Wild East: Russian and US formations in Eastern Europe

Experience in recent conflicts has prompted both Russia and the United States to rethink their primary war fighting formations in Eastern Europe. Samuel Cranny-Evans reports

When Russia and the United States last contemplated fighting each other they massed armies of thousands of men and vehicles throughout Europe under the threat of nuclear weapons. The war, if it ever came, was expected to follow a predictable path. Soviet troops would advance on prepared NATO positions, potentially preceded by tactical nuclear weapons.

A Russian T-72 tank without a licence plate and coming from the Donetsk airport area moves along a snow-covered avenue in the district of Kievsky in Donetsk on 26 November 2014. (AFP/Getty Images)

Fortunately for Eastern Europe, times have changed. Both countries now look to smaller advanced manoeuvre formations as their primary war fighting formation. For the US much
of its combat power is concentrated within the combined arms battalion (CAB), whereas Russia has formulated the battalion tactical group (BTG) concept.

**Chechen lessons**

The BTG is not a new idea for Russian formations, its precedent lying in the Chechen conflicts from 1994 and 2000. While Russia could feed notionally enormous formations, many failed to maintain their equipment, with BTGs being formed from available units to overcome this lack of readiness.

As well as facing a lack of familiarity with equipment, units that had never trained together were sent into combat untested. Nonetheless, the concept stuck and in 2007 official efforts were made to establish BTGs. By August 2008 there were BTGs deployed to the border with Georgia, maintained at a readiness of two hours through six-month rotations. Once the conflict began in earnest, the BTGs from the 58th Army could act independently of their central command post and seize the key strategic Gufinsky bridge. A second BTG formed from the 247th Guards Air Assault Regiment was able to seize a Georgian base, thanks to its advance speed, and recover a Buk air defence system. In 10 days the formation was able to cover 550 km, the speed of the advance dissuading Georgian forces from engaging.

The Russian BTG is designed for rapid action, aiming to decisively influence a battlefield and deter would-be aggressors. A standard BTG is understood to include a single combined-arms manoeuvre battalion, equipped with main battle tanks (MBTs) and some supporting motorised infantry elements, including a motorised rifle company and at least one artillery battalion. An air defence battery, an engineering platoon, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) reconnaissance personnel are also included.

One BTG is formed per manoeuvre brigade in the Russian ground forces. This includes the country’s marine infantry, its airborne forces, and Spetsnaz brigades. The size of a BTG ranges from 700 to 900 men with about 100 vehicles and support systems. In a break from Soviet tradition BTGs are staffed only by professional soldiers rather than conscripts.

This serves multiple purposes: First, the unit is not subject to seasonal changes in personnel as new conscripts enter the force and the trained conscripts leave. Second, conscripts are prohibited under Russian law from conducting combat operations in peacetime. Professional soldiers are not bound by the same requirements and must obey orders to deploy if received. For Russia this means that its BTGs are truly high-readiness forces and can be deployed at short notice without the need to declare war, as shown in Ukraine.

BTGs are designed to be streamlined formations that can be deployed over great distances at short notice. Using pre-positioned equipment a BTG can be transported via Russia’s military aviation arm, understood to be capable of moving between 20,000 and 25,000 lightly armed troops in a single airlift operation. Once in position these troops can then use pre-positioned equipment to conduct an operation, without needing to bring their own heavy systems.
There are some weaknesses to this system, as Russia is yet to standardise its military vehicles and equipment. BTGs in the Eastern Military District might be used to training with a T-62 MBT or older variant of the T-72 MBT. Were they deployed to the Western Military District a unit might be inexperienced in using the more modern T-72 and T-90 MBTs stationed there. However, Russia is working to rapidly modernise the equipment of its land forces, and it seems unlikely that this will prevail for long.

There are some indications that BTGs are prioritised when new equipment is assigned. In March 2019 the 74th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade sent its BTGs on an exercise in Siberia. The formation included a mix of old equipment such as the BMD-2 air-droppable infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), and new systems like the T-72B3 MBT.

The group also practised with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) including the Orlan-10 and the Zastava, a local name for the Bird Eye 400. The Russian Unmanned Vehicle Systems Association (RUVSA) describes the Orlan-10 as able to accommodate photo and video cameras, a gyro-stabilised TV camera, and an infrared imager. It can also be equipped with an electronic warfare (EW) suite as part of the Leer-3 system. With this payload, the Orlan-10 UAV can jam GSM-900, GSM-1800, 3G or 4G signals within a radius of 6 km. This payload also enables the UAV to imitate a cellular base station, forcing connections from nearby devices. The Orlan-10 UAV has been used extensively in Ukraine, and it is believed to have been used to correct and direct artillery fire. It can also be used to geo-locate an enemy command post within a 120 km radius.

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