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Russian Military Performance and Outlook

Despite advantages of a larger recruitment base and defense industrial capacity, the Russian military has been unable to decisively defeat the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The Russian military has suffered significant losses in personnel and equipment. Its performance arguably has been hindered by a rigid command and control structure, a weakened corps of trained and professional units, and a reliance on tactics with high casualty rates. The Russian military, however, remains a resilient and capable adversary.

Since 2022, Congress has supported Ukraine's defense against Russia's renewed invasion. In November 2023 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien assessed,

Ukrainian forces have used Western weapons to great effect against Russian forces: Ukraine has liberated a significant part of its territory initially seized by Russia. It destroyed thousands of Russian tanks and combat vehicles as well as hundreds of aircraft, and Russia has suffered a significant loss of combat power.

Nevertheless, the Russian military continues to launch offensive operations and, in February 2024, captured the Ukrainian town of Avdiivka. Members may consider the Russian military's condition and performance as they evaluate the state of the war, assess the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions, and debate whether to appropriate additional military assistance for Ukraine.

Command and Control

Despite attempted reforms to increase lower-level leadership and autonomy, the Russian military arguably continues to operate with a Soviet-style centralized command. This command style at the tactical level often has contributed to the types of inflexible operations that contributed to previous failures and casualties.

Some observers argue that Russia's leadership prioritizes the perceived political loyalty of officers over their battlefield effectiveness, particularly since the June 2023 Wagner Group mutiny, in which a Russian private military company engaged in armed revolt against Russia's military leadership. Multiple Russian military leaders, including some reported to be among the most competent, have been relieved of command, apparently for perceived criticism of, or insufficient loyalty to, Russian political leaders.

Nevertheless, the Russian military leadership remains a cohesive force. It has gradually consolidated various semi-independent security force units and organizations fighting for Russia and brought them under its central command.

Additionally, the Russian military leadership has proven capable of adaptation and of implementing changes in force structure, operations, and equipment since the 2022 invasion. Observers continue to debate the speed and breadth of these changes, as reforms in some cases appear isolated to addressing specific problems or implemented after extended debate that leads to delays.

Personnel

In January 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia had over 600,000 personnel in Ukraine, while some observers estimate the number at 470,000 forces. Continued casualties and challenges fielding well-trained troops have hindered, but not stopped, Russian military operations.

Casualties

U.S. intelligence agencies reportedly estimated in December 2023 that the Russian military had suffered 315,000 killed and injured. The rates arguably reflect the continued use of tactics that resulted in high casualty rates in the past. These tactics include a reliance on massed personnel attacks, indiscriminate artillery fire, and limited tactical-level flexibility. Casualty totals likely include mobilized personnel, volunteers, National Guard, recruited prison convicts, and personnel from Russian-occupied Ukrainian regions. Overall, the casualties represent 87% of Russia's estimated pre-war ground strength of about 360,000 personnel.

The loss of experienced soldiers has been particularly detrimental to the effectiveness and capability of the Russian military. Many of Russia's casualties have been among elite and professional soldiers, as well as the junior officer corps. New recruits often have less training than those they are replacing, exacerbating the impact of the losses and apparently eroding the effectiveness of some Russian military units. Some observers say the loss of such experienced troops will have a long-term detrimental effect on Russian military capabilities.

Recruitment and Mobilization

To replenish the Russian military's ranks, President Putin has increased the military's official size to 1.32 million. Russian authorities announced a mobilization of 300,000 personnel in September 2022 but have yet to announce another large-scale mobilization, likely due at least in part to domestic political considerations. There are some indications of growing dissent, including public protests by the families of mobilized personnel. Some observers posit that Putin is unlikely to announce another mobilization until after the scheduled March 2024 Russian presidential elections.

“We have created, staffed, and equipped two combined arms armies, a mixed aviation corps, as well as 50 formations and military units, including four divisions, 18 brigades, and 28 regiments.”

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Expanded Meeting of Russian Defense Ministry Board, December 19, 2023.

Russia offers a variety of incentives to recruit new personnel. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) offers salaries that can be three times the average Russian monthly wage, as well as bonuses and payments should soldiers be killed or wounded. Volunteers in units formed by local authorities and mercenary units reportedly receive the same pay and benefits; unlike professional troops, volunteers are able to leave service after the end of their contracts. In addition, prisoners are recruited with a promise of amnesty.

The MoD also employs more coercive recruitment methods, including increased penalties for ignoring draft summons, pressure on conscripts to sign contracts, and punishments for canceling contracts. Russian law prohibits the deployment of conscripts to combat.

In December 2023, Putin stated that the military had recruited 486,000 personnel in 2023 and 1,500 personnel a day had signed contracts. Some observers assert these figures are exaggerated and do not accurately reflect the variety and often ad hoc nature of current Russian military recruitment. Additionally, reports suggest the training of recruits is often substandard and rushed, undermining the Russian military’s ability to conduct complex offensive operations. Regardless, some observers assert Russia continues to recruit sufficient personnel to replenish and rotate units for operations in Ukraine.

Equipment and Ammunition

In addition to inflicting heavy personnel losses on the Russian military, the UAF has destroyed large quantities of Russian equipment, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery and rocket systems, helicopters, and naval vessels. Russia has responded to those losses by mobilizing its economy to support the war effort. Among other actions, it has directed civilian enterprises to produce products with military applications, transitioned the defense industry to round-the-clock production, and directed about 30% of the federal budget to the military in 2024. Russia also has received assistance from Iran and North Korea (including ballistic missiles, drones, and artillery ammunition) that has helped sustain its stockpiles.

Such efforts mentioned above have contributed to the Russian defense industry’s resilience in the face of U.S. and other international sanctions restricting the import of critical components. Russia has continued to increase its production capacity and output—including dramatically scaling drone production. However, a lack of sufficient components and manufacturing tools, combined with the need to continue producing equipment and ammunition, arguably has forced the Russian defense industry in many cases to prioritize quantity over quality. Examples include the use of dual-use items (which are less effective than

components designed exclusively for the military) in missiles and helicopters and reactivation of Soviet-era tanks and artillery.

With its wartime production posture, Russia’s defense industry appears capable of building, upgrading, and repairing most equipment and weapon systems to sustain combat operations. It remains unclear whether the defense industry will be able to mass produce modern or advanced weapon systems or sustain production over the long term.

Current Military Performance and Outlook

After several defeats in 2022 and spring 2023, Russian forces constructed extensive defensive lines in southern Ukraine and stabilized their command situation to blunt the counteroffensive Ukraine launched in summer 2023. Since that offensive, Russian forces have resumed localized offensive operations. These offensives are not of the same size and scale witnessed during 2022 and early 2023 but involve large numbers of troops and amounts of equipment. Russian operations often retain many of the same characteristics as previous operations that resulted in heavy casualties and limited territorial gains and have similar results. Nevertheless, the Russian military’s strategy of slowly wearing down the UAF appears to be working in some areas, as demonstrated by the capture of Avdiivka.

Despite ineffective operations in some areas, the Russian military also continues to adapt. It has deployed new equipment and tactics to counter UAF operations, including the increased use of drones and electronic warfare. Russian logistics also have successfully adapted several times over the course of the conflict in response to improved UAF long-range strike capabilities provided by the United States and other Western allies.

UAF long-range strikes continue to challenge Russian operations (including forcing Russia’s Black Sea Fleet to relocate much of its operations out of occupied Crimea) but arguably may be insufficient on their own to halt Russian advances. Russia also continues its own long-range precision strike campaign targeting key Ukrainian military and infrastructure targets, after likely stockpiling enough drones and missiles to launch coordinated attacks.

The Biden Administration, allied partners, and the Ukrainian government have warned that recent Russian military successes will continue absent further U.S. security assistance. Other observers, including some Members of Congress, assert the UAF cannot defeat the Russian military regardless of U.S. security assistance. Some observers also note the continued presence of Western components in Russian military equipment, leading some Members of Congress to call for greater oversight of current sanctions on the Russian defense industry.

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