



RUSSIA'S MILITARY POSTURE: GROUND FORCES ORDER OF BATTLE

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Relations internationales

U.S. leaders and their European allies are unprepared for the ways in which Putin is poised to wage war in Ukraine and the Baltic. The Russian military is well-positioned to launch a short-notice conventional war in Ukraine and a hybrid war in the Baltic States, the opposite of what Western leaders seem to expect in each theater.

NATO leaders increasingly warn of the threat of a conventional invasion of the Baltic States (or even Western Europe). But Russian ground forces are not deployed or organized to initiate a short-notice conventional war in that region. They have, however, redeployed and reorganized since 2014 in a way that would support a rapid mechanized invasion of Ukraine from both north and east, while remaining well-prepared to conduct a hybrid warfare intervention in the Baltics similar to what they did in Ukraine after the Maidan Revolution. The United States and its partners should re-evaluate the most likely Russian courses of action and reconsider the mix of military and non-military tools required to defend NATO allies and Ukraine from potential Russian aggression.

Several factors shape current Russian military thought. Both President Vladimir Putin and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov prefer to use hybrid warfare rather than conventional invasion to accomplish their aims because of the lower cost and lower risk of escalation hybrid warfare offers.

Gerasimov published a well-known article in 2013 laying out this preference and approach, which the Russian military has practiced repeatedly since 2008. The ostensible justification for Russian intervention, moreover, is the mistreatment of Russian co-nationals in former Soviet states - a justification that lends itself much more naturally to pseudo-insurgency and hybrid intervention than to direct invasion. Russia remains at war with Ukraine, finally, and its military posture shows how central that fact is to its

leadership. Approaching the examination of Russian intentions from this framework casts doubt on the likelihood of a short-notice conventional invasion of the Baltics in the short term, but instead highlights a number of worrisome threats and trends for which NATO is not adequately preparing.

Russia conducted an unconventional operation to seize and secure the strategic peninsula of Crimea. This operation was a reaction to the unexpected collapse of the government of Russian puppet Viktor Yanukovych and the sudden exposure of the Russian naval base at Sevastopol to a pro-Western Ukrainian government. Putin then deployed a combination of conventional forces and special operators to Eastern Ukraine, having secured Crimea, to undo the results of the Maidan Revolution by means short of full-scale conventional war. This effort proved only partially successful. Russian proxies control a portion of eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian government in Kyiv remains weak and vulnerable, but is still in the hands of Ukrainians fighting to preserve their independence from Moscow. This ongoing war looms large in the eyes of the senior Russian military leadership. Russia's interests in Ukraine cannot be excluded from consideration in discussions about possible Russian threats to the Baltic States or the rest of NATO.

The Soviet and Russian militaries have historically placed great theoretical emphasis on the problems of properly deploying and organizing forces before a conflict. Soviet military literature on the "initial period of war" is extensive, as is the Soviet corpus of writing about correct organization of forces. Gerasimov was a tank officer by background and a graduate of the Armed Forces General Staff Military Academy (formerly the Frunze General Staff Academy). It is inconceivable that he did not have these theories and concerns drilled into him at an early age and throughout his career. He has been Chief of the General Staff since 2012, and has thus overseen all the reorganization and redeployment that has occurred since that time. Those changes, therefore, offer meaningful indications of Gerasimov's views of the nature of the current and future wars Russia might have to fight.

Russian officers are learning from experiences in Ukraine. They are cultivating the ability to subsume irregular proxy forces into Russian command-and-control structures in order to increase the strength and impact of the Russian Armed Forces. Russia is testing new asymmetric capabilities on the Ukrainian battlefield and in Syria and subsequently incorporating them into conventional force structures. The Kremlin is simultaneously undertaking a significant effort to reconfigure the Russian Armed Forces to improve management and coordination of forces during wartime. Russia recently resurrected division and corps echelons in the ground forces organizational structure in an effort to relieve Russian commanders of overwhelming responsibilities on a large-scale and fast-paced battlefield. This change likely indicates that Russia identified problems with the previous structure while commanding-andcontrolling forces in Ukraine and is implementing improvements accordingly.

Russia inherited an unsustainable Soviet military structure that manifested in the Russian Armed Forces poor performance in the 2008 invasion of Georgia. The Kremlin deployed a combination of elite airborne troops and conventional ground, air, and naval forces across the Russo-Georgian border to prevent Georgian integration with the West.⁹ Russia subsequently occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹⁰ These operations demonstrated significant failures that included command-and-control mistakes and logistical

catastrophes that served as the basis for a large-scale reform initiative.¹¹ The 2008 global economic downturn also began to pressure the Russian economy, fueling a desire for cost-savings through reform of the bloated and inefficient Soviet-era military structure...

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