Nobody, but us! Recent developments in Russia's airborne forces (VDV)

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Introduction

Russia's elite airborne force (parachute and air assault) is the *Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska* (VDV).[1] It can be considered a strategic force, on a par with their rocket and space forces. With its origins in the 1930s, Russia's airborne force is currently the largest and most highly-mechanised in the world. Having fought with distinction during World War II, against the mujahideen in Afghanistan, and in the Five-Day War with Georgia, the presence of Russian airborne troops in Crimea and eastern Ukraine only confirmed their status as an elite force within the Russian military. Recent changes in manning levels, coupled with equipment modernisation and operational experience, has made the VDV an even more formidable force.

In October 2014, Open Briefing published *Strategic Order of Battle: Russian Airborne Forces*, which provided an in-depth look at the ongoing transformation of Russia's airborne forces, together with a strategic order of battle that detailed personnel and equipment levels for each of Russia's airborne divisions, independent air assault brigades, Spetsnaz regiment, headquarters units and training division.[2] As such, it represented the most detailed open source intelligence on Russia's airborne forces available. Since then, the evolution of these forces has continued apace. Many of these changes were anticipated; however, some were not. These unexpected developments are as much a reflection of the dynamism of their commander, Colonel-General Vladimir Shamanov, as they are of the defence and foreign policy direction of the Russian president, Shamanov's close friend Vladimir Putin.

Unlike its Western counterparts, the VDV is a highly-mechanised force, with most of its armoured vehicles capable of being air-dropped from transport aircraft. At a current strength of approximately 37,500 troops, Russia's airborne force fulfils many of the same roles of those in the West, with one notable exemption: that of a reliable enforcer for politically-sensitive operations. In the main, and particularly since the deployment of airborne and air assault units to Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Russia's VDV continues to enjoy a wide base of popular support at home.

Russia's airborne forces are the core of the country's rapid reaction forces, the *Sily Bystrogo Reagirovaniya* (SBR). Since its inception in 2013, the SBR's function has been to respond to any threat along the 550,000 kilometres of Russia's border, including the adjacent seas and oceans. Not surprisingly, the SBR also includes naval infantry (Marine) formations and special forces (Spetsnaz) components located in most of the relevant Operational-Strategic Commands (OSCs).

[1] The VDV's motto is *Никто, кроме нас!* (Nobody, but us!).

[2] http://www.openbriefing.org/thinktank/publications/russian-airborne-forces/.

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Current status and disposition

The present status and disposition of Russia's VDV formations (both active and forming) are listed below. It should be noted that *all* of the airborne (parachute) formations, plus the one special forces and one high-readiness air assault brigade are located within the Central OSC, where most of the Russian Air Force's military transport aviation assets are located.

Formation name	Location	Operational-Strategic Command	Status
7th Guards Air Assault Division (7 GAAD)	Novorossysk	Southern	Reported to have mountain commando role. 3rd (deactivated) regiment now being manned. Will receive unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and electronic warfare (EW) companies and a tank battalion (2S25).
76th Guards Air Assault Division (76 GAAD)	Pskov	Western	3rd (deactivated) regiment now being manned. Will receive UAV and EW companies and a tank battalion (2S25).
98th Guards Airborne Division (98 GABD)	Ivanovo	Central	**Immediate Response Force.** 3rd (deactivated) regiment now being manned. New UAV and EW companies and a tank battalion (2S25) forming.
104th Guards Airborne Division (104 GABD)	Ulyanovsk	Central	Reactivated. Now forming from 31 GAAB (below). To be fully manned and equipped by 2018. To include new UAV and EW companies and a tank battalion (2S25).

Formation name	Location	Operational-Strategic Command	Status
106th Guards Airborne Division (106 GABD)	Tula	Central	3rd (deactivated) regiment now being manned. New UAV and EW companies and a tank battalion (2S25) forming. Undertook the 2014 evaluations of the BMD-4M and Rakushka vehicles.
45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade	Kubinka	Central	Reports to VDV and Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU). Increased size. Receiving new equipment (e.g. UAVs). Undertakes the trials on all new VDV equipment.
31st Guards Air Assault Brigade (31 GAAB)	Ulyanovsk	Central	**Immediate Response Force**. Will form core of reactivated 104 GABD (above) by 2018.
11th Guards Air Assault Brigade (11 GAAB)	Ulan-Ude	Eastern	Resubordinated back to VDV from OSC in 2013.
56th Guards Air Assault Brigade (56 GAAB)	Kamyshin	Southern	Resubordinated back to VDV from OSC in 2013.
83rd Guards Air Assault Brigade (83 GAAB)	Ussuriysk	Eastern	Resubordinated back to VDV from OSC in 2013.
(345th) Guards Air Assault Brigade (345 GAAB)	Voronezh	Western	Reactivated. Now forming (2016). Uses 'Bagram' honorific/title.
242rd Airborne Training Centre (former division)	Omsk	Eastern	No change.

Increased VDV personnel levels

Throughout 2015 and early 2016, personnel levels in the VDV have increased substantially. With Shamanov's announcement that the third (deactivated) regiment of each division will be manned (about 1,550 troops each), all present/active VDV divisions will be up to their wartime authorised establishment (about 8,000 troops per division). The newly forming 104 Guards Airborne Division (GABD) will account for an additional 8,000 troops by the 2018-19. With the establishment of a new air assault brigade and the fielding of new units (e.g. a tank battalion and a reconnaissance battalion in each division) and new sub-units (i.e. EW and UAV companies) factored in, the net gain to the VDV will be over 16,000 troops. This represents a significant increase of nearly 45% in these elite offensive forces.

In addition to the seasonal unit and sub-unit training cycles, it is clear that battle-groups from each airborne division, at least two of the independent air assault brigades (31st and 56th) and 45 Spetsnaz have taken part in operations in eastern Ukraine. Closer to home, according to the Russian military's own newspaper, *Red Star*, a 10-day regimental-level exercise took place in 76 GAAD near Pskov on 15-24 October 2015.[3] It culminated in the mass para-drop of 1,500 troops on several (battalion-sized) equidistant drop zones and the delivery of armoured vehicles from by IL-76MD transport aircraft. Intriguingly, the exercise also incorporated the use of 35 helicopters as well as fixed-wing aircraft (IL-76 Candid), with other heavy equipment arriving on 100 railcars, all overseen by the division commander, Guards Major-General Alexei Naumets. This is the first known exercise in which the Russian military properly integrated army aviation (in fact, air force helicopters) with an air assault formation, and suggests a relatively sophisticated C2 capability. Western analysts continue to be surprised at the level of mechanisation of Russian airborne/air assault forces.

New combat equipment

Modernisation of the VDV's equipment continues apace. It was common knowledge that the 1970s-era BMD-1 infantry fighting vehicles were being replaced by (or converted to) the somewhat newer BMD-2s as a stop-gap measure; however, in early 2015 Shamanov announced that the potent BMD-4M (with 100mm main gun and co-axial 30mm autocannon) was now in series production and would replace the aging BMD-2s.[4] He also announced that the newly-deployed BTR-MD Rakushka armoured personnel carrier (APC) would replace all the BTR-Ds in Russia's airborne forces, with the VDV having 1,000 of these potent combat vehicles by 2020. The Rakushka is expected to deploy in different variants. Thus far, the VDV has used the vehicle in the APC, cargo and ambulance variants and, intriguingly, as a platform for the 1L222-1 Garmon air defence radar.[5] The Garmon is associated with the very potent Pantsir-S1 air defence system, both notably deployed together at the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014.

[3] http://www.redstar.ru/index.php/news-menu/vesti/v-voennyh-okrugah/iz-zapadnogo-voennogo-okruga/item/26175-ekzamen-derzhit-76-ya.

[4] http://www.armyrecognition.com/december_2015_global_defense_security_news_uk/more_btr-4m_and_btr-mdm_airborne_armoured_vehicles_for_russian_airborne_troops_tass_12212152.html.

[5] On Jan 21, 2016, Shamanov announced that a robotic version of the BTR-MD Rakushka would be an anti-tank variant, replacing existing BTR-RD inventories. http://www.armyrecognition.com/january_2016_global_defense_security_news_industry/russia_is_testing_new_anti_tank_robotic_based_on_btr_mdm_airborne_armoured_personnel_carrier_tass_12101163.html.

Although the deployment of the advanced 9K333 Verba man-portable air defence system (MANPADS) is now confirmed with most airborne units,[6] there has been no vehicle-based replacement for the older and inferior SA-13 Gopher (Strela-10M3) in divisional air defence regiments. While an enhanced replacement for the SA-13 – the Sosna, with double the range – is being deployed, it is still on the same MT-LB chassis as its predecessor. This means it is not air-droppable, and would have to be air-landed by the widest-body aircraft available (e.g., the AN-124 Condor). It is possible a version mounted on the new Rakushka chassis is in development and will be deployed before 2018. Finally, a new nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) reconnaissance vehicle, the RKhM-5 Povozka-D-1, is nearing the end of field trials (including being air-dropped), and will be deployed to divisional NBC detection units in 2016.[7]

In January 2016, Shamanov announced plans to field up to six tank companies (60 tanks, or two battalion-sets), plus two unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) companies and two electronic warfare (EW) companies during 2016. The only real candidate as an air-droppable tank is the 2S25 Sprut-SD with its potent 125mm gun (2A46M-5). Although described as a self-propelled anti-tank gun or light tank, this system will likely fill the gap left by the ASU-85 assault gun when it was removed from service in the 1980s, providing a forward screen or advance guard for an airborne force.[8] They will likely be deployed in the two airborne divisions (98th and 106th) first, then in battalion-sets deployed to both air assault divisions (7th and 76th) in 2017, and finally to the soon-to-be formed 104 GABD in 2018. This said, at this point it is hard to imagine them deployed in such numbers with the air assault brigades.[9]

The UAV and EW companies to be deployed in 2016 will likely be with the 98 and 106 GABD. If not with the latter, then it will likely be deployed centrally with the high-readiness 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade (GAAB) at Ulyanovsk. These initial deployments will be followed by deployments to the other divisions and brigades in due course. The table of organisation (TO&E) for these new units will likely look like those of the new tank and motorized rifle brigades, though the airborne/air assault divisions will likely have divested many of the heavier armoured/truck-mounted systems (e.g. R-330B), due to the obvious constraints on air mobility. Interestingly, Shamanov envisions tactical UAVs deployed down to the company/combat-team level, so there will likely be a mixture of catapult-launched (CL) and man-portable (MP) systems deployed, such as the Orlan-10[10] and Takhion and, soon, Korsar[11] respectively. Larger UAVs, such as the Forpost (IAI's Searcher II), which require runways, will likely be used at operational levels.

[6] http://www.armyrecognition.com/january_2016_global_defense_security_news_industry/four_of_russia_s_airborne_troops_equipped_with_verba_9k333_manpads_air_defense_missile_system_11001161.html.

[7] http://i-hls.com/2015/12/russia-tests-new-chemical-reconnaissance-armoured-vehicle/.

[8] It is worth mentioning that the 2S25's 125mm gun (2A46M-5) is the same one mounted on the T-90 main battle tank and some versions of the T-80. Like these, the 2S2 too has a barrel-launched anti-tank guided missile, the AT-11 Sniper (9M119M Refleks). With a range of 5,000 m, it can engage enemy main battle tanks at twice their effective range (often about 2,700 m), and can penetrate 900 mm of Rolled Homogenous Armour (RHA) *after* penetrating any Explosive Reactive Armour (ERA). This allows the 2S25 to engage in 'hunter-killer' mode, engaging numerous targets before being detected.

[9] This is not to say that the 2S25 will *not* be deployed to the air assault brigades altogether. It may be in smaller numbers, likely transported into action by the MI-26 HALO heavy-lift helicopter.

[10] The Orlan-10 has been used extensively by the Russians in eastern Ukraine and Syria, where some have been shot down. The Orlan-10s in Ukraine utilised different payloads, including a 12-camera terrain analysis set-up and an Electronic Warfare (EW) variant. This latter configuration evidently achieved catastrophic success in the locating of Ukrainian assets and their subsequent destruction by artillery.

[11] http://www.armyrecognition.com/december_2015_global_defense_security_news_uk/russia_manufactured_its_first_prototypes_of_advanced_short-range_uav_korsar_42212153.html.

If the VDV are keen to breach the technological gap with the United States and other NATO countries, these UAV companies may (initially) be organised along Western military lines. If so, then a minimum of eight tactical UAVs will likely be found in each of these new UAV companies. This said, there may be an additional platoon/troop of 35-40 soldiers, armed with smaller UAVs (e.g., Eleron 3SVs), and deployed in two/three-man teams down to subordinate battalions for specific operations or lengths of time. Being part of the UAV company for administrative/training purposes keeps their knowledge and skills current, while passing on their UAV experience via periodic contact with subordinate units.

Much more information is available about the two new EW companies, which will likely follow a similar deployment pattern to the UAV companies.[12] Reports suggest that the Infauna proximity-fuse jammer will be deployed near high-value assets (i.e. C2), along with the Leer-2 intercept and locating (DF) system mounted on the popular GAZ Tiger vehicle. A natural role will be locating and identifying Western air defence radars in support of airborne or air assault operations. In support of this, the MKTA Judoka (ELINT) system has been devised and mounted on KAMAZ 4350D series trucks. Furthermore, as airborne and air assault assets are doctrinally focused on operating behind enemy lines, small mobile EW teams may be equipped with newer, man-portable systems. This would be akin to the United Kingdom's successful Land Electronic Warfare Teams (LEWTs), with an intercept operator/'gister', linguist/interpreter and analyst/reporter. Such deployments are of immense value to operational commanders in the field, and have been validated on air assault operations in Afghanistan.

All of these EW and UAV systems will have been trialled (and likely now deployed with) the centrally located 45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade at Kubinka. It should also be noted that these UAV and EW systems have been deployed in the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine with deadly effect. Here the present technological advances have been fused with the natural predilection of the Russian military for using artillery (and especially multi-barrelled rocket launchers). The catastrophic effects experienced by Ukraine's military may be a wake-up call to Western military leaders to consider what a future conflict without air supremacy might look like, and to consider anew investing in tactical air-defence systems.

In combat, the VDV has demonstrated significant enhancements to command and control (C2) and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. One area where technology has been used to enhance airborne/air assault operations is in the battle-tasking of artillery fire missions and air strikes through the use of Andromeda-D automated command and control systems. Since first being trailed with 31 GAAB at Ulyanovsk in 2012,[13] some further details of its use have emerged: not only does it coordinate these assets, but it also appears to have operations/functions not unlike that of the United States' Blue-Force Tracker, including identifying and geo-locating any friendly units in the area.

[12] http://www.openbriefing.org/regionaldesks/europe/russias-electronic-warfare-capability-in-ukraine/.

[13] http://en.ria.ru/video/20120402/172552009.html.

Conclusion

The ongoing expansion and modernisation of Russia's airborne forces means they continue to be formidable adversaries to any would-be foe. By doctrine, the VDV is the strategic reserve of the military high command and the core of Russia's Rapid Reaction Forces. As Russia shifts its gaze from perceived threats along its southern borders to those along its western ones, together with a fundamental shift to a military doctrine that once more sees NATO as the primary threat, the temptation to use the VDV as a military solution to political problems will likely only grow. Where Putin decides to draw the line of his ambitions (or those of the always opportunistic Shamanov) may decide whether the legacy of Russia's VDV will be worth passing on or if it will descend into political and military controversy.