OVER THE last few years, the Russian military has been undergoing a very visible active modernisation. While this constitutes an important change in its own right (since Russia remains a large military power with forces exceeding those of any of its individual neighbours), the most significant change is not to the size of the Russian military but to the nature of its forces: instead of being primarily structured for defensive operations, in case of a hypothetical large-scale military conflict (while also retaining the capability of carrying out operations in low-intensity conflicts), the Russian armed forces are now gaining an offensive-oriented structure, with capabilities tailored for large-scale war.

At the same time, despite the painful military reforms undertaken after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian General Staff have managed to preserve the core expertise related to planning large-scale conventional – that is, general non-nuclear – military operations. The country’s military involvement in Ukraine (and later in Syria) demonstrated its ability to prepare and conduct – with the use of integrated conventional and sub-conventional means and tactics – precisely these types of operations. The retention of this capability on the Russian side clearly contrasts with the overwhelming concentration on counter-terrorism, peacekeeping and humanitarian operations that have been the main emphasis of Western militaries over the last fifteen years, to the detriment of their ability to conduct large-scale conventional operations.

Taken together, these developments have resulted in Russia possessing both the means to conduct large-scale offensive operations in Europe, and the planning skills and expertise necessary for the preparation and fulfilment of such operations. Combined with the Russian political leadership’s obvious willingness to use these capabilities in an aggressive manner outside its frontiers – as manifested by the annexation of Crimea and subsequent destabilising actions in Ukraine’s eastern regions, as well as the extensive military intervention in Syria – Russia’s military build-up raises serious concerns about the stability and security of the European continent.
Moscow’s current divisive and confrontational policy is not likely to end any time soon; the West will have to live with it for the foreseeable future. It is thus all the more important to pay attention to developments in the Russian military and their underlying motives. This briefing paper examines some of the new Russian capabilities and critical skills. A forthcoming RUSI study will offer further in-depth analysis of the new, emerging and modernised Russian military capabilities.

Confidence-Destruction Measures

Any analysis of Russian military capabilities must look at the crucial early stage of Moscow’s military operation against Ukraine in March–June 2014. This entire episode demonstrated that the Russian General Staff have retained a high level of planning skills at the strategic level oriented to offensive- rather than defensive-style operations. The deployment pattern of Russian troops on the border of Ukraine in March–June 2014 was a clear indication of this capability.

After the occupation of Crimea, the deployment of Russian troops along the border with Ukraine in Spring 2014 was intended to deter Kiev from using military means to suppress the Russian-backed rebels in Eastern Ukraine. The deployment began just as Kiev was scrambling to regain military control of Ukraine’s eastern regions, which had been subjected to sub-conventional destabilisation operations by Russian forces (with widespread use of Russian-inspired insurgents). When deterrence failed and Ukrainian forces showed signs that they may quell the rebellion, Russian troops actually invaded the country in order to defeat Ukrainian units and save ‘Project Novorossiya’, as the Russian-held rebel territories inside Ukraine are commonly known. The aim of Moscow’s deployment was therefore to back the country’s sub-conventional actions, which were undermining Ukraine’s territorial integrity, although the operation as a whole was offensive-oriented.

The Russian side portrayed the deployment as a sequence of snap exercises. In some instances, exercises transitioned from one to another, but usually they built up into a crescendo: up to 40,000–50,000 combat troops (or 90,000 troops including combat support and combat service support units and elements) participated in the deployment. Such ‘exercises’ would therefore be subject to the notification requirements stipulated by the OSCE Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures. Its provisions – specifically Chapter V, Paragraphs 38 and 40.1.1 – require that all other participating states must be notified of any military activity involving more than 9,000 ground troops at least 42 days in advance of the exercise.1 The Russian ‘exercises’ and troop deployments as a whole were thoroughly tailored by the General Staff to avoid these notification requirements,2 making it possible for Russia to seize and retain operational surprise without formally violating the Vienna Document.

2. The General Staff is equivalent in the Russian military system to the Defence Staff in the UK; the British General Staff’s equivalent is called the Main Command of Ground Troops.
Three factors were instrumental in Russia’s efforts to avoid the application of the Vienna Document provisions:

1. First, the troops were organised as battalion tactical groups (Bataljonnye Takticheskie Gruppy) which are similar to the US brigade combat teams in doctrinal terms, but they are of battalion size and have a flexible, ad hoc structure. These seemed to operate independently of each other, but were under the undisclosed central command of the General Staff and/or the Southern Military District (MD) headquarters (see Box 1). Thus, Russia successfully bypassed the provision contained in Paragraph 40.1.1 of the Vienna Document which requires parties to provide notification of military activities if troops involved are ‘organized into a divisional structure or at least at two brigades/regiments’.

2. Second, the deployment was tailored so that Russian troop concentrations – with one notable exception – did not exceed the 9,000 limit in any single zone. The exception was the reserves in Group ‘Tavriya’ – there were around 11,700 troops concentrated in high alert for possible reinforcement. Even in this case, Russia avoided the Vienna Document provisions as the reserve troops never left their permanent camps and were therefore not formal participants in any exercises.

3. Third, Russia refused to even consider the notion that the troops deployed for these ‘exercises’ were under centralised command – one of the other triggers for notification under Paragraph 40 of the Vienna Document. By claiming this, Moscow further blocked the application of the document to the situation near the Russian–Ukrainian border.3

Taken together, these three factors allowed Russia to concentrate a substantial number of troops near its border with Ukraine; the international confidence-building measures proved unable to prevent this from occurring. The Kremlin’s capacity to exploit loopholes in international law will surely feature in any future interventions that might arise.

Western political and military planners should not overlook the key lessons from Russia’s activities: Moscow’s military machine has preserved and developed its ability and readiness to prepare and employ conventional military capabilities in a full-scale war scenario. These capabilities differ markedly from those that have been developed within NATO’s command structures. Indeed, the Alliance needs to regain those capabilities which were largely lost following the end of the Cold War; capabilities that Russia has maintained. Indeed, Russia’s confrontational attitude towards the West, alongside its proven skills in planning military activities and its more pronounced offensive-oriented structures, should be sounding alarm bells for NATO’s military planners.

Box 1: The Russian General Staff’s Role in the Ukrainian Operation

While Russia has not disclosed the role of its General Staff in controlling the spring-summer 2014 operation in Ukraine, the fact that it was controlled by the General Staff is revealed by an analysis of the list of units involved. These include units and elements from the Western, Southern and Central MDs, and Airborne Troops, as well as spetsnaz brigades.¹

First, spetsnaz brigades directly report to the 2nd Main Intelligence Directorate (or GRU, Glavnoey Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie) of the General Staff; as such, spetsnaz brigades cannot be employed without the knowledge and orders of the General Staff. Six different spetsnaz brigades were involved in the Ukraine operation in its early stages.

Second, any ‘out of area’ – that is, beyond the MD’s boundaries – exercise cannot be planned by the corresponding MD’s commander, but must be co-ordinated and ordered by the General Staff. Yet both the 15th Guards and 23rd Guards Motorised Rifle Brigade (MRBde) of the Central MD were deployed out of area – on ‘exercise’ – in the Western MD. Furthermore, the 15th Guards is the ‘peacekeeping’ brigade (the one oriented for deployments abroad in peacekeeping operations), and although it is under the administrative control of the Central MD, decisions on its deployment are made by the General Staff. Also, the 20th Guards MRBde of the Southern MD was deployed out of area to the Western MD.

Third, airborne troops have the status of the Supreme Commander’s reserve in the Russian military system and are thus operationally subordinated to the General Staff serving as the Supreme Commander’s headquarters (HQ). The deployment of airborne troops is therefore controlled and ordered by the General Staff. Elements of four airborne divisions, as well as one brigade (31st) and one regiment (45th), were involved in the Ukrainian operation.

This shows that the Russian General Staff was in control of the spring-summer deployment near the Russian–Ukrainian border and the subsequent operation of the Russian troops. Immediate operational control functions might have been delegated by the General Staff to the Southern MD HQ, which is located near the operational area, or to the General Staff’s operational group dispatched – with the operational control task – to the Southern MD HQ to streamline the operational control procedures.

Offensive-Oriented Structure of Forces

One element of the Russian military’s modernisation has been the dramatic expansion of the surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities of Russian Ground Forces and Airborne Troops. Reconnaissance brigades are being established among the ground troops. Three brigades of this type already exist (the 100th (experimental) in the Southern MD, the 127th in Crimea and the 96th in the newly established 1st Guards Tank Army); while one more brigade was being established in the Operational-Strategic Command North (also referred to as Arctic Command) as of May 2016. Based on available information, the plans seem to call for the establishment of a reconnaissance brigade in every combined arms army of the Russian Ground Forces.

Combat tasks for Russian reconnaissance brigades differ substantially from those of US battlefield surveillance brigades. Every Russian brigade of this type contains a spetsnaz component (roughly of battalion size) which is tasked, among other things, with the combined task of long-range patrol and direct action (usually treated as two distinct tasks by Western militaries), and with the establishment of insurgent group operations. The remit of Russian reconnaissance brigades is therefore much wider than just surveillance, reconnaissance and tactical air control. The psychological operations battalion – an integral part of the brigade – provides further evidence of a more offensive, as opposed to defensive, role.
The evolution of Russia's military structure involves more than just the establishment of reconnaissance brigades in combined arms armies. The reconnaissance companies of Russian combined arms brigades and divisions – as well as airborne and air assault ones – are being expanded to full reconnaissance battalions. Their first companies are being retrained to become *spetsnaz* companies. Every brigade or division commander will have an integral subordinated *spetsnaz* company to work in the interests of the corresponding formation.

These developments in Russian Ground Forces and Airborne Troops are not entirely new. In the Soviet Army, one *spetsnaz* company was subordinated to every combined arms and tank (‘Shock’) army (of approximately three to four divisions). Under ongoing plans, the overall *spetsnaz* manpower of Russia’s conventional forces (not counting *spetsnaz* elements of the Strategic Rocket Forces) will be nearly doubled (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Russian Special Operations Forces in 2013 and Planned for 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2013</th>
<th></th>
<th>2018</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brigades</td>
<td>Regiments</td>
<td>Battalions</td>
<td>Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRU</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airborne Troops</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground Troops</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brigades</td>
<td>Regiments</td>
<td>Battalions</td>
<td>Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRU</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airborne Troops</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground Troops</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author’s analysis.*

Air assault formations – another highly capable offensive component of Russia’s armed forces – are being expanded and strengthened. The new 345th Air Assault Brigade is planned to be established near Voronezh, southwest Russia, in 2017. Meanwhile, the 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade is being uprated to become the 104th Guards Air Assault Division – this is the same formation which was downrated in the mid-1990s. The existing air assault divisions, the 7th Guards (Mountain) and the 76th Guards, will also be expanded – if sufficient manpower is available – in order to restore their third air assault regiments, which were disestablished with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. (The 104th Guards will be re-established in the three-

4. The GRU is the Main Intelligence Directorate (*Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie*) of the Russian General Staff.
regiment structure from the outset.) The ambitious plans of the Airborne Troops headquarters also envisage a third airborne regiment being added to each airborne division (the 98th Guards and 106th Guards).

The planned addition of a tank company to every Russian air assault formation will not affect the air mobility of formations in a negative way. This is because air assault units and formations do not use large-scale paradrop insertion as a main tactic. The addition will, however, substantially contribute to their offensive potential if the formations are used in the assault infantry role, as was the case in eastern Ukraine. It was initially envisaged that the manpower of the Russian Airborne Troops (including airborne and air assault components) would be reduced to 18,000 by around 2013. The plan now is to substantially increase its manpower, from 40,000 to nearly 60,000 troops (up to 72,000 if the additional regiments are introduced into the airborne divisions). Airborne troops are also set to become the basis for rapid reaction forces currently being considered by Moscow for use abroad.

In addition, the offensive potential of Russian forces is being upgraded with specialist elements. Pontoon bridge units that were de-activated in the late 1980s – to make the Soviet forces more defensive than offensive – and then disbanded in the 1990s, are now being re-established to expand the Russian forces’ fast river-crossing capability, which is necessary in dynamic offensive operations but excessive in defensive ones. Assault sapper elements tasked with urban assaults are being established in combat engineer brigades of the Russian Ground Forces. Flamethrower elements (including TOS-1/-1M heavy flamethrower platoons) are being introduced into the structures of every Russian combined arms formation, while similar elements are being expanded in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence brigades.

The widespread introduction into service of the sophisticated and capable ‘Borisoglebsk-2’ electronic warfare systems – replacing the earlier ‘Mandat’ systems – degrades the ability of Western forces to use GPS-assisted and radio proximity fuse-equipped munitions effectively against Russian troops. Indeed, due to the new system’s much higher technical sophistication, it would be substantially more difficult for the Western forces to avoid Russian jamming of GPS signal and premature activation of radio proximity fuses. The new system potentially gives Russian troops the capability to jam Western communications as well as command and control networks, thus impeding – in theory – Western network-centric operations. While not exclusively for offensive purposes, this electronic warfare capability complicates any NATO effort to counter Russian actions, thereby improving Russia’s chances of success in a hypothetical offensive operation.

Moscow has been preparing for such hypothetical offensives for quite some time. Indeed, Russia has established a highly offensive formation in its Western MD: the 1st Guards Tank Army. Those units subordinated to this newly established army include: the 2nd Guards Tamanskaya Motorised Rifle Division (MRD) in Alabino, southwest of Moscow; the 4th Guards Kantemirovskaya Tank Division (TD) (in Naro-Fominsk, also southwest of Moscow); the 6th Tank Brigade; the 27th Guards MRBde; and several specialist combat support and support brigades. There are four new combined arms divisions being established in the Russian Ground Forces,
adding substantially to Russia's conventional offensive capabilities: two divisions in the Western MD; and one each in the Southern and Central MDs.

The 20th Guards Combined Arms Army, which is being re-established in Voronezh, will include two of the new divisions: the 10th Guards TD in Boguchar, near Voronezh, and 144th Guards MRD in Elnya (Smolensk province). The 20th Guards will also include the 23rd Guards MRBde in Valuyki (Belgorod province); the 28th MRBde in Klintsy (Bryansk province); and several specialist brigades (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Locations of the Newly Established and Relocated Russian Formations

The third new combined arms division will be the 150th Guards MRD in Novocherkassk near Rostov-on-Don, which will add considerable combat potential to the Southern MD’s forces. It is likely that the 15th MRD in Nizhneudinsk in the Central MD will be the fourth new division to be established in Russia in 2016.
The newly established 1st Guards Tank and 20th Guards Armies will become the first in the Russian armed forces to receive delivery of the new Armata vehicles. Despite popular perceptions, Armata is not just the new Russian main battle tank (MBT); rather, it is a heavily armoured chassis with an integral combat information management-and-control system which can be equipped with different ‘payload’ modules. This flexibility is the basis of the 28 combat and support vehicle variants that make up the Armata family. Armata is therefore the conceptual equivalent of the US Striker vehicles. Comparisons can be made to unit structures as well. Discussions are already underway in Russian military circles about standardising the hardware of Armata-equipped units to form a single Armata-only variant, thus completely eliminating vehicle diversity. This would necessarily require tactics to be adjusted. If put into practice, then talk of Armata units in the Russian Ground Forces will be commonplace, just as it is in conversations about Striker brigades in the US Army.

**Box 2: Armata**

‘Armata’ is the family name for the Russian modular tracked heavy armoured vehicles, of which the T-14 next-generation MBT is the leading member. All vehicles in the Armata family are based on the TUGP ‘Armata’ heavy universal tracked platform (TUGP comes from ‘Tyazholyaya Universalnaya Gusechnaya Platforma’, the Russian for ‘heavy universal tracked platform’). Different unmanned combat and service modules installed onto the TUGP chassis result in different types of combat, combat support and support vehicles. The crew and troops are always contained within the body of the TUGP itself, and are thus provided with protection at the level of the world’s best MBTs. This guarantees high personnel survivability in the modern battlefield environment.

The philosophy behind the ‘Armata’ family design is to have units equipped with highly survivable standardised vehicles of all necessary types, ranging from combat vehicles like the MBT (T-14 ‘Armata’), which is the world’s first tank to be equipped with an unmanned – as opposed to a manned – turret (see Figure 3), and the infantry fighting vehicle (T-15 ‘Bagulnik’, see Figure 4); to combat support vehicles like self-propelled guns, multiple-launcher rocket systems, and heavy flamethrowers; to support vehicles like combat repair and recovery vehicles (T-16), and minelayers, among others. The standardisation of the vehicles’ chassis means that the unit’s operational effectiveness is not impeded by any difference in the vehicles’ mobility and protection. If there were a difference, then it would be difficult to maintain the unit’s battle formations because of the difference in the vehicles’ ability to negotiate terrain and hostile fire, thus partially ‘watering down’ the punch of the armoured formation.
Figure 3: T-14 ‘Armata’ MBT

Image courtesy of Vitaly V Kuzmin/Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 4: T-15 ‘Bagulnik’ Heavy Infantry Fighting Vehicle

Image courtesy of Vitaly V Kuzmin/Wikimedia Commons.
The fundamental difference between Striker and Armata is that the former consists of lightly armoured vehicles while the latter consists of heavily armoured vehicles. Due to the high battlefield survivability of Armata vehicles, Armata units would be an order of magnitude more difficult to counter and, therefore, would be much more suitable for offensive operations than their Western equivalents. Indeed, the Armata units are excessive for defence but very suitable for offensive operations. The creation of a complete tank army consisting exclusively of Armata units, which is in Moscow’s plans, gives the Russian military the near-perfect (for the time being) offensive tool to counter NATO forces. Unfortunately, some Western states continue to see Russian forces as being merely defensively sufficient; not offensively capable.

That said, the newly established armies are not exclusively oriented against NATO. Indeed, the deployment pattern of the new armies’ formations shows that the main purpose of their establishment – for the time being – is to legitimise permanent military pressure on Ukraine. This is being achieved through the permanent deployment of Russian troops near the Russian–Ukrainian border (see Figure 2). Such a deployment is different to what would be expected were Russia preparing for an immediate attack against NATO. In fact, the new and relocated formations sit along a wide arc which bears a strong resemblance to the deployment patterns in the spring and summer of 2014 (see Figure 1). This does not, however, imply the threat of an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine, as in the summer 2014; the political considerations have changed and the Kremlin is interested now in lifting Western sanctions, which a Russian invasion would make impossible. Despite this, the deployment pattern reveals some possible considerations and plans of Russian policy-makers.

Semi-official ‘leaks’ from the Russian General Staff state that every newly established division will have manpower levels of around 10,000\(^5\). If these ‘leaks’ are to be believed then the establishment of three divisions and one brigade (the 345th Air Assault), plus the permanent relocation to near the Ukrainian border of two more motorised rifle brigades (the 23rd and 28th Guards, from Samara and Ekaterinburg respectively), will give Russian military planners approximately the same number of troops concentrated near Ukraine (about 42,000) as were concentrated there during the spring and early summer of 2014 (around 40,000–50,000). The deployment of these troops in permanent camps rather than in temporary field camps – as on the previous occasion – would make such a deployment on the border of Ukraine more sustainable and affordable for Russia. Taken together, this strongly suggests that Moscow plans to carry on pressuring Ukraine for the time being. While this pressure will be chiefly political, it will also involve the wide use of military tools. Ukraine will not be left alone to make its own sovereign choices.

Conclusion

The anti-Ukrainian nature of recent Russian deployments is clear, indicating a persistent Russian objective to gain and hold the upper hand in that conflict. But Moscow is also aiming higher: it evidently plans to exploit Western concerns regarding Russia’s offensive capabilities to plant

---

doubts about the affordability and feasibility of any discussion in either NATO or the EU about containing Russia. The Kremlin’s strategy seeks to create an over-inflated expectation among Western observers that Moscow is willing to use military force (the so-called ‘aura of power’, as described by the then US Secretary of Defense Harold Brown in January 1980). The aim is to reduce the ability of Western political and military decision-makers to devise policies which seek to restrict Russia’s room for strategic manoeuvre or to oppose its adventurism. This ‘aura of power’, if properly created and employed by Moscow, would serve as the substitute for the possession of power itself. Thus the Kremlin’s problem of shortage of resources might be resolved – no one would dare to confront Russia’s adventures, thereby enabling it to achieve its foreign policy goals despite the fact that it lacks the resources necessary to do so under ‘normal’ circumstances (that is, when in competition with other states).6

Russia’s de facto unannounced, snap, full-scale mobilisation exercises on 14–22 June 2016 in response to NATO’s Operation Anakonda 2016 exercise in Poland – the largest military exercise in Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War – are clear evidence of the seriousness of Moscow’s approach. The explanation offered by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is that snap exercises per se are not covered by the stipulations of the Vienna Document and so Russia is not obliged to formally announce them.7 In reality, Moscow is not only destroying confidence in the regulatory framework of the security environment, but it is also recreating the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity that existed during the Cold War.

Russia’s divisive and confrontational policy is likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future: Moscow has invested so much in creating these new military formations and infrastructure that it would be extremely difficult to reverse the direction of travel. As a result, Moscow’s political-military leadership will not be able to abandon this policy any time soon, even if they desired to do so.

A certain level of confrontation (of the higher or lower degree, depending on the circumstances) will remain part of Russia’s approach for the time being, and the West should be ready for this. The West needs to wake up to the fact that its relationship with Russia is no longer characterised by co-operation; rather, it is characterised by confrontation. While this does not imply that regaining capabilities to conduct large-scale conventional operations is the only possible response for NATO, it does mean that NATO should consider rebuilding its forces in certain areas to regain the credibility of its defence guarantees in response to Russia’s new military capabilities. This is no longer a matter of choice, but of necessity.

Dr Igor Sutyagin is a Senior Research Fellow in Russian Studies at RUSI.

6. For further discussion of the ‘aura of power’ phenomenon and its implications for Russian policy, see Igor Sutyagin, ‘Driving Forces in Russia’s Strategic Thinking’, in Janne Haaland Matlary and Tormod Heier (eds), Ukraine and Beyond: Russia’s Strategic Security Challenge to Europe (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

Over 180 years of independent defence and security thinking

The Royal United Services Institute is the UK’s leading independent think-tank on international defence and security. Its mission is to be an analytical, research-led global forum for informing, influencing and enhancing public debate on a safer and more stable world.

Since its foundation in 1831, RUSI has relied on its members to support its activities, sustaining its political independence for over 180 years.

London | Brussels | Nairobi | Doha | Tokyo | Washington, DC

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s), and do not reflect the views of RUSI or any other institution.

Published in 2016 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No-Derivatives 4.0 International Licence. For more information, see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

RUSI Briefing Paper, July 2016.