



Modern Russia Can Fight And Win Land Wars

Technological advances strengthen Russia's artillery-centric army and shrink the threat of a rout from the air by NATO. Russia is poised to change political outcomes with military means for decades.



Samo Burja

Feb 23

♡ 4 ↗



Russian TOS-1 multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) preparing to fire during an exercise in 2011. Photo by Vitaly Kuzmin. [Source](#).

Russia's Armed Forces are very different from their Western equivalents. On the surface level of equipment comparisons, the divergence is not obvious. Like every other militarily advanced country, Russia has tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, howitzers, multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), attack helicopters, multirole fighter jets, a variety of submarines, and even an aircraft carrier, albeit one that is currently being overhauled. However, the Russian military combines these weapons systems into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The Russian approach to war has been deeply shaped by Russia's geography, recent military expeditions abroad, and the overarching goal of building a conventional military that can decisively win land wars without being routed from the air.

While the United States relies heavily on airpower¹ to strike key targets and support ground forces in combat, Russia instead relies on ground-based heavy artillery. This is not an antiquated holdover from the Soviet era. Russian rocket and artillery systems

today not only substantially outnumber those of the U.S. or European militaries, but also have much greater firepower and range. The latest generation of Russian howitzers are capable of hitting targets at twice the range of comparable U.S. systems. More importantly, technological advances in cheap drones and other low-cost sensors are rapidly erasing artillery's traditional challenge in locating targets quickly and accurately enough to hit them.² Russian tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, while heavily armed in their own right, are ultimately complements to artillery and are designed and deployed accordingly. Such ground forces are nevertheless vulnerable to attacks from the air, which is why Russia has developed what is now the world's most sophisticated integrated air defense system, designed to shield its ground forces from the substantial airpower advantage of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

This unique military posture is the direct result of a major reform of the Russian military, overseen by Russian President Vladimir Putin during the last fifteen years. By the 1980s, the Soviet Armed Forces were increasingly incapable of facing NATO, as technological advances in missiles and aircraft employed by Western militaries threatened Soviet troops far behind the frontlines. Innovative Soviet military thinkers such as Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov conceived sweeping reforms to remedy this imbalance, including a greater focus on air defense and the development of new sensors to alleviate the Soviet military's chronic blindness problem. The rigid defense bureaucracy of the USSR, however, proved resistant to reform until the country collapsed in 1991. Military reform remained a low priority for the Russian government until, after several years in power, Putin had built up a political faction strong enough to overcome the defense bureaucracy's inertia. The reformist defense minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who served from 2007 to 2012, reorganized the Russian military bureaucracy and relentlessly purged the General Staff, creating an opening for a long-overdue update to defense planning called the "New Look Reforms." Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, who has served since 2012, has overseen the development of Russia's military into a far more agile force than the one Russia inherited from the USSR in 1991. The military now has modernized equipment, a higher proportion of professional soldiers, more responsibility for lower-level officers, and, finally, the hoped-for air defense systems key to countering NATO airpower.

The Russian military once failed to defeat a Chechen rebellion in the 1990s before succeeding a few years later in a costly war of attrition. At the time, these expensive victories made clear that the then-still unreformed Russian military could not seriously compete with the United States or its NATO allies. This view largely remained the same after Russia won a brief war against neighboring Georgia in 2008, although it became clear that Russia was willing and able to fight limited wars against its post-Soviet neighbors. In 2014, Russian troops unofficially invaded Ukraine to annex Crimea and help prop up separatist republics in the eastern Donbas region. These daring military moves were a prelude to Russia's large-scale and logistically ambitious intervention in Syria, which began the next year and would eventually see over 63,000 Russian military personnel "receive combat experience" within three years.³ As Russia now surrounds Ukraine with nearly 200,000 troops, it is becoming clear that Russia is willing to conduct not just limited wars against its neighbors, but all-out invasions.

Russia's trajectory of more ambitious and more efficient military engagements is a clear product of its recent reforms, but the threat of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in particular, would probably not be possible without the new air defense systems. This is because NATO member states are, counterintuitively, much more averse to sustaining major losses of expensive military equipment than to human casualties, because losses of jet fighters or aircraft carriers, for example, would dramatically undercut the overwhelming air superiority that underlies NATO's combat effectiveness. With the threat of NATO intervention from the air at least partially mitigated, the question becomes how much farther beyond Ukraine can Russia successfully change political outcomes using military means. In Moldova, Georgia, and now Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly proven capable of consolidating military victory into political and institutional gains by creating partially recognized client states in occupied territories. It has also proven capable of using military force to stabilize much larger allies like Kazakhstan⁴ and Syria,⁵ thereby bringing them closer to client state status. Russia is not likely to directly antagonize any NATO member states in the near future. But the long theoretical Russian threat that motivated states like Poland or Estonia to join NATO as quickly as possible is now very real. Finland, Sweden, and Moldova are notably not part of NATO. The Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East are all ripe targets for military maneuvering that could lead to war.

As Russia rises in relative military power compared to the U.S. and European powers like the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, the challenges posed by the Russian military and its approach to tactics, operations, and strategy take on relevance not seen since the last years of the Cold War. Moreover, Russia's reorientation towards building a military capable of winning conventional wars despite NATO airpower has also informed the transformative reform of the People's Liberation Army of China, which has long aimed to take over Taiwan. Consequently, even if the U.S. can find a political accommodation with Russia or successfully transfer the defense of Europe over to its allies, the challenge of the Russian way of war is likely to confront the U.S. in the Pacific.

Russian Use of Artillery



A Russian 2S19 "Msta" howitzer in 2020. [Source](#).

The key distinguishing feature of the Russian military is its density and quality of artillery. The Russian army packs far more firepower than any Western equivalent, and its artillery is typically longer-ranged than equivalent Western systems.⁶ While rockets are slower to reload and less accurate than traditional gun artillery, they offer considerably greater range and firepower, which the Red Army famously used to enormous physical and psychological effect in pivotal battles such as Stalingrad.⁷ A single battery of four BM-13s offered equivalent saturation bombardment to 72 field guns.

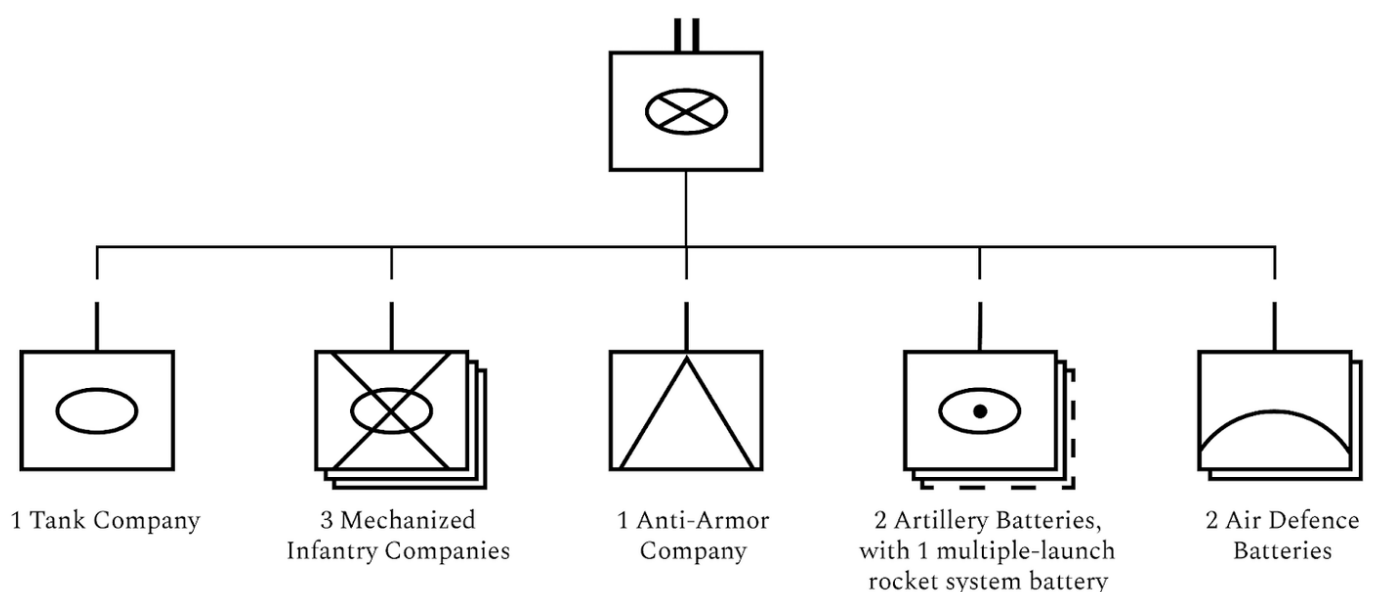
The Russian Ground Forces today continue to prioritize artillery as the main method of delivering firepower, an approach with several advantages over the Western focus on airpower. Most importantly, it is much cheaper. Low procurement and operating costs keep Russian defense spending affordable and stable at around 3-4% of GDP,⁸ a major improvement on the ruinously expensive policies pursued by the USSR in the late 1980s, which attempted to match U.S. technological strength on a system-by-system basis.⁹ Modern Russian procurement prefers systems cheap enough to be bought in large quantities, even if some amount of technological edge is sacrificed in the process.

Secondly, artillery can saturate large areas with explosives, allowing Russian commanders to attrit an opposing force while suffering minimal casualties. Notably, Russia never signed the 2008 Oslo Convention on Cluster Munitions¹⁰ and employs systems such as the TOS-1 thermobaric MLRS,¹¹ which can saturate an area of 40,000 square meters. European countries that signed the Oslo Convention, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, have no comparable ability to saturate large areas. Their reliance on small stocks of expensive precision-guided munitions represents a major strategic weakness in any potential large-scale European conflict.¹²

Lastly, Russian defense manufacturers continue to produce world-leading artillery systems. Russia's continued focus on developing its indirect fire capabilities allows its domestic arms industry to deepen its expertise in this specialized niche. The Uragan M-1 MLRS, for instance, can hit targets up to 120 km away, while even older Russian MLRS such as the BM-30 *Smerch* have maximum ranges around 90 km, substantially outranging the U.S. Army's M270, with its 40-70 km range. Soviet tube artillery has likewise been modernized far more aggressively than equivalent U.S. systems.¹³ The latest variants of the 2S19 "Msta" howitzer range out to 80 km,¹⁴ while even the relatively few modernized Paladin self-propelled howitzers of the U.S. Army have a maximum range of only 40 km. The focus on striking targets from distance goes beyond artillery as Russia further develops its cruise and ballistic missile capabilities, aiming to construct a mix of long-range precision strike options to hit vital enemy infrastructure while its massive area-effect and precision-guided artillery systems dominate the fight at up to 100 kilometers of range.

Russian artillery is not just qualitatively superior but also more numerous. A brief comparison of the structure of a Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) against a U.S. Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) illustrates this point. While the American brigade—a formation of around 4500 troops—has around six times as many tanks as the BTG, this ratio is completely reversed in the respective artillery formations. The U.S. ABCT has just 18 howitzers and no MLRS, while the standard Russian BTG—a much smaller formation of just 800-900 men—has the same number of howitzers and generally includes an MLRS battery and a dedicated anti-tank company with long-range *Kornet* anti-tank guided missiles.

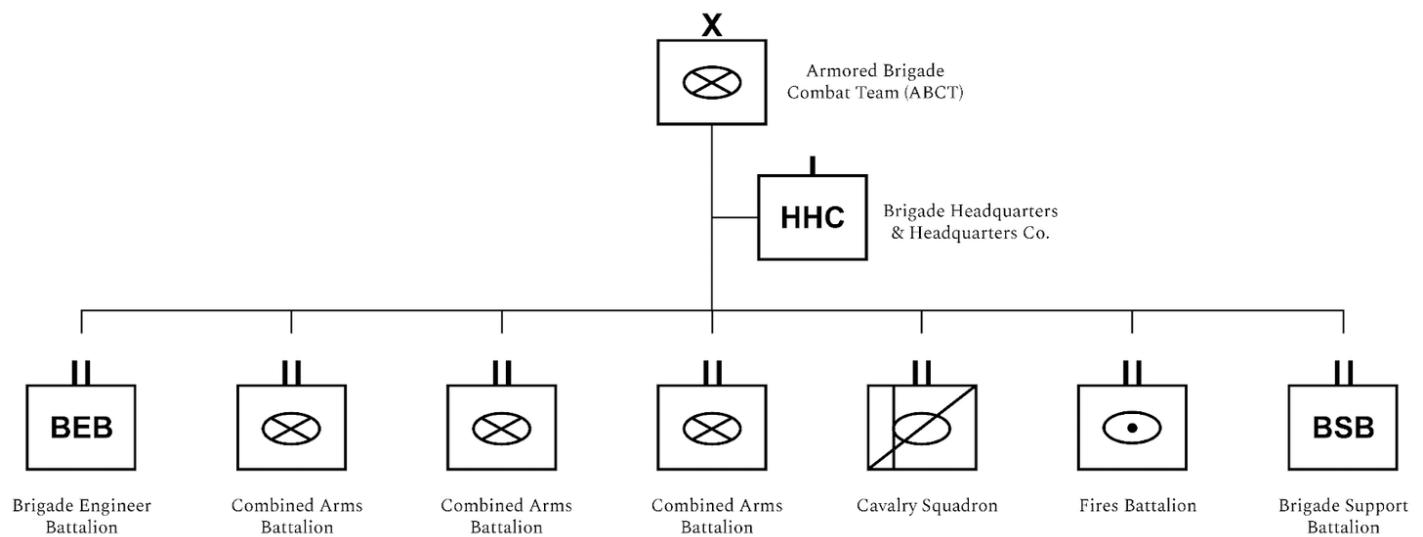
Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) Force Structure



Bismarck Analysis, 2022

Figure 1. The basic force structure of a Russian Battalion Tactical Group (approximately 800-900 men). On operations, the BTG would be supplemented with electronic warfare and UAV assets. It is supported by the logistics assets of the brigade that it is drawn from. Note how the BTG incorporates its own air defense units.

U.S. Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT)



Bismarck Analysis, 2022

Figure 2. The basic structure of a U.S. armored brigade (approximately 4500 men). Each combined arms battalion contains two Platoons of Abrams tanks, coupled with infantry riding in Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles. Despite the much larger size of the ABCT, its commander will generally have to manage a less diverse set of assets than the Russian BTG commander: MLRS and air defense are noticeably absent.

While Russia and the U.S. both operate dedicated supporting artillery brigades, Russia operates more of them and retains substantial advantages in range, payload, and perhaps most importantly, in prestige. When the U.S. sent its artillery units to Iraq as substitutes for infantry, it illustrated how far this branch of the Army had fallen as it struggled to find a role in the “War on Terror.” Russia’s artillery in active service is now largely self-propelled—though it continues to keep large stocks of older towed howitzers in storage¹⁵—while the U.S. Army continues to operate towed artillery such as the M777 howitzer in large quantities. U.S. Army leadership has been in denial about the speed and lethality of modern Russian counter-battery fire, which can arrive on an artillery formation a mere 2-3 minutes after it has fired its opening salvo, although recent announcements have finally indicated a realization about the scale of the problem they confront.¹⁶ Russia’s increased focus on this artillery has led to major advantages in the relative cost of armaments. The Russian-made 152 mm artillery shell costs just \$1000, while the U.S.-made equivalent, the 155 mm 982 Excalibur shell, costs \$80,000.¹⁷

Perhaps most crucially, Russia’s advantage in artillery is rapidly being compounded by the growing adoption of drones—technically called unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). While unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) that carry their own missiles—such as Turkey’s Bayraktar TB-2—are the most notorious military drones, Russia uses its 2000-strong¹⁸ drone fleet primarily for reconnaissance and target acquisition to assist the artillery. Surprisingly, Russia does not currently operate any UCAVs, although it plans to introduce them to the force beginning in 2023. In the meantime, UAV companies are now routinely attached to brigades and BTGs, and Russia has developed its own large fleet of medium-altitude long-endurance reconnaissance drones such as the Orlan-10,¹⁹ with a low unit cost of around \$100,000,²⁰ compared to \$1-2 million for a TB-2 or approximately £15 million for the British Army’s Watchkeeper.²¹ The digitalization of older Soviet artillery and the integration of newer systems into the GLONASS satellite system increases precision and enables UAVs to be used to their maximum effect.²²

Russia's flat geography is well suited to the use of reconnaissance drones since human forward artillery observers often struggle to attain a sufficiently elevated position.

Russia's Approach to Mechanized Warfare



A Russian T-14 Armata main battle tank on parade in 2015. [Source](#).

Russian grand strategy envisages a large-scale war with NATO as a primarily defensive effort taking place near or even inside Russia's borders, but "active defense," as it is called by Russian military theorists, will inevitably include offensive operations, and a potentially large-scale decisive counterattack. In local wars, such as those in Georgia or Ukraine, Russian theory and practice remain fundamentally offensive.²³

Accordingly, while the Russian Ground Forces employ large amounts of artillery, they also operate many tanks. Although Russian theorists are acutely aware of the vulnerability of traditional armor on the modern battlefield—as shown by the recent appearance of tanks with improvised cage armor designed to protect its tanks from anti-tank missiles and drone attack²⁴—it remains the only solution that can provide the desired levels of firepower, mobility, and troop protection. Russia's ground units are further protected by the enormous quantities of short- and medium-range air defense embedded into its brigades and BTGs. This kind of air defense, with typical maximum ranges of 5–12 km, gets fewer headlines than the long-range systems such as the S-400 operated by the Russian Aerospace Forces, but in reality, the air defense systems operated by the Ground Forces are just as vital and will only grow in importance as drones and loitering munitions are adopted by militaries worldwide. In contrast, the U.S. Army almost entirely abolished its short-range air defense capabilities after the Cold War ended,²⁵ and is now desperately scrambling to reconstitute some way to equip its own brigades.²⁶

The use of armor in Russian military theory has its own peculiarities. In typical Western practice, the tank and its accompanying infantry do the bulk of the work of seizing contested ground, supported as necessary by artillery and airpower. In Russian practice, tanks accompany motorized infantry to seize more limited sets of terrain—only enough necessary for the artillery to safely conduct strikes on the real target. As a result, Russia maintains virtually no light infantry on the model of U.S. Infantry Brigade Combat Teams, believing these to be irrelevant in modern warfare.²⁷ Even its most lightweight Airborne and Naval Infantry brigades are now being equipped with tanks,²⁸ while the majority of the armored Ground Forces are in the motor-rifle brigades, which have no direct equivalents in most Western forces. These brigades are noticeably lighter and more mobile than U.S. Armored Brigade Combat Teams, but significantly heavier and equipped with more firepower than the U.S. Army's medium-weight Stryker brigades or European medium brigades. The firepower is not limited to tanks and artillery, but runs across almost every armored vehicle Russia puts into service; 30mm cannons and anti-tank guided missiles are increasingly common on anything that moves.

Beyond firepower, mobility is the other key element of Russian operational theory, on both the offense and the defense. In a defensive conflict with NATO, Russian theorists endorse a theory of maneuver defense, a term that corresponds loosely to the traditional national strategy of giving up territory so as to set up a war of attrition. On the offensive, Russian theory prizes speed and the rapid execution of battle plans to out-tempo the enemy and disrupt their planning process. Accordingly, Russian infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers are amphibious,²⁹ while tanks are equipped with snorkels,³⁰ enabling Russian armor to move at speed across the country's many rivers and streams without waiting for bridging equipment.

The importance of speed is also evident in the unique Russian approach to the command of maneuver units. Russian brigade and BTG commanders lack the extensive staff common in Western maneuver units but also command a greater variety of companies than their Western counterparts. This is carefully designed to enable a more lightweight command operation and minimize cognitive load. Russian command theory has a strong preference for quick "80% solutions," rather than theoretically perfect but practically fragile battlefield plans. Commanders memorize a playbook of tactics and skilled commanders will combine two or three tactics from the list to create an apparently complex battlefield maneuver in a matter of minutes. Brigade and BTG leaders are generally more mathematically competent than is the case in the West and are well-trained in the use of nomograms and basic formulae to quickly compute the desired weight of artillery fire. Moreover, Russian officer education differs substantially from the Western model. In the U.S., officers are given a general education, in Russia, they are given a much narrower, specialist education that aims to equip its cadets to fill a few roles extremely well. Transfers between branches of the military and temporary assignments to a different branch are relatively common in a typical American officer's career pathway, but in the Russian system, they are very unusual. Officer specialization, therefore, is another Russian institutional mechanism for conducting fast and effective operations.

This modern force structure that underpins the Ground Forces' mechanized operations was largely set in place between 2008-2012 as part of the New Look reforms, but by 2012, the military was still inexperienced and untested in battle. This situation was remedied in subsequent years, partly in Ukraine and Syria, and partly due to a renewed focus on stress-testing logistics and training for rapid deployments.

Excellent Logistics Allow For A Deployable Ground Force



The Russian flag flies alongside the flag of the Russian Engineer Troops near ancient ruins in Palmyra, Syria in 2016. [Source](#).

Unlike European militaries, the Russian military is well-practiced in fast deployments. During General Valery Gerasimov's tenure as Chief of General Staff since 2012, it has become customary for brigades to participate in large-scale snap exercises thousands of kilometers away from their bases, while an annual long-distance rail move is a regular feature of brigade training.³¹ Gerasimov aimed to cure a weakness of the Soviet military —much of its military was fixed to its bases and could not be easily moved as required. As the Russian military has shrunk and professionalized, the need for a highly transportable force has grown, but this comes with enormous logistical challenges over Russia's vast territory. Armored vehicles, whether wheeled or tracked, simply cannot drive themselves for long distances regularly without unacceptable rates of mechanical failure, and must be transported instead. Airlifts are expensive and impractical on a large scale given the quantities of heavy armor in the Ground Forces, while Russia's geography makes large-scale naval transport operations implausible.

Railways are the primary solution to this problem.³² While the Russian military does employ Heavy Equipment Transporters for road marches, it inherited a great deal of expertise in railway-based operations from the Soviet military, and this remains the primary method of transport in practice, as demonstrated over the last few months near Ukraine. The Ground Forces today employ about 29,000 railway troops (about 60% conscripts) tasked with assisting transportation, maintaining key lines, and repairing the tracks when damaged in wartime. The demand for large-scale railway operations is

particularly acute since the supply and maintenance needs of the Russian military are considerably greater than those of its competitors. The cost of embedded artillery and air defense units is that Russian maneuver units need constant resupply of heavy shells, rockets, and missiles to remain operationally effective.³³ Consequently, while Russia can quickly exert its military might within the boundaries of the former USSR, it would struggle to sustain large-scale operations in countries that do not use the Russian five-foot rail gauge. Shifting between gauges is a time-consuming operation that would substantially slow down Russian operations, while the changeover location would constitute an obvious and hard-to-defend single point of failure.

Beyond exercises, limited wars have been the main avenue for readying the force for larger operations. While the U.S. and U.K. dedicated themselves to counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, buying equipment unsuitable for large-scale conventional wars and scaling down or canceling the procurement of modern weapons, Russia was institutionally strengthened by its conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. While the Syrian conflict was against a far less technologically sophisticated foe than Russia would face in other theaters and could have been conducted as a Western-style stabilization operation, Russia was not limited to a Western conception of population-centric counterinsurgency. Accordingly, amidst a large-scale aerial bombing campaign, it used both ballistic and cruise missiles, employed thermobaric flamethrowers, and deployed T-90 tanks.³⁴

These conflicts were viewed as training grounds for larger wars, enabling the General Staff to test new equipment almost as they received it while experimenting with novel doctrine and force structures. In Syria, for instance, Russia learned how to integrate UAVs of a wide variety of sizes into its force, using them to conduct electronic warfare, target airpower, and make long-range strikes from naval vessels. Gerasimov has claimed in interviews that it was routine for up to 70 Russian UAVs to be in the air at once.³⁵ While Russia had employed UAVs previously in Ukraine, UAVs then were primarily used in the Ground Forces to enable artillery fire. Syria instead offered a real opportunity to integrate them with the Aerospace Forces. Notably, through its investments in more advanced reconnaissance capabilities, the Russian air force was able to substantially improve the accuracy of even its unguided munitions.

Syria also proved that Russia can deploy and sustain a large force far beyond its borders. While Russia remains largely a regional power, it was able to deploy its sole aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, and use it to launch Su-33 and Mig-29KR fighters to conduct strikes on Syrian territory, suffering only two crashes and no deaths in the process. Supply and maintenance operations were conducted by four Turkish-flagged cargo vessels that the Russians bought, refitted, and added to their auxiliary fleet on short notice.³⁶ Helicopters and other heavy assets were often flown in by AN-124 airlifters, giant planes that can fly with a maximum payload of 150 tonnes.³⁷ While the Syrian deployment and resupply operation could not have easily scaled up to anything substantially larger, it sufficed for the task at hand.

Russia's 2014 seizures of Crimea and Donbas in Ukraine, on the other hand, were a testing arena for the Ground Forces, where Russia deployed approximately 26,000 troops to hold Crimea while deploying another 10,000 to Donbas. What Western observers have

called hybrid war should perhaps just be called war.³⁸ Donbas, in particular, saw the first use of BTGs, which have since become the standard form of deployable maneuver unit for local wars—some 80-100 Russian BTGs are massed on Ukraine's borders at the time of writing.

The origin of the BTG concept goes back to the Chechen Wars, and similar combined arms units were deployed extensively in the 2008 war in Georgia. Nevertheless, Donbas offered new opportunities to test and refine the BTG structure and integrate new technologies that Russia did not possess in the Georgian War, most notably reconnaissance UAVs operated as real-time forward artillery observers. A strike at Zelenopillya, Ukraine in July 2014 has become the most infamous example of Russia's use of drones to magnify the power of its Soviet-era artillery systems. On this occasion, a Ukrainian mechanized brigade positioned about 10 km from the Russian border found itself under observation by Russian UAVs. Barely minutes later, it was struck by successive rounds of rocket fire from the other side of the border, obliterating two battalions worth of materiel and killing close to 40 men.³⁹ Electronic warfare units are now also embedded into BTGs, a practice that began in Donbas, as Ukrainian forces routinely found their communications impaired by Russian jamming.⁴⁰

Perhaps most importantly, a whole new generation of Russian commanders acquired practical combat experience. In a 2017 interview, Gerasimov noted that all of Russia's military district commanders had gone to Syria, 90% of its divisional leaders, and half of its brigade and regimental commanders.⁴¹

Russia Can Create and Stabilize Client States



Russian troops without insignia occupy a Ukrainian military base in Crimea in 2014. [Source](#).

It is important to distinguish the political outcomes of warfare from the military outcomes. Winning wars is not just the sum of winning a series of battles, but also

depends on the ability of a country's political and military institutions to work together effectively. When these institutions are functional and coordinated, they can identify desired political outcomes and then achieve them as war goals. This is ultimately not just a strictly military accomplishment, but also a political, diplomatic, and institutional one. Firepower ends battles, but peace treaties end wars. The winning side must be capable of articulating its interests and war goals in the first place. The U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are perhaps some of the strongest recent examples of what a mismatch between the ability to achieve military outcomes and the ability to achieve political outcomes looks like. Despite overwhelming and victorious military force, the U.S. appeared largely incapable of converting these military successes into political and institutional successes, leading instead to decades of costly military occupation that, in the case of Afghanistan, led to an embarrassing return to the status quo from over twenty years ago.⁴²

Russia, in contrast, has proven very skilled at aligning military force with desired political outcomes. This has most commonly taken the form of using Russian troops to create and then prop up internationally unrecognized client states in disputed territories. This formula has been used successfully in the breakaway provinces of Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two disputed provinces in Georgia, have been occupied by Russian troops since the 2008 war and are formally recognized as independent by Russia. Russian peacekeepers are present in Moldova and Azerbaijan, in the breakaway regions of Transnistria and Artsakh respectively, though Russia has not formally recognized the independence of either. In Ukraine, Russian troops unofficially occupied Crimea in 2014 before Crimea declared short-lived independence, quickly followed by accession to the Russian Federation. Russian troops were present in the pro-Russian separatist republics in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine for years before Russia formally recognized their independence in February 2022. Russia can win local wars with its neighbors and convert these military victories into new client states that can then either be left "frozen" to prevent the neighboring country from reconsolidating state capacity or even eventually annexed by Russia with the legitimacy of a treaty between nominal states.

While creating small unrecognized client states is a useful tool of Russian statecraft, Russia has also proven capable of stabilizing much larger allied regimes and, in the process, moving them towards client state status. The most recent notable example is Kazakhstan, which [faced mass unrest in January 2022](#) that seemingly developed into an attempt to overthrow the pro-Russian government. Armed groups targeted key infrastructure and government buildings, necessitating a heavy response from security forces that resulted in hundreds reported dead and thousands arrested. Under the provisions of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a mutual defense pact between Russia, Kazakhstan, and other post-Soviet states, Russia sent thousands of troops to Kazakhstan overnight to help quell unrest and show support for the Kazakh government. Since 2015, Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War on behalf of dictator Bashar al-Assad's government has not just prevented a collapse of the regime, but recaptured most of Syria's territory from rebel groups and secured permanent Russian access to Syria's Mediterranean ports.

Between 2020 and 2021, Russian support stabilized the regime of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, which faced sanctions and a retraction of official recognition from the United States, European Union (EU), and other Western-aligned countries after a disputed election in 2020. Belarus ultimately neither requested nor needed Russian military intervention, though it was offered by the Russian government.⁴³ Russian-made arms and training by Russian security services, however, reportedly helped Belarusian security services disperse anti-government protests and break up activist networks,⁴⁴ while Lukashenko personally thanked Putin for the extension of a \$1.5 billion loan to Belarus during the height of the crackdown.⁴⁵ Before Russia's show of support for Belarus against the West, Lukashenko was trying to slow roll Belarus' integration with Russia to preserve his own local power.⁴⁶ Though he nominally supported entities such as the Union State, a supranational union of Russia and Belarus created by a treaty in 1999, Lukashenko notably refused to affirm Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and even cast aspersions on its legitimacy.⁴⁷ This finally changed in November 2021 with an announcement of an official trip to Crimea,⁴⁸ followed by the signing of an agreement on 28 Union State "integration programs" between Belarus and Russia.⁴⁹ Belarus is now indefinitely hosting at least 30,000 Russian troops.⁵⁰

In the context of an all-out war between Russia and Ukraine, all of this means that Russia is well-prepared to lock in territorial gains made by its military forces with the establishment of new client states on Ukrainian territory. Such states will almost certainly remain internationally unrecognized, except perhaps by states in Russia's sphere of influence, but this does not matter for Russian goals. Such rump states can perhaps eventually be politically integrated into the Union State, officially annexed by the Russian Federation, or simply left alone to be fully dependent on Russia in all but name.

In the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration has reportedly considered arming a Ukrainian insurgency against Russian occupation.⁵¹ Leaving aside the military viability of such a plan, it is unlikely to be politically viable. Aside from the promise of direct Russian economic aid, Russia's client state strategy can also raise the power and prestige of local elites, who become official leaders of their own government with direct access to the Russian political elite, rather than just being one of many regions subordinate to a disliked unitary elite in the capital. Moreover, even in the event of a violent and prolonged insurgency, the Russian government has already proven its political will to absorb casualties, both in the Chechen Wars of the 1990s and more recently in Syria and Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Russian soldiers have died in combat since the 1990s. The pacification of Chechnya has been largely achieved through the Moscow-approved and long-term rule of powerful local elites, such as Ramzan Kadyrov (whose official title is "Head of the Chechen Republic"), in what is officially an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation.

Russian Expansionism Becomes A Viable Strategy in Europe



Vladimir Putin convenes a meeting of the Security Council to discuss the formal recognition of separatist republics in Ukraine in February 2022. [Source](#).

The modern Russian military then has the capability to defeat any of its former Soviet neighbors and it is without peer in Europe. While the Soviet military had great quantitative advantages but some crucial qualitative deficits, today the Russian military is not just bigger than the forces of any individual European country, it is qualitatively better than all of them. Notably, there are some niche capabilities across some European forces that Russia lacks, such as Turkey's fleet of cheap but high-impact UCAVs such as the [Bayraktar TB-2](#), or the U.K. and France's carrier battle groups. Russia's overall qualitative edge, however, far outstrips any of those nations individually. In the opening phase of a war against the combined might of NATO, Russia could at least hold its own, assuming the war took place near its own borders, although its lack of a meaningful operational reserve and relative shortages of key precision-guided munitions mean that it is still poorly prepared for a lengthy conventional war of attrition.

Whether or not the Russian army marches into Kiev this year, it is well-positioned to remain a meaningful instrument of Russian national power for decades to come. Even if Russian economic growth remains sluggish, as is expected, the current burden of defense spending is eminently sustainable with revenue from gas exports from [Russia's developing Arctic region](#), which are likely to become even more profitable, especially if technological developments lead to [rapid adoption of solar power](#) around the world.

The rising prestige of military service and its professionalization in key combat roles helps offset the manpower shortages caused by the demographic collapse of the 1990s. The full consequences of this collapse are profound and will be felt for most of this century, but notably modern Russia is no longer the only power dealing with this problem. Fertility collapse has been seen in all major developed countries such as Japan, Germany, and China. Notably, even the United States, which was until recently the last exception, has seen a drop of its total fertility rate (TFR) to a historic low of 1.6 in 2020, while deaths of despair come to make up an ever greater source of morbidity.⁵² The

global demographic transition is now an important economic, political, and eventually, military headwind eating away at the absolute position of all current great powers. Putin has successfully halted and even reversed Russia's absolute decline as a military power despite many economic, political, and social headwinds. After significant institutional reform, this military power can now be converted into territorial, economic, political, and, at times, even demographic gains.⁵³

While Russian military power has diminished enormously compared to China, it is unclear if Russia is declining relative to the United States, which now finds itself overstretched by global commitments. Perhaps more importantly, when compared with European militaries, Russia's military power is clearly ascendant. The key remaining advantage of European states over Russia is their strong—if stagnant—economies, which have become less indispensable for Russia as trade partners due to the rise of China. The strong economic position of Germany, which is very effective when dealing with weaker Eastern European states, has proven ineffective against Russia due to its energy dependence on Russian gas exports. The only rising power that might act as a headwind against Russia's rise is then Erdogan's Turkey, itself in geopolitical conflicts with Mediterranean powers such as France.

Live players that adapt to strategic circumstances often profoundly transform these circumstances in unexpected ways.⁵⁴ A decade ago, few would have predicted that Russia would successfully respond to the strategic challenge of NATO expansion. Both European states and the EU have found themselves incapable of developing military capacities that could serve as deterrents. Meanwhile, the U.S. very much possesses such military capacity, but not the political or economic capacity to implement a grand strategy beyond that of managed decline. The institutional decline which causes such failures rests on a dearth of live players at all levels of modern Western organizations. The societal and political problems behind this stagnation will prove difficult to resolve. But this doesn't mean Russian power is unopposed. The borders of European NATO countries themselves are likely to be a line Russia won't cross in the near future. Further, Russia has found no answer to the strategic challenge of China, one it will have to meet if it wishes to remain an independent great power in the future.

-
- 1 E. Taylor Francis, "A House Built on Sand: Air Supremacy in US Air Force - History, Theory, and Doctrine," *Lemay Center for Doctrine at Air University*, April 2020, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Papers/LP006_FRANCIS_A_HOUSE_BUILT_ON_SAND_AIR_SUPREMACY_IN_US_AIR_FORCE_HISTORY_THEORY_AND_DOCTRINE.PDF
 - 2 Liam Collins, Harrison Morgan, "King of Battle: Russia Breaks Out the Big Guns," *Association of the United States Army*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.ausa.org/articles/king-battle-russia-breaks-out-big-guns>
 - 3 "Russia says 63,000 troops have seen combat in Syria," *BBC News*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45284121>
 - 4 For an evaluation of the force Russia deployed to Kazakhstan, see Alexander Mladenov & Kassimir Grozev, "Russia flexes surge capability muscles", *Shephard News*, 20 Jan, 2022,

<https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/defence-notes/russia-flexes-surge-capability-muscles-analysis/>

- 5 For an overview of the political settlement Russia has obtained in Syria, see Kamal Alam, "In the Chaos of Syrian Geopolitics, Russia Remains Dominant", *Royal United Services Institute*, 15 May, 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/chaos-syrian-geopolitics-russia-remains-dominant>
- 6 Russia's emphasis on artillery predates even the Soviet Union. The country's first truly specialist military academy was the Artillery Training School that opened its doors in Imperial Russia's St. Petersburg in 1820, today known as the Mikhailovskaya Military Artillery Academy. In the Soviet era, artillery continued to stand out. During World War II, Soviet engineers developed the world's first self-propelled multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS): the famous truck-mounted "Katyusha" BM-13. For more on Russia's history of artillery see: V.A. Konstantinov, "Mikhailovskaya Military Artillery Academy: 185 years of activity in Military education and science," *Military Thought*, Vol. 15, Issue 1, 2006, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA151959578&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=08695636&p=AO NE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7E9851e85c>
- 7 Anthony Beevor, "Stalingrad," *Penguin*, 2007
- 8 Richard Connolly, "Russian Military Expenditure in Comparative Perspective: A Purchasing Power Parity Estimate," *University of Birmingham & Chatham House*, 2019, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-021955-Final.pdf
- 9 Precise numbers for the size of both the USSR's GDP and its defense spending are not available, but most estimates converge on the USSR spending about 15% of GDP on defense throughout most of the Cold War, and larger amounts at times of military build-up. For a discussion see Jose Luis Fernandez Ricon de la Puente, "The Soviet Union: Military Spending", *Nintil*, 31 May, 2016, <https://nintil.com/the-soviet-union-military-spending/>
- 10 While all Western European countries have signed the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the United States and China are among the many countries which have not.
- 11 This system is being attached to various units currently deployed on Ukraine's border. See original tweet [here](#).
- 12 Jack Watling, "The Future of Fires: Maximising the UK's Tactical and Operational Firepower," *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, 2019, https://static.rusi.org/op_201911_future_of_fires_watling_web_0.pdf
- 13 Roger McDermott, "Russian Military Pursues 'Artillery Reform'," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume 16, Issue 143, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-military-pursues-artillery-reform/>
- 14 "Artillerymen of the combined arms army of the Western Military District solemnly handed over the keys to ten new howitzers "Msta-S-M2"," *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade (CAWAT)*, June 3, 2020, <https://armstrade.org/includes/periodics/news/2020/0603/095058134/detail.shtml>
- 15 See p. 100 of Andrew Radin et al, 2019, "The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition", *RAND Corporation*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3099.html; Some older towed artillery systems have recently appeared in Ukraine: see this video of a Battalion Tactical Group deployed with the Msta-B howitzer [here](#).

- 16 For a discussion of this see John Gordon IV et al., "Army Fires Capabilities for 2025 and Beyond," *RAND Corporation*, 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2124.html
- 17 Lester W. Grau, Charles K. Bartles, "The Russian Way of War," *Foreign Military Studies Office*, 2016, p.262,
- 18 Samuel Bendett, "Russian Unmanned Vehicle Developments: Syria and Beyond," pp. 38-47, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24241.9?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents in "Improvisation and Adaptability in the Russian Military," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, April 1, 2020,
- 19 Peter Suci, "Russia's Heavy Weapons are Getting a new UAV-based targeting System," *The National Interest*, December 21, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/russias-heavy-weapons-are-getting-new-uav-based-targeting-system-198295>
- 20 "First Export of Russian Orlan-E Drones Goes to Myanmar," *Defense World*, January 22, 2021, https://www.defenseworld.net/news/28818/First_Export_of_Russian_Orlan_E_Drones_to_Myanmar#.YhUq_9_P02w
- 21 Alice Ross, Jack Serle, "UK's £1.2bn bill for drone that's seen 146 hours of active duty," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/02/watchkeeper-drone-uk-military-delay-over-budget-investigation>
- 22 Roger McDermott, "Moscow Enhances Artillery Firepower in Kaliningrad", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 1, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-enhances-artillery-firepower-in-kaliningrad/>
- 23 For a more in depth discussion of Russian strategic theory see Michael Kofman et al., Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts," *Center for Naval Analyses*, 2021, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/pdf/Russian-Military-Strategy-Core-Tenets-and-Operational-Concepts.pdf
- 24 See original tweet [here](#).
- 25 The decline of U.S army short-range air defense is discussed in Alan J. Vick et al., "Air Base Defense Rethinking Army and Air Force Roles and Functions," *RAND Corporation*, 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4300/RR4368/RAND_RR4368.pdf
- 26 Short-range air defense is now returning to the U.S. Army's Stryker brigades: see Jordan Allen, "M-SHORAD system bolsters Army's air defense capabilities," *U.S. Army*, April 23, 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/245530/m_shorad_system_bolsters_armys_air_defense_capabilities
- 27 For a discussion of the problems the U.S Army perceives with its IBCTs see "Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) Mobility, Reconnaissance, and Firepower Programs," *Congressional Research Office*, July 8, 2019, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/R44968.pdf>
- 28 Jörgen Elfving, "The Tanks Are Coming: Russia Introduces Tank Units to Airborne Forces and Naval Infantry," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 15, Issue: 51, April 4, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-tanks-are-coming-russia-introduces-tank-units-to-airborne-forces-and-naval-infantry/>
- 29 Lester W. Grau, "Snorkeling Russian Tanks Across Rivers," *U.S. Army Fort Benning Maneuver Center of Excellence*, Fall, 2019,

<https://www.benning.army.mil/armor/earmor/content/issues/2019/Fall/4Grau19.pdf>

- 30 See [here](#) for a T-90 deep wading.
- 31 Lester W. Grau, Charles K. Bartles, "The Russian Way of War," *Foreign Military Studies Office*, 2016, p.101; See quotes in Ramm Alexey, "Verification by Ukraine," *Military-Industrial Courier*, April 27, 2015, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/25027>
- 32 Lester W. Grau, Charles K. Bartles, "The Russian Way of War," *Foreign Military Studies Office*, 2016, p.327,
- 33 Alex Vershinin, "Feeding the Bear: A Closer Look at Russian Army Logistics and the Fait Accompli," *War on the Rocks*, November 23, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/feeding-the-bear-a-closer-look-at-russian-army-logistics/>
- 34 Timothy Thomas, "Russian Lessons Learned in Syria: An Assessment," *The MITRE Corporation*, June, 2020, <https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/publications/pr-19-3483-russian-lessons-learned-in-syria.pdf>
- 35 Viktor Baranets, "Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General of the Army Valery Gerasimov: "We broke the back of the shock forces of terrorism," *TVNZ*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/>
- 36 Jonathan Saul, Maria Tsvetkova, " Russia supplies Syria mission with old cargo ships bought from Turkey," *Reuters*, December 15, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-syria-ships-idUSKBN0TY2BG20151215>
- 37 Tyler Rogoway, "Russia Wants To Replace Its Giant An-124 Airlifters With Updated Decades-Old Design," *The Drive*, December 29, 2018, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/25712/russia-is-looking-back-to-the-future-to-replace-its-giant-an-124-cargo-aircraft>
- 38 For a discussion of the problems with the term "hybrid war" see Michael Kofman, "Russian Hybrid War and Other Dark Arts", *War On The Rocks*, March 11, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>
- 39 Jack Watling, "The Future of Fires: Maximising the UK's Tactical and Operational Firepower," *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, 2019, https://static.rusi.org/op_201911_future_of_fires_watling_web_0.pdf
- 40 Amos C. Fox, Andrew J. Rossow, "Making Sense of Russian Hybrid Warfare: A Brief Assessment of the Russo-Ukrainian War," *The Land Warfare Papers*, No. 112, March, 2017, <https://www.ausa.org/sites/default/files/publications/LWP-112-Making-Sense-of-Russian-Hybrid-Warfare-A-Brief-Assessment-of-the-Russo-Ukrainian-War.pdf>
- 41 Viktor Baranets, "Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General of the Army Valery Gerasimov: "We broke the back of the shock forces of terrorism," *TVNZ*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/>
- 42 James Dobbins, "Afghanistan Was Lost Long Ago," *RAND Corporation*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/08/afghanistan-was-lost-long-ago.html>
- 43 Fraser Jackson, "Protestors pack Belarus capital, Russia offers Lukashenko military help," *France 24*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200817-protestors-pack-belarus-capital-russia-offers-lukashenko-military-help>
- 44 Vlad Kobets, David J. Kramer, "Lukashenko's Brutal Crackdown Has Lethal Help From

Moscow," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/04/belarus-lukashenko-protests-election-russia-putin-brutal-crackdown-weapons-ammunition-bypol/>

- 45 "Belarusian leader thanks Putin for economic support during mass protests," *Reuters*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus-idUSKBN2AM238>
- 46 Luka Jukic, "The End of Lukashenko or the End of Belarus?" *Palladium Magazine*, September 14, 2020, <https://palladiummag.com/2020/09/14/the-end-of-lukashenko-or-the-end-of-belarus/>
- 47 "President of the Republic of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko answers questions of mass media representatives on 23 March 2014," *President of the Republic of Belarus*, March 23, 2014, <https://president.gov.by/en/events/president-of-the-republic-of-belarus-alexander-lukashenko-answers-questions-of-mass-media-representatives-on-8348>
- 48 "Lukashenko Says Crimea is Russian, Will Visit Peninsula With Putin," *The Moscow Times*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/11/30/lukashenko-says-crimea-is-russian-will-visit-peninsula-with-putin-a75707>
- 49 "Putin, Lukashenka Agree To 28 Union State 'Programs'," *Radio Free Europe*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-lukashenka-union-state/31546225.html>
- 50 Luke Harding, Pjotr Sauer, Shaun Walker, "Russian troops will remain indefinitely, says Belarus, as fears rise of Ukraine invasion," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/20/russian-troops-will-remain-indefinitely-says-belarus-as-fears-rise-of-ukraine-invasion>
- 51 Helene Cooper, "U.S. Considers Backing an Insurgency if Russia Invades Ukraine," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/us/politics/russia-ukraine-biden-military.html>
- 52 "US birth rate falls 4% to its lowest point ever," *BBC News*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57003722>; Angus Deaton, Lyndsey Jefferson, "Amidst America's changing politics, deaths of despair persist," *Chatham House*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/amidst-americas-changing-politics-deaths-despair-persist>
- 53 Vladimir Mukomel, "Migration of Ukrainians to Russia in 2014–2015," *E-International Relations*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/05/04/migration-of-ukrainians-to-russia-in-2014-2015/>
- 54 Samo Burja, "Live versus Dead Players," *Samo Burja*, March 14, 2018 <https://samoburja.com/live-versus-dead-players/>

 4 Share

Substack is the home for great writing