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Russian Armed Forces: Capabilities

Since 2008, Russia has sought to modernize its military and engaged in several armed interventions outside its borders. The 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy prioritizes “long-term strategic competition” with Russia (and China). To help guide policymaking in response to challenges posed by Russia, Members of Congress may have an interest in assessing the capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces. This report briefly describes Russia’s current military capabilities, including strengths and weaknesses.

Defense Budget and State Armament Plan

Official figures suggest Russia’s military expenditures have ranged between \$60 billion and \$65 billion a year, or roughly 4% of its gross domestic product (GDP). However, the extent of defense spending may be greater if assessed on the basis of purchasing power parity rather than market exchange rates.

Russia’s long-term defense spending priorities are detailed in State Armament Plans (GPVs), which run in 10-year increments. GPV 2020, which ran from 2011 to 2020, focused on increasing the military’s overall share of modernized equipment to 70%. The newest plan, GPV 2027, calls for total spending of about \$330 billion (in 2018 dollars) and 3%–4% of GDP from 2018 to 2027.

Command and Control

Russian military reforms have emphasized the streamlining of command and control structures. Russian forces are organized into five military districts (MDs) and operational/joint strategic commands (OSK; see **Figure 1**). Russia also has created a Moscow-based central command center, the National Defense Management Center.

Figure 1. Russian Federation Military Districts



Source: Russian Ministry of Defence.

Notes: The Southern MD/OSK is responsible for Ukraine’s occupied Crimea region.

Ground Forces

Over the last decade, Russia has significantly changed its ground forces. Recruiting professional soldiers has

increased, along with upgrading heavy artillery, missile artillery, and electronic warfare units. Additional priorities have included reconnaissance, communication, and the creation of permanently ready units at full staffing levels. Ground forces emphasize mobility and are increasingly capable of conducting short but complex, high-tempo operations. At the same time, Russian ground forces continue to rely on conscription, multiple types of similar equipment, and relatively limited personnel and units to guard Russia’s expansive borders.

Russian ground forces are organized into 11 combined arms armies, one tank army, and four army corps. Russia’s most advanced capabilities are in the Western Military District, and the Southern Military District appears to have the most competent units. Russian units exhibit a mixture of division and brigade structures; brigades are utilized primarily in regions or areas where full divisions would be unwieldy. Both generate ad hoc, task-specific Battalion Tactical Groups, which have artillery and air defense units attached and can be combined with other units as needed. Even with a focus on permanent readiness, however, only a few subunits can be considered deployable.

Recruiting professional soldiers has been a priority. Conscription is unpopular and, at 12 months, considered too short by the Russian military to effectively train new conscripts. Most conscripts occupy secondary support roles, although in most maneuver units conscripts comprise up to one-third of personnel.

The Russian military’s experiences in Ukraine and Syria have reaffirmed for it the importance of massed artillery, rocket fire, and armored forces. However, ground forces have been a relatively low funding priority in Russia’s modernization; most of these efforts went into upgrading existing platforms, which decreased standardization across units and increased maintenance costs.

Aerospace Forces

The Aerospace Forces (VKS) combine Air Force, Air Defense, Space Forces, and Army Aviation. Alongside the Navy, Aerospace Forces received top priority during GPV 2020, allowing for the introduction of new and upgraded legacy systems, including substantially improved missiles and precision-guided munitions. Additionally, effort has gone into expanding training and flight times for pilots and air crews.

Russia’s air forces feature numerous types of capable fighters, fighter interceptors, and tactical bombers. Russia’s intervention in Syria has given the Aerospace Forces significant operational experience and has been used as a testing ground for new capabilities, including precision-

strike and air-launched cruise missiles by both tactical and long-range assets.

The development of fifth-generation fighters has run into considerable production and design challenges, and Russia lags significantly behind the U.S. in precision strike/bomb capabilities. Russia's strategic bomber force (Long Range Aviation) has continued to operate with heavily modernized Soviet-era bombers. Additionally, Russia's long-range transport capabilities remain limited, restricting the rapid movement of ground or airborne forces.

Strategic air defenses are controlled by the Aerospace Forces. VKS systems are responsible for defending critical infrastructure and strategic targets. They are separate from Ground Forces air defense units (PVO), which provide air defense to maneuver units. Combined, these systems form what many analysts consider to be a formidable integrated air defense system, although some contend that its purported capabilities are inflated.

Navy

The Russian Navy benefited from relatively high funding levels during GPV 2020, allowing it to introduce new ships, submarines, and precision-strike capabilities after years of limited funding. Shipbuilding has prioritized smaller warships with high levels of firepower, often with modular or multipurpose designs, allowing for flexibility. In particular, the Russian Navy has focused on developing long-range and precision-strike capabilities. Most of Russia's larger surface ships are over 30 years old and undergoing various retrofits to extend their service life as Russia's shipbuilding industry struggles to produce ships over 7,000 tons. As a result, Russia increasingly relies on heavily armed frigates as its primary surface combatants. These ships are equipped with Vertical Launch Systems to house an array of cruise missiles, anti-submarine missiles, and hypersonic anti-ship missiles. However, this is not without complications, as Russia has struggled to produce engines since its relationship with Ukrainian producers was severed in 2014. Even with high levels of funding, Russia's production of new surface ships has fallen far short of initial plans. Russia's submarine forces continue to make advances in both manufacturing and capabilities, deploying new nuclear-powered ballistic submarines, nuclear-powered cruise missile submarines, and diesel-electric attack submarines.

Organized into four fleets (Northern, Pacific, Black Sea, and Baltic) and one flotilla (Caspian), the Russian Navy's primary objectives are sea denial and protecting Russia's submarine-based nuclear deterrent. Recognizing resource and shipbuilding constraints, Russia's Navy focuses on littoral defense, with limited expeditionary capabilities.

The Northern and Pacific fleets are home to Russia's nuclear submarine force. The Northern Fleet is the most advanced, with responsibility for the Arctic and the Northern MD/OSK. Additionally, since Russia's occupation of Ukraine's Crimea region, the Black Sea Fleet has grown in size and capabilities and has contributed most of the ships to the Navy's Mediterranean task force.

Coastal Defense Troops

The Navy is responsible for Coastal Defense Artillery units and Marine Infantry. Coastal Defense Artillery units are designed and equipped to protect Russia's ports and coastlines. They are equipped with a variety of mobile and stationary artillery, as well as advanced anti-ship missiles.

Each fleet commands at least one brigade of Naval Infantry (around 10,000-12,500 troops total). These brigades are almost completely professionally manned, are considered an elite force, and form part of Russia's rapid reaction and intervention forces. Naval Infantry forces are similarly equipped to and structured like other Russian ground force units, with reintroduced tank battalions, but few landing ships mean they have a limited amphibious capability.

Spetsnaz and Special Operations Command

Spetsnaz are Russia's elite light infantry force, responsible for long-range battlefield reconnaissance and sabotage, as well as overseeing local allied units in eastern Ukraine and Syria. They are considered a strategic-level asset under the Main Directorate of the General Staff, although they are deployed under the command of local military districts. Totalling around 17,000 troops, they are organized into seven regular Independent Special Designation Brigades. Despite efforts to fully professionalize, Spetsnaz units are still composed of some conscripts, although they, along with the Airborne and Air Assault Troops (VDV), have their first pick of conscripts.

The Russian military's tier-one Special Forces unit is the Special Operations Forces Command, built around the 346th Independent Spetsnaz Brigade. This unit was modeled on Western Special Forces and represents Russia's most capable intervention force.

Airborne and Air Assault Troops

Russia's airborne and air assault troops represent some of Russia's most capable units. Considered a strategic asset under the command of the General Staff, they are well-equipped, have the highest state of readiness, and, like Spetsnaz, receive priority for professionalization and the first pick of conscripts (the VDV is about 30% conscript based). Consisting of around 45,000 troops, Russia's airborne divisions are organized into two airborne divisions, two air assault divisions, four independent air assault brigades, and an elite Spetsnaz reconnaissance regiment. However, Russia's limited air transport capabilities mean most units focus on air assault, with armored vehicles and reintroduced tank battalions. Two divisions focus on strategic-level parachute operations.

Additional Resources

Russian Military Capability in a Ten Year Perspective-2019, eds. Fredrik Westerlund and Susanne Oxenstierna (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency FOI, 2019); Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations*, 2017; Keith Crane, Olga Olikier, and Brian Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities*, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 2019.

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