initial invasion of Ukraine can be blamed on the invasion plan itself or scapegoated commanders, rather than acknowledging the need to integrate lessons from Ukraine into a fundamentally sound foundation. This unlikely approach would be a significant Russian mistake and is considered later in this chapter.

weight of numbers.[268] Despite the popular perception of the Red Army as a ponderous and attritional force, the Red Army considered its rapid offensives — such as the highly successful Soviet invasion of Manchuria in August 1945, which captured an area larger than that of France and Germany combined in ten days but is often ignored in the West — as its greatest achievements and models for future practice that the modern Russian military studies to the present day.[269] Russian military discussions prior to 2022 emphasized the need to fight fragmented mobile battles without cohesive front lines and to quickly win a war with NATO through a combination of rapid mechanized maneuver and potential nuclear escalation, *not* wearing NATO down in a protracted conflict.[270] The Russian military could reconsider its capabilities and its possible advantages over NATO in a protracted positional war based on its experience of positional war in Ukraine, to be sure. The Russian military's continued exaltation of the Red Army in World War II; historical focus on speed and mass at the operational level; and the desire to avoid a future positional war (as discussed in the first chapter of this report) will all push the Russian military to attempt to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver, however — even if it faces limitations on its ability to do so, discussed subsequently in this chapter.

Militaries do not often prepare for types of wars they do not want to fight — and the Russian military did not intend to fight a positional and attritional war in Ukraine.

The Russian military's evaluation of its performance in Ukraine and how it views the war as a predictor of — or aberration from — the likely character of future war will shape Russian decisions to incorporate elements of these three pathways into its reconstitution efforts. The Russian military will almost certainly concentrate on restoring mechanized maneuver, but the degree to which it does so by integrating lessons from Ukraine or retreating to pre-2022 conceptions will hinge on Russia's institutional lessons learned process.

Current Russian Command Culture Will Impede Learning and Reconstitution Efforts

The Russian military's current culture of self-deception and tendency to punish failure will undercut the Russian military's historically good learning processes (modeled on past Soviet practice). The Russian military is suffused with yes-men and a culture that punishes honest reporting and rewards blind obedience. The Russian military will likely struggle to recognize its own limitations and design a reconstitution plan that is internally consistent and within the Russian military's capabilities to implement. These complications will not invalidate the Russian military's ability to learn and iterate, but will impede its ability to *maximally* extract lessons from Ukraine and design an internally consistent and implementable reconstitution plan.

Yes-Men and Factionalism in the Russian Military

The Kremlin and the senior leadership of the MoD have exacerbated the Russian military's pre-war culture of fear and punishment since 2022. A willingness to keep one's head down and follow orders is a greater predictor of career advancement in the Russian military than battlefield effectiveness or innovative thinking. Officers who stay the course and do not upset their superiors, rather than the most innovative and creative thinkers willing to frankly discuss Russian shortcomings, will be promoted and will shape Russian reconstitution efforts.

The Russian military is a highly personalized system that reflects Putin's civilian government.[271] The Kremlin and key *siloviki* (senior Russian security services officials who are key stakeholders in Putin's regime) are closely involved in Russian military planning, assessments of Russian capabilities requirements, and officer appointments and promotions. Senior Kremlin officials hold their policy portfolios due to personal ties to Putin, not always due to their on-paper positions, and their ability to impact policy often relies on informal influence and personal ties with Putin and other stakeholders.[272] Putin's circle does not offer him diverse views on strategy and will directly lie to him — such as when then-Defense Minister Shoigu improbably told Putin that "everything is going to plan" two weeks into the full-scale invasion of Ukraine — and it is not a career-enhancing move for Putin's inner circle to question his decisions.[273] The Kremlin's frustrations with the MoD's performance in 2022 and throughout the war have prompted political infighting among senior officers and the Kremlin, and dramatically increased the rate of turnover among senior officers.[274] Putin often removes senior officers he perceives to have failed, but retains these officers for future recall by exiling them to positions in the Russian deployment to Syria or rear area commands rather than retiring or imprisoning them.[275] Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov runs the Russian military in a manner similar to Putin's. Gerasimov often prioritizes maintaining his own position and the preeminence of the General Staff over military effectiveness. Putin and Gerasimov retain officers due to their loyalty and remove or demote them for real or imagined poor battlefield performance; to punish ties to out-of-favor actors such as the Wagner Group; and as part of factional MoD politics, such as struggles between commanders affiliated with the Army and the VDV.

The Russian military's tendency to punish independence and honest reporting of failure, as well as sometimes actual failure, incentivizes Russian officers to follow orders, report progress, and keep their heads down. A Russian officer's willingness to follow orders unquestioningly and suppress bad news is often a greater predictor of continued service or professional advancement than his battlefield performance or demonstrated initiative. Senior Russian commanders have issued inflexible orders throughout the war — capture a town by an arbitrary date, advance at a certain pace per day, do not retreat from a defensive location under any circumstances — untethered from battlefield conditions.[276]

Russian officers often misrepresent the battlefield situation to their seniors to falsely present good news, providing senior commanders a flatly incorrect understanding of the battlefield — leading them to issue unrealistic and illogical orders that do not reflect the battlefield situation, perpetuating a cycle of Russian tactical commanders misreporting the results of illogical orders from operational and strategic commanders.[277] Senior Russian officers and civilian security officials likewise paint Putin an overly positive picture of the war.[278] The Russian General Staff significantly downplayed Ukraine's August 2024 incursion into Kursk Oblast to Putin, for example, and falsely informed him that Russian forces encircled Ukrainian units.[279] Putin directed Russian Minister of Defense Andrei Belousov and Gerasimov to "honestly" tell him about the frontline situation on August 1, 2025, implying, probably correctly, that they had not been doing so.[280] Putin's statement could indicate that he is aware that he sometimes receives false information, but his partial awareness will not reverse the demand signals for good news he has instituted — and he could in fact characterize accurate but unwanted news as "dishonest," as Stalin did throughout WWII.[281] Officers who simply report setbacks are often replaced or punished, leading commanders to report dishonestly and scapegoat their colleagues for failures while suppressing bad news themselves until it is too dire to be concealed.[282] A Russian officer's best career choice is thus to follow orders rigidly, regardless of their chance of success or failure.

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Gerasimov and other senior figures in the MoD will likely favor and promote officers in the traditionalist wing of the Russian military and those who demonstrate personal loyalty. Gerasimov and Shoigu act as the center of the traditionalists in the MoD.[283] Gerasimov and other senior Russian MoD officials have fought since 2022 to maintain the MoD's prestige and their own careers against the Kremlin's criticisms and temporary elevation of non-MoD irregular formations.[284] Several Russian commanders have publicly demonstrated loyalties to their branch or specific irregular formations, rather than to the Russian military as an institution. The phenomenon of officers demonstrating loyalty to their branch or service over the needs of the military as a whole is certainly not unique to the Russian military, but the intensity of internal divisions in the Russian military is extreme. Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky repeatedly clashed with Gerasimov and heavily prioritized the VDV above other Russian forces, for example.[285] The Russian MoD cracked down on the previously effective cadre of Wagner Group-favorable officers following the failed Wagner Group mutiny, including General of the Army Sergei Surovikin, whom the Kremlin sidelined to an administrative role with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).[286] Putin replaced Shoigu with Andrey Belousov in May 2024, and the Kremlin and Belousov rapidly conducted an extensive reshuffling of senior personnel to remove individuals reportedly affiliated with Shoigu.[287] The Russian military will likely continue to sideline effective officers and disregard or minimize their potential input on lessons learned efforts in favor of those with close ties to Gerasimov as long as the Gerasimov faction is in power.

The Russian "milbloggers," military journalists or nationalist commentators who report and comment on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Russian capabilities, will likely continue their wartime external inputs to Russian personnel appointments and warfighting throughout the Russian reconstitution process. The milbloggers have repeatedly influenced the Kremlin's appointment and firing of senior officers, and the Kremlin seeks to shape and control their highly influential discussions of the war.[288] The milbloggers do not have a strictly positive or negative influence on Russian military

capabilities. Many milbloggers accurately criticize poor MoD decisions and highlight effective commanders and adaptations, but their constant outside pressure disrupts Russian MoD processes — at times possibly to the detriment of Russian operations — despite the Kremlin's efforts to coopt or suppress certain milbloggers. The milbloggers will likely continue to influence Russian military personnel policies and will act as an informal public corollary to the Russian military's lessons learned efforts in the medium term — though their exact impact on Russian learning efforts is beyond the scope of this report and difficult to forecast.

The saga of the removal and imprisonment of Major General Ivan Popov epitomizes the command dynamics in the wartime Russian military.[289] Popov is a highly successful and popular general who commanded the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA), the primary Russian formation that halted the Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast in June 2023. The Kremlin relieved Popov in July 2023, prompting him to release a voice memo accusing then-Defense Minister Shoigu of dismissing him in retaliation for Popov's honest expression of concerns to MoD officials about the situation in his area of responsibility and advocating for better support for the 58th CAA. Popov relied on a network of friendly commanders and veterans to amplify his message, leading to widespread outrage in the milblogger information space over his perceived unjust dismissal. The Kremlin responded by exiling him to Syria as deputy commander of the group of Russian forces there before recalling him to Russia in January 2024; arresting him on charges of large-scale fraud in May 2024 (which Popov denied); and sentencing him to prison in April 2025 after rejecting an appeal by Popov to deploy to the frontline in Ukraine to redeem himself.[290]

The Kremlin and senior Russian military officials have created a culture of fear and blind obedience, exacerbating the Russian military's longstanding challenges with corruption and the limitations of overly centralized authority. Senior Russian commanders have created a chilling effect — officers have learned to follow orders without question; to avoid contradicting superiors; and to avoid publicly advocating for their troops. Rampant corruption among Russian officers means that almost every officer can be charged with fraud, putting them at constant risk for removal over "newly discovered" corruption charges.[291]

Loyalty, not battlefield effectiveness, correlates with career survival — and loyalty will thus determine which officers shape future Russian reconstitution efforts. Western analysts and military professionals rightly note that the Russian military's combat experience in Ukraine will make it more effective, and some further argue that "military Darwinism" will ensure that the Russian officers who survive the war and are elevated to senior positions will be battle-hardened professionals.[292] Russian tactical and operational-level officers (and select personnel in assault detachments) are receiving valuable combat experience, to be sure, and they are all definitionally professionals. The Russian military is unlikely to take maximum advantage of its newly acquired combat experience any more than most armies do, however, particularly at senior levels. It is important not to romanticize the capabilities of officers in armies at war, which often contain many time-serving mediocre or even poor officers in senior positions and do not reliably winnow out all incompetents through any sort of "military Darwinism." Russian officer rotation policies in the early years of the war undercut future Russian learning, furthermore. The Russian military subjected junior officers to such long periods on the frontline that the most effective personnel were often killed before they could rotate out to contribute to generalized lessons learned processes, though reduced Russian officer casualties since 2023 have partially mitigated this challenge.[293] Perhaps more damagingly, the *career* survival of officers who personally survive is not positively correlated with combat effectiveness as noted above, and to a large degree is *negatively* correlated with the willingness to openly address the Russian military's setbacks and deficiencies. The officers most likely to shape the Russian military's lessons learned processes from Ukraine will be those who kept their heads down, said "yes sir," reported good news, and did not directly challenge their superiors.

The Russian Military Will Not Be Able to Honestly Discuss Lessons

The Russian military's current culture will impede the Russian military's historically effective lessons learned processes, discussed in the first chapter of this report. The Russian military's culture of punishing failure and bad news is impeding (but is not halting) wartime adaptation and will similarly impact the postwar lessons learned effort. The Russian military has the potential to conduct an effective lessons learned effort, but internal dishonesty and political constraints will partially compromise this process.

The Russian military's widespread culture of false reporting and its reticence to acknowledge setbacks and casualties will likely partially carry forward into post-war lessons learned efforts. The Russian military's wartime suppression of bad news and efforts to find individual scapegoats for institutional setbacks create a cycle in which predictable (and at times *actively predicted* by certain officers) gaps go unaddressed until they are too obvious to be ignored by senior officers, delaying wartime learning.[294] The Kremlin's wartime censorship of casualty figures and refusal to openly discuss major setbacks is not inherently unusual, but the Russian military's current culture and the Kremlin's tendency to punish the bearers of bad news mean that the Russian military's *internal* understanding of the war is likely also compromised. H.H. Asquith, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1908 – 1916, quipped that the British War Office in WWI kept three sets of data: "one to mislead the public, another to mislead the Cabinet [the United Kingdom's civilian government], and the third to mislead itself" — an accurate description of the modern Russian military.[295] The Russian military's combination of suppressing bad news internally and preventing public discussion will likely limit Russian learning efforts to a closed subset of Russian officers in classified or private settings, instead of integrating a wide range of inputs, and will prevent even these closed learning sessions from being maximally honest.

The Russian military's obfuscation of the actual battlefield situation and suppression of bad news will additionally constrain reconstitution efforts by preventing Russian commanders from accurately assessing the strength and capabilities of Russian units and writing an accurate history of the war. Military planners and force designers cannot work effectively in a dishonest reporting culture. The Russian military's widespread corruption (such as commanders reporting nonexistent soldiers to collect their paychecks, falsified readiness and training reports, and poor maintenance standards) all led the Russian military to overestimate its own capabilities prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[296] The Russian military's combat losses and the disintegration of pre-war force structures likely exacerbated this challenge, and the structure and capabilities of individual Russian formations widely vary. Russian military planners may base their reconstitution plans on an inaccurate assessment of current Russian capabilities. False reporting by Russian officers will additionally distort the Russian military's internal historical record of the war. The Red Army's comprehensive and self-critical campaign studies and after action reviews written during and shortly after the end of WWII formed the backbone of its excellent post-WWII learning.[297] The modern Russian military's pervasive false reporting may reduce the accuracy of its historical record, as many official daily unit reports and situation maps are likely inaccurate.

Putin, Gerasimov, and other senior Russian officials' sensitivity to criticism and desire to suppress politically inconvenient but effective commanders will likely limit honest discussion of Russian decision-making at the strategic level. Poor decisions by Putin, Gerasimov, and other senior MoD leaders are inextricably linked to Russia's military performance in Ukraine. Russian officers and civilians likely cannot openly criticize Putin for his numerous errors and misjudgments at the strategic level. Gerasimov will likely take steps to protect his own position from criticism in lessons learned discussions, as will other senior officers serving at the end of the war. The Kremlin has already sought to rewrite the Russian military's failure to capture Kyiv as a cunning attempt to draw Ukrainian forces away

from eastern Ukraine before withdrawing rather than a failed attempt to capture Ukraine's capital, for example, much as the Soviet Union under Stalin retroactively claimed the Soviet military's utter failure to halt German forces at the Soviet border and immediately transition to the offensive (as intended in pre-war doctrine) was a planned withdrawal into the Soviet interior.[298] The Kremlin and MoD may additionally minimize the positive impact of politically inconvenient or disgraced officers such as Army General Sergey Surovikin, Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, and Major General Ivan Popov, and may suppress some learning opportunities from the relative effectiveness of the Wagner Group. The Soviet military's post-WWII learning efforts made some similar politically-influenced errors of omission — such as Marshal Georgy Zhukov's attempt to minimize the significance of his failed Operation Mars in favor of the concurrent and successful Operation Uranus; or the General Staff's suppression of future Chief of the General Staff Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky's ineptitude and the effectiveness of the ethnically Polish Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky during offensive operations in Belarus in late 1943.[299] The Soviet learning effort was overall effective and honest despite these and other occasional distortions, however, and contemporary Russian challenges will similarly impede but will not completely invalidate the post-Ukraine learning effort.

The Russian military faces serious self-imposed barriers to accurately and honestly observing lessons from the war in Ukraine and implementing adaptations. If the Russian military does not ask the right questions at the right levels, it will either fail to adapt or will implement adaptations that do not improve its effectiveness.[300] The Russian military system's prioritization of loyalty over competence, tendency to suppress bad news, and the efforts of senior MoD officials to protect their own positions and influence will impede Russian learning efforts.

The Russian officers who have survived (personally and politically) or been elevated as of early 2025 are not those who are willing to advocate for new concepts or challenge flawed judgments from above. A successful effort to assess major military lessons and implement them to reconstitute a forward-looking force requires effective and intelligent senior officers; a willingness to think critically about one's own military's performance; and a willingness to institute major change if necessary.[301] These constraints will not wholly invalidate the Russian military's post-war learning efforts but will prevent them from being *maximally* effective.

The Russians Will Likely Design an Incoherent Reconstitution Plan

The Russian military will likely design and implement an incoherent reconstitution plan by designing an inefficient force mix, overreaching its own reconstitution capacity, or acting on inaccurate lessons learned. Allan Millet and Williamson Murray's groundbreaking study of military effectiveness defines military effectiveness as "the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power" and states that "a fully effective military is one that derives maximum combat power from the resources physically and politically available."[302] The Russian military's ability to reconstitute an effective force — regardless of the exact force structure and capabilities it generates — will depend on its ability to design an internally consistent and feasible reconstitution plan.

All militaries risk implementing adaptations based on poorly identified or inaccurate lessons from major combat operations. General of the Army Dmitri Pavlov, the head of the Red Army's armored forces, assessed that large armored formations had no future based on Soviet operations in the Spanish Civil War, for example.[303] The modern Russian military made

Poor decisions by Putin, Gerasimov, and other senior MoD leaders are inextricably linked to Russia's military performance in Ukraine. Russian officers and civilians likely cannot openly criticize Putin for his numerous errors and misjudgments at the strategic level.

similar learning errors (as discussed in the second chapter of this report) by over-projecting the effectiveness of BTGs in eastern Ukraine in 2014 – 2015 and internalizing poor air support tactics based on operating in nearly uncontested airspace in Syria.[304] The Russian military's dishonest inputs and political constraints discussed previously increase the Russian military's risk of implementing adaptations to poorly identified lessons, but all militaries face the challenge of learning effective lessons.

The Russian military may downplay the necessity of substantial changes and fall back on rhetorical tropes of inherent Russian effectiveness and determination. Secretary of the Security Council and former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed on May 6, 2025 that Soviet victory in WWII embodied "the inexhaustible genetically embedded spiritual strength of our people," arguing that Russians (claiming the entirety of the Soviet Union as "Russian") are inherently spiritually and morally stronger than their opponents and reducing Soviet success to a question of moral superiority.[305] The Red Army struggled to acknowledge the limits of ideological and moral strength versus actual military capabilities in the early years of WWII — succinctly summarized by historian John Erickson's statement that "the 'discipline of the revolver,' to use a [Russian] Civil War phrase, could not of itself fuel stranded tank columns, compensate for plain tactical incompetence and [sic] operational ineptitude."[306] Russian military writing on lessons learned from Syria often relied on this trope as well, and many otherwise forward-looking Russian officers argued that fighting spirit and courage will always outweigh the importance of technological capabilities and new doctrine.[307] The Russian military may repeat this error when assessing its performance in Ukraine, and may frame its ability to weather staggering losses and continue offensive operations as an unambiguous virtue, rather than a necessary adaptation to severe weaknesses.

The Russian military might also face a gap between its interest in responding to identified lessons and its ability to internalize those lessons and implement adaptations.[308] Militaries cannot always institutionally implement desired adaptations or force structure changes due to economic and cultural factors. The Russian military has repeatedly faced this challenge in the 21st century. The Russian military identified several desired adaptations to lessons learned from its deployment to Syria but was unable to fully implement them before 2022 due to the cost of acquiring new systems and the difficulty of rapidly reshaping training programs.[309] The Russian military additionally never fully implemented the 2008 New Look reforms. Insufficient funding but more importantly insufficient *organizational buy-in* from senior Russian officers impeded the New Look reforms.[310] Russian officers and military commentators strenuously objected to the *principle* of the New Look reforms' changes to decades of Russian and Soviet traditions and what Russian officers saw as efforts to undermine the security and prestige of the Russian military's bloated officer corps, in addition to professional disagreements over the substance of the proposed reforms. Former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reversed many of the partially implemented New Look reforms as soon as he took office in late 2012. Shoigu particularly targeted unpopular policies (regardless of their effectiveness) and took steps to distance himself from his predecessor, Anatoly Serdyukov.[311] The Russian military may repeat this error by designing a reconstitution plan that maintains Russian traditions and does not ruffle the feathers of senior officers, rather than designing a reconstitution plan that fully addresses the Russian military's weaknesses and slaughters sacred cows if needed.

The Russian military may design an overly optimistic reconstitution plan intended to provide the Russian military the capabilities to fight the war it *wants* to fight and not the war it *needs* or is *able to* fight. Military systems often fall into the trap of writing idealized doctrine and designing unimplementable force structures, rather than preparing for the likely warfighting conditions they face and acknowledging the limits of their own capabilities.[312] The success or failure of militaries as learning institutions is often predicated on their ability to quickly and accurately recognize differences between pre-war expectations and practical experience and to act on those differences.[313] Overly ambitious written doctrine and training can actively harm a military's performance if personnel are instructed to implement a doctrine that their own skills and the capabilities of their forces cannot fulfill. The Red Army never fully implemented its

groundbreaking 1936 – 1937 doctrine, for example.[314] It failed to integrate paratroopers (which were intended to be a crucial element of deep battle) into offensive operations and failed to mechanize or motorize infantry to the degree it intended. The Red Army adapted and developed its own highly effective doctrine throughout WWII, but Soviet officers struggled to implement pre-war offensive concepts that were disconnected from the Red Army's practical capabilities in 1941 and 1942, leading to repeated hopeless counteroffensives in the first year of the war. The contemporary Russian military could make a similar error by revisiting pre-2022 discussions of "sixth generation" or "non-contact" warfare and writing doctrine reliant on fielding precision strike capabilities beyond Russia's means to acquire and field at scale.[315] The Russian military will need to institutionally recognize, accept, and build on its degraded force structure and capabilities to effectively plan and implement a reconstitution pathway, rather than ignoring hard lessons and planning an aspirational but unimplementable reconstitution plan and future doctrine.

The Russian military will not simply discard its adaptations in Ukraine and attempt to reconstitute its pre-2022 force structure despite these numerous potential impediments to effective Russian learning and planning. The worst pathway for the Russian military — and best case for NATO — would be if the Russian military assesses that the character of the war in Ukraine *and* the Russian military's initial performance were aberrations; retreats into traditionalism; rejects potential lessons from the positional stages of the war in Ukraine as irrelevant to maneuver warfare; and attempts to rebuild large mechanized formations strictly along the lines of the pre-2022 Russian military. Russia cannot match Soviet levels of production and will take an extensive period to rebuild its pre-2022 armored fleet, let alone recruit and train sufficient personnel to staff those units.[316] The Russian MoD would likely create numerous on-paper formations that it cannot fully staff and equip and would fail to leverage its hard-earned battlefield experience in Ukraine if it attempted to strictly rebuild its pre-2022 force. Modern NATO militaries are purpose-built to destroy Soviet-style massed armor, and a Russian retreat into tradition would simplify NATO's need to reassess its own force generation requirements and counter Russian adaptations in Ukraine. There are no indicators that the Russian military will take this drastic path, however, and there are in fact numerous indicators (discussed in the following section) that the Russian military is already institutionalizing its wartime learning and adaptations from Ukraine. The Russian military will struggle to maximally leverage its potential learning from Ukraine and design a coherent reconstitution plan and may indeed reject *some* effective adaptations and potential lessons from Ukraine in favor of obsolete pre-war concepts and force structures, but these limitations will not completely undercut its institutional learning efforts. Institutional pressures will drive the Russian military to innovate, and NATO must prepare to adjust its own requirements to defeat an evolving Russian military threat.

Positive Institutional Pressures Will Drive the Russian Military to Innovate

The Russian military's positive cultural traits and institutional pressures will lead the Russian military to innovate and integrate effective adaptations from Ukraine into its efforts to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver. The Russian military has numerous options under the broad heading of "attempting to restore maneuver," and is already pursuing efforts to integrate several adaptations from Ukraine into future force design. The Russian military risks learning inaccurate lessons; designing an incoherent or overly ambitious reconstitution plan; or attempting to return to a form of mechanized maneuver beyond that which technology and the current character of war justifies or supports, to be

sure. Russian military culture will not solely impede Russian reconstitution, however, and the Russian military will likely demonstrate some creativity and institutional rigor in its efforts to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver.

The Russian military is unlikely to willingly embrace positional, attritional warfare as its desired approach to future war. The Russian military has retained the Soviet military's paramount focus on conducting rapid mechanized maneuver as the highest manifestation of effective operational art, as discussed in the first chapter of this report. The Russian military adapted itself to fight a positional war in Ukraine because its intended concept of operations failed, not because it viewed positional war as a desirable course of action. The Russian military continued attempting to conduct mechanized maneuver into late 2022 far after it lost any realistic chance of doing so, in fact, and may have achieved better results if it had accepted that it faced a protracted, positional conflict earlier in 2022 *before* conducting numerous costly mechanized assaults in eastern Ukraine. The 2025 RAND report on Russian reconstitution pathways discussed previously posits that the Russian military could attempt to create a "mass, mechanized, attrition-based model" — but as discussed in the first chapter of this report, the Russian military intends to field a mass mechanized force to *avoid* fighting a protracted and attritional war and instead to achieve a rapid victory, and the Russian military's current attrition-based model relies on dismounted or at most motorized (not mechanized) infantry.[317] Soviet lessons learned efforts after WWII and theoretical writing throughout the Cold War heavily concentrated on the importance of the "initial period of war," emphasizing the necessity of avoiding replicating initial Soviet errors in WWII, and modern Russian military writing prior to 2022 retained this focus and heavily emphasized the need to win a war with NATO quickly.[318] The Russian military has adapted to fight a positional war in Ukraine (as described in the second chapter of this report) and may be forced to do so again, but Russian military culture and historical institutional pressures will very likely push it to attempt to *avoid* positional conflicts and win wars quickly through a reconstituted mechanized force, rather than optimizing itself to intentionally fight a future positional war.

The Russian military will likely demonstrate some creativity and institutional rigor in its efforts to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver.

The Russian military is responding to the positional character of war in Ukraine by using the Russian military's consistent approach prior to 2022: responding to the changing character of war with technological solutions to operational and tactical challenges.[319] The modern Russian military has always sought to adapt to the changing character of war with new technologies, as discussed in the first chapter of this report. The Russian military heavily invested in "automated control systems" prior to 2022 to integrate its forces into a single networked information space and speed up the implementation of its battle orders processes.[320] One of the Russian military's primary lessons from its intervention in Syria was the need to heavily invest in standoff precision munitions in the hopes of conducting what Russian officers call non-contact war.[321] The Russian military has similarly focused on technological solutions to operational problems in Ukraine. The Russian military's heavy investment in fiber optic drones, successful efforts to jam Western-provided precision munitions, and even the relatively low-tech innovation of glide bomb kits to create a standoff fires capability, having failed to achieve air superiority, are all emblematic of the Russian military's technological innovation. Even if the Russian military assesses that the optimum way to restore maneuver is to return to its pre-2022 force structure and operational concepts, it will at a minimum leverage its current adaptations in Ukraine and new technological solutions to execute preexisting operational concepts more effectively.

The Russian military is already developing counter-UAV systems to make armor survivable and will likely develop further technological systems and revise its operational concepts to enable operationally

significant maneuver. The Russian military is actively developing several kinetic anti-drone systems — such AI-enabled interceptor drones, advanced sighting systems for machine guns, and directed energy weapons — and Russian milbloggers claim Russian forces began using several of these systems in Ukraine as early as May 2025.[322] The Russian military will likely attempt to mount many of these systems on tanks or vehicles accompanying tanks to supplement or replace existing defensive measures like slat armor and anti-drone cages. The Russian military will likely invest in advanced EW systems and leverage precision strike to disrupt enemy ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) to generate limited windows under which Russian armor can concentrate and maneuver relatively securely.[323] The Russian military has extensively (and highly effectively) iterated its tactical force structures in Ukraine and will likely experiment with different approaches to concentrating or dispersing armor as needed.

The Russian MoD is centralizing its control over wartime drone units and institutionalizing the development of future drone systems and doctrine and will integrate its effective drone capabilities into any possible reconstitution pathway. The Russian MoD established the "Rubikon" center in August 2024 to facilitate drone development and deploy specialized drone detachments and announced the creation of a new "Unmanned Systems Forces" branch in December 2024, as discussed in the second chapter of this report.[324] The Kremlin is heavily investing in factories to produce domestic copies of the Iranian Shahed-136 drone in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone and will likely integrate Shaheds into any medium-term reconstitution plans and strike capabilities as a form of strategic bombing — rather than setting them aside as a temporary sub-optimization.[325] The Russian military's drone units and senior commanders are likely in the early stages of cohering their own relatively elite interest group that advocates for the importance of drones in Russian warfighting — much like the VDV faction, traditionalist armor officers, or air force commanders act as advocates for their branch or service in Russian debates on reconstitution planning. The Russian military is highly unlikely to have gone through the trouble of forcibly disbanding individual irregular drone detachments and establishing new, centralized organizational structures to manage drone development and employment — and subsequently *not* further invest in the Rubikon center and Unmanned Systems Forces. The Russian military initially developed its drone capabilities in Ukraine on a predominantly ad hoc basis to fight a positional war but will very likely carry these adaptations forward and integrate them into efforts to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver.

Gerasimov and the traditionalists in the Russian military may push the Russian military towards rebuilding massed armored formations and insufficiently integrating lessons from Ukraine, but even Gerasimov will not completely reject the Russian military's adaptations in Ukraine. Gerasimov's education and career path have been that of a prototypical late Soviet armor officer. Gerasimov attended the Soviet Union's prestigious Malinovsky Armor Academy (later merged with the Frunze Military Academy in 1998 into the current Combined Arms Academy, to the consternation of many Russian armor officers) and served in motorized rifle and tank formations until his education at the General Staff Academy.[326] Gerasimov has, of course, made several important speeches on the changing character of war and the Russian military's need to integrate non-military means into warfighting, but he has long supported a large, mechanized Russian military and will likely continue to do so. Even Gerasimov and other relative "traditionalists" in the Russian military likely recognize the importance of drones and other innovations, however.

The Russian military does not have a Budyonny-like figure who seeks to abolish drone units and dismounted infantry and return to a purely pre-2022 mechanized force structure. Soviet Marshal Semyon Budyonny founded the Red Army's cavalry arm and was an effective commander in the Russian Civil War — and a close ally of Joseph Stalin.[327] Budyonny staunchly opposed the efforts of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and other leading Soviet proponents of mechanization and airpower. Budyonny testified against Tukhachevsky in his show trial (prior to Tukhachevksy's execution) in the Great Purge and insisted until the start of WWII that Soviet investment in armored forces was a mistake. The Russian military's modern equivalent would be Gerasimov

(or another senior officer) disbanding the Rubikon center; abolishing newly created drone detachments; halting training courses on dismounted infiltration tactics; and attempting to rebuild the Russian military's pre-2022 structure with almost no alteration. There is considerable evidence that none of the current senior officers in the Russian military are taking a position anything like this one or advocating such a pure reversion to pre-2022 concepts and approaches. Gerasimov has fought to centralize control over UAV development and operation under the MoD, not to abolish or restrict it, a fact that suggests that he recognizes and embraces the value of UAVs and other technological improvements and will not discard them. If Gerasimov and other traditionalists in the Russian military exert dominant influence over Russian reconstitution efforts, the Russian military may assess that its pre-2022 concepts and force structures are largely sufficient; equip tanks with new counter-UAV systems; make limited investments in precision artillery munitions; abandon the BTG concept; and restore tank units (rather than dismounted infantry or drone units) as the Russian military's preeminent warfighting arm. Even these changes would constitute a significant shift from the structure and capabilities of the Russian military as of February 2022 — and this would be the *traditionalist* approach to Russian reconstitution. But all current trends suggest that even the traditionalists will embrace considerable innovation.

Gerasimov and other traditionalists in the Russian military will nevertheless likely act as a brake on forward-looking innovation and exacerbate many of the limitations on an honest and effective lessons learned process discussed previously, but it is unclear how long Putin will retain Gerasimov as Chief of the General Staff — and who might succeed Gerasimov. Putin has retained Gerasimov as Chief of the General Staff since 2022 due to his loyalty and to maintain continuity, not due to his effective leadership or suitability to lead the Russian military's reconstitution efforts. Putin has not given any public indication of how long he intends to keep Gerasimov in his current position, but could remove him at any time — and may be waiting to do so until after the end of major combat operations in Ukraine, to avoid further significant upheaval during wartime and avoid the public image of sacking his theater commander. It remains unclear who will succeed Gerasimov as Chief of the General Staff, as the two most prominent candidates prior to 2022 (Army General Alexander Dvornikov and Army General Sergey Surovikin) are out of Putin's favor and hold backwater administrative roles as of August 2025.[328] The next Chief of the General Staff could be a VDV officer, an experienced maneuver officer with fewer ties to Gerasimov, a dark horse candidate appointed by Putin to keep the traditionally independent General Staff on a short leash — or, for that matter, another traditionalist even *less* willing than Gerasimov to contradict Putin or give him bad news. This report's assessments of the likely limitations on Russian learning and reconstitution efforts assume that Gerasimov or someone like him will lead the Russian military long enough to shape the post-war learning efforts, but a significant shakeup at the senior levels of the Russian military could alter current institutional pressures.

Conclusion

The Russian military will most likely attempt to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver by rebuilding large mechanized formations and providing them with counter-drone capabilities, investing in operationally significant precision strike capabilities, and integrating some of its adaptations in Ukraine into future capabilities. The Russian military's current status as a force optimized for positional warfare will shape Russian reconstitution efforts whether the Russian military wants it to or not, but the Russian military is unlikely to institutionally refocus itself on positional warfare in the medium term despite its experiences in Ukraine. The Russian military is unlikely to conduct a *maximally*

effective lessons learned and reconstitution process. The Russian military is attempting to expand, reorganize, and re-equip its forces simultaneously. Any one of those tasks is difficult enough for peacetime military, much less one still fighting an unexpectedly protracted war. The Russian military's suppression of bad news, political constraints on learning, and current command culture will impede Russian learning. The Russian military is still a learning institution, however, and is slowly ascending to the mean of historically effective Russian and Soviet learning after its disastrous performance in 2022. The Russian military's institutional tendencies to leverage new technologies to solve operational problems and to conduct thorough lessons learned efforts will increase the effectiveness of Russian military reconstitution. The Russian military will make mistakes, and its choices may seem illogical to a Western observer. Even a somewhat incoherent and inefficient Russian reconstitution effort will create a force capable of threatening NATO interests and European security, however.

The Russian military could pursue numerous potential courses of action under this report's overall forecast cone that it will pursue a hybrid reconstitution pathway intended to create a force capable of restoring mechanized maneuver. This report does not forecast the specific investments and adaptations the Russian military will implement and is intended to shape further research — by ISW and other Western research institutions — assessing the exact path the Russian military will take. Western analysts should prioritize assessing the following (non-comprehensive) indicators of the Russian military's specific reconstitution pathway.

- **Public aspects of the Russian military's lessons learned discussions will partially indicate how the Russian military views its invasion of Ukraine.** The Russian military will likely supplement its classified lessons learned effort with a public discussion of its invasion of Ukraine in military journals and military newspapers but will likely restrict public discussion of the war more than it restricted discussion of Russia's intervention in Syria. Milblogger commentary and official statements by Russian officials will also provide insight into possible Russian learning efforts. The Russian military is unlikely to publicly admit major failures in public discussions, but articles in leading military journals will reflect potential avenues of conceptual development and learning. Russian military authors may use historical comparisons to circumspectly discuss operations in Ukraine — such as writing about Soviet failures in the initial period of war in WWII or Russian urban tactics in Chechnya to critique Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine and specialized urban assault detachments, respectively.
- **The Russian military's approach to integrating newly produced or refurbished tanks into combat units — not solely its production of armored vehicles — will indicate its likely approach to restoring mechanized maneuver.** The Russian military's ongoing campaign to rebuild its depleted armor fleet is an ambiguous indicator of intended future operational concepts. Unless the Russian military completely abandons armor — which there is zero indication it will do — it will continue to replace its losses in Ukraine, if nothing else to provide reserves for a future war. The Russian military is currently stockpiling most of its newly produced T-90 tanks on the Finnish border, which does not inherently indicate that it intends to return to a pre-2022 force structure for war with NATO.[329] The Russian military's deployment of T-90s in northwestern Russia keeps them safe from Ukrainian deep strike and is intended to intimidate NATO — but the Russian military has not integrated its most advanced tanks into combat-capable and experienced units, which remain

The Russian military will make mistakes, and its choices may seem illogical to a Western observer. Even a somewhat incoherent and inefficient Russian reconstitution effort will create a force capable of threatening NATO interests and European security, however.

engaged in Ukraine. The Russian military's eventual allocation of newly built tanks to combat units, the structure of tactical units, and changes in training exercises will provide greater insight into the Russian military's intended use cases for modern armor.

- **The Russian military has issued numerous interim field manuals on new tactics and unit structures in Ukraine, but it is not yet clear how it will integrate these wartime manuals into formal doctrine and peacetime training processes.** Ukrainian forces have captured numerous Russian field manuals on wartime adaptations, such as infantry assault detachments and drone use.[330] The Russian military faces choices about what adaptations in Ukraine it formally integrates into peacetime training and revised Russian field manuals will indicate the Russian military's *intended* future capabilities, though it will be difficult for open-source organizations to confirm Russian training manuals in detail.
- **The Russian military is likely committed to expanding and institutionalizing its drone forces, but the scale and focus of this investment — and the rest of the Russian military's response to the growth of a new branch of arms — remains to be seen.** The Russian MoD announced the creation of a separate Unmanned Systems Forces in late 2024, but it is unclear where the Russian military will position this new branch in relation to its existing branches and services. The Russian military's investment (or lack thereof) in the Rubikon center and how it permanently integrates wartime detachments into future force structures will shape the Russian military's future drone capabilities. The Kremlin's investment in further domestic production of Shaheds and other similar drones will shape the Russian military's medium-term strategic strike capabilities.
- **The Russian defense industrial base's actual spending and production of high-tech munitions and systems will be far more important than the Russian MoD's stated intent to field advanced systems.** The Russian military's stated intent to develop and field high-end precision munitions, advanced aircraft, and other systems consistently outpaced its resources prior to 2022, and will continue to do so. Granular production and funding numbers will be essential to determining the Russian military's actual ability to integrate operationally significant precision strike into its force reconstitution efforts.
- **The Kremlin will likely continue to rely on foreign partners (such as China and Iran) for military equipment, and its purchasing decisions will indicate Russian reconstitution priorities.** The Kremlin's potential purchases of systems and equipment from China at scale will be a particularly key indicator of reconstitution priorities. Individual Russian units and civilian volunteers have purchased Chinese drones, motorbikes, and other systems throughout Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Russian military's potential efforts to institutionalize these purchases into formal arms sales or joint production deals (or at minimum increasing its ad hoc purchases on the open market) will indicate the Russian military's potential prioritization of motorcycle assault groups, tactical drone systems, or other capabilities.
- **Detailed analysis of Russian officer appointments and assessments of the careers and views of the next generation of Russian officers will illuminate the influence of the Russian military's various factions on reconstitution efforts.** Putin's decision to retain or replace Gerasimov as Chief of the General Staff and personnel appointments at the top of the Russian military's branches and services will indicate who will be empowered to shape the Russian military's reconstitution efforts. Establishing a clear picture of the Russian military's military district, army, and division commanders and their career paths will additionally illuminate the combat experience and capabilities of the Russian military's next generation of senior officers. The Russian military has taken steps to obscure the biographical details and appointments of senior officers since 2022, but open-source research on officers and their past careers can still provide insight into the individuals who will shape Russian reconstitution efforts.[331]

This report's arguments that the current Russian military is degraded and optimized for positional warfare and that the Russian military will face severe challenges in its likely effort to reconstitute a force capable of mechanized maneuver are not intended to downplay or minimize the Russian threat. The Russian military in Ukraine is dangerous, the Kremlin remains committed to its revisionist and aggressive objectives in Europe, and Russian military learning from Ukraine will improve its capabilities, even if it does not conduct lessons learned processes maximally effectively. A partially or inefficiently reconstituted Russian military can still threaten NATO and US interests. NATO and Western analytical organizations must refocus on assessing the *ongoing process* of Russian reconstitution, rather than orienting its planning on preparing to defeat a nominally fully reconstituted Russian military by a designated date. Russian military reconstitution is a process, and what the Kremlin assesses is "good enough" for offensive action against NATO may significantly differ from what NATO would consider a reconstituted military.

Russian military reconstitution is a process, and what the Kremlin assesses is "good enough" for offensive action against NATO may significantly differ from what NATO would consider a reconstituted military.

The Russian military will draw on multiple possible reconstitution pathways, will experiment with new technologies and operational concepts, and will conduct a partially incoherent reconstitution effort — increasing the difficulty of forecasting Russian capabilities and the Russian threat to Europe. The Russian military currently has many vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and Russian reconstitution efforts will alter but not eliminate these vulnerabilities. NATO should study Russian military culture and Russian reconstitution efforts to identify these changing vulnerabilities, rather than assuming either that the Russian military is unstoppable or that it will simply rebuild its pre-2022 structure and doctrine. Careful and continuous analysis of the Russian military's evolving reconstitution process will enable NATO to exploit Russian vulnerabilities and create a force capable of deterring — and if necessary, defeating — the next round of Russian aggression against Europe.

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