

THE FUTURE OF RUSSIAN AIRBORNE FORCES

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Photos courtesy of Russian Defence Ministry (TASS)
and Weapons and Warfare

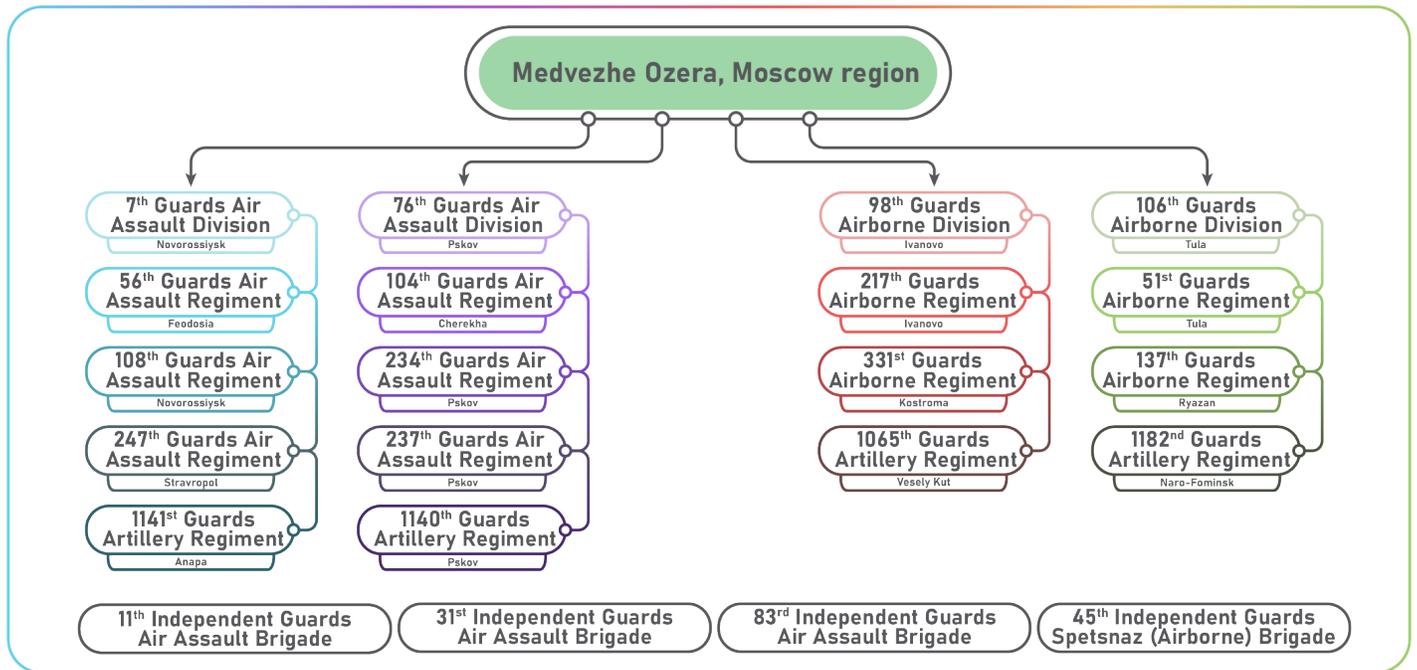


Figure 1. Russian Airborne Forces Retool for an Expanded Role¹

Introduction

The Russian Airborne Forces, known as the Russian VDV (from the Russian *vozdushno-desantnye voyska*), have a long history and a significant role in the Russian military signature and its ethos. The Russian VDV consists mostly of professional service contract soldiers, making it an elite unit. During the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this force was a strategic threat, capable of airdrop operations far behind enemy lines with a variety of assets. These included infantry fighting vehicles, mortar-howitzers, air defense artillery, and command and control vehicles. After the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, when Russia launched its military transformation and modernization program, the Russian VDV began to receive various wheeled platforms. Many of them are still in use, and some were deployed during interventions in Syria, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. This change in equipment corresponds to a change of tasks for the Russian VDV. For example, accepting the role of a rapid reaction force, being able to deploy at short notice, and having the capability to travel on wheels for long distances. By knowing what equipment the Russian VDV will use in the near future, the intelligence community can assess the future order of battle for the VDV's battalion tactical groups and its support units.

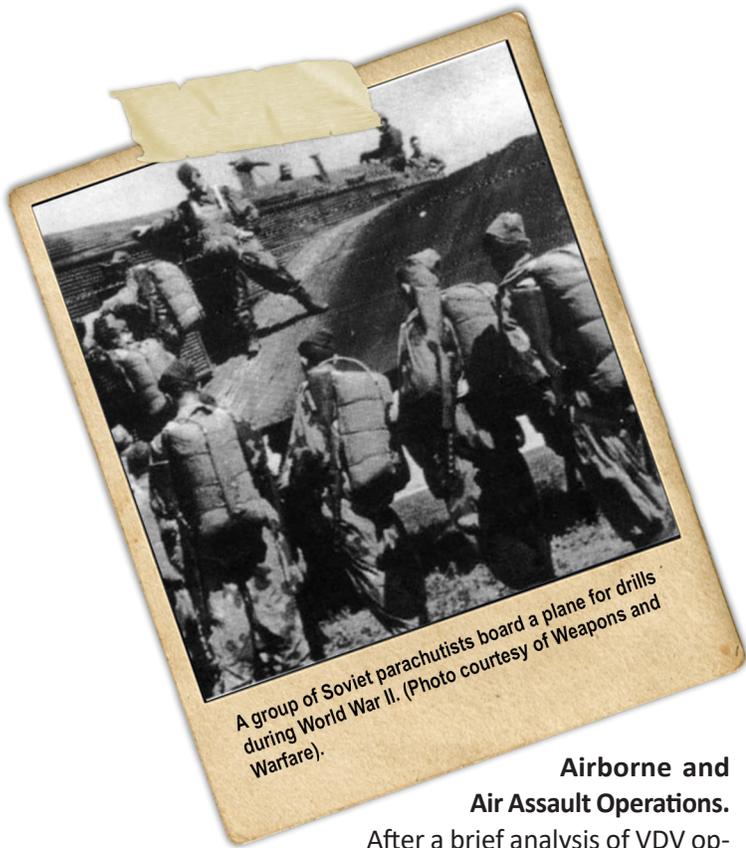
Role of the Russian Airborne Forces

The Russian VDV originated in the 1930s. This force fought in World War II and deployed to stop insurrections in Hungary (1956) and in Czechoslovakia (1968). The Russian VDV also participated in the Afghanistan campaign (1979 to 1989), both Chechen wars (1994 to 1996 and 1999 to 2000), the war with Georgia (2008), the invasion of Ukraine (2014), and

the war with Ukraine (2022 to present). The Russian VDV's participation in these conflicts highlights the significant role of this force. Additionally, the exceptionally high percentage of contract soldiers (80 to 100 percent) makes it considerably more professional and elite than other units in the Russian Armed Forces.²

Currently, the Russian VDV consist of two air assault divisions, two airborne divisions, three independent air assault brigades, and one independent Spetsnaz (from the Russian *spetsialnogo naznacheniya*, or special purpose/forces) brigade (Figure 1), making it the largest airborne force in the world. Throughout its 90-year history, the Russian VDV has changed, shifted, and influenced many times.³

Historically, parachute divisions were intended to be strategic forces under the command of the general staff, while air assault units were operational forces that supported military district commands. However, during its history, the VDV has also conducted operations as light infantry because of the VDV's superior skills, greater proportion of professional soldiers, and willingness to complete the mission.⁴ Also the VDV, equipped with its specialized BMD light armored vehicles, conducted ground forces tasks. For this reason, from 2009 to 2010, the minister of defense and his chief of general staff tried to abolish the VDV as a separate combat arm and to transfer all its existing assets to the army. However, this change never happened because some members of the high command and political leadership wanted to keep the VDV intact. Nonetheless, it created the challenge of identifying a role for the VDV that would justify its separate command structure and distinctive range of equipment.⁵



A group of Soviet paratroopers board a plane for drills during World War II. (Photo courtesy of Weapons and Warfare).

Airborne and Air Assault Operations.

After a brief analysis of VDV operations in the last 20 years, the intelligence community can distinguish four main roles of the VDV forces:

- ◆ Strategic airborne operations in the enemy rear with or without mechanized platforms.
- ◆ Operational air assault operations to support the seizure of key terrain.
- ◆ Mechanized force to support the main effort axis.
- ◆ Rapid reaction force in support of peacekeeping operations, stability operations, and rapid military campaigns around the world.

Operations in Ukraine from late February to early March 2022 confirmed the customary practice of seizing airfields using—

- ◆ Air assault of up to a battalion size element to secure a landing zone.
- ◆ Parachuted airdrop of a battalion tactical group with armored vehicles.
- ◆ Landing of support weapon systems like the T-72B3 main battle tanks, SA-13 air defense artillery systems, and D-30 howitzers.

In most cases, operations were halted after the air assault because the air assault units could not secure the landing zone and destroy Ukrainian air defense artillery assets, thereby denying the arrival of the battalion tactical groups.

Rapid Reaction Force. In early 2019, the Russian Ministry of Defense revealed its intent to revise the role of Russian VDV, changing it from a conventional airborne force to an

expeditionary operations force for global hotspots. The force would keep its current types of equipment, including the latest innovations in the order of battle, such as wheeled armored vehicles, main battle tanks, and artillery. At the same time, it would keep a capacity for rapid deployment. The VDV's role would be somewhere between a force of heavy mechanized units, which has great firepower but takes a long time to deploy, and a Spetsnaz force, which is quick to deploy but lacks firepower.⁶

New Equipment for the Russian VDV Forces

In 2016, the Russian Armed Forces reiterated a commitment to shape the VDV as a rapid reaction force. This commitment included new guidelines for rearmament policies, stating that VDV forces should receive the following improvements by 2025:

- ◆ BMD-2 upgraded to BMD-2M as a primary infantry fighting vehicle.
- ◆ BMD-2 replaced by BMD-4M as a primary infantry fighting vehicle.
- ◆ BTR-MD replaced by BTR-MDM multirole armored vehicle.
- ◆ 2S9 (Nona) replaced by 2S42 Lotos 120mm self-propelled gun.⁷

Since 2014, Russian VDV forces have received, and are schedule to receive, many wheeled platforms, including—

- ◆ 4x4 IVECO Rys (Lynx) as a scout/reconnaissance vehicle.⁸
- ◆ 4x4 GAZ-2975-Tigr as a scout/reconnaissance and Spetsnaz vehicle.⁹
- ◆ 4x4 K-4386 Typhoon-VDV, a Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle that has a seven-man dismount and a 30mm autocannon.¹⁰



Russian Airborne Troops spearhead the Collective Security Treaty Organization's intervention in Kazakhstan (Photo courtesy of the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies [EDAM])

- ◆ 8x8 2S43 “Malva” 152mm self-propelled wheeled artillery system that will serve in the Russian VDV artillery brigade. Accepting wheeled artillery systems into the Russian Armed Forces is a change of approach since the 1980s. Russia expects more military involvement in conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. Terrain in these theaters is more favorable for wheeled platforms and allows the exploitation of its benefits, such as mobility, reliability, maintenance time, and costs.¹¹
- ◆ 4x4 2S41 “Drok” 82mm mortar, based on the K-4386 Typhoon platform.¹²

Use of Wheeled Platforms—Current Experience

During the past 9 months, the Russian VDV has taken part in two major events that included full or near-full VDV battalion tactical group emplacement—opposing the insurrection in Kazakhstan and the invasion of Ukraine.

Insurrection in Kazakhstan. Responding to Kazakhstan’s call for the Collective Security Treaty Organization’s support against the insurrection,¹³ Russia allegedly deployed approximately 2,500 troops to assist in conducting security operations in key areas in Kazakhstan. Russian officials reported that the Russian Armed Forces deployed the 45th Separate Air Assault Spetsnaz Brigade, elements of the 98th Airborne Division and 31st Separate Air Assault Brigade, and elements of the 76th Air Assault Division.¹⁴ Observing the Russian Armed Forces’ composition and the relatively short period of time during which the forces reached Kazakhstan, it can be assessed that this deployment confirmed the VDV’s role as a rapid reaction force.

Open-source photo and video evidence from the deployment revealed a high presence of these wheeled platforms. The 31st Separate Air Assault Brigade likely consisted of one

mechanized BMD-2 based company, two mechanized BTR-82A based companies, and one motorized K-4386 Typhoon based company, as well as a sustainment company.¹⁵ The 45th Separate Air Assault Spetsnaz Brigade was presumably represented by a company-size element consisting of GAZ-2975-Tigr and BTR-82A vehicles and a sustainment element. An undetermined size of BMD-2 based subunits represented the 98th Airborne Division contingent.

Invasion in Ukraine. On 24 February 2022, the Russian Armed Forces once again invaded Ukraine. Initially, unclassified sources did not provide reliable information about the exact positions of Russian military units. Nevertheless, footage of combat across all axes of the Russian Armed Forces’ advance provided a similar pattern about the use of wheeled platforms. Spetsnaz and reconnaissance units have widely used the GAZ-2975-Tigr and KamAZ-63968 vehicles, mostly in urban areas. Generally, VDV units have been performing with BMD-2 and BMD-4 vehicles, reinforced by T-72B3 tanks; however, some units within those formations are using BTR-82A platforms. A few K-4386 Typhoon vehicles were used, typically within naval infantry and Spetsnaz forces, confirming previous reports of a priority to supply these vehicles. Notably, the VDV forces were set to conduct the encirclement of the city of Kiev; however, the operation to seize Antonov airport near Hostomel first did not progress as planned.¹⁶

Possible Future Order of Battle

Current developments in Russian VDV forces lead to an assessment that, in the midterm, VDV divisions will keep tracked vehicles, replacing the BMP-2 with the BMP-2M and the BMP-4M. Also, in order to unify the motor pool and ease logistical and repair procedures, different support vehicles will be replaced with the ones on the BMP-4 chassis (Figure 2).

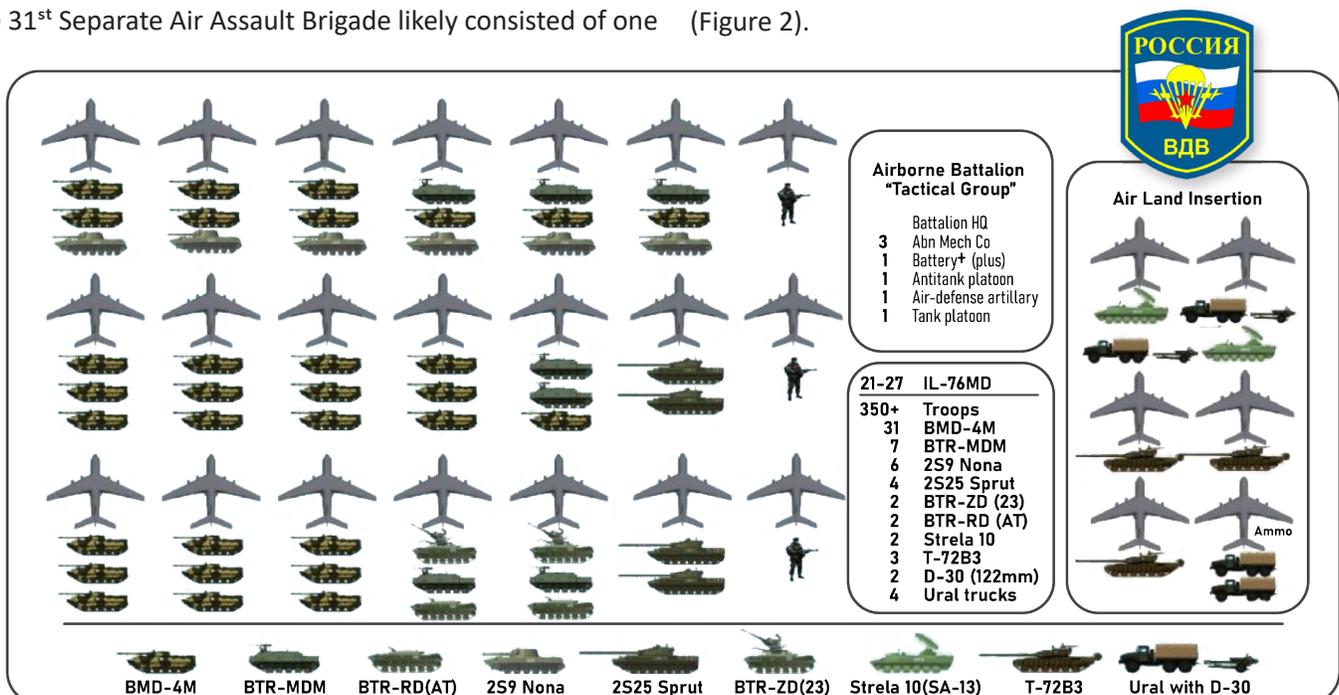


Figure 2. Notional Airborne Assault Configuration¹⁷

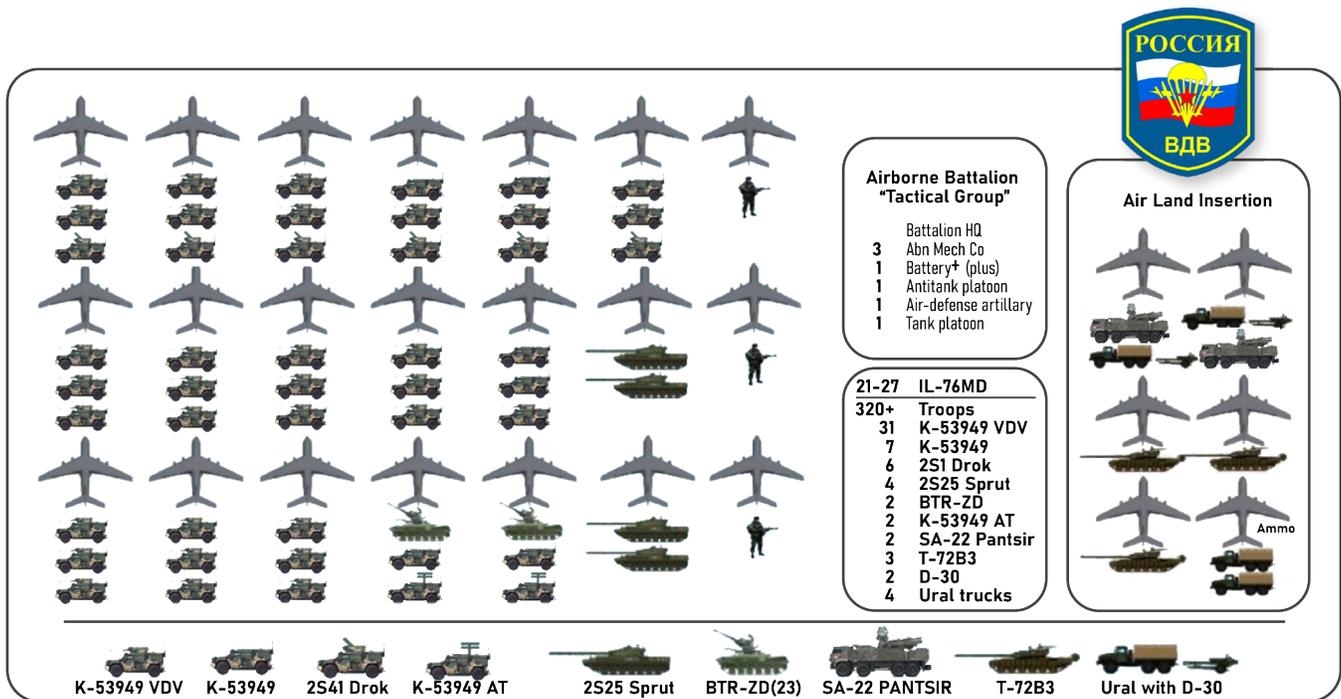


Figure 3. Possible Future Airborne Assault Configuration¹⁸

The Russian VDV's separate brigades, for instance the 11th, 31st, and 83rd Independent Guards Air Assault Brigades, have received more wheeled platforms in the last 5 years. The intelligence community assesses that these units are testing various possible unit configurations. Taking into consideration recent Russian Ministry of Defense contracts for the procurement of more K-53949s and recent various modifications of this vehicle, it is likely these platforms could create a core for the future VDV independent brigades (Figure 3). The Russian Armed Forces' logistical lessons in the Ukraine campaign indicate it is possible that future VDV forces will simplify their vehicle platforms in order to simplify the corresponding maintenance and repair. Also, it is most likely that the future VDV will significantly increase its sustainment element in order to prevent common fuel and food shortages.

The first 4 weeks of war in Ukraine confirmed the importance of road infrastructure, indicating that modern warfare is highly dependent on controlling urban areas and having ready access to the road and rail infrastructure. The change from tracked vehicles to wheeled vehicles in the order of battle would also generate an economy of force because the K-53949 platforms consist of two crew members, a personnel reduction of approximately 10 percent. Because of the aging BTR-ZD technology, it is also highly likely that the Russian military industry will use mounted air defense systems (K-53949 platform-based).

Conclusion

The Russian Armed Forces are constantly and rapidly changing; however, having a significant number of Soviet-era armored vehicle stocks will delay the forces' modernization. Considering the impact of economic sanctions, it is unlikely

Russia will succeed in continuing most of its projects (for example, the Armata Universal Combat Platform and the Typhoon MRAP projects) with the expected speed and volume of output. It is highly likely that Russia will replace its significant losses from the war in Ukraine with refurbished and modernized older-generation vehicles because it is the cheaper solution. Nevertheless, highly mobile forces will be necessary to support friendly regimes threatened by insurrection, to boost economic recovery, and to strengthen economic ties with friendly governments in the Middle East and Africa. This will be the role for the wheeled rapid reaction force—**independent air assault brigades.** 🇷🇺

Endnotes

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