

Russia's Military Restructuring and Expansion Hindered by the Ukraine War

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The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is pursuing three simultaneous and overlapping force generation efforts as it seeks to manage short- to medium-term requirements in Ukraine while also pursuing long-term restructuring to prepare for a potential future large-scale conventional war against NATO. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov have explicitly framed Russia's announced long-term force restructuring as increasing conventional capabilities against NATO.¹ The Russian MoD is also creating new formations intended as reinforcements for Russia's war in Ukraine separate from the peacetime Russian force structure, specifically the several new formations reportedly forming entirely in occupied areas of Ukraine and under the command and control of operationalized "groupings of forces" in Ukraine rather than under existing Russian military districts. The MoD appears to be undermining its long-term restructuring effort, however, by rushing some new formations - which were likely intended to form a strategic reserve or be the basis of long-term force restructuring - as rapid reinforcements to Russian forces in Ukraine. **The Russian MoD's use of ongoing force structure changes to rush newly created and understrength formations to Ukraine will likely impede the accomplishment of the parallel objective of restructuring Russian ground forces to orient on conventional warfare with NATO as the main adversary.**

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu first proposed a series of force structure changes and intended military reforms in December 2022, and Russian President Vladimir Putin approved select changes in January 2023.² These changes include re-dividing the Western Military District into the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts; the creation of "self-sufficient groupings of troops" in occupied Ukraine; the formation of a new army corps, three new motorized rifle divisions, and two new air assault divisions; and the reorganization of seven existing separate motorized rifle brigades into motorized rifle divisions.³ The Russian military is already in the process of implementing these changes at the military district level, is standing up several of these new formations from the army to brigade level, and has already deployed several of these formations to Ukraine.

This special edition will focus on the implications of force structure changes ordered in 2023 (and changes that are reportedly under consideration but have not yet been confirmed to have begun) on Russian operations in Ukraine into 2024. ISW will assess the likely ramifications of the MoD's mid-to-long-term force restructuring on the Russian military threat to both Ukraine and NATO in a report forthcoming in 2024.

Shoigu first presented the proposed force structure changes at the Russian MoD collegium on December 21, 2022.⁴ At the next Russian MoD collegium on January 17, 2023, Shoigu announced Putin's directive to implement a slightly altered form of the December 2022 proposal for large-scale military reforms between 2023 and 2026.⁵ Shoigu and other Russian military officials have discussed further specifics on the force restructuring since the initial January 17 presentation, which are assessed below.

The MoD is in the process of splitting the Western Military District (WMD) and eliminating the Northern Fleet as an independent military district-level command to restore the Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts (MMD and LMD), reversing the 2010 formation of the WMD. Shoigu announced the creation of two “new interservice strategic territorial administrations,” the LMD and MMD, on January 17 and reported that both military districts were undergoing recruitment, formation, and staffing as of July 3.⁶ The Russian MoD merged the LMD and MMD into the WMD in 2010, with part of the WMD further splitting to form the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command in 2014.⁷ The 2010 Military District restructuring was part of wider reforms intended to modernize the Russian armed forces and create a more consolidated command and control (C2) system but has since been decried by Russian military analysts as the “thoughtless reduction of military units” or “completely ill-conceived and voluntaristic,” and particularly ineffective when applied to Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁸

The restoration of the MMD and LMD is likely intended to create the streamlined C2 structures necessary to concentrate on and manage operations in the northwestern and western directions due to the war in Ukraine. The WMD is currently oriented on the northeastern part of the Ukrainian border; Belarus; and the Russian border with NATO through the Baltic states. The WMD’s strategic focus is therefore stretched between supporting Russian operations in Ukraine and posturing against NATO. Finland’s recent NATO accession (and Sweden’s likely accession) has exacerbated this challenge. The Russian MoD additionally announced the elimination of the Northern Fleet, which borders Finland and the Arctic, as a formation equal to a military district on October 8 and is in the process of transferring its ground, aviation, and air defense forces to the LMD and its naval assets to the Russian Navy by December 1.⁹ If the Russian MoD restores the pre-2010 boundaries of these districts, the LMD will border Finland, Sweden, and the Arctic; and the MMD will border northeastern Ukraine and Poland. The WMD will cease to exist in its current form. This military district restructuring will in theory split the command burden of Russian forces postured against NATO between two full-fledged districts (rather than the WMD and the last-among-equals Northern Fleet headquarters), strengthen Russian power projection capabilities along the Finnish border, and likely enable the MMD to prioritize operations in Ukraine on the Russian-Ukrainian border as well as through Belarus. It is unclear when the recreation of the MMD and LMD will be fully complete, however, and ISW will assess the implications of these district-level changes further in a forthcoming 2024 report.

The Russian MoD is additionally formalizing several *ad hoc* headquarters and force structures of Russian units operating in Ukraine as part of ongoing force restructuring. Shoigu announced on January 17 that the MoD would create “self-sufficient groups of forces” in occupied areas of Ukraine.¹⁰ This change may in part be intended to further Russia’s rhetorical claim to have annexed these occupied territories, as well as to solidify current C2 structures and set conditions for protracted deployments in Ukraine. These “self-sufficient” troop groupings may be entirely based in and commanded out of occupied Ukraine as opposed to having to route C2 into existing headquarters in Russia. The specifics of this new structure remain unclear, considering that the two groupings of forces already based in occupied Ukraine — the 1st Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Army Corps and 2nd Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Army Corps — are technically already subordinate to the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD), which is headquartered in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. Shoigu may have been signaling his intent for occupied

Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts to stand up their own groupings of forces that will be commanded entirely out of occupied Ukraine.

Shoigu and other senior Russian military officials have discussed further details of force structure changes below the district level since January 2023:

- Shoigu announced on January 17 that Russia will form three new motorized rifle divisions (MRDs) and will reorganize seven existing separate motorized rifle brigades (MRBs) of the current Western, Central, and Eastern military districts and Northern Fleet into MRDs.¹¹
- Chief of the Russian General Staff and overall theater commander of Russian troops in Ukraine Army General Valery Gerasimov noted on January 24 that three of these MRDs will be formed in combined arms armies (CAAs) operating in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts.¹²
- Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the General Staff Head Colonel General Yevgeny Burdinsky claimed on June 2 that “it is necessary to provide timely organizational and staffing support for the formation of combined arms and air armies, an army corps, the Azov naval region, 5 divisions and 26 brigades, [and] the creation of the Moscow and Leningrad military districts.”¹³ It is unclear if Burdinsky was suggesting that Russia should establish 26 new independent brigades in addition to the conversion of seven existing brigades into divisions and the creation of new corps and combined arms armies, or that the brigades mentioned are units already organic to or existing under newly forming armies and army corps. The Russian military is extremely unlikely to be able to stand up 26 new brigades to their doctrinal end strengths rapidly alongside the other announced changes, so these mentioned brigades are most likely subordinate to existing or new formations.
- Burdinsky's statements about the Azov naval district, likely a subordinate naval headquarters similar to the existing Caspian Flotilla, suggests that Russia may seek to alleviate some of the command responsibilities of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), particularly as Russia seeks to base the Azov naval region out of occupied ports in Berdyansk and Mariupol.¹⁴
- During the January 17 collegium, Shoigu reported that Russia is forming an army corps (AC) in Karelia, on the Finnish border.¹⁵ Head of the Republic of Karelia Artur Parfenchikov confirmed the formation of this AC in July.¹⁶
- Russian state media outlet *TASS* reported on November 1 that its internal sources claimed that the Northern, Pacific, Baltic, and Black Sea fleets and Caspian Flotilla are all returning to the direct control of the Russian Navy rather than reporting to military districts.¹⁷ *TASS* also reported that the ground, aviation, and air defense forces of the Northern Fleet will transfer to the control of the newly-reforming Leningrad Military District.¹⁸ These initial reports indicate that the army corps reporting to Russia's fleets will transition into combined arms armies under the direct control of Russia's military districts.

Russia's Airborne Forces (VDV) are additionally undergoing several force structure changes and expansions:

- Shoigu reported that Russia will create two new air assault divisions.¹⁹ VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky confirmed on August 2 that the VDV is converting the existing 31st Air Assault Brigade into the 104th Air Assault Division, making it the fifth VDV Division.²⁰ Shoigu claimed that the 104th Air Assault Division was completing its formation as of September 26.²¹
- Teplinsky also stated that the VDV will form two new regiments by the end of 2023, likely referring to the currently forming 299th and 119th Parachute Regiments – which will be subordinated to the 98th and 106th Airborne Divisions, respectively, increasing the complements

of these divisions from two to three regiments to match the structure of the 76th Air Assault Division.²²

- Shoigu and Teplinsky both alluded to the formation of a new VDV artillery brigade, which would be the first ever VDV artillery *brigade*.²³ All existing VDV divisions have a subordinate artillery *regiment*.²⁴ Russian and other open sources have suggested that this unit may be the 52nd VDV Artillery Brigade, which has reportedly already deployed to Ukraine.²⁵
- Limited Russian sources have additionally speculated about the creation of the second of the two new VDV divisions mentioned by Shoigu — likely the 44th Air Assault Division, which is being formed on the basis of the existing 387th MRR and 111th MRR of the 1st DNR AC.²⁶ Information about the 44th Air Assault Division is generally of lower confidence than information about the 104th Air Assault Division and remains unconfirmed. The 44th Air Assault Division will be a VDV division in name only and not in function, however, if it is formed out of DNR motorized rifle regiments (the implications of this erosion of the specific designation of units as “airborne” are considered).

New Russian formations that ISW has confirmed to have deployed to Ukraine:

25th Combined Arms Army (25th CAA):

Russian sources and Western open-source analysts noted that the 25th CAA began forming in the Russian Far East in mid-May 2023.²⁷ The exact composition of the 25th CAA remains unclear. At least two of the 25th CAA's confirmed constituent elements, the 67th Motorized Rifle Division (MRD) and 164th Motorized Rifle Brigade (MRB), deployed to the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area as of early September and are currently supporting Russian offensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line.²⁸ Ukrainian Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff General Oleksii Hromov noted on July 5 that the 25th CAA would have one MRD (confirmed to be the 67th MRD), 2 MRBs (confirmed to be the 164th MRB and one unidentified MRB), and a tank battalion.²⁹ Some Western analysts have suggested that the 25th CAA will be comprised of the 67th MRD (reportedly comprised of four constituent elements: the 19th Tank Regiment (TR), and 31st, 36th, and 37th MRRs); the 164th MRB; the 11th Tank Brigade; the 73rd Artillery Brigade, and various support elements.³⁰ ISW has not yet observed visual evidence of the constituent entities of the 25th CAA in combat beyond the 67th MRD and 164th MRB but has no reason to doubt that these other units exist within the 25th CAA's structure. Several Russian sources reported that the 25th CAA will report to the Eastern Military District (EMD), as it largely formed in the Russian Far East.³¹ Some sources claim that the 25th CAA is part of the Central Military District (CMD), however.³² The Russian MoD may have formally transferred the 25th CAA between districts, or these sources may have conflated the Central Grouping of Forces, which commands the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast axis where the 25th CAA is currently committed, with the CMD in discussing the 25th CAA.

- 25th Combined Arms Army [Confirmed, Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast axis] ³³
 - 67th Motorized Rifle Division [Confirmed, Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast axis] ³⁴
 - 19th Tank Regiment [Unconfirmed]
 - 31st Motorized Rifle Regiment [Unconfirmed]
 - 36th Motorized Rifle Regiment [Unconfirmed]
 - 37th Motorized Rifle Regiment [Unconfirmed]
 - 164th Motorized Rifle Brigade [Confirmed, Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast axis] ³⁵
 - 11th Tank Battalion [Unconfirmed]
 - 73rd Artillery Brigade [Unconfirmed]

- Various support battalions

18th Combined Arms Army (18th CAA):

Russia has already formed the 18th CAA in occupied Crimea as part of the Southern Military District (SMD) and deployed some of its elements to critical areas of the frontline in southern Ukraine.³⁶ Russian 58th CAA reserve officer Oleg Marzoev claimed on August 18 that Russia formed the 18th CAA "on the basis" of the 22nd Army Corps (AC) (formally of the Black Sea Fleet), likely meaning that Russian MoD has eliminated the 22nd AC and transferred its assets to the new, army-level headquarters, which will report directly to the SMD rather than to the Black Sea Fleet.³⁷ Other Russian sources have additionally suggested that the 22nd AC and its constituent elements are now subordinate to the 18th CAA.³⁸ This change tracks with other reports that the Russian military is currently stripping its four fleets – which are in fact combined arms headquarters commanding land and air assets – of their non-naval assets while returning their naval assets to the direct control of the Russian Navy, as ISW has previously reported.³⁹ Oleg Marzoev claimed that the 18th CAA is “one of the largest military formations” within the Russian armed forces and noted that elements of the 18th CAA deployed to the Kherson direction in the spring and summer of 2023.⁴⁰ Oleg Marzoev also named Lieutenant General Arkady Marzoev (no apparent relation to Oleg Marzoev) as the new commander of the 18th CAA as of August 2023.⁴¹ The UK Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) confirmed the creation of the 18th CAA on August 21, 2023, and reported that the 18th CAA deployed to the Kherson direction to free up other more experienced units, such as VDV forces, to redeploy to the western Zaporizhia Oblast sector to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.⁴² One Russian milblogger suggested that at least one MRD of the 18th CAA, likely the 70th MRD and its constituent 28th MRR, have been involved in the defense of Kozachi Laheri and other frontline settlements on the left bank of the Dnipro River.⁴³ These units are likely currently engaged in defending against larger-than-usual Ukrainian operations on the left bank of the Dnipro River.⁴⁴

- 18th Combined Arms Army [Confirmed, Kherson Oblast] ⁴⁵
 - 70th Motorized Rifle Division [Confirmed, Kherson Oblast] ⁴⁶
 - 28th Motorized Rifle Regiment [Confirmed, Kherson Oblast] ⁴⁷
 - 22th Army Corps [Likely newly subordinated to the 18th Combined Arms Army, but still unconfirmed in formal composition] ⁴⁸
 - 40th Army Corps [Potentially subordinate to the 18th Combined Arms Army, but still unconfirmed] ⁴⁹
 - 144th Motorized Rifle Brigade [Confirmed, southern Ukraine] ⁵⁰
 - 47th Motorized Rifle Division [Confirmed, southern Ukraine] ⁵¹

40th Army Corps (40th AC):

Russian military officials have confirmed the formation of the 40th Army Corps (AC) under the SMD in the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic.⁵² A Rostov Oblast media outlet stated on May 12 that volunteers began entering contracts with a motorized rifle battalion of the 144th MRB of the 40th AC, confirming the existence of at least one constituent brigade of the 40th AC.⁵³ A Russian source also indicated that the 47th MRD is also under formation as part of the 40th AC, and Crimea occupation head Sergei Aksyonov claimed that the 47th MRD deployed to southern Ukraine as early as September 2022.⁵⁴ Some Russian reporting on the 40th AC suggests that it is actually subordinate to the 18th CAA (established in Crimea on the basis of the 22nd AC), akin to how the 1st and 2nd Acs are both subordinate to the 8th CAA. Regardless of whether the 40th AC is officially part of the 18th CAA or

reports directly to the SMD, it has likely been committed to the same area and is fighting alongside elements of the 18th CAA as part of the “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces in Kherson Oblast.

- 40th Army Corps [Potentially subordinate to the 18th Combined Arms Army, but still unconfirmed] ⁵⁵
 - 144th Motorized Rifle Brigade [Confirmed] ⁵⁶
 - 47th Motorized Rifle Division [Confirmed, southern Ukraine] ⁵⁷

3rd Army Corps (3rd AC):

The 3rd AC formed in late summer 2022 out of volunteer units but has undergone significant changes over the course of 2023, and the MoD appears to be formalizing it as a permanent unit, rather than a headquarters to command *ad hoc* volunteer battalions. Russian sources claimed that while the 3rd AC initially formed as part of the WMD in August of 2022, it transferred to the command of the Central Grouping of Forces and the CMD in the summer of 2023.⁵⁸ According to Russian sources, the 3rd AC is comprised of the 6th MRD (comprised of the 57th MRR and two other unnamed MRRs, the 27th Artillery Regiment, 52nd Anti-Aircraft Missile Division, and 10th Tank Regiment); the 72nd MRB (comprised of several volunteer battalions); the 17th Artillery Brigade; and several support elements.⁵⁹ ISW observed elements of the 72nd MRB operating in the Bakhmut area as of September 2023, although Ukrainian military officials stated that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations south of Bakhmut have essentially rendered the 72nd MRB combat ineffective.⁶⁰ Russian sources noted that elements of the 3rd AC likely deployed to the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast area as of late summer 2023, which may be why some sources suggest that the 3rd AC is transferring to the command of the Central Grouping of Forces, which has responsibility over this axis.⁶¹ It is unclear if the 3rd AC remains administratively subordinate to the WMD while operating under the auspices of the Central Grouping of Forces, or if it has been entirely and formally shifted to the CMD.

- 3rd Army Corps [Confirmed] ⁶²
 - 6th Motorized Rifle Division [Confirmed, Bakhmut area]⁶³
 - 3 unidentified motorized rifle regiments
 - 27th Artillery Regiment
 - 52nd Separate Anti-Aircraft Missile Artillery Brigade
 - 10th Tank Regiment
 - 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade [Confirmed, partially around Bakhmut]⁶⁴
 - Bashkir “Shaimuratova” volunteer battalion
 - Chuvash “Atal” volunteer battalion
 - Tatar “Alga” volunteer battalion [Confirmed, Bakhmut area]⁶⁵
 - Orenburg Oblast “Yaik” volunteer battalion
 - 17th Rocket Artillery Brigade
 - Various support regiments and battalions

52nd VDV Artillery Brigade:

ISW has confirmed the formation of the 52nd VDV Artillery Brigade in Krasnodar Krai and its likely deployment to Ukraine. The Russian Paratroopers Union announced that it collected and distributed aid for the 52nd VDV Artillery Brigade in Raevka village, Anapa, Krasnodar Krai, and claimed that the 52nd VDV Artillery Brigade is fighting in the Kherson direction.⁶⁶ The Moscow State Pedagogical University additionally confirmed the existence and deployment of the 52nd VDV Artillery Brigade and reported that students of its “NeFormat” program provided humanitarian assistance to the

brigade, earning the thanks of its commander, Colonel Alexander Kalish.⁶⁷ It is unclear how the 52nd VDV Artillery Brigade functions in relation to other VDV elements – if it is a centralized reserve of artillery intended to support specifically VDV regiments and brigades in combat; or if it is a VDV unit in name only and is functionally a regular artillery brigade.

387th Motorized Rifle Regiment (387th MRR):

Various Russian sources have offered different discussions of the formation of the 387th MRR. Some sources have speculated the 44th VDV Division is currently being formed with the 387th MRR and the 111th MRR as its main constituent elements. Other Russian sources, however, claimed that the 387th MRR formed in October 2022 from mobilized servicemembers from central Russia, including Tula Oblast, and has already been active in Ukraine.⁶⁸ ISW has observed elements of the 387th MRR fighting in western Zaporizhia Oblast alongside VDV units as recently as late October 2023.⁶⁹ Kherson Oblast occupation senator Andrey Alekseenko also mentioned a 387th Regiment (unspecified if motorized rifle or airborne) in July 2023, claiming that it was fighting as part of the 7th VDV Division in Kherson Oblast.⁷⁰ It is likely that the 387th MRR is fighting alongside VDV elements and at least nominally subordinated to VDV command on the frontline, though it is unlikely to be trained and equipped as a VDV unit.

New Russian formations that ISW has confirmed are currently forming, but have not yet been observed in Ukraine:

104th VDV Division:

Teplinsky confirmed on August 2 that the 104th VDV Division is in the process of forming, and Shoigu stated on September 26 that its formation is "being completed."⁷¹ Russian media initially reported plans to revive the 104th VDV Division (which was reformed into the 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade in 1998) with a three-regiment structure in April 2022.⁷² Several Russian sources noted that the 31st Separate Guards Air Assault Brigade will form the basis of the revived 104th Division in Ulyanovsk, Ulyanovsk Oblast.⁷³ The 104th VDV Division will likely follow the structure of other VDV divisions and consist of between two and three airborne and air assault regiments, a reconnaissance battalion, artillery regiment, anti-aircraft missile regiment, and tank battalion – and will likely be closer to a true VDV formation in terms of training and equipment than the previously discussed 44th VDV Division, as it is being formed out of a VDV brigade and not DNR motorized rifle regiments.

299th Guards Parachute Regiment:

Local Yaroslavl Oblast media began reporting on August 1 that the 299th Parachute Regiment is currently forming as part of the 98th VDV Division.⁷⁴ Shoigu additionally alluded to the formation of the 299th Parachute Regiment on September 26, confirming that a parachute regiment is currently forming as part of the "Ivanovo formation" (the 98th VDV Division is based in Ivanovo Oblast).⁷⁵ Former Russian soldier and current author and military commentator Aleksei Sunonkin noted that Yaroslavl Oblast recruitment ads suggest that the 98th VDV Division will be expanding from its previous two regiment structure to include the 299th Parachute Regiment as its third regiment.⁷⁶ Sunonkin also speculated that the new parachute regiment would be formed as a motorized rifle or infantry regiment without VDV-specific equipment.

119th Parachute Regiment:

Russian and Ukrainian sources suggested that the 106th VDV Division is forming the 119th Parachute Regiment.⁷⁷ Sunonkin claimed that as is the case with the 299th Parachute Regiment, the 119th

Parachute Regiment may be formed either as a motorized rifle or infantry regiment without proper VDV equipment.⁷⁸

Russian formations which Russian sources have mentioned but whose existence ISW cannot confirm:

14th Combined Arms Army (14th Army Corps):

Russia may be reorganizing the 14th Army Corps (Northern Fleet) into a combined arms army, potentially as part of a wider effort to disaggregate the ground formations of fleets into combined arms armies while transferring their naval forces to the direct control of the Russian Navy.⁷⁹ Russian outlet *Izvestia* reported on July 3, 2023, that the Russian MoD is currently forming a new combined arms army in the Northern Fleet out of an existing army corps, and the 14th Army Corps is the only corps in the Northern Fleet.⁸⁰ A Russian military commentator noted that the Baltic Fleet's 11th Army Corps may also undergo a similar transition, but we have not observed any confirmation of this speculation.⁸¹ The purported transformation of the army corps of two of Russia's fleets into combined arms armies further confirms that Russia appears to be moving its ground forces to the control of military districts while transferring naval assets back to the Russian Navy.⁸²

55th Naval Infantry Division:

An obituary posted to a *Vkontakte* page on August 17 claims that a soldier of the 55th Naval Infantry Division of the Pacific Fleet died fighting in Ukraine.⁸³ A Russian source amplified the obituary and claimed that it is evidence that Russia is reforming the 55th Naval Infantry Division (disbanded in 2009) on the basis of the Pacific Fleet's existing 155th Naval Infantry Brigade.⁸⁴ ISW has not observed any confirmation of the 55th Naval Infantry Division beyond this single obituary and Russian source speculation, however.

245th Guards Motorized Rifle Regiment (MRR):

Russian outlet *Izvestia* announced on April 26, 2023, that the Russian MoD is reforming the 245th MRR as part of the 47th Tank Division (1st Guards Tank Army, Western Military District).⁸⁵ ISW has not observed any mention of the reformation of the 245th Motorized Rifle Regiment by other Russian sources, however.

Ongoing Russian military restructuring highlights several Russian military priorities in the immediate and mid-term, which should shape the overall analysis and forecasts of conventional Russian capabilities in Ukraine:

The immediate commitment of several new and understrength formations to the frontline in Ukraine suggests the Russian MoD is electing to replace losses in Ukraine in part by creating new formations, rather than rebuilding and restoring existing formations and recommitting the rebuilt versions. This phenomenon could cause an over-estimation of Russian capabilities and military strength, as destroyed and highly degraded Russian units and formations remain active on paper, even if they lack any significant combat power. Combining the essentially defunct formations with new formations, which are very unlikely to be staffed to doctrinal end strength, will generate an artificially inflated count of Russian formations active in Ukraine.

The Russian MoD's focus on rapidly deploying these new formations to Ukraine is

obfuscating the difference in chains of command to operationalized “group of forces” headquarters in Ukraine versus permanent administrative military district designations. Russian media has reported, for example, that the 25th CAA formed in the Russian Far East is part of the EMD. Subsequent Russian reporting on the army suggests that it has either been fully subordinated to the CMD or that it will be operating in Ukraine under the operational control of the Center Grouping of Forces, which is responsible for the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area. The fact that the actual command and subordination of the 25th CAA remains so unclear even as the army has been largely committed to operations in Ukraine suggests that Russia is prioritizing the deployment of these new formations to Ukraine over solidifying or clarifying permanent C2 structures. This phenomenon could have tactical and operational impacts on the areas of the front where such formations are deploying, as the C2 lines between new formations, the regionally based grouping of forces that they are operating under, and the wider military district that they are part of, increasingly blur and overlap. This confusion could also simply be an artifact of the opacity of Russian officials reporting on chains of command. It is unlikely that units in the field are confused about which higher headquarters control them.

The Russian MoD appears committed, at least nominally, to retaining doctrinal distinctions between Russian regiments and brigades, despite the fact that these distinctions ultimately blur on the battlefield. Shoigu notably telegraphed Russia's intent to convert several motorized rifle brigades into motorized rifle divisions, while still simultaneously standing up new brigades.⁸⁶ Despite the division/brigade split on paper, however, it is unlikely that these distinctions will actually survive deployment to the frontline in Ukraine. For much of the invasion of Ukraine, Russian formations have deployed individual units *ad hoc* to the frontline and operated as company or battalion level units, and elements of several different formations often operate in the same discrete geographic area. The Russian military has long debated the need for division structures suited for protracted and large-scale conventional maneuver warfare versus smaller and more mobile brigades. The Russian military's dedication to building out mechanized divisions while still maintaining (and even adding to) the existing brigade structure suggests that the Russian military envisions the need for both such formations for future large-scale conventional operations in Ukraine or elsewhere.

The formal distinctions between the size and structure of Russian units and formations at different echelons and of different types are eroding on the battlefield, and most frontline and currently forming units are essentially understrength and low-quality motorized rifle units – though these units remain dangerous and should not be underestimated. Ukrainian military observer Konstantyn Mashovets provided an example of this phenomenon in relation to Russian deployments to the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area, remarking that Russian command is choosing to “strengthen” groupings of forces with understaffed motorized rifle formations that are comprised of around 75 percent of their intended complement of personnel, armored combat vehicles, and artillery systems.⁸⁷ Similarly, the formation of the 44th “VDV” Division out of former DNR motorized rifle formations suggests that understrength motorized rifle formations are now being classified as higher-echelon and more well trained and equipped formations.⁸⁸

None of these changes appear to take account of the way Russian forces are actually fighting in Ukraine, moreover, as Russian milbloggers have recently hinted. Russian units have repeatedly shown themselves unable to operate effectively as coherent mechanized

structures. Renewed attempts to conduct mechanized maneuver war around Avdiivka generated massive losses in armored vehicles, causing the Russian command to return to a combination of small-unit attacks and massed infantry assaults.⁸⁹ The retention of pre-war doctrinal structures in Shoigu's reform scheme suggests that the Russian military has either not learned the lessons of combat in Ukraine or else is for some reason confident that the tactical problems that have led to the current positional war will not recur in future wars.

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