

ADAPTING RUSSIA'S ARMED FORCES FOR PROLONGED CONFRONTATION

The objectives of Russia's military reform reflect the leadership's vision of the resources required for the conflict with Ukraine and prolonged confrontation with the West.

Russia presents its military reform as a response to NATO's expansion, probably anticipating a possible conflict with the alliance within the next decade.

Russia's goal is to achieve military dominance in the Baltic Sea region. For Estonia, Russia's military reform entails a significant increase in Russian forces near the Estonian border in the coming years.

At the end of 2022, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced plans to overhaul the organisational structure of the Russian Armed Forces, reform the military command, establish additional units and formations in almost all branches, and increase the personnel strength to 1.5 million service members. These ambitious reforms are planned to be implemented over three to four years and are being presented as a response to NATO's expansion.

Minister Shoigu's military restructuring efforts cover two main directions:

1. restructuring the military command and control chain;
2. expanding personnel size and adding new units to the armed forces.

FOCUS ON RESTRUCTURING THE MILITARY COMMAND AND CONTROL CHAIN

The reform will dissolve joint strategic commands and revert to a structure based on military branches and services. The Pacific, Black Sea and Baltic Fleets, which were previously part of joint strategic commands, have been brought back under the direct command of the Russian Navy. The joint strategic command formed around the Northern Fleet during past reforms has been dissolved, returning it to a regular structure. The air and air defence forces have been reorganised, no longer subordinated to the military districts. Instead, they now operate under the command of the Russian Aerospace Forces. The military districts will retain only a limited role as territorial commands. The planning and execution of Russian joint operations will likely occur at the level of the General Staff or dedicated joint task force staffs.

Another major change is the establishment of the Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts in early 2024, replacing the Western Joint Strategic Command. This shift likely aims to bolster Russia's military posture towards Finland after its accession to NATO.

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A third significant change is the addition of corps-level command to the structure of land forces involving a transition to a four-level command scheme: military district – army – corps – division. Army corps already existed in the Russian military organisation before Shoigu's reforms, but they were established solely for operations in geographically isolated regions (such as the 11th Army Corps of the Baltic Fleet in Kaliningrad enclave, the 68th Army Corps of the Eastern Military District in Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, and the 14th Army Corps of the Northern Fleet in the Kola Peninsula). With Shoigu's military reform, army corps are formed within the regular army structure, indicating that the Russian leadership sees the need to return to a mass army concept to continue the conflict in Ukraine and prepare for a possible conflict with NATO.

INCREASING PERSONNEL SIZE AND ADDING NEW UNITS

Increasing the personnel and adding new units to the armed forces is the primary focus of Shoigu's military reform. Russia aims to increase its military personnel from 1.15 million to 1.5 million soldiers by 2026, restructure 12 land and naval infantry brigades into divisions, and create dozens of new units larger than regiments in the land, air and naval forces, as well as in the airborne troops. The formation of many of these units has already begun, but the main challenge is the shortage of contracted service members and officers, which delays the unit formation process.

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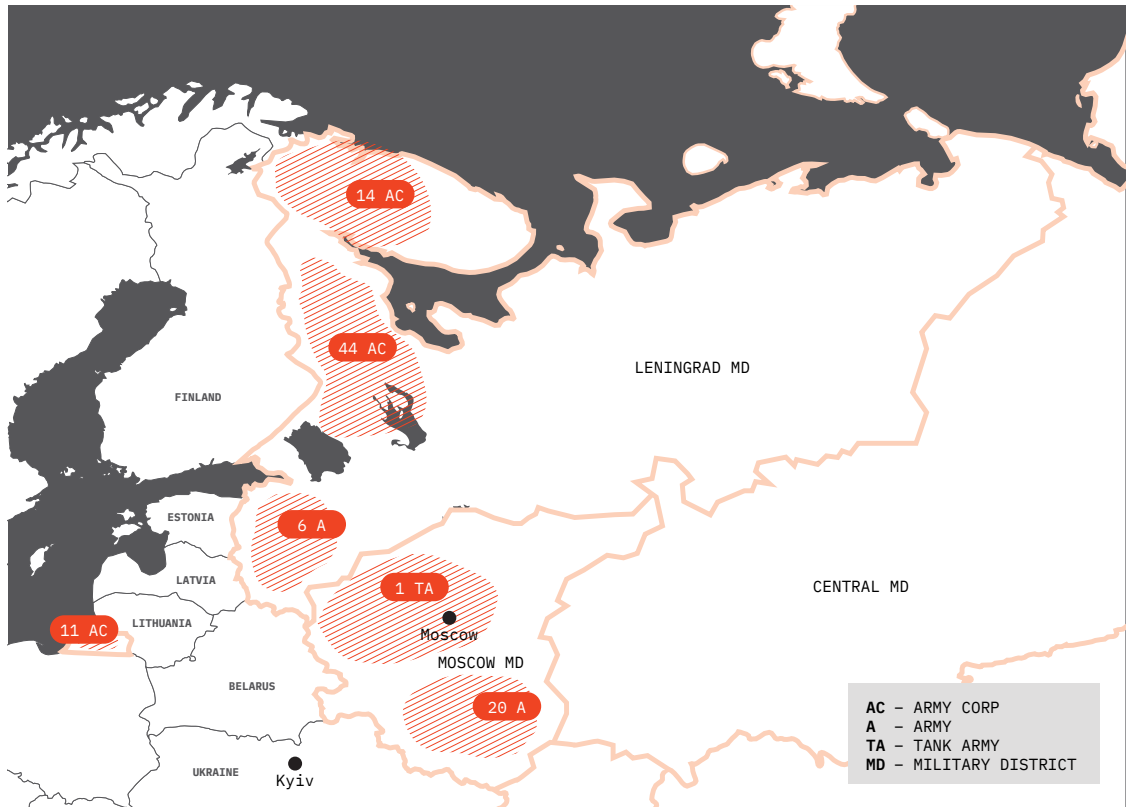
Although Russia plans to strengthen all strategic directions, including organising naval infantry brigades into divisions and establishing five regional artillery divisions, the highest priority for force generation lies in the Western strategic direction and Ukraine. The Kremlin is preparing for a prolonged conflict with Ukraine, necessitating additional armies and army corps (3rd and 40th Army Corps, 18th Army and 25th Army), for which dozens of new manoeuvre, combat support and combat service support units are being formed.

The second priority region is the Finnish direction, where Russia's military posture was minimal until Finland's recent accession to NATO. Russia plans to create the 44th Army Corps, likely based in Petrozavodsk, to address this. This formation will probably be built around at least two or three manoeuvre units with around a dozen fire support and combat support units.

The growth of Russian military capabilities in Estonia's vicinity in the Leningrad and Pskov Oblasts primarily results from the potential transformation of existing units into divisions. According to one possible scenario, the personnel strength of Russian land forces and airborne troops in the Estonian direction may nearly double from approximately 19,000 before 24 February 2022. The extent to which these units will achieve combat readiness depends on Russia's ability to recruit, train and retain contracted service members.

The success and timeline of Russia's military reform will be largely determined by the course of the war in Ukraine. If Russia manages to implement the reform, NATO could face a Soviet-style mass army in the next decade. This army is likely to be technologically inferior to NATO allies' defence forces in most areas, except for electronic warfare and long-range strike capabilities. However, its military potential would be significant, owing to its size, firepower (including artillery and numerous inexpensive combat drones), combat experience and reserves. Defending against a possible conventional attack from such an army would require allied defence forces and defence industries to be significantly more prepared, capable and better-stocked with ammunition and materiel than they currently are.

In summary, Russia's plan to increase its military forces is ambitious, especially considering the short timeline and Russia's economic and demographic situation. However, it is also a source of threat for Estonia and NATO, contributing to Russia's aggressive posture, military potential and growing militarisation reinforcing Russia's apparent path of a long-term confrontation with the West.



Positioning of Russian forces in the vicinity of Estonia after the military reform.