

Russia's revamp of military districts

Back to a centralised future?

Jonas Kjellén

In December 2022, the Russian military leadership announced a reorganisation of the Western military district through its partition. By March 1, 2024, the new organisation was launched, recreating the Moscow and Leningrad military districts. Against the backdrop of previous military district formats, this RUFBS Briefing suggests not only that this reorganisation is likely a preparation for a larger force structure in northwestern Russia but also signifies a gradual centralisation of military operational command.

THE MILITARY DISTRICTS (MD) are the main military-territorial entities in Russia, with their historical roots dating back to both the Soviet Union and Imperial Russia. Simply put, the idea of the MD has traditionally been to make the most of Russia's main military advantage versus its European neighbours – that is, to mobilise its large population for military purposes. In order to put all military forces within its territory into full strength and ready for war, the MD needed to be a well-oiled peacetime military-administrative machine, in control of a vast complex of storage facilities, repair shops, and military logistics hubs.

In war, the MD's traditional role has been to partially transform into a front, while retaining administrative tasks, such as generating reserves. Limited to operational control over ground forces units, operational-tactical aviation, and the military rear services, the front does not include units and structures of separate or central subordination, such as the fleets of the Navy, Airborne Troops units, and Strategic Rocket Forces.

As organisational entities, MDs survived the Soviet Union's collapse, but since 1992 their number has been reduced several times, first to nine¹ in 1992, eight in 1998, seven in 2001, and four in 2010. While the reforms in 1998 and 2001 were merely about optimisation — merging the MDs reflected a gradual contraction of the military organisation — the 2010 reform fundamentally changed their underlying logic.

At first glance, the creation of the Leningrad and Moscow MDs appears similar to the reduction of MDs in 1998 and 2001. But instead of merging, the number of MDs has expanded through partition. In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, an enlarged command structure to prepare for an expanded force structure seems logical. A closer examination, however, suggests that the recent change in the MDs also has wider implications for their future role, including a partial reversion of the 2010 MD reform.

THE RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR PROMPTED CHANGE

The impetus of the 2010 MD reform came from the experiences of the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008. The war had proved that Russia found it difficult, in spite of its one million-strong army, to swiftly raise and deploy a minor force to subdue a small country on its southern border. Part of the reason was that its armed forces were structurally a smaller version of their Soviet equivalent, with support structures dimensioned for raising a Cold-War era mass army. Although the deficiencies of the armed forces were well-known, low salaries in the 1990s in combination with the many opportunities for embezzlement resulted in fierce resistance to reform among insiders.

Restructuring the MDs was one of several measures in the 2009–10 reform, but, most importantly, it

¹ Until 2010, the “Kaliningrad special region” functioned as a minor military district and was therefore counted as one.

entailed a changed rationale for the MDs. The names of the new MDs illustrates this clearly. Whereas their former names, such as Leningrad, Moscow North Caucasus, and Far East underscored a territorial-administrative responsibility, the new MDs — the Western, Southern, Central, and Eastern — signal a new emphasis on operational responsibility in certain directions.

Two separate processes, though sides of the same coin, led to an increased emphasis on operational command for the MDs and a decreased focus on military-administrative tasks. First, administrative tasks within the MD were radically streamlined through the disbanding of cadre units, abolition of mobilisation and ammunition storage bases, outsourcing of military maintenance, and the downsizing of military education and medical structures. Second, a similarly massive reduction of superfluous command structures, predominantly but not only located in Moscow, resulted in the decentralisation of military command to the MD level. Based on the former MD headquarters, Joint Strategic Commands (JSC) became the primary military command bodies for joint operations, as the reform deprived the Navy of its operational command over naval forces during the transition of all fleets and flotillas to JSC subordination.

Military successes, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the intervention in Syria in 2015, when the armed forces had no problems mustering the required forces, likely confirmed to the military leadership that the focus on force availability and decentralised joint command had been effective. In December 2014, a fifth JSC, based on the Northern Fleet headquarters responsible for operations in the Arctic region, was formed.

WAR AGAIN PROMPTS CHANGE

Shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, problems that could be ascribed to the current functioning of Russia's MDs became visible. First, the invasion was conducted along several axes, although seemingly without a designated overall commander. This clearly reproduced Russia's pre-invasion military organisation of five separate JSCs, but was later rectified by the appointment of a central commander.

Second, when the initial push to take Kyiv and topple the Ukrainian leadership failed, it became apparent that Russia lacked additional soldiers to throw into the war. The precedence of force availability, at the expense of scalable capabilities, compelled Russia to resort to unorthodox recruitment sources, such as penal facilities. Hence, the war demonstrated the weaknesses of both a decentralised and dispersed military command and a force structure lacking the ability to scale up.

There is both circumstantial as well as direct evidence that the reconstruction of the Leningrad and Moscow MDs was not only to increase force density in northwestern Russia, but also a result of once again changing the role of MDs to address the problems exposed by the war. First, the announcement of the Western MD's partition was coupled with several measures emphasising the military-administrative tasks of MDs, including the improvement of the procedures for accumulating weaponry and equipment for mobilisation, rebuilding the armed-forces equipment repair and maintenance service, and finalising the digitalisation of the military commissariats. Second, the reuse of the old geographical MD names indicates a greater emphasis on military-administrative tasks in the two new MDs. But, indeed, the fact that the other three MDs remain untouched could also suggest that the change is minor or that there will be a mixed system, with varied emphasis on military-administrative and operational tasks. Third, simultaneously with the disbanding of the Northern Fleet JSC and transfer of its responsibilities to the new Leningrad MD, operational control over all fleets shifted from the JSCs to the Navy command. Hence, in one stroke, not just the Western MD but all JSCs were deprived of their control over naval forces, and thereby their role as a joint command.

It is likely that Russia's military strategic command and control will remain in a state of limbo for some time, especially as the ongoing war will require the most attention. However, the tendency to re-centralise operational command and once again bestow the MDs with their historical military-administrative task of mobilisation preparation is strong.

Jonas Kjellén, M.A., is a senior analyst at the Swedish Defence Research Agency, specialising in Russia's armed forces, with a particular focus on its navy.