

Russia Stands Up Another Motorized Rifle Division in the Southern Military District

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OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted article from *Izvestiya*, a large-circulation pro-Kremlin daily newspaper, discusses Russian plans to upsize the 20th Motorized Rifle Brigade to the 20th Motorized Rifle Division. This is the second new motorized rifle division for the Southern Military District (SMD) in as many years, as the 19th Motorized Rifle Division was formed in 2020. Although Russia has increased its force structure in recent years by converting a few brigades into divisions, Russia does not appear to be increasing the number of personnel on active duty in the Ground Forces. As a result, the only way that the Russian Ground Forces can create these new divisions is through a combination of creating divisions that are missing one or more maneuver regiments and lowering unit manning levels throughout the Ground Forces. This increase of force structure and lowering of unit manning levels may appear to roll back the previous decade's New Look military reforms, but this is not the case. Before the New Look reforms, most Ground Forces' unit manning levels were well below 50%. In addition, the equipment was old and often not well maintained. Today, Russia's personnel and equipment readiness levels are much higher. Before the New Look reforms, a regiment and brigade might have been able to form one battalion tactical group (BTG), now most regiments and brigades can field two BTGs. It is likely that high-readiness Ground Forces units will not be impacted by current reforms, but most other Ground Forces units will see a drop in personnel manning. This reduced manning will probably not drop below 70%, the percentage generally believed to still be sufficient for a unit to be capable of accomplishing standard combat missions.

The *Izvestiya* article is also interesting because it quotes Russian military expert Viktor Murakhovskiy, whose comments shed some light on Russian military thinking regarding the relationship between Ground Forces' divisions and brigades. Although it would appear that a motorized rifle brigade is approximately the equivalent to a motorized rifle regiment (as both units have three motorized rifle battalions and one tank battalion), it is clear from Murakhovskiy's comments that a motorized rifle brigade, in the Russian view, is seen as having capabilities more on par with a motorized rifle division than a regiment. This thinking is likely due to some of the key enablers for combined arms combat against a technically sophisticated adversary (e.g., electronic warfare, UAVs, etc.), which exist in both the divisions and brigades but are not found in the division's subordinate regiments.

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The accompanying excerpted article from *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the official newspaper of the Russian Ministry of Defense, features commentary from Russian Defense Minister, General Sergey Shoygu about the reasoning for increased conventional military capabilities in the SMD. For a period of time in the 2000s, there was only one combined arms army (CAA) in the SMD, now there are three—the

Source: Roman Kretsul, Aleksey Ramm “А теперь «20-я»: легендарное гвардейское соединение вернется в строй 20-й гвардейской мотострелковой дивизии (And Now the 20th: Legendary Guards Formation Back in the Order of Battle),” *Izvestiya* (a large-circulation pro-Kremlin daily newspaper), 25 April 2021. <https://iz.ru/1156655/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm/teper-20-ia-legendarnoe-gvardeiskoe-soedinenie-vernetsia-v-stroi>

The Defense Ministry is reinforcing the country's southern frontiers with motorized rifle units, sources in the military tell Izvestiya. According to them, the army is planning to revive the legendary 20th Guards Carpathia-Berlin Motorized Rifle Division and its units will be stationed in Volgograd and Kamyshin...Our sources say that it will be incorporated into the 8th Guards Combined-Arms Army. The organizational structure and manning levels are now being decided...The Defense Ministry has decided to relocate airborne assault troops in order to make room for it. The 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade is currently based in the city of Kamyshin but, as Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu announced previously, it is about to be restructured into a regiment and moved to Crimea. Izvestiya's sources commented that the garrison space thus vacated will be taken over by units of the newly formed 20th Guards Division.

The 19th Motorized Rifle Division was recreated last year as part of the 58th Army and there are plans to form a new division in 2021, the Southern Military District's commander, General of the Army Aleksandr Dvornikov, announced earlier...The 20th Division is famous as a kind of production line for senior military commanders. For example, in the 2000s it was led by Colonel General Sergey Istrakov, now a deputy chief of the General Staff; Colonel General Gennadiy Zhidko, now commander of the Eastern Military District; and Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, currently commanding the Central Military District.

Unlike a brigade, a division is a fully fledged formation that can pursue operational-tactical objectives in its own right, military expert Viktor Murakhovskiy told Izvestiya. “To do this it doesn't need any extra reinforcement, especially in logistics or artillery and air defense support,” he commented. “It has enough of everything in its standard complement. So a division is not only a larger but also a more self-sufficient formation than a brigade. At the conclusion of exercises in Crimea, the defense minister pointed to growing threats on the southwest strategic front, including that NATO is involving nonmember states like Ukraine and Georgia in its activities. In order to successfully counter such dangers, alongside developing new weapons systems we also need to update the structure of our forces and have sufficient troops and assets so that nobody is tempted to provoke or show aggression to Russia with conventional weapons. We remember that kind of provocation, for example Georgia's attack on our peacekeepers in 2008. Nuclear power status and possession of a strategic nuclear deterrent are not actually any guarantee against military provocation or even aggression against Russia, so there have to be sufficiently potent general-purpose forces.”

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58th CAA (Vladikavkaz), the 49th CAA (Stavropol), and the 8th CAA (Novocherkassk). Shoygu outlines some of the reasoning behind these increases in capabilities, generally relating to Ukraine and NATO. An interesting aspect of both articles is the Russian means of responding to and deterring NATO. It is clear that large formations, such as brigades and especially divisions, are seen as the primary means of conventional deterrence. Although battalion tactical groups have been the primary means of Russian conventional force projection in recent local conflicts, Russian thinking about conflict with NATO involves brigades, divisions, and combined arms armies, not a mass deployment of various battalion tactical groups.

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Great Emblem of the 8th Guards Combined Arms Army.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Great_emblem_of_the_8th_Guards_Combined_Arms_Army.svg, Attribution: CC BY 4.0

Source: Aleksandr Tikhonov “Принимаем симметричные меры стратегического сдерживания (We are Taking Symmetrical Strategic Deterrence Measures),” *Krasnaya Zvezda* (newspaper of the Russian Ministry of Defense), 21 April 2021. <http://redstar.ru/prinimaem-simmetrichnye-mery-strategicheskogo-sderzhivaniya/>

A session of the Collegium of the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense was held in Moscow. It took place at the military establishment's National Command Center under the leadership of Russian Federation Minister of Defense, General of the Army Sergey Shoygu...Transitioning to the review of the progress of the fulfillment of the operational plans for the Southern Military District in accordance with the president's edicts and his tasking based on the results of the meetings at Sochi, the minister of defense focused the attention of the attendees on the military and political situation that had evolved in the Southwestern Strategic Direction. Based on the assessment of the head of the Russian military establishment, the situation remains complicated, which is largely due to the attempts of a number of foreign states to expand their military presence along Russia's southern and western borders.

“The destructive course of the military and political leadership of Ukraine is being continued, as the leadership strives to destabilize the situation in the Donets Basin,” noted General of the Army Sergey Shoygu. “The United States and NATO are continuing to conduct provocative activities in the airspace and maritime regions of the Black Sea.” The minister also cited the unstable state of affairs in a number of countries of the Middle East and the Transcaucasus.

“The attempts of NATO to hamper normalization are forcing us to take symmetrical strategic deterrence measures and to expand the capabilities of the troops of the Southern Military District,” said General of the Army Sergey Shoygu, and he offered some statistics and facts relating to the results of work in this area. Thus, last year as part of combat staff improvements, 54 organizational activities were conducted. Of these the main event was the formation of yet another motorized rifle division.

Simultaneously, the uninterrupted rearming of the district is underway. “In 2020 the troops received more than 3,000 pieces of modern weapons and military equipment, and the share of modern weapons and military equipment in the military units and formations has reached 70 percent,” reported General of the Army Sergey Shoygu....