Defense and Security

HOW RUSSIA FIGHTS

INSIDE THE OPERATIONAL EVOLUTION OF MOSCOW'S ARMED FORCES BEYOND UKRAINE

OCTOBER 2025

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CONTENTS

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Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is undoubtedly a profoundly transformative event in doctrinal, organizational, capability, and technological terms for all participants and observers of the hostilities. The war on the ground, in the air, and on the waters of Ukraine represents an unprecedented return to European soil of high-intensity, large-scale, and protracted conventional warfare, with the inherent consequences of progressive wear and tear on the opposing sides' military capabilities and the massive mobilization of national war resources to prevail in the conflict. It is a battlespace in which tactical and operational elements of the past have merged with the most futuristic advances in science and technology, shaping, on the one hand, a conflict of attrition based on material warfare and, on the other, highly innovative combat. These aspects form the basis of a constant, cross-cutting process of analysing the lessons identified and the lessons learned from the feedback from experience at every level of the war, constantly confronted with the challenging distinction between fleeting theatre-specific trends and real learnings that can be abstracted from it. This ongoing effort inevitably also involves the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and Moscow's broader military-industrial complex.

The war in Ukraine is, in fact, a powerful catalyst for transformation for the Kremlin's military apparatus, a harbinger of a highly significant contribution to its definition and configuration well beyond the current conflict, particularly in terms of how it would be employed in high-intensity conventional hostilities against a peer or near-peer competitor. Experiments of all kinds implemented by Russian forces on all fronts of the conflict have generated a significant flow of operational, tactical, and technical feedback. This has contributed to a broad-spectrum reshaping, brought about through wartime experience, from the last soldier on the battlefield to the highest levels of military-strategic and military-industrial leadership, relevant to the Russian Federation's understanding, interpretation, and approach to its military instrument in the near future. This metamorphosis tends to transcend the borders of formal defence reform, ultimately shaping the shared

culture within the apparatus, with widespread implications for training, preparation, and procurement processes.

The Russian Armed Forces emerging beyond Ukraine, however, will not be exclusively the result of adjustments imposed by the vigorous, resilient, and effective opposition of Kiev's forces, supported by military assistance from the Countries of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (UDCG), but rather the simultaneous product of at least three historical trends and three converging lines of transformation. From the first perspective, the Kremlin's military instrument will continue to be influenced over the long term by the complex paradigms, especially doctrinal and organizational, of the Soviet era, intersecting with the partial modernizing effects introduced by the 2008 Military Reform and subsequent specific interventions to update the Russian defence apparatus. All adjustments resulting from the experience gained from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will be based on this foundation. These latter, precisely in terms of the second aspect, will likely arise from the synthesis of bottom-up processes promoted by veterans of all ranks, top-down processes outlined by a formal review of hostilities by dedicated top-level institutional bodies, and industrial processes resulting from the restructuring of the production sector for wartime purposes, according to a war economy. The combination of these historical trends and transformative directions, combined with the effect of bureaucratic-hierarchical friction and particularistic interests, will very likely determine the configuration of the Russian Armed Forces of the future.

This Focus Report aims to outline some of the possible doctrinal, organizational, capability, and technological evolutionary trajectories at the operational and tactical levels emerging from the analysis of Russian offensive and defensive activities, planned and conducted in the Ukrainian battlespace. It specifically aims to explore potential lasting transformations in terms of the organization and deployment of units and departments, as well as the use of assets, materials, and weapons systems, including in terms of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and standard operating procedures (SOPs). Despite the importance of the space and cyber domains during hostilities, the analysis focuses primarily on the traditional domains of land, air, and sea, investigating

the actual or potential adaptations by the Russian Armed Forces components operating in them, namely the three branches represented by the Land Forces (SV – Sukhoputnye Voyska), the Aerospace Forces (VKS – Vozdushno-Kosmicheskiye Sily), and the Navy (VMF – Voyenno-Morskoy Flot), as well as the independent Airborne Troops (VDV – Vozdušno-Desantnye Voyska) within the confines of their conventional contribution to combat. The set of lessons learned actually acquired and implemented by these, coordinated with the parallel development of Moscow's defence industry in specific capability segments, thus allows to depict a potential profile of how Russia fights.

I SV: the tactical review of the deep battle

The land component has always been the epicentre of the Soviet and then Russian military, at least quantitatively, with a significant emphasis on mechanized and armoured forces for the massive penetration of enemy lines, as well as on conducting contact manoeuvres aimed at enabling artillery fire. The war in Ukraine, fought essentially on a field and urban front spanning over 1,000 kilometres, further emphasized the primacy of the SV, which have been most impacted by significant processes of metamorphosis, both involutional and evolutionary, aimed at overcoming intrinsic capability deficiencies on the one hand, and at meeting the operational requirements dictated by the contemporary battlefield on the other. Precisely for these aspects and the importance that this branch of the Russian Armed Forces has demonstrated in a theatre the Kremlin considers a crucial strategic periphery, the SV appear destined to remain the backbone of Moscow's conventional deterrent and defence potential.

Figure 1 - Russian soldier engaged in the representative urban context of the Battle of Mariupol, in 2022.

When Russian troops launched the so-called Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the military deployment was essentially structured according to the dictates of the military reforms implemented by the Kremlin in the 2000s, incorporating experience gained from the military campaigns in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Crimea, and Donbass. The key linchpins of this deployment were the Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs), configured as modular, nearly autonomous combined arms units composed of highly operationally ready elements from brigade-level units. Despite their variability, they typically included a motorized rifle battalion, a tank company, one to three artillery batteries, an air

defence platoon, an engineer team, and logistics support, for a total personnel strength that could range from 600 to 900 personnel. Designed to conduct rapid operations through enemy depth in the context of medium-intensity, short-duration military operations, they proved grossly inadequate in terms of mass, operational resilience, and firepower, which would have characterized hostilities in Ukraine from the outset. This contributed significantly to the failure of the poorly informed and superficially prepared SMO.

The BTGs deployed by the SV, estimated at between 100 and 120 in total, were also undersized compared to theoretical deployment tables and, in particular, suffered a significant shortage of infantry personnel, subsequently exacerbated by the significant losses suffered by Moscow's troops in the early days of the conflict. The high dispersion of forces, the degradation of the logistical support chain, and the difficulties at the Command and Control (C2) level encountered during the first weeks of the operation, therefore forced the SV to radically restructure their deployment. This implied the abandonment of the BTGs model and the simultaneous reinstatement, starting from the autumn of 2022, of the previous Soviet-style divisional model, resuming operations on the field at regimental level with a parallel continuous adaptation at the TTPs level.

Figure 2 - Russian soldier in operation among the figurative rubble resulting from the Battle of Severodonetsk, in 2022.

The Russian Armed Forces' land component has thus refocused on Motorized Rifle Regiments, which since the end of 2022 have constituted the true backbone of the reorganized SV engaged in combat on Ukrainian soil. These units generally consist of three motorized rifle battalions, a tank battalion, an artillery battalion, and an anti-aircraft battalion, the latter three often understaffed only as reinforced companies, with additional support elements.

In the context of attritional combat, in order to maintain their combat power as long as possible, these units tend to conduct sub-tactical operations, carrying out rapid assaults with small infantry groups, generally consisting of a minimum of two and a maximum of twelve men. Russian assault TTPs, heavily reliant on infantry, have, due to the proliferation of sensors and effectors on the battlefield and the resulting increase in lethality, progressively shifted toward the use of increasingly smaller and more flexible units, pursuing a dispersed and distributed approach. These infantry formations are then further divided, based on recruitment methods and the level of experience and competence of the personnel, into units assigned to manoeuvre or assault, or simply to engage enemy troops. Specifically, the latter is significant in numerical terms and is composed, on average, of poorly trained personnel, hastily equipped with only light weapons, continuously deployed to engage enemy lines in repeated and exhausting assaults. This is done with the primary goal of consolidating and degrading the defending forces over time, and the secondary goal of testing the enemy's strength on the front, including by occupying tactical footholds near vulnerable points. Such actions, highly costly in terms of human losses, serve as a preparatory step for the subsequent deployment of assault formations, which are instead highly trained, heavily equipped, and characterized by high firepower.

Russian assault troops, whether Storm Z, VDV, or Naval Infantry, are tasked with penetrating enemy defences, operating in synergy with intense artillery barrage, and sometimes with the ground support of armoured vehicles. Once the mission is completed, they are usually taken over by manoeuvre infantry personnel, whether motorized or mechanized, who are charged with consolidating the positions gained

and, if necessary, exploiting the progress achieved to expand the salient under Russian control.

Figure 3 - Column of Russian BTR-82 armoured personnel carriers on the move.

The SV have then increasingly integrated these TTPs in contact with a recourse to infiltration tactics behind enemy lines, relying on the action of small sabotage and reconnaissance groups (DRG – *Diversionno-Razvedyvatel'naya Gruppa*) to operate deep within the territory behind Ukrainian lines, for the purpose of conducting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations, carrying out covert sabotage, and conducting targeted attacks against sensitive objectives. While the concept of DRGs is not new to Soviet and later Russian doctrine, the novelty is their use not at the strategic level, and only rarely at the operational level, but increasingly at the tactical level, employing selected personnel drawn from and trained in the Motorized Rifle Regiments. DRGs also tend to operate in the field in close synergy with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which coordinate ground-based effects from above, providing real-time observation of the situation on the ground. On several occasions, DRGs have conducted night operations wearing anti-drone thermal cloaks, specific, increasingly widespread equipment made from insulating fabrics designed to block thermal emissions.

This allowed personnel to more effectively evade the tracking, identification and targeting of enemy sensors and effectors, achieving a tactical surprise that was functional in generating dilemmas for enemy defences.

Figure 4 - Russian units engaged in a firefight, combined with the use of drones, inside a building.

At the same time, the Russian manoeuvre has registered, in particular during 2025, a growing frontline use of light vehicles such as buggies, quads, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and motorcycles, employed both in assault operations and for ISR tasks at ground level, logistics and rapid evacuation of the wounded (CASEVAC – Casualty Evacuation). This trend represents a response to the lethality of the battlefield, caused above all by the near omnipresence of first-person view unmanned aerial vehicles (FPV UAVs), whose use by Ukraine has caused extremely significant losses to Russia's armoured and mechanized components. Specifically, it is estimated that since the beginning of the conflict, Moscow has lost over 4,000 tanks (MBTs – Main Battle Tanks), more than 8,000 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), and approximately 700 armoured personnel carriers (APCs). Within this framework, drones are responsible for between 60% and 70% of the total damaged or destroyed assets, reflecting a growing hybridization of firepower and threat sources, to which the Russian military has progressively adapted

Figure 5 - An FPV UAV attack quadcopter carrying an explosive payload. These systems were used to conduct precision strikes near the target.

for force protection. As a result, Russian troops have drastically reduced the use of their heavy vehicles on the battlefield, deploying them only after thorough preliminary preparation of the front and rear areas in attempts to penetrate vulnerable points. This was achieved by systematically resorting, in these specific cases, to formations of a lower tactical level as advance guards. The operational remodulation of the use of Russian MBTs also saw a widespread shift in their use to provide fire support for the infantry, sometimes even as alternatives to artillery for remotely engaging enemy positions.

Among the light vehicles that have replaced mobility support along the contact line, the most distinctive feature is the widespread use of off-road motorcycles for assaults. These two-wheeled vehicles have the advantage of high speed and manoeuvrability, allowing them to advance very quickly over difficult terrain and penetrate enemy defences, more easily evading exposure to UAVs and artillery fire. While these motorcycles allow for a semblance of manoeuvrability, albeit a relatively limited one, they inevitably lack the protection, firepower, and survivability of heavier vehicles. For this reason, in some cases, Russian motorcycles have been progressively equipped to increase their protection, including by installing cages or metal nets and equipping them with portable electronic warfare (EW) equipment. The SV have also implemented an integrative doctrine aimed at achieving the systematic use of these assets on the battlefield, likely increasingly structured into distinct units, as occurred in the case of the 123rd Motorized Rifle Brigade and some VDV Regiments. In this regard, in August 2025, the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, Andrei Removich Belousov, announced that 22,725 motorcycles, quads, and buggies had been supplied to the Armed Forces of Moscow during the year, with further deliveries of another 12,186 vehicles of the same type planned

by January 2026. Presumably, therefore, the use of these assets may not constitute a mere parenthesis strictly tied to the tactical contingencies of the Ukrainian theatre, but represent a persistent integration, in terms of organization and TTPs, for the conduct of actions at small unit level on a battlefield characterized by high transparency and high lethality.

Figure 6 - Russian infantry units engaged in conducting attacks on the front lines of enemy positions, using off-road motorcycles.

On the other hand, compared to motorcycles, ATVs offer greater advantages in terms of stability and load capacity and are also gaining increasing tactical relevance. The capabilities these vehicles offer for the rapid transport of troops, ammunition, and equipment along advance lines, as well as for the timely evacuation of wounded personnel from the front to the rear, make them valuable assets not only in assault operations, but also and especially in logistical operations along the Line of Contact (LoC).Regarding supply and evacuation operations for the wounded, the Ukrainian war theatre has also demonstrated the gradual use by Russia of unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs). In addition to logistical tasks, some UGVs are also sometimes used in combat operations, to provide covering fire for infantry, clear the way for armoured vehicles, and provide cover for the infantry. They can be used in counter mobility operations, or as explosive weapons by detonating near the target. Specifically, in March 2024, a group of Russian *Courier-*

type UGVs, equipped with *AGS-17 Plamya* automatic grenade launchers, were observed participating in an assault operation near Berdychi, southeast of Avdiivka. The SV are no strangers to experimenting with UGVs, both in logistical support roles and in combat, as already highlighted in detailed incidents during operations in Syria. The Ukrainian battlefield, however, has significantly fostered bottom-up innovation tailored to the needs of front-line units. While the experience gained on the battlefield and the massive amount of data collected are suitable for informing improved semi-autonomous solutions for dedicated UGVs for SV, the massive human losses suffered, but also imposed, could significantly promote their acquisition. Compared to the past, however, the priority now appears to be focused on small or at most medium-sized platforms, designed for specific tasks and provided to company or battalion level units.

Figure 7 - A Russian Courier UGV, equipped with an automatic grenade launcher and engaged in assault action.

The drastic reduction in the use of heavy vehicles has consistently led to a significant reduction in the battlefield attrition rate of these assets, which in the case of MBTs is reported to have steadily decreased at least since December 2024, reaching the lowest levels recorded since the start of the war in June and July 2025. Specifically, losses of the *T-62* and *T-90* have remained constant, while those of the *T-72* and *T-80* have

progressively decreased. Despite this, Russia has continued to systematically invest in the development and production of tanks and other armoured vehicles, with the plausible intent of replenishing its arsenals in anticipation of future attempts to restore manoeuvrability on the battlefield. One of the most impactful technical developments regarding MBTs is the introduction into service of active protection systems (APS), currently integrated into both the *T-72B3* and the *T-90M*. The Russian production chain also continues its industrial efforts to increase the survivability of its MBTs with new and more performing types of reactive armour, compared to the current explosive reactive armour (ERA*) Relikt*, in turn an evolution of the previous one *Kontakt-5*.

Figure 8 - A Russian T-90 MBT manoeuvring on a contemporary battlefield, characterized by multiple threats.

Both the development of progressive technical improvements in Russian MBTs, IFVs, and APCs, as well as the investment in their production potential by the Moscow military-industrial complex, amply underscore how the temporary marginalization of heavy assets in no way implies the abandonment of armoured manoeuvre by the SV. This, in fact, remains the pinnacle of a tactical interpretation of the concept of deep battle, in which the combination of disarticulation and degradation of the enemy's front and rear, through supremacy in indirect artillery fire, enables limited spatial and temporal

vulnerabilities, characterized by decision-making delays and reduced lethality of the opposing side. These vulnerabilities are also catalysed and facilitated by the combination of repeated infantry assaults and DRG infiltrations beyond the line of contact. Given this situation, it is the convergence of armoured reserves from camouflaged positions in the rear and their flanking penetration towards key terrain beyond enemy defences that could potentially, from the Russian perspective, determine the adversary's retreat and the achievement of a tactical or, in some cases, even operational result. This is a scheme of action that, in the experience and intent of the Kremlin's military deployment, appears to be feasible so far, due to the need for speed and dispersion of forces, on one front and with a force at most at battalion level.

Figure 9 - Some operators of a Russian DRG engaged in infiltration behind enemy lines.

Both the attritional conflict and the eventual restoration of armoured manoeuvre are, however, based on the primacy of indirect artillery fire, the cornerstone of the Red Army's combat power since World War II, and subsequently of the SV. This component has subsequently found continuity and effectiveness in all operations conducted in the Ukrainian theatre. This predominance, however, has been marked by profound transformations in the balance between concentration and density of fire on the one hand, and ammunition economy, distribution of sources, and precision of effect on the other. At the beginning of the SMO, each Russian BTG included a maximum of two tube artillery batteries and one rocket artillery battery, equipped with self-propelled howitzers such as the *2S3 Akatsiya* or the 152 mm *2S19 Msta-S* and the 203 mm *2S7 Pion*, and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) such as the *9K515 Tornado-S* and the *BM-27 Uragan*.

Figure 10 - A Russian 2S19 Msta-S self-propelled howitzer. These assets were widely used during the conflict for artillery fire support.

The abandonment of the BTGs model and the return to the regimental system, instead, led to a centralization of the artillery in independent brigades (Brigade Artillery Group), ready to deploy batteries to support the various lines of advance, maintaining a significant force in reserve under the direct command of the brigade itself. The Russian artillery, distributed tactically and concentrated operationally, has also gradually

shifted toward a mobile and distributed deployment, combined with a retreat of approximately 12-15 kilometres from the front line. This reorganization has favoured the planning and conduct of a decentralized and more selective firepower manoeuvre, based on a rapid sequence of movement, positioning, fire, and withdrawal (shoot and scoot).

While during the summer 2022 offensive, Russian artillery fired between 20,000 and 60,000 rounds per day, exploiting the ability to generate an overwhelming volume of fire at the expense of limited synchronization of its effects and poor target acquisition capability, in subsequent phases this rate decreased in favour of improved effectiveness on high-payoff targets (HPTs).

Figure 11 - An Iskander-M TEL in firing position.

The SV achieved significant improvements in their ability to find, fix, and neutralize targets (F3 – Find, Fix, and Finish), integrating observation and designation using various types of UAVs, with artillery deployed across distributed fire sources, but with concentrated and simultaneous effects on the target (TRSC – Tactical Reconnaissance Strike Complex). In addition to increased fire synchronization up to the highest unit levels, the SV have significantly improved targeting coordination against the enemy's rear and first depth, with the use of *Iskander-M* short-range

ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and with the effects generated by and through the third dimension of the VKS and VMF. This capability has been extensively demonstrated with the use of ISR UAVs organic to artillery batteries for the designation of high-value targets (HVTs), including the *M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System* (HIMARS) and *Patriot* systems, C2 facilities, airfields, and ammunition depots, to support the kinetic action of *Iskander-M* SRBMs.

In July 2025, the mobile launchers (TEL – Transporter-Erector-Launcher) of the latter, present in the vicinity of the Ukrainian theatre, even reached 60 units, resulting in being able to receive coordinates on the move and launch a vector in about 3 minutes. Parallel to a greater integration of both multi-weapon and joint targeting potential, and an acceleration of the F3 cycle, the Russian artillery has significantly increased the use of guided munitions, in particular with the *2K25 Krasnopol*, updated in the new *Krasnopol-M2* version. A 152 mm laser-guided projectile, this uses a semi-active laser homing system that allows it to reach targets designated by forward observers (FO) or UAVs, such as the *Orlan-30*s, and is compatible with various Russian artillery systems, such as the *2S19 Msta-S* self-propelled guns and the *D-20* towed howitzers. Similarly, Russian forces are increasingly using a similar 122 mm laser-guided munition, the *Kitolov-2M*, designed for artillery systems such as the *D-30* howitzer and the *2S1 Gvozdika* self-propelled gun.

Figure 12 - Launchers of an S-400 air defence system in deployment.

Technical and tactical advances in the use of indirect fire by Russian troops have been accompanied by an incremental and coordinated use of loitering munitions, such as the *Zala*, *Lancet-3*, and *Kub-BLA*, which simultaneously act as sensors and effectors to engage enemy air defences, artillery systems, and occasionally armoured vehicles. These have significantly improved the effectiveness of Russian artillery and enabled targeted attacks, even at low altitude, aimed at degrading and disrupting enemy defences, in some cases supporting the saturation of enemy anti-aircraft defences through swarm releases, as occurred with the most recent *V2Us*.

Figure 13 – A Lancet-3 loitering munition flying towards the target.

The introduction of the latter in February 2025 underscores the importance placed on such systems by the SV to ensure reliable, low-cost tactical precision targeting against enemy frontlines and rear areas, thanks to an inertial and satellite guidance system, also enabled for manual control in FPV mode via broadband wireless communication. The increasing use of FPV UAVs and loitering munitions by the SV is further underscored by the fact that approximately 70% of the injuries sustained by Ukrainian personnel on the Pokrovsk front were caused by these systems, rendering the Ground Lines of Communication (GLOC) impassable at times, depriving the front of supplies of any kind, and impeding or delaying unit rotations. The kill zone generated by these systems has also expanded to within 2 kilometres from the LoC in early 2024 to the current 10 kilometres.

Overall, the Russian approach emerges, based on the combined use of traditional artillery, UAVs, loitering munitions, and guided and unguided glide bombs, in synergy with ground operations by assault troops and DRGs. Indirect fire, although profoundly updated in terms of the dynamic distribution of sources and the balance between massing and accuracy, continues to represent the doctrinal core of SV manoeuvre, with a number of innovations that further strengthen its role and amplify its effectiveness at the theatre level.

The land component of the Russian Armed Forces has also maintained and renewed its original Soviet inspired approach to the construction of layered and fortified defences, the initial construction of which often tends to take place almost immediately after conquering a new position. Enabled by widespread training among personnel on the preparation of rapid obstacles and concealed positions for direct fire, the availability of dedicated military engineering units, and the provision of a series of special vehicles for digging trenches, among other things, these generally comprise two or three main lines, spaced approximately 5 kilometres apart and characterized by increasing solidity and complexity the further away from the front.

Figure 14 - Russian military sets up anti-drone nets along a GLOC in the rear, to defend against the threat of FPV UAVs.

Similarly, mining has been a decisive element in mobility denial and counter-mobility warfare operations, both in the defensive and offensive phases. Indeed, the SV have progressively consolidated the extensive use of minefields to channel and isolate enemy forces within areas saturated by artillery fire (fire sacks). Central to this organizational approach are the Mobile Obstacle Detachments, manoeuvring units of the military engineering corps that operate in conjunction with mines and anti-tank support systems, to degrade and disrupt enemy deployments both during advances and retreats. In terms of assets, confirming the importance of this segment for the SV, the most recent system deployed is the wheeled Intelligent Submunition Delivery System (ISDM) *Zemledeliye*, which employs a total of 50 122 mm rockets, allowing for depth mining up to 15 kilometres from the release area.

Figure 15 - An MLRS BM-27 Tornado-S in fire activity.

The munitions used by this system include a diverse range of mine-exploding munitions, such as the *AT POM-3*, and the Soviet-era *AP PTM-3* and *PFM-1S* mines, used primarily for defensive purposes. Along with these systems, traditional rocket launchers such as the 122 mm *BM-21 Grad* and the 220 mm *BM-27 Uragan* have also been widely adapted to deploy rockets equipped with mine-exploding submunitions. These launch platforms, with proven battlefield experience, have enabled the creation of areas inaccessible, or with minimal flow rate, for the

Ukrainian military, disrupting its counter offensive operations in many cases. The Russian Armed Forces' ground component has also begun using UAVs for battlefield minework, particularly to disrupt enemy GLOC in the rear areas. Some incidents have involved the release of *AP PTM-3* anti-tank mines from under the drone's fuselage. This same model is also increasingly being integrated as the warhead in *Lancet* type loitering munitions, ensuring a more powerful and effective detonation than the standard *KZ-6*.

Figure 16 - The Pantsir-S air defence system, frequently used for short range air defence.

Beyond field defence and the use of new TTPs and SOPs for the deployment of mines to shape the battlefield, the SV have similarly increased the emphasis on protecting their forces from air threats. This latter aspect follows a modernization of the tradition, consolidated since Soviet doctrine, of deploying mobile short range air defence systems (SHORAD) for the defence of manoeuvre units, complementing it with the implementation of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) systems with theatre coverage, the latter under the responsibility of the VKS. The simultaneous concentration of layered air defences, with long, medium and short range systems, through the deployment at increasing distances from the front of systems such as the *S-400 Triumf*, the *S-300VM Antey-2500*, the *Buk-M2/M3*, the *Tor-M2*, and the *Pantsir-S1*,

combined with the selective disarticulation of enemy multi-domain firepower through EW, SRBMs, and artillery, has significantly reduced the effectiveness of Ukrainian targeting against Russian rear areas over time. The conflict also allowed the Russian Armed Forces, as a whole, to collect an enormous amount of data on Euro-Atlantic-produced weapon systems and attack vectors, permitting an accurate technical capability analysis and the development of effective countermeasures, often tested and implemented within just a few months. In parallel with a significant improvement in countering the threats themselves, Russian forces have developed and rigorously implemented new SOPs to hinder enemy ISR activities, particularly in the electromagnetic environment. In the initial phase of the war, the Kremlin troops were in fact accustomed to using high frequency unencrypted devices and cell phones, allowing geolocation by Kiev units, resulting in heavy human and material losses. Field experience has led SV to a widespread transition to encrypted communications and a general rethinking of the use of radio transmission tools, with greater discipline in their use and an almost total absence of front-line communications.

In this regard, there has been a progressive improvement in the efficiency of the transmission departments through the development of the advanced encrypted communication system *R-187P1 Azart* (SDR – Software Defined Radio), specifically designed to provide troops with secure communications that are resistant to enemy jamming. The system operates in the very high and ultra-high frequency bands (VHF/UHF) and covers a range of approximately 18 kilometres in land communications. It can also be used both as a repeater station and for positioning purposes, using GLONASS and GPS systems. The *R-187P1* is also increasingly being supported by the *R-168 Akveduk* fifth generation tactical digital radio, suitable for operational continuity even in less permissive electromagnetic environments. Although seemingly basic, the dissemination of this equipment across all SV departments and the familiarization with it and the related SOPs by a large portion of personnel at all levels represents significant progress for a ground component historically plagued by delays in communications and transmissions.

Overall, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has forced significant reorganizations across all branches and corps that comprise the SV, both promoting involutional adaptations and evolutionary innovations aimed at sustaining and prevailing in attritional combat and devising new approaches to selectively restore manoeuvre. Beyond the contingencies of the Ukrainian theatre, what appears to emerge from this perspective is a revision of the Soviet-derived in-depth battle, reinterpreted at the tactical level and selectively phased, in which superior firepower constitutes the fundamental linchpin for degrading and disarticulating the adversary, simultaneously wearing it down with coordinated tactical and sub-tactical actions at the front and in the rear. This approach aims to test the adversary's resilience (not only military) while preserving the combat power of mechanized and armoured units, increasingly understood as operational reserves to catalyse the exploitation of potential gaps in the enemy's defences by carrying out flanking actions. A metamorphosis still in progress which nevertheless underlines how the SV emerging from the muddy trenches of far Eastern Europe represent a more competent, resilient and combat-ready force throughout its ranks.

II VKS: la frammentazione degli effetti aerei

The Russian air force has suffered a significant reduction in its impact and ability to generate decisive effects across the battlespace compared to what the Russian Armed Forces had initially anticipated. Not only did the VKS fail to achieve air supremacy at the outset of hostilities, but they also failed to consolidate a superiority sufficient to maintain freedom of action over Ukrainian skies. Target planning itself presented significant challenges, with the almost total and complete ineffectiveness of an operation to suppress and destroy enemy air defences (SEAD/DEAD – Suppression of Enemy Air Defences/Destruction of Enemy Air Defences), resulting in the rapid establishment of a contested air domain. Furthermore, the preliminary bombing campaign failed, largely because it was poorly informed, to achieve its objective of disrupting Kiev's C2 capabilities, undermining the rapid outcome sought by the SMO. The VKS's contribution has thus increasingly become structured along three distinct lines of action: a separate air war conducted exclusively with long range missiles for targeting the enemy depth, the development of a stand-off Close Air Support (CAS) capability, and the contribution to the defence of airspace close to the front line. All three have also undergone significant changes due to the introduction of various types of UAVs operating at various altitudes, hybridizing the use of air defence on the one hand and fragmenting the air domain in an unprecedented way on the other.

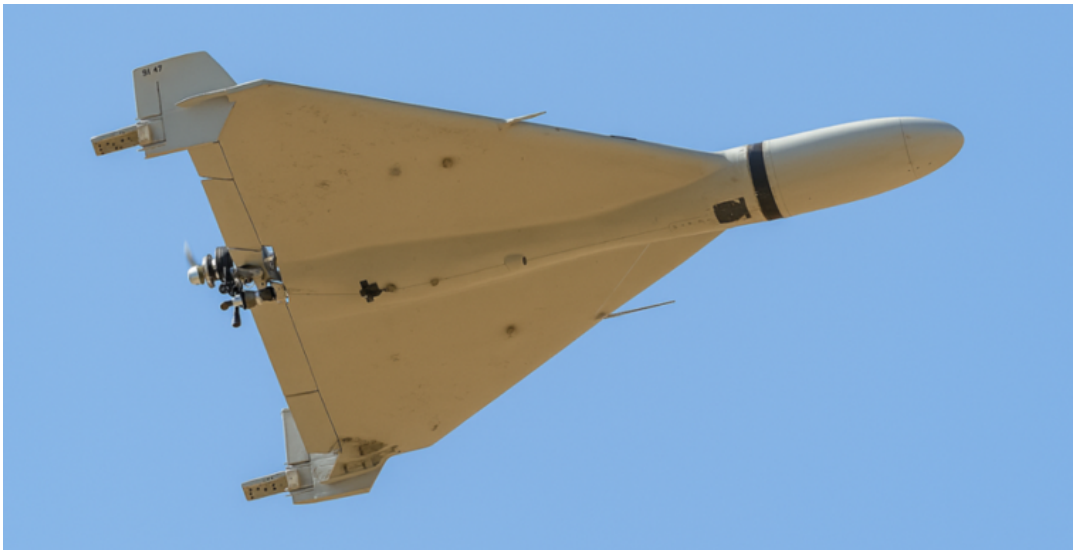

Figure 17 - Un drone Geran-2, utilisé massivement par les forces armées russes pour cibler dans la profondeur ukrainienne.

Since the early days of the SMO, the VKS have primarily pursued a continuous strategic stand-off targeting action against critical targets throughout Ukrainian territory, primarily employing *MiG-31K* fighters to launch *Kh-47M2 Kinzhal* hypersonic ballistic missiles, *Su-35S* fighters to deploy *Kh-69* cruise missiles, and *Tu-95MS* and *Tu-22M3* bombers to launch *Kh-101* and *Kh-22* cruise missiles, respectively.

Figure 18 - A Russian Tupolev Tu-22M3 strategic bomber releases a Kh-22 air to surface missile.

This campaign continued in fits and starts throughout the conflict, and continues today, characterized by a progressive implementation of saturation bombing, integrated with the launch of long range attack drones (OWA UAVs – One-Way Attack Unmanned Aerial Vehicles). The use of these aircraft has intensified particularly since the last months of 2024 and is expected to continue growing throughout 2025, made possible by the rapid expansion in the production scale of the Russian military-industrial complex of OWA UAVs derived from the Iranian *Shahed-131* and *Shahed-136*, particularly the *Geran-1* and *Geran-2* versions, which can travel up to 2,500 kilometres at a maximum speed of 180 kilometres per hour. Recent developments made to these attack vectors include new interference resistant controlled reception antennas, the introduction of payloads and the use of datalinks able to use the Ukrainian mobile phone network. The Russian forces have also

increased the use of decoy drones, unarmed and highly cost-effective means of delivery released in masse alongside missile and OWA UAV launches to saturate, confuse, and overwhelm Ukrainian air defences. The hybridization of long-range air targeting potential and the significant experience gained in route planning and attack salvo composition represents an extremely significant transformation, which will tend to be embedded in the doctrinal approach of the Russian Armed Forces with the parallel pursuit of the destruction of critical infrastructure, coupled with the depletion of enemy air defences arsenals. From the perspective of the Kremlin's military posture, saturation therefore appears to emerge both in terms of immediate excess threats compared to counter-air systems, in order to effectively hit designated targets, and in terms of the erosion of enemy anti-air defences over time, with results almost similar to those of a SEAD/DEAD operation.

Figure 19 - A MIG-31K, configured for the transport and release of the Kh-47M2 Kinzhal hypersonic ballistic missile.

In contrast to the essentially separate nature of the long-range air campaign deep in Ukraine from hostilities on the ground, except for a material warfare perspective, the VKS have developed, especially since 2025, an ever-increasing synergy with the SV in battlefield air interdiction (BAI) and CAS activities. Integrated and synchronized with

the use of artillery, FPV UAVs, and loitering munitions, these have focused on the stand-off deployment of guided glide bombs, in order to ensure the survivability of the fixed-wing aircraft that drop them. Although often rudimentary, these devices, created by combining free-fall bombs with a kit consisting of a guidance system and retractable metal wings (UMPK – *Universalny Modul Planirovaniya i Korrektsii*), have proven extremely effective, economical, and scalable. From a production perspective, these deployments have enhanced vast Soviet era arsenals, not only providing the VKS with a previously absent option but also creating the conditions for a greater airborne contribution to ground operations. Innovations in aerial munitions have also been integrated with a widespread revival of SOPs for toss bombing, aiming to further increase the distance between the aircraft and the target, both for range and protection of the launching device.

Taken together, these adaptations constitute an extremely significant evolution, both because they imply an unprecedented reassessment of the role of Russian fixed-wing aircraft in supporting tactical manoeuvres, and because they are based on the experience gained in a high intensity conventional warfighting context characterized by a degraded electromagnetic environment and actively contested air dominance. The technical improvements progressively introduced in guided glide bombs, their widespread use on the battlefield, both in open and urban environments, and the likely deployment by the Russian military-industrial complex of at least 75,000 units by 2025 alone, further underscore how Moscow's war machine views them as a key asset for strengthening firepower supremacy, even in the third dimension. The evolution of Russian capabilities in BAI and CAS tasks is closely related and integrated with a possible doctrinal review of tactical depth warfare, disrupting the rear areas from which flanking manoeuvres can then be executed, degrading vulnerable points on the enemy front with physical and cognitive effects, exposing them to armoured penetration by ground forces.

In parallel with their in-depth targeting and, in some respects, unprecedented support for the SV, the VKS have finally integrated the defence of the airspace above their forces with constant patrols of the skies, actively competing for that over enemy troops. This has required

a refinement in the coordination between air assets and ground-based air defence systems, forced by numerous incidents of friendly fire, which peaked in the transition phase between the start of the SMO, which originally envisioned a sequential approach between air operations and ground manoeuvres, and the consolidation of the war of attrition, where synchronization between the SV and the VKS has become crucial to effectively balance force protection with the degradation of the adversary. In the Defensive Counter Air (DCA) and Offensive Counter Air (OCA) operations conducted by Russian aircrafts, the operational requirement of being able to threaten and potentially engage an enemy asset at long range has proven crucial to maintaining an asymmetry in the ability of opposing aircraft to approach the front line. From this perspective, the VKS appear to pursue a significant improvement in capability in the relevant segment, starting with air-to-air vectors with similar characteristics already in use and extensively tested in Ukraine, such as the *R-37* and *R-77M*.

Beyond the fixed-wing component, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has profoundly transformed the paradigms for employing rotary-wing assets, including for VKS, requiring a nearly complete overhaul of their use. During the first year of conflict alone, the Russian Armed Forces lost a total of 57 helicopters, of which 41 were shot down, 15 destroyed or damaged on the ground, and one abandoned, equivalent to approximately 28% of the entire fleet in operational readiness. This attrition rate was the result of a manoeuvre in the third dimension based on assumptions completely incompatible with the pervasive lethality at low altitudes, which has instead characterized the Ukrainian theatre from the very beginning. In this context, man portable air defence systems (MANPADS) were particularly impactful, accounting for at least 49% of the total losses suffered. The most emblematic episode of Moscow's initial difficulties in using its rotary wing assets was the attempted helicopter assault conducted by the VDV at Antonov Airport in Hostomel on February 24, 2022, during which between five and seven aircraft were destroyed in just over 24 hours, including *Ka-52 Alligator* and *Mil Mi-24/35* attack helicopters and *Mil Mi-8* troop transports.

Figure 20 - A KA-52M Alligator attack helicopter. The use of these assets has changed appreciably during the conflict in Ukraine.

The VKS, however, did not abandon the use of these platforms, but instead adapted their role on the battlefield starting in the second year of the war, using them primarily for defensive purposes and for conducting long-range ambushes, thus operating beyond the range of Ukrainian MANPADS. In particular, the *Ka-52 Alligator*, meanwhile upgraded to the new *Ka-52M* version, has gradually proven itself to be an effective anti-tank platform. During Kiev's counteroffensive in the summer of 2023, it played a decisive role in targeting Ukrainian armoured formations attempting to penetrate Russian defence lines.

Moscow's forces have therefore introduced both significant changes to their TTPs and technological improvements to their assets, particularly in self-protection, night vision, and target acquisition systems. Russian attack helicopters are currently relying on enhanced aiming systems and software improvements that have resolved existing vibration-induced problems, while also integrating new-generation munitions, such as the *Kh-39 LMUR* air to surface anti-tank missile, which gives the *Ka-52M Alligator* a range of up to 15 kilometres. In general terms, however, the major discontinuity was represented by the abandonment of a doctrinal conception of Soviet origin, which considered the helicopter as a flying armoured platform to be used similarly to its

ground counterparts, in favour of deployment further back from the front, often dedicated to indirect fire support with unguided rockets launched in a ballistic trajectory (lofting). The technical and tactical adjustments induced by the conflict in Ukraine, primarily related to increased lethality at low altitudes, will likely persist in the rotary wing component of the VKS, transposing, among other things, into a particular emphasis on training in low-level flight and doctrinal updates for a prevalent use of helicopters for Close Combat Attack (CCA) activities in stand-off mode.

Although the Russian-Ukrainian war is not strictly speaking an air-to-ground conflict, due to the mutual ability to contest the opposing sides' airspace, and is instead characterized by a high lethality zone for airborne assets extending at least 30 kilometres across the front, the failures, losses, and marginalization suffered by the VKS have led to a consequent capacity adaptation in some areas. This essentially hinges on the pervasive transition to stand-off targeting capabilities, from strategic bombing, through BAI, to CAS and CCA, including far from insignificant improvements in coordination with SV to generate effects on the enemy's front and rear. The convergence between implemented TTPs, technological developments, and the orientation of industrial mobilization appears to consolidate a propensity among VKS, both in the air to surface and air to air segments, toward a conservative approach, aimed at operating from safe airspace, engaging or striking targets from the greatest possible distance. This is ultimately consistent with the persistence of a doctrine geared more toward challenging a peer competitor's air superiority through attrition, rather than imposing Russian supremacy over the battlefield.

III VMF: the miniaturization of the fleet

Characterized by a profound asymmetry of forces and initially viewed by the Kremlin's Armed Forces as a vulnerable flank in Kiev's theatre defence deployment, the Black Sea naval extension of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict forced the VMF to confront a highly innovative adversary that effectively challenged first its freedom of manoeuvre and then its very freedom of navigation. The Russian fleet was thus exposed to extremely heavy losses, both quantitatively and qualitatively, suffering the effects of an unprecedented combination of aerial, seaborne (USV – Unmanned Surface Vessel), and underwater (UUV – Unmanned Underwater Vehicle) drones, as well as anti-ship and cruise missiles, which rendered a large area off the Ukrainian coast unsafe.

Figure 21 - A Kalibr cruise carrier, with LACM capability, launched from a missile corvette.

Affected by failures and losses, coupled with the substantial ineffectiveness of its actions to enforce a naval blockade, including massive but ineffective maritime mining, the VMF has therefore adapted its approach to operations in brown waters, partly by emulating the TTPs and technologies of its counterparts. Unlike in other traditional domains, however, the lessons learned in theBlack Sea are unlikely to inform transversal adjustments within the Russian fleet, with their effects limited to the naval deployment active in the region and other

quadrants with similar characteristics, such as the Mediterranean basin and the Baltic Sea theatre.

Figure 22 - Sinking of a large surface unit after being hit by anti-ship missiles.

Since the inception of the SMO, the Russian Armed Forces have employed VMF surface vessels and submarines to launch *Kalibr* cruise missiles, with a range of approximately 1,000 nautical miles, for long range targeting of critical targets deep within Ukrainian territory, complementing the multi-domain strike campaign conducted jointly with the SV and VKS. Specifically, the Russian fleet has deployed *Grigorovich* class frigates, *Buyan-M* class corvettes, and *Kilo* class attack submarines in the Black Sea, demonstrating the effects of the so called kalibrization process, the inclusion of these attack vectors on vessels of any type and class. This configuration was the result of an adaptive process aimed at maximizing and standardizing offensive potential from the sea, as already experienced, particularly in the context of military operations in Syria against Islamic State targets. Unlike those occasions, however, the VMF had to contend with hybrid sea denial operations implemented by Ukrainian forces, starting in April 2022, when two Ukrainian made *Neptune* subsonic anti-ship missiles sank the Russian guided missile cruiser *Moskva*. The subsequent and incremental use of USVs such as the *Magura V5*, responsible for, among other things,

the sinking of the landing ship *Caesar Kunikov*, and the simultaneous use of attack vectors provided as part of the UDCG's military assistance, such as *Storm Shadow* and the *MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System* (ATacMS), capable of striking Russian naval assets even within the port of Sevastopol, forced the VMF to significantly reduce its presence near the Ukrainian coast. This has led to a withdrawal of most of the assets in the inner areas of the eastern Black Sea, in particular in the Russian port of Novorossiysk, substantially marginalizing the ability of the Moscow fleet to continue to contribute effectively to the hostilities.

Figure 23 - A Russian operator about to set up an Orlan-10 UAV before release.

The VMF then adopted further countermeasures, strengthening naval defences against Ukrainian USVs and UUVs, intensifying patrols using submarines, rotary-wing aircraft, and UAVs, and deploying underwater mines and physical barriers to protect ports. Although primarily defensive, this approach allowed the Russian fleet to gain experience in force protection in a contested operational scenario, dismantling outdated paradigms unsuitable for facing an adaptive adversary, albeit one markedly inferior in the traditional maritime domain. At the same time, the Russian fleet decided to adapt to the asymmetric level of naval engagement, emulating its counterpart in the industrial development of UAVs, USVs, and UUVs designed to ensure that Kiev's sea denial could not lead to any form of sea control. As evidence of the progress made in this segment, the VMF targeted the Ukrainian reconnaissance vessel *Simferopol* at the mouth of the Danube, employing a Russian made USV for the first time. The efficiency and positive operational response of these assets are the basis of a process of progressive experimental drone deployment within the Russian fleet's naval groups. In this

context, UAVs such as the *Orlan-10* and *Forpost* represent a tangible example of how the Russian Federation has incorporated these capabilities into its air-sea deployment, likely destined to maintain solid continuity beyond the conflict in Ukraine. Although tentative and with limited operational results, also as a result of the objective absence of a conventional counterpart on which to test new assets and TTPs, this trend signals the beginning of the development of the concept of distributed maritime operations within the VMF, focused however on an unmanned component with limited ISR or outboard explosive effector functions deployed from the coast or from other naval units.

Overall, the experience gained from the conflict could lead to a partial reassessment of the Russian fleet's composition, with implications at least for the units deployed in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Baltic Sea. The lessons learned from hostilities, combined with Russia's awareness of its traditional maritime inferiority compared to its likely peers, could indeed promote a selective transition within Russian naval doctrine. Specifically, the trends emerging in parallel from Moscow's military-industrial complex signal a greater investment in the development of small-tonnage vessels, highly mobile, lightweight vessels capable of agile manoeuvring and evading fast threats on and under the surface, in both green and brown waters. The potential reversal of the balance of power at sea compared to future scenarios could ultimately promote the replication, in doctrinal and capability terms, of what was accomplished by Ukrainian forces, with the aim of denying freedom of navigation to a potential adversary.

Conclusions

The Russian Armed Forces have fought several conflicts in multiple theatres since the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly over the last fifteen years, demonstrating a generally limited capacity to capitalize on the benefits of their experience. The war in Ukraine, however, presents extraordinary circumstances in terms of magnitude, duration, and impact on the society, economy, and even the territory of the Russian Federation. This underpins a different approach by Moscow's military-security apparatus, which has demonstrated, particularly since the second year of hostilities, its ability to adapt its conduct, balancing the recovery of traditional paradigms with the pursuit of innovation. The impact that the SMO has had and will have on the Kremlin's military instrument and its self-representation also transcends the limits of any formal adaptation reform of the same after the war. Rather, it will likely shape the future professional culture of all personnel, regular and irregular, employed without distinction by the Russian Ministry of Defence.

At both the institutional and industrial levels, the conflict in Ukraine has allowed, and more often forced, Moscow's Armed Forces to transform themselves, both for battlefield survival requirements and for the personal needs of preserving positions of power within Moscow's military-security apparatus. Social and industrial mobilization, and the hybridization of forces and tactics, have thus enabled, through a combination of doctrinal, organizational, and capability involutions and evolutions, a marked operational resilience. Suffering horrific losses, the Kremlin's military instrument has absorbed an incomparable and irreproducible return of experience in large-scale, high-intensity conventional warfighting on a highly transparent and lethal battlefield. The SV, VKS, and VMF have learned, or at least experienced, more than any peer or near-peer competitor how to regain, assume, and maintain the initiative in an attritional engagement based on material warfare, conceptually exploring how to restore manoeuvre, at least at the tactical level. By consolidating the centrality of mass and firepower in the Russian approach to combat, they have acquired expertise in conducting dispersed and distributed operations, forcibly developing greater multi-service and joint coordination.

Determining how much and which of these changes will take root in the Russian Armed Forces beyond Ukraine, formalizing and implementing them structurally, is premature. However, if enhanced by greater internal synergy within the military-industrial complex and a functionalist revision of institutional hierarchies, they could grant Moscow's military apparatus a potentially decisive advantage in both a localized conflict and a conventional war. The tactical-operational transformation already underway, however, will likely need to be incorporated into a broader strategic review of Russia's defence potential, including likely budget constraints and the resulting priorities placed on advanced capabilities and technologies that were not applied in any way in the hostilities in Ukraine, but which, in the Kremlin's view, represent crucial elements for the Russian Federation's primacy and deterrence. The Strategic Missile Forces (RVSN – *Raketnye Vojska Strategičeskogo Naznačenija)* and the space domain developments pursued by the VKS could indeed catalyse a significant portion of investment, as they are retrospectively considered crucial in deterring major peer competitors from directly intervening within the perceived Russian strategic periphery, enabling limited operations under asymmetric conditions. This could, secondarily, involve the imposition of a favourable attritional contest over a long period, even on a large scale.

Pending the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine, the strengthening of a perception of a permanent state of war within the Kremlin's military-security apparatus, combined with the effects of Russia's industrial conversion and mobilization, as well as the updated regeneration of the Russian Armed Forces, will likely tend to equip the Russian Federation with a competitive military instrument within three to five years of the cessation of hostilities. Understanding the trends that could impact both the reconstitution of SV, VKS, and VMF, as well as their actual combat methods, is therefore essential for the credibility and readiness of Euro-Atlantic deterrence and defence.

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