

The Central Brain of the Russian Armed Forces

The Modern Russian General Staff in Institutional Context

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Abstract

The Russia Strategic Initiative at US European Command tasked CNA with providing a primer on the Russian General Staff for a public audience. The General Staff is perhaps the most important warfighting institution in the Russian Armed Forces, acting both as the planning “brains” of the Russian military and also as its operational-strategic headquarters. This paper covers the formal structure of the Russian General Staff, its institutional relationships with other military-bureaucratic institutions in Russia, its role in civil-military relations, its historical evolution, and its special role during wartime. It also offers multiple interpretations of the General Staff’s significance in military decision-making, considering the dynamics of political and policy influence in Russia and the role of the General Staff in developing military and political-military doctrine. This paper also raises the issue of the Russian General Staff chief’s incumbency and leadership continuity in light of the 2024 cabinet reshuffle.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In light of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and renewed research interest in command and control, military decision-making, and the dynamics of Russian civil-military relations, the Russia Strategic Initiative at US European Command tasked CNA with providing a primer on the Russian General Staff for a public audience. This occasional paper provides a digestible introduction to the Russian General Staff.

The General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation is the most central warfighting institution in the Russian Armed Forces, acting both as the planning “brains” of the Russian military and also as the operational-strategic headquarters. Although the administrative, bureaucratic, procurement, logistical, and training functions of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) are massive (as are the research, development, and production roles of the Russian military-industrial complex), the Russian General Staff ultimately plans and executes wartime operations alongside theater and operational direction commanders.

Despite the constant potential for internal bureaucratic tensions within Russia’s sprawling military institutions, the Russian General Staff has safeguarded its role as an intellectual hub and as the key war-planning, war-executing, and operational-strategic decision-making body in the ecosystem of major institutions that make up the Russian military. It has successfully defended its prerogatives to plan and execute war-making on behalf of the minister of defense and his principal in the Kremlin against bureaucratic infighting and is tightly integrated with both the regional military districts and wartime theater and operational commands.

Furthermore, the General Staff has thrived under its longtime leader, Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Valeriy Gerasimov, despite challenges both before and after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war. It is also well positioned to remain the key decision-influencing, war-planning, and operational-strategic locus of energy within the Russian Armed Forces for the foreseeable future—despite the fact that former defense minister Sergei Shoigu (Gerasimov’s longtime ally) has been removed from his position.

The longevity of CGS Gerasimov, who has been serving since 2012, has helped maintain the General Staff’s position within the military-bureaucratic hierarchy and has likely furthered centralization dynamics. Whether the General Staff may be reformed or decision-making shifted to Joint Strategic Commands, theater commander, or other parts of the MOD upon Gerasimov’s retirement remains an open question.

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INTRODUCTION

The General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (i.e., the Russian General Staff) is the central warfighting institution in the Russian Armed Forces, acting both as the planning “brains” of the Russian military and also as the operational-strategic headquarters. Although the administrative, bureaucratic, procurement, logistical, and training functions of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) are massive (as are the research, development, and production roles of Russian military-industrial complex), the Russian General Staff ultimately plans and executes wartime operations alongside theater and operational direction commanders.

This CNA occasional paper introduces the structure, the functions, and both the formal and de facto roles of the Russian General Staff. The audience for this paper is tripartite: (1) those who are unfamiliar with the Russian General Staff’s existence or workings, (2) those who seek a shorter form summary and analytic perspective on the Russian General Staff than is available in the existing literature, and (3) those looking for a synthesis of the latest research and views on the Russian General Staff from both Western and Russian-language analysts.

We have divided this paper into two sections. In the first, we provide a general overview of the Russian General Staff, which we intend to serve as a useful resource for researchers, analysts, and observers who need a quick reference to the major components and functions of the institution. This section of the paper covers the formal structures of the Russian General Staff, its relationship with other military-bureaucratic institutions within Russia, its role in civil-military relations, its historical evolution, and its special role during wartime.

In the second section, we provide additional perspectives on whether and in what ways the Russian General Staff influences Russia’s political-military decision-making processes and outcomes by looking at its institutional role within the MOD, the Russian military ecosystem, and the Russian political-military order. We specifically examine how the General Staff acts and asserts itself as an institution for military decision-making while considering the dynamics of political and policy influence in Russia and where it sits in developing military and political-military doctrine. We also examine how incumbency and leadership continuity have influenced the chief of the General Staff (CGS)—the single most important uniformed figure in the Russian military and second only to the minister of defense and the Russian president as supreme commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

We conclude with a set of key insights on the General Staff and implications for policy-makers in Western states.

We intend this occasional paper to be easily digestible to analysts looking for a quick primer on the Russian General Staff as well as a short-form introduction to current debates within Russia surrounding the institution’s place, activities, and relevance within the Russian military. We focus particularly on recent changes and the importance of wartime conditions. Much longer treatments of the Russian General Staff exist elsewhere and inform the paper throughout.¹

In developing this paper, we referenced a set of existing secondary sources on the Russian General Staff in English and in Russian, supplementing them as needed by official Russian government documents

¹ For a full list of these longer treatments, see the English-language section of Appendix B: Recommended Reading.

and journalistic accounts.² We rely extensively on open-source reporting in a descriptive and ideographic manner. In the second section, we bring in theoretical perspectives on decision-making, institutional influence, and regime politics, but we do not rely on a single overarching framework.

Overall, this paper focuses on the role of the Russian General Staff as a key intellectual hub and as the key war-planning, war-executing, and operational-strategic decision-making body in the ecosystem of major institutions that make up the Russian military. This impressive institution has safeguarded its core role within the Russian MOD and broader military decision-making space while slowly innovating through internal modernization related to command and control (C2) and operational-strategic command.

All the while, it has successfully defended its prerogatives to plan and execute war-making on behalf of the minister of defense and the supreme commander-in-chief against bureaucratic rivals and is tightly integrated with both the regional military districts and the wartime theater and operational commands. It has thrived under CGS Gerasimov, despite challenges both before and after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, and it is well positioned to remain the key decision-influencing, war-planning, and operational-strategic locus of energy within the Russian Armed Forces for the foreseeable future.

² For a list of key Russian language documents, leader statements, and analytic pieces on the General Staff, see the Russian-language section of Appendix B: Recommended Reading.

OVERVIEW OF THE RUSSIAN GENERAL STAFF

The Russian General Staff is a long-standing institution within the Russian Armed Forces, having existed in one form or another since the 18th century while providing continuity from the imperial period through the Soviet era and into the present day. In this section, we provide a descriptive overview of the Russian General Staff as of summer 2024, illustrating its formal structure, its relationship to other military-bureaucratic institutions within the Russian MOD, and its place in the broader ecosystem of state institutions within Russia's authoritarian political order.

Formal structure and primary tasks

The Russian General Staff is the organizational and substantive centerpiece of a C2 structure that is among the flattest and simplest that the Russian military has had in modern times. It executes C2 directly over Russia's strategic forces, while the Joint Strategic Commands (JSCs) direct conventional forces with oversight from the General Staff.³ The JSCs, also known as military districts, are shown in Figure 1. The General Staff is responsible for drafting, coordinating, and executing the military's long-term force development plans in coordination with the service headquarters.

The General Staff is headed by the CGS, who holds command authority over the whole of the Russian Armed Forces alongside the minister of defense and the Russian president in his constitutional role as supreme commander-in-chief. The CGS also serves

as the first deputy minister of defense and in the modern era is understood to maintain a mutually supportive and symbiotic relationship with the defense minister.⁴

The CGS is formally subservient to and directly appointed by the president, yet as first deputy minister of defense, the CGS also holds a hierarchical position underneath the minister of defense. In this way, the CGS holds two potentially competing positions within the political-military hierarchy, although in both cases, the CGS ultimately does not have the final word on decision-making beyond the operational-strategic level.

In addition to C2 and operational-strategic planning, the General Staff is tasked with theorizing, conceptualizing, operationalizing, and implementing operational control and military planning requirements for the Russian Armed Forces over the short, medium, and long term. It does so through institutions within its specialized directorates as well as other research institutions associated with the General Staff.

This function is meant to guide and assist the service headquarters (i.e., ground forces, naval forces, aerospace forces, strategic rocket forces, airborne forces, and special operations forces), which focus on recruiting and developing officers, planning future force employment, and planning weapons systems development in coordination with the

³ The Russian term is *Ob'edinyonnoye Strategicheskoe Komandovanie* (OSK) and is often referred to generically as *military districts*.

⁴ Alexis A. Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff: Understanding the Military's Decisionmaking Role in a "Besieged Fortress,"* RAND, Mar. 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1233-7.html, p. vi.

Figure 1. Russia’s military districts, February 2024



Source: “Map of Military Districts of Russia 2024,” Wikimedia Commons, Feb. 26, 2024, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Military_districts_of_Russia_2024.svg.

defense industrial base.⁵ In other words, the General Staff performs the functions of both the US Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff, as well as some tasks assigned to combatant commands in the US system.

The General Staff is administratively divided into a set of directorates:

- Main Operations Directorate (*Glavnoe operativnoe upravlenie—GOU*)
- Main Directorate (*Glavnoe upravlenie—*traditionally known as GRU but formally known as GU)

- Main Organization and Mobilization Directorate (*Glavnoe organizatsionno-mobilizatsionnoe upravlenie—GOMU*)
- Main Communications Directorate (*Glavnoe upravlenie svyazi—GUS*)
- National Defense Management Center (*Natsional’nyi Tsentri Upravleniya Oboronoj RF—NTsUO*)
- Operational Training Directorate (*Upravlenie operativnoi podgotovki—UOP*)
- Directorate of Electronic Warfare Troops (*Upravlenie nachal’nika voisk radioelektronnoi bor’by—UNVRB*)

⁵ On the Russian military-industrial complex, see, for example, Mathieu Boulègue, “Russia’s Military-Industrial Complex and Military Innovation,” in *Assessing Russian Plans for Military Regeneration: Modernization and Reconstitution Challenges for Moscow’s War Machine*, ed. Mathieu Boulègue et al. (Chatham House, July 2024), pp. 44–52, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/07/assessing-russian-plans-military-regeneration/07-russias-military-industrial-complex-and>.

- Military Topographic Directorate (*Voennotopograficheskoe upravlenie*—VTU)
- Directorate for the Construction and Development of Unmanned Aerial Systems (*Upravlenie stroitelstva i razvitiya sistemy bespilotnykh letatelnykh apparatov*—USRSBLA)
- 8th Directorate (State Secret Protection Service of the Armed Forces)
- Archive Service

Underneath or outside of the primary directorates, other military institutions also exist within the General Staff's purview, including the Military Academy of the General Staff (and its Center for Military-Strategic Studies), the Military Band Service, and Russia's Special Operations Forces.

These directorates are not meant to be of equivalent importance but rather to reflect distinct tasks and functions within the General Staff. Some are headed by two- or three-star flag officers, including the GRU or the GOU, whereas others are responsible for purely administrative functions or have highly specific and technical roles (such as the UNVRB or USRSBLA). Figure 2 notes the general organizational chart for the major directorates.

The GOU is one of the most important directorates for warfighting, given that it is the "leading military command body that solves problems of planning and command and control of troops" and that it "transforms all decisions and instructions of the military-political leadership of the country into the

form of directives, combat orders and orders, and promptly communicates them to the troops," in the words of GOU head Sergei Rudskoi.⁶ It shares this task with the NTsUO, which implements and coordinates in real time. Meanwhile, the GRU is one of the most aggressive intelligence institutions in Russia, with considerable reach in areas of active combat (such as Ukraine or Syria), among Wagner Group enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa, and in active operations against Western targets.⁷ Appendix: Tasks of the General Staff reproduces the formal task list of the General Staff in Russian legislation.

The dominant role of the General Staff in the Russian military is to provide the military with some insulation from bureaucratic rivalries among the service branches and between theater commands. The General Staff's vertical planning and resource distribution process shapes the Russian military's long-term force structure and procurement priorities in an efficient manner, promoting policy consistency over time. This system, in theory, is designed to allow the General Staff to overcome bureaucratic resistance to make hard strategic and organizational choices at a structural level.

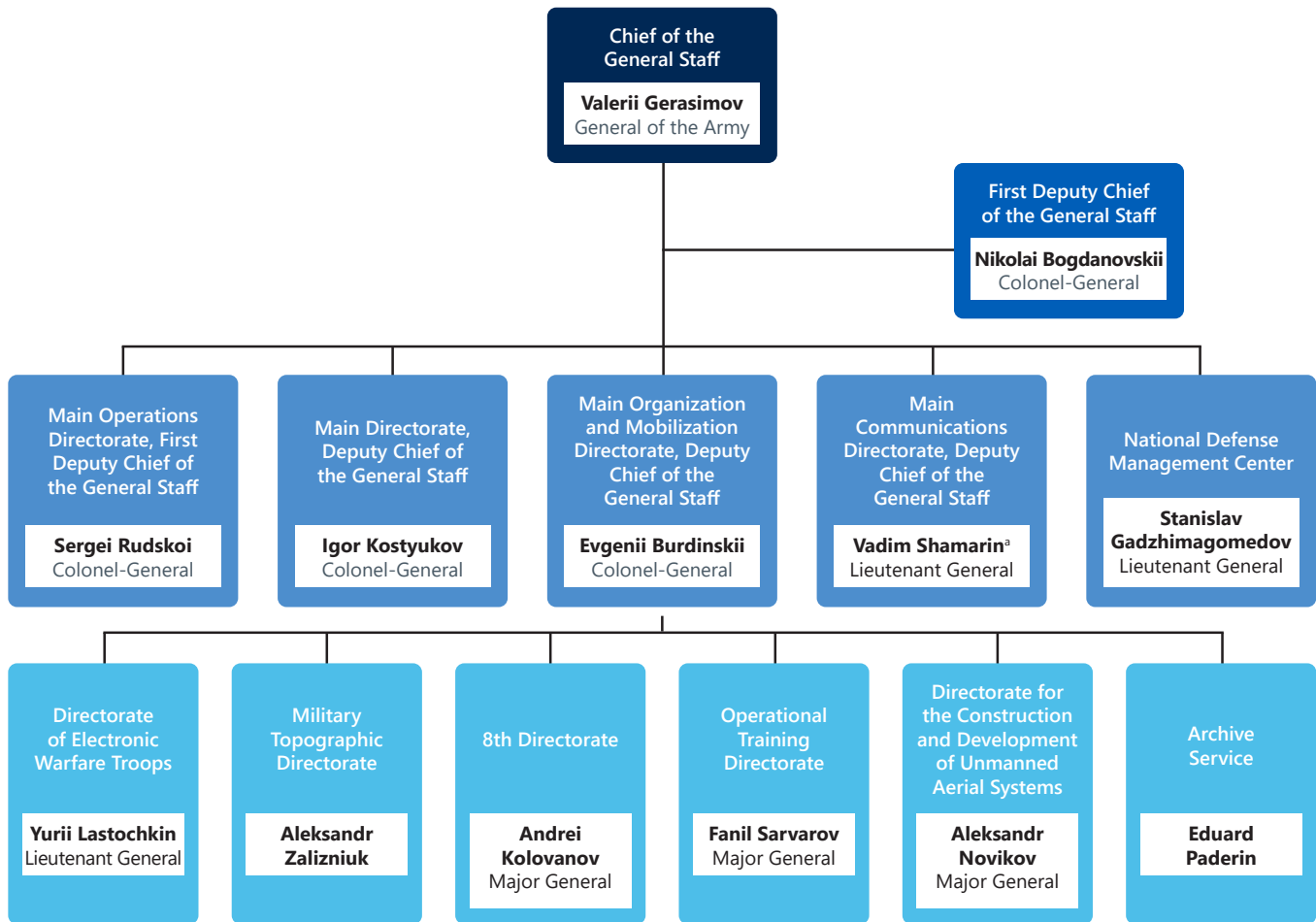
The C2 system of the General Staff is run through the NTsUO, which was set up by the MOD in 2014 to modernize and streamline operational decision-making and coordination efforts. The NTsUO serves as the central peacetime and wartime command post and situation center, is a physical location in Moscow from which the execution of military plans takes place, and also is a coordinating military-bureaucratic entity.⁸

⁶ Sergei Rudskoi, "In the Center of the Defense of the Country [В центре обороны страны]," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Feb. 19, 2021, <http://redstar.ru/v-tsentre-oborony-strany/>.

⁷ See, for example, Mark Phythian and David Strachan-Morris, "Intelligence & the Russo-Ukrainian War: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024), pp. 377–85; Mark Galeotti, "GRU: Military Intelligence," *Mayak Intelligence*, Apr. 2021; and Mark Galeotti, "The Intelligence and Security Services and Strategic Decision-Making," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, *Security Insights*, May 2019, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2019-09/SecurityInsights_30_Galeotti_May2019.pdf.

⁸ Vitalii Tsybmal and Vasilii Zatsepin, "New System of Management of Russian Defense: Reform or Imitation? [Новая система управления обороной России: Реформа или имитация]," *Ekonomicheskoe Razvitie Rossii* 22, no. 5 (2015): 80–83, <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/novaya-sistema-upravelniya-oboronoj-rossii-reforma-ili-imitatsiya>.

Figure 2. Organizational chart of the Russian General Staff



Source: CNA, updated from Alexis A. Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff: Understanding the Military's Decisionmaking Role in a "Besieged Fortress,"* RAND, Mar. 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1233-7.html.

Note that the head of the Main Directorate is an admiral.

^a Arrested in May 2024.

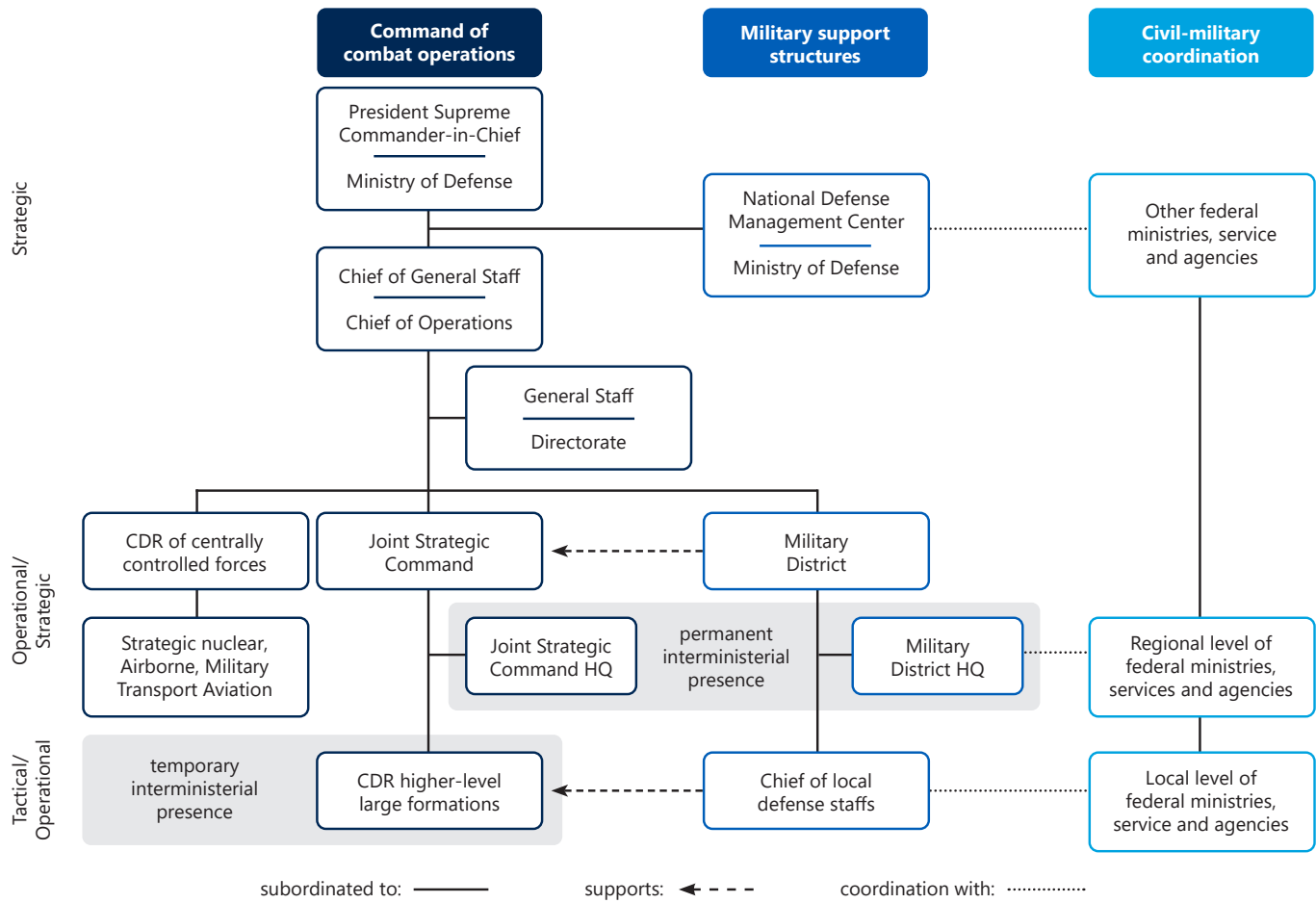
Below the NTsUO structure, corresponding subordinate posts have been set up at every level down to the brigade. These posts include strategic control centers within each service, independent combat arm and regional defense centers within each JSC headquarters, territorial defense centers in operational formations, and command posts at the division and brigade levels.⁹ The NTsUO's place in the broader chain of command for combat operations is shown in Figure 3.

The NTsUO consists of three main components: the Center for Daily Activities, the Center for Combat Control, and the Center for Control of Strategic Nuclear Forces. It allows senior military leadership to direct combat operations and monitor the military's daily activities, including training, readiness, budget execution, and facilities maintenance and construction. During a major war, nearly all government internal security operations are assigned to the jurisdiction of the NTsUO as well.¹⁰

⁹ Tsymbal and Zatsepin, "New System of Management of Russian Defense."

¹⁰ Tsymbal and Zatsepin, "New System of Management of Russian Defense."

Figure 3. Russian chain of command for combat operations



Source: CNA, derived from Roger N. Dermott and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Military Decision-Making Process & Automated Command and Control*, German Institute for Defense and Strategic Studies, Oct. 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345212545_The_Russian_Military_Decision-Making_Process_Automated_Command_and_Control.

Although little is known publicly about the NTsUO’s operations during the current Russia-Ukraine war, analysts have viewed it as a major contributor to Russian victory during the Syrian Civil War.¹¹ During this conflict, it served as a management center

that furthered coordination efforts and connected the MOD, combat forces in theater, and political principals in the Kremlin together. One report described the NTsUO as a “whole-of-government management center.”¹²

¹¹ See, for example, Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*; Michael Kofman, “Syria and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow’s Military Strategy and Operational Performance,” in *Russia’s War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, ed. Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020).

¹² Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, p. 46.

Relationship with other military-bureaucratic institutions

The General Staff has previously been described as “the brain of the Russian army.”¹³ What this means in practice is that the General Staff (alongside theater commanders and the JSCs) is tasked with developing military doctrine, force development and training concepts, and operational planning, whereas other parts of the military structure are responsible for other aspects of the functioning of the military, such as budgeting, procurement, and training. The General Staff is also responsible for combat readiness and force mobilization—tasks that have become especially crucial during wartime.

The leadership of the MOD and the General Staff currently work in a smooth and complementary relationship, but this was not the case during Russia’s post-Soviet military history. Rather, the 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by frequent and long-lasting internal conflicts between the minister of defense and the CGS caused by an unclear division of responsibilities and subsequent efforts by both figures to attain primacy. These conflicts were particularly visible between Minister of Defense Igor Sergeev and CGS Anatoly Kvashnin in the late 1990s and between Anatoly Serdyukov and Yuri Baluyevsky from 2007 to 2008. The earlier conflict was rooted in different visions of military development between Sergeev, who sought primacy for the strategic rocket forces, and Kvashnin, who preferred to focus on the ground forces.¹⁴

In this case, Kvashnin emerged victorious, with Sergeev being replaced by Sergei Ivanov, a longtime Putin insider. To date, Sergeev was the last Russian

defense minister who was career uniformed military, with all subsequent defense ministers having been civilians—possibly out of a desire to reduce internal conflicts within the military elite over strategic and political-military issues. Meanwhile, the later conflict between Baluyevsky and Serdyukov was rooted in different visions for the future development of the armed forces; this conflict resulted in not only Baluyevsky’s dismissal but also the restructuring of the General Staff.¹⁵

As part of the Serdyukov military reform, the duplication of responsibilities between the General Staff and the MOD proper (and therefore intra-bureaucratic stresses within the Russian Armed Forces) has been eliminated, with the General Staff focusing on strategic planning and operations. Since the 2009 reform, the General Staff has had primary decision-making authority over military planning and warfighting, whereas other parts of the MOD and other services have generally overseen basic training, support functions, and, in the case of the military services, implementation of plans developed by the General Staff. Notably, although the minister of defense is the primary political contact on the military side of Russia’s civil-military relationship, the CGS is the official actually tasked with developing and executing military operations at the strategic and operational-strategic level, thus de facto running any given military action.¹⁶

Given the centrality of the ground forces in the Russian military, the leadership of the General Staff primarily consists of officers from the ground forces, which means that other services, and especially the Navy and the Air Force, generally have less influence in the General Staff.

¹³ Steven J. Main, “The ‘Brain’ of the Russian Army: The Centre for Military-Strategic Research, General Staff (TsVSI GSh), 1985–2000,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 13, no. 3 (2000), p. 47.

¹⁴ Nikolai Sokov, “The Nuclear Debate of Summer 2000,” NTI Report (June 2004), www.nti.org/analysis/articles/nuclear-debate-summer-2000/.

¹⁵ Chloe Arnold, “Russia: Resignation Signals Trouble Within Defense Ministry,” *RFE/RL*, Mar. 27, 2008, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1079697.html>.

¹⁶ See, for example, discussion in Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*.

Role in civil-military relations and regime politics

Although the General Staff as an organization performs analytical and planning roles for the Russian military, the CGS has for many years had a more politically prominent role. Since the advent of civilian defense ministers early in Vladimir Putin's presidency, the CGS has de facto been the highest ranking military officer in the Russian military. As such, the CGS has played a pivotal role in providing the military perspective on security issues that are key to the political leadership.

At the same time, given the strict subordination of the military to civilian rule and the Russian military's overall culture of avoiding direct participation in politics, the CGSs do not make direct public pronouncements on government decisions regarding security issues or the use of force. Furthermore, as far as is known, they have also refrained from privately conveying positions on these issues to the political leadership, focusing instead on more practical aspects of potential military operations, including their feasibility and options for how they might be carried out. To the extent that the military leadership has provided a point of view to the political leadership on the wisdom of various policy choices, these views have been conveyed by the minister of defense rather than the CGS.

After many years of conflictual relations between defense ministers and CGSs, the period since 2008 has been characterized by smooth and cordial relations between Sergei Shoigu and Valeriy Gerasimov—the top civilian and military officials in the MOD and General Staff, respectively. Anatoly Serdyukov and CGS Nikolay Makarov worked together to carry out the New Look Reforms from 2009 to 2012,

with Serdyukov focusing on the organizational and financial aspects, as well as providing top cover, while Makarov focused on the specifics of military reorganization. Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov had a similar division of responsibilities, though focused more on reestablishing stability and increasing effectiveness within the military forces rather than pushing through further reforms.¹⁷

The replacement of Shoigu by Andrei Belousov in the spring of 2023 has raised the question of whether CGS Gerasimov will soon be replaced as well, though for the moment Putin has indicated that he will remain in place. Regardless of whether Gerasimov remains or is replaced by a new CGS, by all indications, the CGS will continue to refrain from direct involvement in the political sphere and will focus instead on running military operations.

Historical evolution

The functions of the Russian military's General Staff have remained remarkably consistent since the early days of the Red Army. The General Staff was described as the "brain" of the Soviet military as early as the 1920s. During World War II, the General Staff was given operational control of the military, and it has retained this function during wartime ever since. Assessing the post-WWII military-bureaucratic landscape, Odom noted, "After the war it became the most powerful centre for virtually all aspects of military planning, operations, and determination of resource requirements."¹⁸

During the Soviet period, the General Staff was responsible for virtually all military planning, including the development of war plans, whereas the minister of defense and his staff were responsible primarily for setting policy direction, which was then implemented by the General Staff and the services.

¹⁷ Kirill Shamiev, *Understanding Senior Leadership Dynamics Within the Russian Military*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-senior-leadership-dynamics-within-russian-military>.

¹⁸ William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

After the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of a separate Russian army, the General Staff largely retained the responsibilities that it had during the Soviet period. These responsibilities included strategic defense planning, operational planning, C2 in both peacetime and wartime, recruitment and mobilization planning, and planning for weapons and equipment procurement. The services then implemented many of the plans developed by the General Staff, either on their own or with the General Staff.

Lack of clarity regarding their respective roles and responsibilities resulted in recurring conflicts between the General Staff and the minister of defense, which were especially prominent in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Russia addressed these conflicts by making changes to the role of the General Staff, implemented as part of the 2009 New Look Reform.

The changes turned the General Staff more clearly into a strategic planning body, removing any ambiguity over whether it was responsible for combat training or various support functions. At the same time, the formerly independent GRU was incorporated within the General Staff, giving the General Staff a direct role in overseeing intelligence operations as well.¹⁹ The role of the General Staff has remained largely unchanged since the 2009 reform.

Role of the General Staff during wartime

Since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine, the General Staff has played a key role in war planning. It is responsible for overall planning of how the

war is being conducted, including overall strategy, mobilization plans, coordination with defense industry to ensure the procurement of necessary weapons and equipment, and various other aspects of operational planning.

During the initial period of war, no single operational commander was responsible for the overall war effort, which in effect meant that the General Staff was responsible for coordination among the multiple military district headquarters that were prosecuting different geographic parts of the war.²⁰ In later periods, a single commander was appointed for the war effort. During some periods, the CGS served as the overall commander of the war effort, whereas at other times, the operation was headed by a separate senior officer. This was the case most notably during General Sergei Surovikin's installation as commander of the Joint Grouping of Forces in the areas of the Special Military Operation from October 2022 to January 2023.²¹

Except for the period during which General Aleksandr Dvornikov, the commander of the Southern Military District, was commanding the operation, the staffing for the operational command likely came primarily from the General Staff. Operational command was definitely staffed by the General Staff beginning in January 2023, when CGS Gerasimov was put in charge of the operation while concurrently retaining his position as CGS.

The tenure of the chief of the General Staff

The Russian General Staff has had unusual continuity in its chief over the last decade. Multiple interpretations

¹⁹ Note that the GRU was formally renamed the GU (Main Directorate, *Glavnoe upravlenie*) in 2010. President Putin is on record suggesting that the old name could be restored, although there has been no movement on this since first suggested in 2018.

²⁰ Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi et al., *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022*, Royal United Services Institute, Nov. 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022>.

²¹ Julian G. Waller and Cornell Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations: Dimensions, Tensions, and Disruptions*, CNA, DRM-2024-U-038041-Final, July 2024.

have been offered for the continued tenure of CGS Gerasimov. This issue has gained greater prominence given that his firm ally, former minister of defense Shoigu, was removed from the MOD in May 2024. The three primary arguments are as follows:

- **Regime politics.** Gerasimov is personally loyal to Putin, and in such a system, this loyalty is rewarded. Prigozhin’s Rebellion in June 2023 helped to remind the political leadership of the importance of regular military institutions as more reliable bastions of loyalty and order.
- **Bureaucratic politics.** Gerasimov is a keen bureaucratic actor and has allies in the military-bureaucratic elite beyond just the minister of defense. These alliances ensure his safety because other patronal networks within the Russian Armed Forces and the wider political ecosystem can provide cover and justification for his maintenance.
- **Status quo interpretations.** The ongoing war renders his departure untenable, even if a shakeup would be desirable. Shoigu’s transfer was sufficiently disruptive to make the idea of also changing the CGS—at least immediately—unpalatable.

Gerasimov’s longevity has been a subject of interest for some time. According to Alexis A. Blanc et al.:

The political weight of Gerasimov, as the chief of the General Staff, has grown over time. This influence appears to be driven primarily by two factors. First, similar to Leonid Brezhnev, Putin’s decision to militarize Russian foreign policy inherently makes the advice and professional expertise of the General Staff and chief of the General Staff relatively more prominent. Second...

the relatively successful operations in Ukraine and Syria showed that the armed forces can be a useful foreign policy tool that contributes to Russia’s position in the global arena.²²

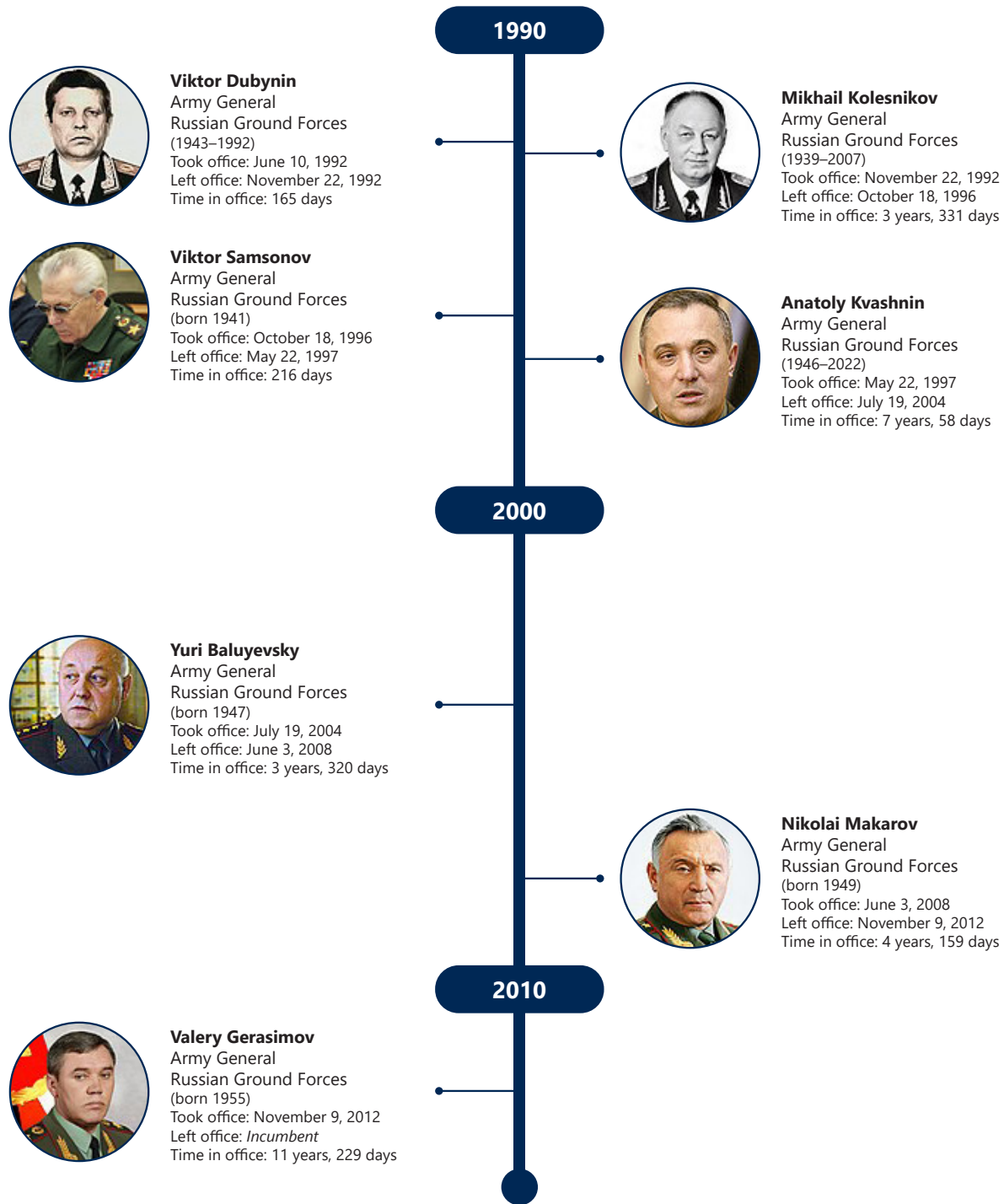
Yet the Russia-Ukraine war suggests a more complicated picture for the CGS, who has had to deal with the downstream effects of failing to achieve victory in the regime-change operation that was originally conceptualized and planned in February 2024. Indeed, both the minister of defense and the CGS would be symbolically castigated by the president in spring 2022 and would later be subject to delegitimization by a chorus of war correspondents and the irregular forces of PMC Wagner during 2022 and 2023.²³

Nevertheless, CGS Gerasimov has survived in his position as far as July 2024, lasting longer than Shoigu. He is by far the longest serving CGS in Russia’s post-Soviet history (as shown in Figure 4) and has successfully managed to not only retain his post but also oversee the modernization of the General Staff and continue its central role in Russia’s military-bureaucratic institutional ecosystem.

²² Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, p. 95.

²³ For further discussion of the MOD’s crisis of legitimacy during the Russia-Ukraine war, see Waller and Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations*.

Figure 4. Chiefs of staff of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, 1992–2024



Source: CNA.

THE WEIGHT OF THE GENERAL STAFF

As described earlier, the Russian General Staff is a core institution within the Russian military. Nevertheless, some uncertainty remains about all the ways in which the General Staff influences political-military decision-making processes and outcomes in Russia. This section provides a brief discussion of three dimensions to this question: military decision-making, political influence, and doctrinal influence.

The General Staff and military decision-making

The General Staff's importance in military decision-making is the most straightforward and clear, as we have already discussed. Without replicating that discussion, we emphasize that the General Staff is formally tasked with operational-strategic decision-making, in coordination with theater commanders and the JSC administration. To this end, the NTsUO C2 system was designed specifically to support the top-down command structure traditionally preferred by the Russian Armed Forces, with General Staff officers equipped to think operationally and strategically while field officers work at the tactical level and defer to the hierarchy for major decisions.

Thinking on the military role of the General Staff continues to evolve in Russia, with an overall emphasis on continued centralization. However, this emphasis is to some degree running up against the day-to-day military realities of the current war, which often require localized decision-making. Russian-language military science publications have not produced much new public work on the operations

of the General Staff since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, with a few exceptions.

One article from 2024 focuses on technical approaches to coordinating C2, describing the need for a “network theory” approach to help undergird C2 efforts across the military to “allow combining reconnaissance, surveillance, navigation, identification, target designation, guidance systems, combat platforms and combat command and control systems in a single information space.”²⁴ In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of a centralized hierarchy in a “pyramidal configuration,” a clear set of tasks and goals, and proportional distribution of implementing points in the organizational tree relative to a small set of core decision-makers and task-setters.

This piece is instructive because it aligns with the general approach of the General Staff toward military decision-making overall—as a problem of systems that can be solved scientifically through organization and process in a centralized fashion.²⁵

The General Staff and political influence

The question of how much political influence the General Staff has in Russia's authoritarian system is less clear. Although previous general staffs, such as the Prussian and German General Staffs of the 19th and early 20th century, were often important political actors within certain militarized polities, the same is not true in Russia. No doubt this difference is largely

²⁴ S. G. Spiridonov and S. E. Adamis, “A Methodological Approach to Substantiating the Rational Organizational Structure of Military Command and Control Bodies [Методический подход к обоснованию рациональной организационной структуры органов управления войсками],” *Voenaya Mysl* no. 7 (2024), pp. 98–104.

²⁵ See also Clint Reach et al., *Russian Military Forecasting and Analysis: The Military-Political Situation and Military Security in Strategic Planning*, RAND, RR-A198-4, June 2022, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA198-4.html.

because of the successful maintenance of civilian control over the military, as well as the foregrounding of the minister of defense role as the most important bridging figure between the uniformed military and political decision-makers in the Kremlin (the president, the presidential administration, and the Security Council most specifically).²⁶

Therefore, the General Staff does not have *direct* political influence and largely has to work through other actors or by shaping the decision-making space through decisions relevant to the capabilities and design of the Russian Armed Forces. Nevertheless, the General Staff has been able at times to exert influence through the defense minister through connections with unofficial war correspondents in civil society, through retired military officers in the Duma or Federation Council (especially those who sit on parliamentary committees relevant to national security, military affairs, and financial decisions), and through the GRU, which at times has had direct channels to the Russian political leadership.²⁷

Finally, the CGS personally has a direct channel to the president but is unlikely to use it other than for operational military matters. This is because of the minister of defense's premier position in the civil-military relationship vis-à-vis the president, his place on the Security Council, and his place in the Cabinet of Ministers in the government.²⁸ Put simply, the minister of defense is much more integrated into political and political-military structures and

networks, whereas the CGS is more likely to demur or act in a more restrained, advisory capacity.

Certain policy matters have important General Staff input. For example, as Blanc et al. note:

The General Staff continues to have a substantial role in the preparation of official positions and recommendations for Russian government delegations to international negotiations on security and arms control matters. The General Staff analyzes and plans negotiations and, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, prepares the "draft directives" for Russian representatives engaged in the talks. Thus, the General Staff serves as an advisory body to the MOD and government more broadly.²⁹

Elsewhere, Fink notes that the General Staff has an important place at the table in nuclear and arms control issues, not least because the CGS is one of three officials with access to the codes controlling Russia's nuclear arsenal.³⁰

The General Staff and doctrinal influence

The General Staff plays a key role in developing military doctrine for the Russian military. This role includes not just the operational use of military forces but also the wartime organization of the entire state. According to statements by CGS Gerasimov,

²⁶ For further discussion on Russia's evolving wartime civil-military relationship, see Waller and Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations*.

²⁷ Galeotti, "The Intelligence and Security Services and Strategic Decision-Making." See also changing regulations on C2 issues as well as questions about private military companies working through the Russian State Duma throughout the wartime period—for example, Angelica Evans et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 23, 2024," Institute for the Study of War, July 23, 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-23-2024>; "Head of Russia's State Duma Defense Committee Says There's No Reason to Ban Wagner Group," *Meduza*, June 25, 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/06/26/head-of-russia-s-state-duma-defense-committee-says-there-s-no-reason-to-ban-wagner-group>.

²⁸ Waller and Overfield, *Wartime Russian Civil-Military Relations*.

²⁹ Blanc et al., *The Russian General Staff*, p. 97.

³⁰ Anya Fink, *The General Staff's Throw-Weight: The Russian Military's Role in and Views of US-Russian Arms Control*, CNA, IRM-2024-U-037906-Final, Mar. 2024, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/03/russian-military-role-in-us-russian-arms-control>.

these plans include strategic deterrence measures that go beyond the purely military to all aspects of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic). In addition, the General Staff has included considerations of civil defense, crisis management, and internal stability in its planning efforts along these lines.

According to Gerasimov, this form of planning requires close cooperation between the General Staff, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS).³¹ The FSB, MVD, and MChS are all part of the power or security bloc of the Russian government, making the General Staff institutionally networked across the range of coercive agencies beyond the MOD itself. The establishment of the Information Operations Troops as a separate unit within the General Staff has given the General Staff authority over planning in the cyber and information warfare domains as well.

In the purely military realm, the General Staff has in recent years focused doctrinal innovation on the effect of the use of long-range weapons in wartime, both in conflict and as part of deterrence efforts using conventional weapons. It has also paid a great deal of attention to the role of the space domain in future warfare. Even more recently, it has focused on the role of uncrewed systems and resulting shifts in wartime. All of these aspects of doctrinal innovation are likely to be included in future editions of Russia's official Military Doctrine, a document that was last updated in 2014. At that time, Russia's overall geopolitical situation was very different from the present day, as was the nature of its military capabilities.

³¹ Gerasimov, "The Role of the General Staff."

CONCLUSION

The Russian General Staff is an intellectual hub as well as the key war-planning, war-executing, and operational-strategic decision-making body in the ecosystem of major institutions that make up the Russian military. It has successfully defended its prerogatives to plan and execute war-making on behalf of the minister of defense and his principal in the Kremlin, and it is tightly integrated with both the regional military districts and wartime theater and operational commands. It has thrived under CGS Gerasimov, despite challenges both before and after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, and it is well positioned to remain the key decision-influencing, war-planning, and operational-strategic locus of energy within the Russian Armed Forces for the foreseeable future.

Reviewing the de jure and de facto roles, functions, and operations of the Russian General Staff allows us to lay out the decision-making and operational-strategic core to the Russian Armed Forces overall. Several points can be brought to bear here:

- The General Staff has retained and perhaps gained in its central role as the key conceptual, coordinating, and organizational institution within the Russian Armed Forces. This role has been notably influenced by the introduction of the NTsUO and its successful testing during the Syrian Civil War. More research is necessary to determine how the NTsUO has operated during the Russia-Ukraine war, but such information may be inaccessible for open-source research for some time.
- The longevity of CGS Gerasimov has been helpful for maintaining the General Staff's position within the military-bureaucratic hierarchy and has likely furthered centralization dynamics. Whether the General Staff may be reformed or decision-making shifted to JSCs, theater commanders, or other parts of the MOD upon Gerasimov's retirement remains an open question.
- Policy-makers in the US and among partners and allies require a useful and comprehensive look at the General Staff, not least because of its primary role in prosecuting and implementing the operational and strategic direction of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Efforts to disrupt components of the General Staff, including the NTsUO, through cyber or other means of pressure, may add to stresses on the Russian Armed Forces within its central nervous system.

APPENDIX A: TASKS OF THE GENERAL STAFF

The following reproduces the official statutory tasks of the General Staff as of February 2024 as described in Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 631.³²

- a) organization of management of the Armed Forces;
- b) organization of defense planning of the Russian Federation;
- c) organizing the development of proposals for the formation and implementation of state policy in the field of defense, participation in its implementation;
- d) coordination of the actions of the Armed Forces, other troops and military formations in peacetime when carrying out strategic deterrence measures;
- e) organizing the planning and implementation of measures to build the Armed Forces, coordinating the development of concepts, plans for the construction and development of other troops and military formations in the interests of defense;
- f) organizing the transfer in accordance with legislative and other regulatory legal acts of the Russian Federation of the Armed Forces, other troops, military formations, bodies and special formations on the organization and composition of wartime, as well as ensuring their mobilization deployment;
- g) organizing the maintenance of the Armed Forces in the necessary readiness and monitoring these activities, as well as monitoring the state of mobilization readiness of other troops, military and special forces;
- h) management of operational and mobilization training of the Armed Forces, coordination of operational and mobilization training of other troops, military and special formations;
- i) organizing and conducting activities for strategic (operational) support of the Armed Forces;
- j) organization of intelligence activities in the interests of defense and within its competence in the interests of the security of the Russian Federation;
- k) development of the control system of the Armed Forces and coordination of the development of control systems of other troops, military and special formations in the interests of defense;
- l) organization of communications and automated control of the Armed Forces, determining the procedure for using and planning the use of the radio frequency spectrum for defense purposes;
- m) planning and organizing organizational activities in the Armed Forces, organization

³² Updated list as of February 2024; directly translated from President of the Russian Federation, "Decree of the President of the RF from 23.07.2013 No. 631 (red. from 26.02.2024) Questions of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation [Указ Президента РФ от 23.07.2013 No. 631 (ред от 26.02.2024), Вопросы Генерального штаба Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации]," Feb. 26, 2024, <https://legalacts.ru/doc/ukaz-prezidenta-rf-ot-23072013-n-631/>.

and implementation of interaction with other troops and military formations on the issues of carrying out the specified events in them;

- n) organization of recruitment of the Armed Forces, other troops, military formations, bodies and special forces with military personnel undergoing conscription military service;
- o) planning the provision of the Armed Forces with the main types of weapons, military, special equipment and materiel, as well as the accumulation and deployment of emergency reserves of these means;
- p) *no longer in force on April 22, 2020. - Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of April 22, 2020 N 283;*
- q) organizing measures to protect state secrets in the Armed Forces and federal executive bodies and organizations subordinate to the Russian Ministry of Defense and control over their implementation.

APPENDIX B: RECOMMENDED READING

For ease of reference, we provide here two reading lists. First, we offer a selection of the most comprehensive English-language works specifically on the Russian General Staff and its core operations in the last 25 years. These works inform the analytic approach and empirical assertions in this paper throughout, although direct citations are kept to a minimum for brevity. Second, we offer a list of key Russian-language documents, leader statements, and analytic pieces on the General Staff.

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ABBREVIATIONS

C2	command and control
CGS	chief of the General Staff
GOMU	Main Organization and Mobilization Directorate (<i>Glavnoe Organizatsionno-Mobilizatsionnoe Upravlenie</i>)
GOU	Main Operations Directorate (<i>Glavnoe Operativnoe Upravlenie</i>)
GS	General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (<i>General'nyy Shtab Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii</i>)
GRU	Main Directorate (<i>Glavnoe Upravlenie</i> —also GU)
GUS	Main Communications Directorate (<i>Glavnoe Upravlenie Svyazi</i>)
JSC	Joint Strategic Command (OSK— <i>Ob'edinyonnoye Strategicheskoe Komandovanie</i>)
MChS	Ministry of Emergency Situations
MOD	Ministry of Defense
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs
NTsUO	National Defense Management Center (<i>Natsional'nyi Tsentri Upravleniya Oborony RF</i>)
FSB	Federal Security Service (<i>Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti</i>)
UNVRB	Directorate of Electronic Warfare Troops (<i>Upravlenie nachal'nika voisk radioelektronnoi bor'by</i>)
UOP	Operational Training Directorate (<i>Upravlenie Operativnoi podgotovki</i>)
USRSBLA	Directorate for the Construction and Development of Unmanned Aerial Systems (<i>Upravlenie Stroitelstva i Razvitiya Sistemy Bepilotnykh Letatelnykh Apparatov</i>)
VTU	Military Topographic Directorate (<i>Voenno-Topograficheskoe Upravlenie</i>)

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