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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 and continues to make steady progress capturing territory in Ukraine. It appears likely to sustain its operational tempo for the immediate future.

Since 2022, Congress has supported Ukraine's defense against Russia's renewed invasion. 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 on Russia and assistance to Ukraine, and deliberate about whether to appropriate further military or other assistance for Ukraine.

### Command and Control

Despite attempted reforms to increase lower-level leadership and autonomy, the Russian military 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.

In May 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin replaced longtime Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu with civilian economist Andrei Belousov. This change came after persistent criticism of the defense leadership and poor performance of the Russian military. Some observers note that Belousov's appointment reflects a recognition by the Russian leadership that the war in Ukraine is a longer-term challenge and that managing economic and defense industrial resources may be crucial to sustaining Russia's war effort. President Putin did not replace Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, possibly out of concern that doing so could provoke instability among the military leadership.

Some observers argue that Russia's leadership prioritizes the perceived political loyalty of officers over their battlefield effectiveness. 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

Recruiting sufficient troops remains a key challenge for Russia's leadership. Continued casualties and challenges fielding well-trained troops have hindered, but not stopped, Russian military operations.

### Casualties

In October 2024, U.S. officials stated that Russia has suffered at least 600,000 killed or wounded. That estimate, however, is possibly low given recent fighting and continued Russian losses.

These rates arguably reflect the continued use of tactics that resulted in high casualty rates in the past, including a reliance on massed personnel attacks, massed artillery fire, and limited operational-level flexibility. Casualty totals likely include mobilized personnel, volunteers, National Guard, recruited prison convicts, and personnel from Russian-occupied Ukrainian regions.

The loss of experienced soldiers has been particularly detrimental to the Russian military's effectiveness and capability. Many of Russia's casualties have been among elite and professional soldiers, as well as the junior officer corps. New recruits, including new junior officers, 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

In September 2024, President Putin increased the size of the military to 1.5 million active-duty troops. Russia's draft budget for 2025-2027 allocates 30 billion rubles (\$315 million at current exchange rates) annually for sign-on bonuses for new recruits. 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.

Russian law prohibits the deployment of conscripts to combat, forcing the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to prioritize recruitment of contract soldiers. The MoD salaries that can be several times the average Russian monthly wage (including sign on bonuses, as high as 22 times the 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. In addition, Russia continues to recruit prisoners with a promise of amnesty, but these recruitment rates reportedly have declined.

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. In addition, Russia has instituted a number of “stop-loss” policies to prohibit soldiers from resigning and bolster the number of soldiers available.

Russia likely continues to recruit sufficient personnel, with some observers estimating 20,000-30,000 new recruits a month, to replenish and rotate units for operations in Ukraine. In July 2024, Russian officials stated that almost 200,000 people had signed contracts since the beginning of the year. Some observers assert these figures are exaggerated and do not accurately reflect the often ad hoc nature of current Russian military recruitment. The bonuses and payments for new recruits also have risen, possibly suggesting increased difficulties with recruitment. Additionally, reports suggest the training of recruits is often substandard and rushed, undermining the Russian military’s ability to conduct complex offensive operations.

## 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 (according to some open-source estimates, Russia has lost more tanks than its entire pre-war active duty force), 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, has transitioned the defense industry to round-the-clock production, and plans to spend 40% of the 2025 federal budget on the military and security services (an increase of 25% from 2024). Russia also has received assistance from Iran and North Korea.

Such efforts have contributed to the Russian defense industry’s resilience in the face of sanctions restricting the import of critical components. U.S. and other Western officials state that China is a crucial source of components for Russia’s defense industry.

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“70% of the machine tools that Russia is importing are coming from China; 90% of the microelectronics that Russia is importing—coming from China. And that’s enabled it to sustain its aggression against Ukraine.”  
U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, July 10, 2024

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Russia has continued to increase its production capacity and output—including substantially scaling up drone production. However, a lack of sufficient components and manufacturing tools, maxed out factory space, and labor shortages, combined with the need to continue producing equipment and ammunition, arguably have forced the Russian defense industry to prioritize quantity over quality. Examples include the use of dual-use items (which are less effective than components designed exclusively for the military) and the reactivation of Soviet-era tanks and artillery. According to some observers, a majority of Russia’s equipment replacements consist of older models refurbished from storage facilities.

Currently, Russia’s defense industry appears capable of upgrading and repairing most equipment and weapon systems for current operations, but it is constrained by dwindling stockpiles and maximized production capacity. It remains unclear whether the defense industry can produce advanced weapon systems or increase production over the long term.

## Current Military Performance and Outlook

After several defeats in spring 2023, Russian forces constructed extensive defensive lines in southern Ukraine and stabilized their command situation. Russian forces have resumed localized offensive operations, focusing on eastern Ukraine. Russian operations often retain many of the same characteristics as previous operations that resulted in heavy casualties and limited territorial gains.

However, the Russian military has reportedly adjusted its tactics to focus on small unit assaults, improved communication, and improved targeting by Russian artillery. 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. This has enabled the Russian military’s strategy of wearing down the UAF in several sectors across the frontline, including capturing the Ukrainian town of Vuhledar in early October 2024.

UAF long-range strikes continue to challenge Russian operations, 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, including destroying much of Ukraine’s energy grid.

The Biden Administration, allied partners, and the Ukrainian government have warned that recent Russian military successes will continue absent continued U.S. security assistance. Others, 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 some Western components in Russian military equipment, leading some Members of Congress to call for greater oversight of sanctions on Russia’s defense industry.

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