



Russia Beefs Up Military Potential in the Country's Western Areas

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Russia has intensively strengthened its military in the Western and Southern districts. These activities are not simply a response to the decisions of NATO, which is strengthening its Eastern Flank, but are strategic in nature. They also pose a challenge for Ukraine and Belarus as Russia has increased the number and capabilities of its combat units operating near their borders. The Russians are more frequently using the notion of military superiority to achieve political goals in Eastern Europe and this is a serious challenge for NATO.

Russia's Western Military Capabilities. To operate in a western strategic direction, Russia would first use units from its Western and Southern Military Districts. The Western Military District (WMD), with about 300,000 troops, was formed in 2010 from the Moscow and Leningrad MDs. It consists of the Baltic Fleet, the 6th Red Banner Leningrad Army of Air and Air Defence Forces, two ground force units (the 6th and 20th Armies), the 1st Armoured, airborne forces (three divisions and one brigade), marines and coastal defence forces, as well as intelligence, support and specialised units and formations.

The Southern Military District (SMD), with 72,000 troops, was formed in 2010 from the North Caucasus MD. It also consists of two ground force units (the 49th and 58th Armies) the Black Sea Fleet, the Caspian Flotilla, the 4th Army of Air Forces and Air Defence, and airborne forces (one division and one brigade).

In 2011 in the WMD, Russia had three armoured brigades and eight mechanised (including four heavy type) and in the SMD, 10 mechanised brigades (including six heavy type), two mountain brigades and two light brigades. All of these units maintain permanent combat readiness. In both military districts, Russia has about 1,100 tanks, 1,900 infantry fighting vehicles, 60 tactical ballistic missile systems, 2,850 artillery units above 100 mm, 570 aircraft, 180 combat helicopters, and 126 ships including seven submarines. The majority of these items are modern ready to be used.

Increasing Operational Capacity to the West. In recent months, Russia has strengthened the potential of both the Western and Southern Military Districts. In 2015, from the 2nd Guards Motor Rifle "Tamanskaya" Division and the 4th Guards "Kantemirovskaya" Tank Division, the 1st Guards Tank Army was formed. On 4 May 2016, the Russian command decided to create three new divisions (partly based on existing brigades) and assigned one to the SMD and two to the WMD. Moreover, a few weeks later, it transferred an additional two mechanised brigades (the 23rd and 28th) from the Central Military District to bases near the border with Belarus and Ukraine. Each of the three new divisions has about 10,000 troops composed of six regiments and operating at permanent combat readiness. These units will be the first to receive the newest equipment, such as T-14 Armata tanks, the Kurganets-25 tracked modular platforms, and Koalitsiya-SV self-propelled gun. Now they mainly have T-72B3 and T-80 tanks and BMP-3 amphibious infantry combat vehicles. The cost of forming each division is estimated at RUB 5 billion. However, they will require providing and staffing the necessary facilities, so their full combat capability may be limited, especially in the short term.

The 150th Mechanised Division will be located in the SMD, in Novocherkassk in Rostov Oblast. In the WMD, the 10th Armoured Division will be stationed in two places—Boguchar in Voronezh Oblast and Valuyki in Belgorod Oblast, so on the border with Ukraine— and a still unnumbered mechanised division will be based in Yelnya in Smolensk Oblast, on the border with Belarus. The 10th and unnumbered unit will be part of the 20th Army, which has its

headquarters in Voronezh, and they are planned to be ready by the end of 2016. The creation of these divisions is a significant modification of one of the goals of the reform of Russia's armed forces (Serdiukov's reform), namely replacing the four-level command system (military district–army–division–regiment) with a three-level system (combined strategic command–operational command–brigade).

In recent months, the air force units operating in the western part of the country have also been strengthened, including the 6th Army of Air and Air Defence Forces, which was extended to have 20 squadrons of S-400 Triumf air-defence systems (NATO: SA-21 Growle).

Since annexing Crimea, Russia has been expanding its military presence, which affects the balance of power in the Black Sea basin in its favour. According to Ukrainian data, about 24,000 Russian soldiers are currently stationed there. Between 2014 and 2015, the Black Sea Fleet received eight new units (including four Kilo-class submarines and two Buyan-class corvettes with the possibility of launching Kalibr (NATO: Klub) missiles with a range of up to 2,600 km). Russia has also significantly strengthened its coastal defence by deploying K-300 Bastion (SSC-5) and Bal (SSC-6 Sennight) mobile missile systems equipped with P-800 Oniks (SS-N-26 Strobile) and Kh-35 (SS-N-25 Switchblade) subsonic anti-ship missiles. Also, S-300 PMU (SA-20 Gargoyle) systems have been deployed for air defence, as have Su-27 "Flanker" fighters, Tu-22M3 "Backfire" long-range bombers, Tu-142 "Bear-F Mod 1" and Il-38 "Dolphin" (May) anti-submarine aircraft, as well as Ka-27 "Helix" and Ka-29 "Helix-B" helicopters. It is also worth noting that Russia is again using the NIP-16 ground deep space tracing station, located near Yevpatoria.

To enhance its combat ability in the Baltic Sea, the deployment in Kaliningrad Oblast of Iskander (SS-26 Stone) and S-400 Triumf missile systems will be crucial, as well as the adaptation of Kilo-class submarines for launching Kalibr missiles. In the event of any conflict, such systems can significantly hinder the access of NATO troops to countries in the region.

The Challenge for Ukraine and Belarus. Although the decision to deploy new divisions on the border with Ukraine will not change the balance of power in favour of Russia—in 2015, the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the eastern part of the country numbered about 60,000-65,000, grouped in 20 brigades (including six mechanised, three artillery, three air-mobile, one airborne), with 300 tanks, 900 armoured personnel carriers, 800 artillery units (including rocket artillery)—it significantly enhances Russia's capabilities to support the separatists in Donbas. The new armoured division on the border with Ukraine means that if the military situation there is exacerbated, the Russians will not have to shift troops from other parts of the country as in 2014. Moreover, because of the topography of the Ukrainian-Russian border, artillery is a key factor in the success of the land forces, which increases the importance of the new armoured and mechanised units. At the same time, the arrangement of the new divisions and brigades near the border with Belarus enhances Russia's military superiority over its smaller neighbour. This is especially the case in the North-West Military District which covers the eastern border of Belarus with 10,000 troops and the whole Armed Forces of Belarus, which is 46,000 on active duty. Moreover, both countries have a joint air defence system and Russia is easily able to take control of Belarusian airspace.

The fear of conventional (and hybrid) actions from the Russian side can be partly found in the Belarus' new military doctrine adopted in April 2016. This document indirectly points to a new type of threat coming from its eastern neighbour. The Belarusian authorities are also concerned about the increasing arms race in Central and Eastern Europe because, due to the economic crisis and limited financial resources, they are not able to play at the same level.

At the same time, Russia's military potential and the agreements it has signed with Belarus (such as the Union State) allows it to use Belarusian territory to conduct its own military activities. In response to the construction of part of the U.S. missile defence system in Poland, Russia may decide to deploy Iskanders to Belarus, which would then require defence systems not only for the neighbouring NATO states but also for Ukraine.

Perspective. Russia's decision to create these new divisions are part of a process to increase its military capabilities in a western strategic direction. It is also the implementation of the idea contained in key documents, such as Russia's military doctrine and doctrine of maritime and national security strategy, that the most important military challenge for the country is NATO. However, regardless of the propaganda surrounding this perception, these decisions seem to presuppose an Alliance move to strengthen the eastern flank (although the decisions and details will be known only after this summer's summit in Warsaw), and it is not just a simple answer to the problem.

Increasing Russia's operational capabilities is also an integral part of its reform of its military, which was launched in 2009 and will continue for some time. Due to their location at the border with NATO countries, the Western and Southern Military Districts will be the first districts to receive the newest armament produced through Russia's State Armaments Programme. In these areas and in the Arctic, also near the borders of Alliance countries, progressive Russian militarisation can be expected. This will be increasingly challenging for NATO and Eastern European countries and should prompt the Alliance to speed up implementation of the Readiness Action Plan.

The development of military capabilities in the western part of Russia may result in an increase in the superiority of Russian conventional forces in Eastern Europe and indicates that for the Russian authorities, the ability to control the territories of Belarus and Ukraine is important, both politically and in military terms.