



An Overabundance of Airborne?

OE Watch Commentary: Russia currently maintains the largest airborne (*Vozdushno-Desantnye Voiska* or VDV) forces in the world, and the Kremlin regards these highly deployable and well-armed units as one of the sharpest tools in their conventional arsenal. These forces helped to seize key objectives during the conflict with Georgia in 2008 and again during the annexation of Crimea in early 2014. With their high state of combat readiness, they would likely serve as the vanguard force in any future operation.

The brief accompanying excerpt, from the pro-Kremlin source, *Izvestiya*, begins with a brief description of a massive VDV exercise which was conducted in July, reporting that “an assault force in the strength of 1,500 servicemen and 69 pieces of equipment was paraded with the use of 45 Il-76 heavy transport aircraft” (for a comprehensive report of the exercise, see: “Военная приемка. Рекордное десантирование,” or “Military Acceptance. Record-breaking Jump,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjTawTdfrug>). It then reviews the current size of the VDV forces and argues that given the country’s limited lift capability, it does not make sense to maintain such a large airborne force.

The author points out that currently “two airborne and two air assault divisions, four air assault brigades, a separate Spetsnaz brigade, and a number of support and training units are in the Russian Airborne Troops’ composition.” The primary lift platform for the VDV is the Il-76 military transport aircraft, and with the current inventory of 120 of these aircraft, there is only “enough to paratroop less than two regiments with a standard set of weapons and military equipment using one sortie.”

The author reminds the reader that this is not a new problem, since “the shortage of aircraft for paratrooping the VDV was acknowledged already in the USSR.” Considering the current economic situation, building hundreds of new aircraft remains out of the question. Despite these drawbacks, the author concludes that given the “VDV’s political weight... it is unlikely that anyone will undertake such a radical reform in the foreseeable future.” While the Russian VDV may have more personnel and equipment than can be accommodated by their current air transport capability, there’s no question that these forces will remain one of the Kremlin’s most formidable tools. **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

“So, the entire available fleet of Il-76 military transport aircraft is enough to paratroop less than two regiments with a standard set of weapons and military equipment using one sortie.”



Russian Airborne Patch.
Source: https://bg.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Russian_Airborne_Troops_patch.svg Copyright cleared.

Source: Илья Крамник, “Границы возможностей; Почему ВДВ в России так и не поменялись (The Limits of Capabilities: Why the VDV in Russia Has Never Changed),” *Izvestiya*, 18 July 2018. <https://iz.ru/767550/ilia-kramnik/granitsy-vozmozhnosti>

The Russian Armed Forces have conducted the latest airborne troops exercises. During the course of the maneuvers, an assault force in the strength of 1,500 servicemen and 69 pieces of equipment was paraded with the use of 45 Il-76 heavy transport aircraft. The conducted exercises simultaneously demonstrate both the VDV’s capabilities and also the limits of these capabilities...

At the present time, two airborne and two air assault divisions, four air assault brigades, a separate Spetsnaz brigade, and a number of support and training units are in the Russian Airborne Troops’ composition. In so doing, all of the combat subunits both of the parachute and of the air assault units undergo training for parachute jumps, and the air assault units and subunits are equipped with air-droppable armored vehicles – armored assault vehicles, assault BTRs, and so forth.

There are approximately 120 Il-76s in the composition of the Russian Air Force at the present time – this type of aircraft is the main aircraft that is used for a parachute assault. Let’s recall that 45 aircraft were involved in the exercises that recently occurred, which were enough for the paratroop of less than a VDV regiment, including two battalions with armored vehicles. So, the entire available fleet of Il-76 military transport aircraft is enough to paratroop less than two regiments with a standard set of weapons and military equipment using one sortie.

The problem of the shortage of aircraft for paratrooping the VDV was acknowledged already in the USSR....

...If we compare to foreign armies, today Russia possesses the largest contingent of airborne units, which clearly exceed the capabilities of the available military transport aviation fleet. This raises definite question with regard to the effectiveness of the expenditure of budget resources, while taking into account the high cost of specialized parachute equipment and the jump training of personnel....

...It is impossible to change the situation that has developed with the shortage of aircraft for the use of the VDV based upon its primary designation in the foreseeable future – this would require a multifold increase of the strength of military transport aviation just like of the strength of the helicopter transport units – for transporting air assault units.

...Meanwhile, while taking into account the Armed Forces structure that has developed and the VDV’s political weight in their composition, we need to realize that it is unlikely that anyone will undertake such a radical reform in the foreseeable future.