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Fire on ice: Russia's new Arctic brigades

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Russia first publicly announced plans to form at least one Arctic brigade in 2011. Many questions still remain over this move. Certainly Russia has experience in conducting polar military operations in eastern Siberia and the Leningrad Oblast, but how does it perceive using only a few thousand troops to deter any would-be aggressors over such a vast Arctic archipelago? What existing formations does Moscow anticipate using and how will they be structured and organised? Lastly, how would such formations be used within the context of Russia's wider political and economic interests?

Russia's military reforms in context

In March 2011, while attending a meeting of the Federation Council's Committee for Defence and Security, General Aleksander Postnikov announced a number of changes to the Russian ground forces, including increasing the number of brigades from 70 to 109 (presumably through reorganising divisions, akin to the US Army transition to various brigade combat teams). Then in July 2011, Moscow announced that it intended to create two new Arctic brigades.

The first of these is the **200th Independent Motorised Rifle Brigade** (200 IMRB) based at **Pechenga** (69° 33' 10" N 031° 13' 10" E), near Murmansk, some 10 kilometres from the Norwegian border. The brigade would receive new and upgraded equipment suited to the arctic environment, while retaining its existing armoured vehicles and tanks. These changes were to be completed by the end of 2011.

The second brigade is to be based a further 300 nautical miles east, at **Arkangelsk** (64° 32' 00" N 40° 32' 00" E). This brigade's disposition remains to be clarified.

Strangely, the stated reason for creating these new Arctic formations was a perceived threat from the United States and Canada, who had reputedly formed similar brigades. Russia claimed to be balancing the situation. However, neither the United States nor Canada has any such formations.



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The genesis of Russia's new Arctic brigades goes back further than 2011. In late 2008, the then Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, launched an ambitious attempt to reform and modernise the Russian Armed Forces. His was not the first initiative of this kind since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For at least 15 years leading up to this, a series of attempts had been made to implement defence reform under the refrain of 'Future Outlook'. However, none of these attempts were ever fully implemented or properly resourced. Any reorganisations that did take place were service-specific (for example, Strategic Missile Forces) and failed to address the overall quality of the troops and their welfare.

This came into sharp focus in the aftermath of Russia's victory over Georgia in 2008, which was almost entirely due to its numerical superiority. Such mixed results from the conflict, coupled with President Vladimir Putin's charismatic leadership, galvanised public support towards real, qualitative modernisation of the Russian armed forces. The push was now on to transform Russia's military from a largely conscript force, to a professional (volunteer/contract) organisation.

The current Russian military transformation has also been helped by the country's real economic growth since 1998, with huge increases in revenues from natural resource sales (particularly oil and gas). Though Russia's GDP growth rate has slowed more recently, the World Bank is still forecasting GDP growth of 2.3% for 2013 (compared to shrinkage of 0.6% for the eurozone).

Moreover, Moscow is acutely aware that the swath of Arctic territory that it has claimed could be home to oil supplies double the size of Saudi Arabia's proven reserves, and that this region contains up to one-fifth of the world's oil and gas reserves. The creation of two Arctic brigades – in concert with new equipment for Russian border guards and coast guard forces – is thus seen as a prudent move to protect Russia's claim to these natural resources.

It is also important to note how the fear of invasion of the *Rodina* (motherland) plays on the Russian psyche and will be an important motivation for the formation of these new brigades. In this context, the proximity of these two closely stationed together Arctic brigades to the disputed area immediately north of Murmansk may have some significance.



Fig 1. Territories in the Arctic Ocean and Barents Sea claimed by Russia
(Source: Foreign Policy Digest)

Moscow has several aspirations for these new military reforms but the one that most pertains to the formation of the Arctic brigades can be found resonating in a statement from then Russian defence minister Anatoliy Serdyukov: 'All ground forces to become fully manned, permanent-readiness units.'

In practical terms, this meant the desire for the most modern equipment, the adoption of a regular (annual/cyclic) training regimen and the readiness to deploy on short notice (six to eight hours) within their areas of responsibility. To attain this, the number of officers was to be dramatically reduced, with warrant officers removed altogether. The remaining non-commissioned officer cadre was to become professionalised, with increases in pay and benefits. Army brigades in the North Caucasus Military District (now the Southern Military District) were to be manned mostly with professionals. It was claimed that once implemented the military's new look would result in an estimated 30% increase in equipment by 2015 and a 70% increase by 2020.

On 27 November 2009, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that 'All units of Russia's naval infantry will be fully equipped with advanced weaponry by 2015. Included in this upgrade will be T-90 tanks, BMP-3 IFVs, 2S31 120mm mortar/artillery trucks, BTR-82A armoured personnel carriers, air defence equipment and small arms.' With weapon-system upgrades occurring in the Russian Airborne (VDV) forces as well, similar changes or modifications to the Arctic brigades are not surprising.

Personnel, weapons platforms and vehicles

The timetable for the Arctic brigades' full readiness has now been extended from 2011 to 2015. 200 IMRB was resubordinated from Ground Forces to the Russian Navy's North Fleet in 2012, possibly taking on the dual role of naval infantry brigade, though it is not presently listed as a marine infantry formation. Such a resubordination of Russian army formations to the navy has only occurred once in recent history, when the Russians attempted to circumvent the provisions of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty by declaring a handful of forward deployed motor rifle divisions as 'coastal defence' troops. For the present, 200 IMRB looks like any other similar army brigade, with about 4,000 troops, epitomising what Army General Nikolai Makarov articulated as Russia's emphasis on 'high operational autonomy, versatility and [above all] firepower.'

Like its motor rifle regiment (MRR) predecessor, 200 IMRB has three motorised rifle battalions and one tank battalion. But this is where the similarities end. Unlike the MRR – which had company-sized numbers of supporting troops – all of the brigade's troops (air defence, engineers, etc) are battalion-sized components, normally associated with a division-size formation. Thus, while an MRR would have an anti-tank company and an air-defence battery, for example, both of these have been doubled or trebled in size, giving it a much higher tooth-to-tail ratio and a more potent 'bite'. This is especially true in the case of the artillery: instead of the three battery (six guns per, 18 guns in total) self-propelled artillery battalion of its predecessor, 200 IMRB has double this – two battalions (six batteries, 36 guns in total), half of these the potent **2S19 SP Howitzer** – plus an additional **BM-21 (Grad 1)** multi-barrelled rocket launcher (MRL) battalion (three batteries of six, 18 MRLs in total). This is, in fact, a divisional artillery regiment and it will no doubt prove to be a logistical challenge to keep it supplied. Its anti-tank (AT) battalion is also double in size, and equipped with the potent **9P149 Shturm-S**.

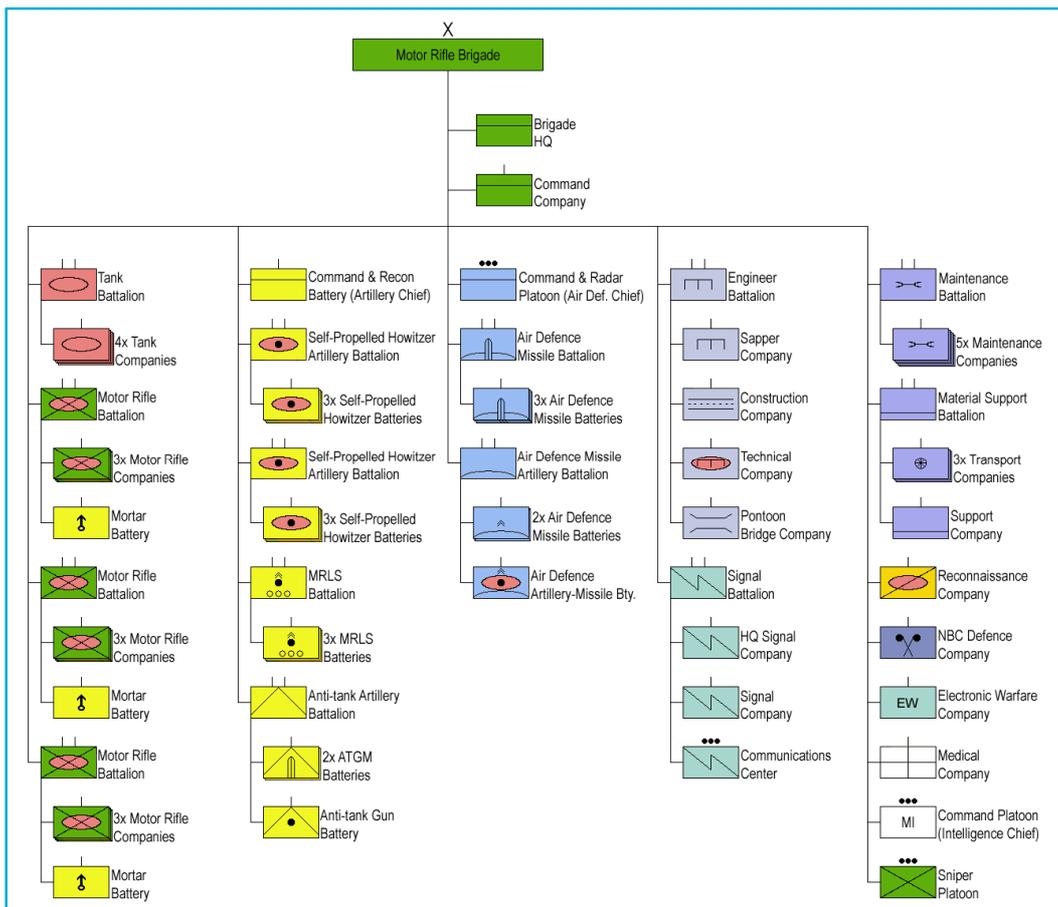


Fig 2. Russian Ground Forces motor rifle brigade standardised structure
 (Source: Noclador/Wikimedia Commons)



Fig 3. 2S19 SP



Fig 4. 9P149 'Shturm-S'



Fig 5. 2S6 'Tunguska'

In a similar fashion, its air defence assets have increased markedly. Where there was a single air defence battery (using guns and missiles) with the MRR, 200 IMRB has three surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries, plus up to two batteries of the very potent **2S6 'Tunguska'** combination air defence system (utilising dual 30mm cannons, with eight **SA-19 'Grison'** SAMs). If it is the improved Tunguska (M1), then the system's range is increased to 10 kilometres (from eight), and its altitude to four kilometres (from 2.4).

While the brigade's current holdings are clearly potent, it bears mentioning that their size is provisional, and could be changed in the future.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, troops of 200 IMRB are now testing snow and swamp-going vehicles like the **GAZ-3351**, **TTM-3P** and the highly capable **DT-3P**. The GAZ-3351 is a two-tiered belted vehicle that looks remarkably similar to the BV-206 series vehicle first built by Hägglunds (now part of BAE Systems Global Combat Systems) for the Swedish Army. The Russian vehicle can carry up to 16 persons or 2,500 kilograms of cargo – an ideal troop transport.

The TTM-3P is thought to be a light amphibious personnel vehicle, though very little is known about it. The DT-3P is an amphibious medium over-snow vehicle (MOSV), with a range of 700 kilometres and a reasonable top speed of 60 kilometres per hour – both important for an operational vehicle. This vehicle bears a striking resemblance to the BvS-10 ('Viking' in the UK Royal Marines), and its replacement the 'Bronco' ('Warthog' in the UK armed forces). Like its western counterparts, the DT-3P would likely be used as a platform for heavy crew-served weapons, such as the US Army does with its TOW anti-tank missile or the UK Royal Marines with their 81mm mortars.



Fig 6. GAZ-3351



Fig 7. DT-3P MOSV

There is also the massive and highly capable **DT-30P 'Vityaza'**, likely for use as a logistics vehicle, and the whitened **DT-10P** and its cousin the **DT-10PM**, both wide-tracked and very robust. Given the nature of the arctic environment, most if not all legacy equipment changes will be tracked, such as the T-90 battle tank, 2S19 SP howitzer, **2S31 'Vena' mortar**, newer MT-LB AT variants and SA-15 Gauntlet 'Tor' (replacing the wheeled SA-8 'Gecko').



Fig 8. DT-30P 'Vityaza'



Fig 9. DT-10PM



Fig 10. 2S31 'Vena'

Conclusion

In March 2013, General Vladimir Chirkin, Commander in Chief of Russia's Land Forces, visited 200 IMRB in Pechenga to ascertain the formation's readiness and how some of the newer systems had been integrated into its order of battle. Having completed his evaluation of the vehicles' advantages and disadvantages in winter conditions, he issued orders to continue the testing throughout spring and summer.

What ultimate size, makeup and missions these new Arctic brigades will have will become much clearer as the transformation across the spectrum of Russia's military forces nears completion, somewhere between 2015 and 2020. While in its present configuration 200 IMRB may be declared as the first 'Arctic brigade', it really is only Arctic in terms of its location, not necessarily capabilities. As such, it truly represents 'fire on ice' with its heavy assets.

However, if fundamental equipment changes (such as a massive influx of over-snow vehicles) are not apparent by 2015, then questions over the legitimacy of Moscow's claims about its true purpose may be moot. Perhaps it is little more than 'smoke on water': more political and economic posturing than a real, cross-Arctic, rapid-intervention force capability – one that arguably already exists within the Russian Airborne Forces. The scale and nature of further developments in the formation of the two Arctic brigades over the next two years or so will tell us much about Moscow's intentions.

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