



ANALYSIS

THE BEAR'S SHARP CLAW OR A SOFT UNDERBELLY? RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES IN THE FAR EAST

| YU KOIZUMI |

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Cover page photo: Crew members disembark, as the Ufa diesel-electric submarine of the Russian Pacific Fleet, carrying Kalibr cruise missiles, returns to its home base after completing a 40-day combat mission on 3 July 2025, in Vladivostok, Russia. Yuri Smityuk/TASS via ZUMA Press/Scanpix

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CONTENTS

List of Tables and Figures	II
List of Abbreviations.....	III
About the Author	IV
Introduction.....	1
1. Force Size	2
1.1. Russian Far East on the Eve of the Full-Scale Invasion	2
1.2. Ground Forces	3
1.3. Naval and Air Forces	5
2. Force Posture.....	5
2.1. Aviation	5
2.2. The Pacific Fleet.....	6
2.3. Infrastructure Development	8
3. Military Relations	10
3.1. North Korea.....	10
3.2. China.....	11
Conclusion	12

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Ground Forces in the Eastern Military District as of 2022.	2
Table 2. Fatalities from the Far Eastern Federal District.	4
Figure 1. Chinese and Russian aircraft’s activities around Japan (2024).	6
Figure 2. Redeployment of the Russian bomber fleet (Engel’s AB).	7
Figure 3. TOF’s submarine forces, Rybachii.	8
Figure 4. Russian SSBN patrol pattern (TOF).	8
Figure 5. Belgorod (Pr 09852) in Sevmash shipyard.	9
Figure 6. New nuclear warhead storage under construction.	10
Figure 7. North Korean ammunition shipment from Rason port.	10

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB	air base
ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone (Japan)
APLSpN	special-mission nuclear submarines (<i>Атомная подводная лодка специального назначения</i> , Russia)
ASW	anti-submarine warfare
BKhRVТ	Materiel repair and storage bases (<i>база хранения и ремонта военной техники</i> , Russia)
BTG	battalion tactical group
CAA	Combined Arms Army (<i>Общевойсковая армия</i> , Russia)
DA	Long-Range Aviation (<i>Авиация Дальнего Действия</i> , Russia)
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency (US)
DiPL	Submarine Division (Russia)
ELINT	electronic intelligence
FY	fiscal year
GLCM	ground-launched cruise missiles
GUGI	Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (<i>Главное управление глубоководных исследований</i> , Russia)
GUMO	Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defence (<i>Главное управление Министерства обороны</i> , Russia)
JASDF	Japan Air Self-Defense Force
KIA	killed in action
KPA	Korean People's Army (North Korea)
MLRS	multiple launch rocket system
MOD	Ministry of Defense (Japan)
MsP	Motor Rifle Regiment
NSS	National Security Strategy (Japan)
OGV	Unified Groups of Troops (<i>Объединённая группировка войск</i> , Russia)
OSC	Open-Source Centre
OSINT	open-source intelligence
OTHR	over-the-horizon radar
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy (China)
PuIAD	Machine-Gun Artillery Division (Russia)
SRBM	short-range ballistic missiles
SSBN	ship, submersible, ballistic, nuclear
SSN	submarine, submersible, nuclear
TOF	Pacific Fleet (<i>Тихоокеанский флот</i> , Russia)
VDV	Airborne Forces (<i>Воздушно-десантные войска</i> , Russia)
VKS	Aerospace Forces (<i>Воздушно-космические силы</i> , Russia)
VMF	Navy (<i>Военно-морской флот Российской Федерации</i> , Russia)
VVO	Eastern Military District (<i>Восточный военный округ</i> , Russia)
WIA	wounded in action
WWII	Second World War

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

Japan lies some 7 500 km away from the battlefield, and the war in Ukraine does not, in and of itself, pose an immediate threat to Japan's security. Tokyo's 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) reflected this assessment, ranking the threat posed by Russia lower than that posed by China and North Korea.¹

This does not mean, however, that Russia's war against Ukraine is irrelevant to Japan's security. At the systemic level, condoning Russia's aggression would destabilise the international order and undermine the stable external environment that underwrites Japan's prosperity. Moreover, since the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union – and later Russia – has continued its illegal occupation of Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan, and the Habomai Islands (collectively known as the Northern Territories), which form an integral part of Japan.

This paper examines how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has reshaped the security environment far beyond Europe – reaching the opposite end of the Eurasian continent and affecting Japan's strategic environment.

Even when focusing on military factors alone, Russia remains a non-negligible actor for

Japan's security calculus. Since the end of the Cold War – when the Soviet Union represented the principal military threat to Japan – Tokyo has shifted the centre of gravity of its defence strategy to the south-western direction to deter China's military build-up. This shift was premised on two assumptions: that the military threat from the north would remain extremely limited, and that the threats posed by Russia, China, and North Korea were distinct and separable. Those premises have gradually eroded. Russia launched an unambiguous war of aggression against its neighbour while at the same time deepening military cooperation with China and North Korea. These dynamics make it no longer possible for Japan to treat the threat sources as confined to a particular geographic front. This is why the 2022 NSS stated that Japan faces “the most severe and complex security environment since the end of WWII.”²

Against this backdrop, reliable estimates of the size and current condition of Russia's military power in the Far East are of great significance to Japan's defence planning, given its limited resources. In the fifth year of Russia's full-scale invasion, it is equally important for European partners to understand the geopolitical and military consequences unfolding at the other end of the Eurasian continent.

Reliable estimates of Russia's military power in the Far East are of great significance to Japan's defence planning

This analysis examines *what* has changed, *how* or in what ways, and to what extent. More specifically, the principal focus is on the force size and force posture of the Russian Armed Forces in the Far East – that is, those units and assets that are stationed in peacetime within the administrative boundaries of the Eastern Military District (*Восточный военный округ*, VVO). It analyses (1) how much military power has moved from the eastern to the western theatre because of the war in Ukraine; (2) the activity level of the forces remaining in the Far East; and (3) how the war has changed the patterns of Russia's military relations with Asian states.

¹ Government of Japan, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Japan Cabinet Secretariat, 2022), 8-9.

² Government of Japan, *National Security Strategy*, 2.

Army/Army Corps HQ	Division/Brigade	
Combined Arms Army (CAA)	Spetsnaz brigade	1
	Tank brigade	1
	Motor-rifle division	1
	Motor-rifle brigade	8
	Machinegun-artillery division	1
	4 Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) and Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) brigade	4
	Artillery brigade	4
	Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) brigade	1
	Air defence brigade	5
Navy (Pacific Fleet)	Naval infantry brigade	2
Airborne Forces (<i>Воздушно-десантные войска</i> , VDV)	Air-assault brigade	2

Table 1. Ground Forces in the Eastern Military District as of 2022. *Source:* IISS.⁴

Russia discloses very little official information about military matters, and this opacity has only worsened since the onset of the invasion. To illuminate the *how* and the *extent* of the changes despite those technical limitations, this paper employs two research methods. First, it conducts open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysis, drawing on published materials and social media. Second, it performs satellite imagery analysis, using commercial optical imagery, in cooperation with the private intelligence organisation, DEEP DIVE, to assess how the war has reconfigured Russia’s military power in the Far East.³

1. FORCE SIZE

1.1. RUSSIAN FAR EAST ON THE EVE OF THE FULL-SCALE INVASION

The annual White Paper by Ministry of Defense of Japan (MOD) in 2021 assessed the total size of ground forces in the VVO at 80 000 personnel, including logistics and engineer units (for the corps-division/brigade breakdown, see Table 1).⁵ Considering that the total active ground forces of the Russian

Armed Forces at that time were estimated at 360 000, approximately one quarter was stationed within the VVO.⁶ Among those was a machine-gun artillery division (18th PulAD) – the formation that has been deployed on Iturup and Kunashir in the Northern Territories since 1978; it is believed to number roughly 3 500 troops⁷.

As for the Russian Navy (*Военно-морской флот Российской Федерации*, VMF), the Pacific Fleet (*Тихоокеанский флот*, TOF) possessed 16 submarines (including seven nuclear-powered boats), eight principal surface combatants, and 42 fixed-wing aircraft, the bulk of which were homeported around Vladivostok in Primorsky Krai. The nuclear-powered submarines were concentrated at the Rybachii base on the Kamchatka Peninsula. With respect to the Aerospace Forces (*Воздушно-космические силы*, VKS), the 11th Air Force & Air Defence Army possessed 278 fixed-wing aircraft and 96 helicopters, with roughly 30 Tu-95MS strategic bombers of Long-Range Aviation (*Авиация Дальнего Действия*, DA) routinely forward-deployed to Ukrainka air base (Amur Oblast).

³ The satellite imagery used in this paper was acquired by DEEP DIVE, a private intelligence organisation operated by the author, and has been made available with permission. The author is the executive director of “[DEEP DIVE - The Institute for Digital Investigations](#).”

⁴ The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (IISS, February 2021), 203 – 204.

⁵ Japan Ministry of Defense, 防衛白書 [DEFENSE OF JAPAN 2021] (Nikkei Insatsu, 2021), 45.

⁶ The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2021* (Routledge, 2021), 192-199.

⁷ “[Армия и вооружение на Курилах](#) [The army and armament in the Kuril Islands],” *Interfax*, 15 February 2011.

1.2. GROUND FORCES

Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 dramatically altered the size of the ground forces stationed within the VVO. *The Military Balance 2025* assesses that a motor rifle division and an artillery brigade were newly formed in the VVO after the war had broken out. That is 'on paper': what *The Military Balance* and Japan's *White Paper* track are the numbers of divisional and brigade headquarters located in each military district. Meanwhile, the actual locations of the combat units subordinate to those headquarters are a different matter.

When the war began in 2022, the Russian Ground Forces' basic tactical echelons were the battalion tactical group (BTG). A BTG is a small combined-arms team generated from an infantry battalion – typically, one manned by relatively well-trained contract soldiers (*контрактники*) – augmented by a tank company, an artillery battery, and other attachments drawn from its parent regiment or brigade.⁸ In the early phases of the war, the core of the ground forces' fighting power consisted of BTGs generated from existing units in this fashion. In other words, the force users in this war were the Unified Groups of Troops (*Объединённая группировка войск*, OGV) formed for each axis of advance, while divisions and brigades primarily served as force providers of BTGs.

In the VVO's case, BTGs drawn from its four Combined Arms Armies formed OGV Vostok, which concentrated in Belarus. This OGV was initially committed to an operation to seize Kyiv, and was later redeployed to the Donbas front.

Quantifying the scale of the ground units dispatched from the VVO to the Ukrainian theatre is difficult, but two empirical observations are suggestive. First, the strategic command-post exercise "Vostok-2022" held in September 2022 was said to involve over 50 000 personnel, more than 5 000 items of equipment, around 140 aircraft, and 60 ships

and auxiliaries.⁹ Given that "Vostok-2014" mobilised 155 000 troops and "Vostok-2018" mobilised no less than 297 000, the scale of "Vostok-2022" was markedly small. It is highly likely that virtually all deployable personnel among the VVO's ground forces (excluding conscripts, who are, by law, not to be sent to a war zone beyond Russia's borders) had been sent to Ukraine.

It is highly likely that virtually all deployable personnel among the VVO's ground forces had been sent to Ukraine

Second, satellite monitoring of the VVO's principal garrisons shows a significant decline in heavy equipment, such as armoured fighting vehicles and artillery. The same trend is visible at materiel repair and storage bases (*база хранения и ремонта военной техники*, BKhRVT) that house equipment reserves. Taken together, these observations support the conclusion that the VVO's force size has been greatly reduced by the war.

1.2.1. CASUALTIES

It is also highly probable that units from the VVO have suffered considerable casualties. As of August 2025, *Mediazona* and the *BBC* had jointly confirmed by name 125 681 Russian military fatalities. Table 2 aggregates those whose origins are in the Far Eastern Federal District, indicating that at least 12 000 or more have been killed. As this figure covers only those whose identities were confirmed from public sources and social media posts, it understates the true total. The *BBC* estimates that unobserved deaths account for 35 – 55% of the overall number; applying that ratio yields a total of 16 412 – 18 843 fatalities from the VVO.¹⁰

A 2025 report by the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed overall Russian military

⁸ Lester W Grau and Charles K Bartles, "Getting to Know the Russian Battalion Tactical Group," RUSI, 14 April 2022.

⁹ "В Минобороны сообщили, что в учениях "Восток-2022" примут участие более 50 тыс. военных [The Ministry of Defence announced that more than 50 000 military personnel will take part in the Vostok-2022 exercises.]," *Tass*, 29 August 2022.

¹⁰ Olga Ivshina, "How Russia took record losses in Ukraine in 2024," *BBC*, 5 May 2025.

Federal subject	KIA	Total population	KIA per 100 000 population
Amur	553	753 046	73
Buriat Republic	3 110	971 139	320
Jewish Autonomous Area	116	144 428	80
Zabaikal	2 138	983 838	217
Kamchatka	515	288 200	179
Magadan	229	134 544	170
Primorskii	2 102	1 799 659	117
Sakha Republic	1 552	1 006 561	154
Sakhalin	951	457 597	208
Khabarovsk	744	1 273 488	58
Chukotka	147	47 778	308
Sum	12 157	7 860 278	155

Table 2. Fatalities from the Far Eastern Federal District. *Source:* Mediazona.¹³

casualties over the three-year war at more than 700 000, including more than 170 000 ground forces killed in action (KIA).¹¹ This implies a killed-to-wounded ratio of about 1:3. An internal US Department of Defense document reportedly obtained by *The Economist* similarly placed the killed and wounded in action (WIA) ratio at 1:3 to 1:4.¹² Applying these ratios to the above figures implies total VVO casualties of 65 648 – 94 215.

1.2.2. THE 18TH MACHINE-GUN ARTILLERY DIVISION

As with other formations, the 18th Machine-Gun Artillery Division (18 PulAD) headquarters itself has very likely remained at its peacetime location in Goriachie Kliuchi on Iturup. Indeed, the division commander, Colonel Andrei Arkhipov, attended the Victory over Japan Day commemoration on 3 September 2024, confirming that the HQ staff have stayed on the islands as a force provider rather than deploying to the front.¹⁴ By contrast, corpses of soldiers wearing the division patch were identified on the Donbas front soon after the invasion began, leaving no doubt that

personnel from the division have been sent into combat.¹⁵

In autumn 2022, a new regiment, designated the 1472nd Motor Rifle Regiment (1472 MsP), was formed under the division. By presidential decree, it was awarded the honorary title “Guards” in recognition of “collective heroic deeds, bravery, indomitable spirit and courage.”¹⁶ This was the first time a subunit of the 18th PulAD had received the “Guards” honorific, and the award most likely relates to its involvement in the war in Ukraine.¹⁷ In January 2025, the division was selected as one of the best units in the Russian Army, probably for the same reason.¹⁸

¹¹ Defense Intelligence Agency, *2025 Worldwide Threat Assessment* (Defense Intelligence Agency, May 2025), 12-13.

¹² “How many Russian soldiers have been killed in Ukraine?,” *The Economist*, 5 July 2024.

¹³ “Потери России в войне с Украиной. Сводка «Медиазоны» [Russia’s losses in the war with Ukraine. Summary by Mediazona],” *Mediazona*, accessed in February 2026.

¹⁴ “Курильчанам вернули день Победы [Victory Day returned to Kuril Islanders],” *Krasnyi Mayak*, 3 September 2024.

¹⁵ Alexey Teslya, “Груз 200 для Курил: украинский спецназ ‘покрошил’ подразделение оккупантов под Славянском [Cargo 200 for the Kuril Islands: Ukrainian special forces “crushed” a unit of occupiers near Slavyansk],” *Glavred*, 16 July 2022.

¹⁶ President of the Russian Federation, *Указ Президента Российской Федерации “О Присвоении 1472 Мотострелковому Полку Почетного Наименования* [Decree Of The President Of The Russian Federation ‘On Awarding The 1472nd Motorised Rifle Regiment An Honorary Title’] (The Kremlin, 14 June 2024).

¹⁷ The regiment is believed to have participated in the assault on Vuhledar alongside the Pacific Fleet’s 155th Naval Infantry Brigade. Sergey Nakhimov, “1472-й гвардейский мотострелковый полк 18-й пулеметно-артиллерийской дивизии 68-го армейского корпуса Восточного военного округа [1472nd Guards Motor Rifle Regiment of the 18th Machine Gun and Artillery Division of the 68th Army Corps of the Eastern Military District],” *Amalnews*, 30 September 2024.

¹⁸ “Пулеметно-артиллерийская дивизия ВВО стала лучшим соединением в Сухопутных войсках по итогам 2024 года [The Eastern Military District’s machine gun and artillery division became the best unit in the Ground Forces at the end of 2024],” Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 5 January 2025.

Satellite imagery, however, shows no marked reduction of equipment at the division's garrisons (tanks are somewhat fewer than before the war). This suggests that the 1472 MsP has served to recruit volunteers within the Northern Territories and then dispatch them to the theatre – that is, it has functioned primarily as a force provider. As the Russian Army, faced with staunch Ukrainian resistance, abandoned BTG-centric tactics, it appears to have reverted to larger regimental echelons as the core tactical unit – hence the creation of the 1472 MsP.

1.3. NAVAL AND AIR FORCES

Compared with the ground forces, the scale of naval and air assets has seen little change. Our satellite imagery analysis indicates that the number of ships and aircraft assigned to the Pacific Fleet and to the VKS 11th Air Force & Air

Compared with the ground forces, the scale of naval and air assets has seen little change

Defence Army is roughly the same as before the full-scale invasion. After the war began, the Pacific Fleet base on Kamchatka received Project 955A (Borei-A class) ballistic missile submarines (ship, submersible, ballistic, nuclear, SSBNs) and Project 885M (Yasen-M class) multi-purpose nuclear-powered attack submarines (submarine, submersible, nuclear, SSNs), with corresponding infrastructure build-up underway.

Air-defence systems have declined markedly, to make up for shortfalls on the Ukrainian front

Air-defence systems are an exception: they have declined markedly, apparently to make up for shortfalls on the Ukrainian front. As the well-known Japanese OSINT researcher “AS-22” (@AS_22im) has documented, all eight VKS air-defence missile regiments located in the VVO have suffered reductions since the invasion. As AS-22 notes, withdrawal has been most severe at interior regiments, where whole battalions and even regimental-level complements have been removed. At border-area regiments, individual batteries

or battalions have sometimes been siphoned off, but complete regimental withdrawals are rare.¹⁹

An exception to this pattern is the Army's S-300V4 unit deployed in the Northern Territories. The S-300V4 was deployed on Iturup and Kunashir in December 2020, but disappeared from satellite imagery between 15 and 30 September 2022. Around the same time, S-400 systems belonging to the VKS were also removed from Sakhalin (some S-400 batteries remain near Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, but the site near Dolinsk to the north has been fully vacated).

2. FORCE POSTURE

2.1. AVIATION

As noted above, the VVO's air assets have not changed significantly in scale since the war began, and the same holds for their activity patterns.

Before the invasion, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) scrambled roughly 260 times per year against Russian aircraft approaching Japan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). The number fell to 150 in 2022, the first year of the war, but began rising again in fiscal year (FY) 2023 and reached 237 in FY2024 – almost back to pre-war levels. Ten of these instances were flights by Tu-95MS bombers (20 aircraft in total), and five were flights by Il-20 electronic intelligence (ELINT) aircraft.²⁰ Russia also violated Japan's territorial airspace in each of the five years from 2019 through 2024. The most recent case was in September 2024, when

¹⁹ AS-22 (@AS_22im), “国境を守る部隊(上から1532連隊まで)が一個大隊規模や一個中隊規模で移動しているのに対し、内陸部の部隊は大隊以上や連隊規模での移動が行われているようだ。[While border defence units (up to the 1532nd Regiment) are moving in battalion-sized or company-sized formations, inland units appear to be conducting movements at battalion level],” X, 1 December 2024.

²⁰ Joint Staff (Japan), “統合幕僚監部『2024年度(令和6年度)緊急発進実施状況について』[Joint Staff Headquarters Implementation Status of Emergency Launches for Fiscal Year 2024 (Reiwa 6)],” Press Release, Ministry of Defense, 10 April 2025. Note that Japan's fiscal year begins in April and ends in March of the following year. Therefore, “fiscal year 2024” as used here refers to the period from April 2024 to March 2025.

a Russian Navy Il-38 anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft intruded over waters off Rebun Island in Hokkaidō. In this sense, Russian aviators have been operating ‘as usual.’

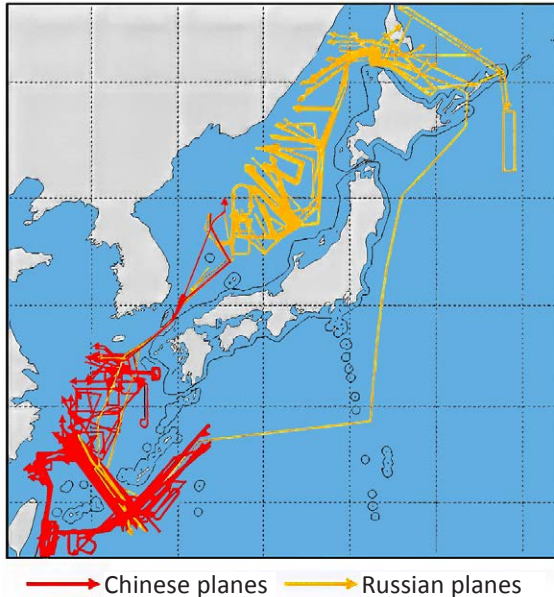


Figure 1. Chinese and Russian aircraft’s activities around Japan (2024). *Source:* Adapted from Joint Staff (Japan).²¹

That said, one important change is that the VVO has come to function as a basing area for air-strike operations against Ukraine.

intensified further. Tu-160 supersonic bombers, which normally operate from Engels, began deploying to Ukrainka and to Yelizovo (Kamchatka) soon thereafter; our satellite imagery shows that 7 – 8 Tu-160s have routinely been present at VVO airfields since. The OSINT researcher “風神Радар” (@HUJINSYOUJO0000), who tracks Russian bomber movements, has also suggested that most Tu-95MS aircraft flying strike missions to Ukraine are maintained at Ukrainka.²²

2.2. THE PACIFIC FLEET

The Pacific Fleet itself has played a limited role in Russia’s war against Ukraine. Although the Fleet’s two naval infantry brigades – the 155th and 40th – have served as shock troops throughout the conflict, its surface and air components have scarcely figured. Since the Bosphorus and Dardanelles were closed to belligerent warships from the outset, there was little for the surface fleet to contribute. For much the same reason, there have been no major changes in the coastal anti-ship missile units stationed on Kamchatka, the Northern Territories, Matua, and Paramushir. In short, as far as the war in Ukraine is concerned, the Pacific Fleet has not had much to do.

Instead, it has been used for naval diplomacy and strategic signalling. Recent examples include port visits by Pacific Fleet corvettes around Asia: a visit to China in December 2024; the “Komodo 2025” exercise with the Indonesian Navy in February 2025; the “Indra Navy 2025” exercise with the Indian Navy in March; “Maritime Interaction 2025,” a joint exercise

The VVO has come to function as a basing area for air-strike operations against Ukraine

Before the war, the only bomber base routinely used within the VVO was Ukrainka in Amur Oblast; in addition, Tu-22M3 medium bombers were based at Belaya in Eastern Siberia. Once Ukraine began striking Russia’s major bomber bases in the west (Engels, Dyagilevo, Shaikovka, etc.) with missiles and drones, the VKS started to disperse bombers further afield. Whereas Ukrainka typically hosted around 20 – 25 Tu-95MS bombers before the war, it has routinely hosted 30 – 35 since – apparently, aircraft evacuated from Engels.

After Ukraine’s special services carried out Operation Spiderweb in June 2025, destroying numerous bombers, the incentives to disperse

The Pacific Fleet has been used for naval diplomacy and strategic signalling

with the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in August; and a subsequent combined patrol in the Pacific after calling at Kamchatka. There

²¹ Joint Staff (Japan), “統合幕僚監部.”

²² 風神Радар@活動低下中 (@HUJINSYOUJO0000), “AviVector氏にも共有して分析してもらったところだけど、もしかしたらTu-95MSの殆どはウクラインカで機体のメンテナンスを行ってから攻撃に出てるんじゃないか? [I’ll share this with AviVector for analysis, but perhaps most Tu-95MSs undergo maintenance at Ukrainka before launching their attacks?],” X, 5 September 2025.

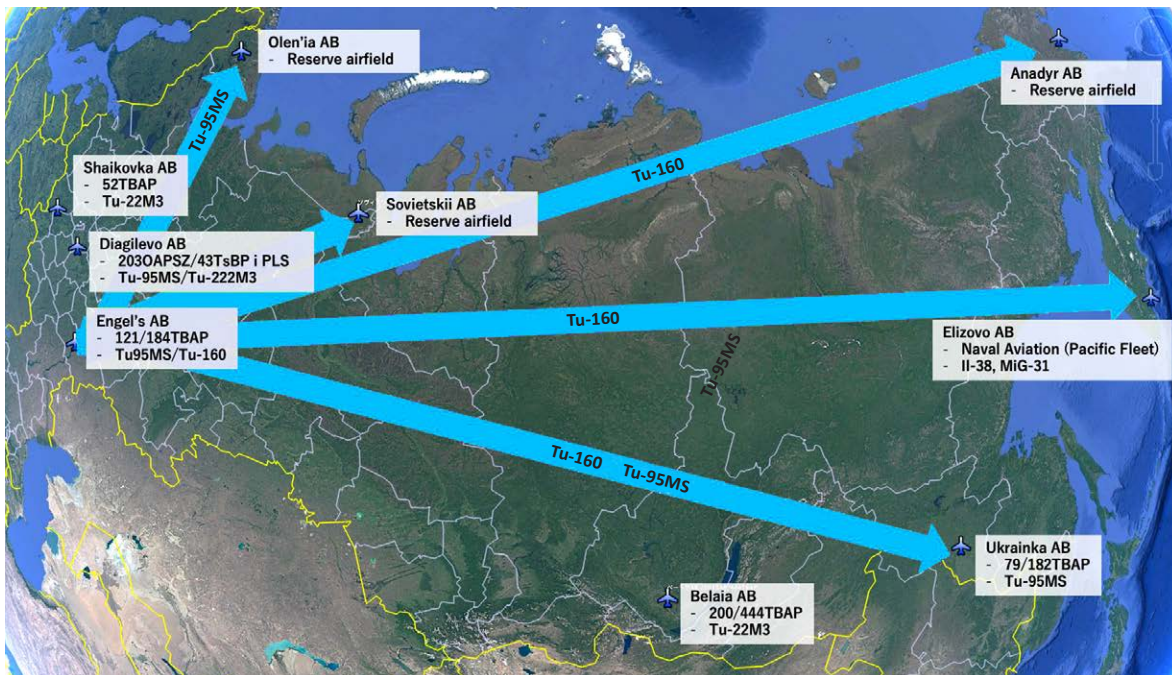


Figure 2. Redeployment of the Russian bomber fleet (Engel's AB). *Source:* The Author.

have also been reports of combined Sino-Russian submarine patrols in the East China Sea. These activities are better understood as politico-military signalling intended to demonstrate Russia's continued ties with its Asian partners, rather than as purely military measures.

Meanwhile, in September 2025, a political campaign called "Power of Truth 2025" was conducted. Vessels of the Pacific Fleet called at ports in the Northern Kurils, Iturup Island, Kunashir Island, and Sakhalin to celebrate the 80th anniversary of victory over Japan. Furthermore, according to the programme published for local residents, "Truth Force 2025" will also feature an exhibition of western-made weapons captured on the battlefield in Ukraine, linking the memory of past victories with the current war.²³

As for nuclear-deterrent patrols by SSBNs, the pattern resembles that of Long-Range Aviation. Patrols dipped somewhat at the outset of the war and fell steeply in 2023, but have risen again since 2024. This likely reflects

the retirement of ageing Project 667BDR (Delta III-class) SSBNs and the commissioning of three new Project 955A (Borei-A-class) boats since 2022.²⁴

In recent years, the Pacific Fleet's nuclear-powered submarines have tended to undertake longer patrols. In the summer – autumn of 2024, a Project 955A boat reportedly patrolled for up to 70 days; in 2025, a Project 885M undertook a three-month-long deployment.²⁵ From April 2025 onwards, Pacific Fleet SSBNs began conducting consecutive patrols of significantly longer duration than previously. At Rybachii Base, no instance was confirmed between early April and late August 2025 where all SSBNs were simultaneously present at the submarine berths; it is highly probable that each submarine undertook consecutive patrols lasting two to three months (or partially

²³ The official Telegram channel of Sakhalin oblast: Правительство Сахалинской области [Government of the Sakhalin Oblast] (sakhgov), "[С 6 по 14 сентября в Сахалинской области проходит акция «Сила в правде-2025»](#)" [From 6 to 14 September, the Sakhalin Region is hosting the 'Power in Truth-2025' campaign], Telegram, 6 September 2025.

²⁴ Yu Koizumi, "[Russian Pacific Fleet Redux: Japan's North as a New Center of Gravity](#)," *War On The Rocks*, 22 October 2024.

²⁵ Минобороны России [Ministry of Defence of Russia] (mod_russia), "[Атомный подводный ракетный крейсер «Красноярск» Тихоокеанского флота торжественно встретили в пункте базирования на Камчатке после выполнения поставленных задач в зоне](#)" [The Pacific Fleet's Krasnoyarsk nuclear-powered missile cruiser was given a ceremonial welcome at its base in Kamchatka after completing its tasks in the area], Telegram, 2 September 2025.

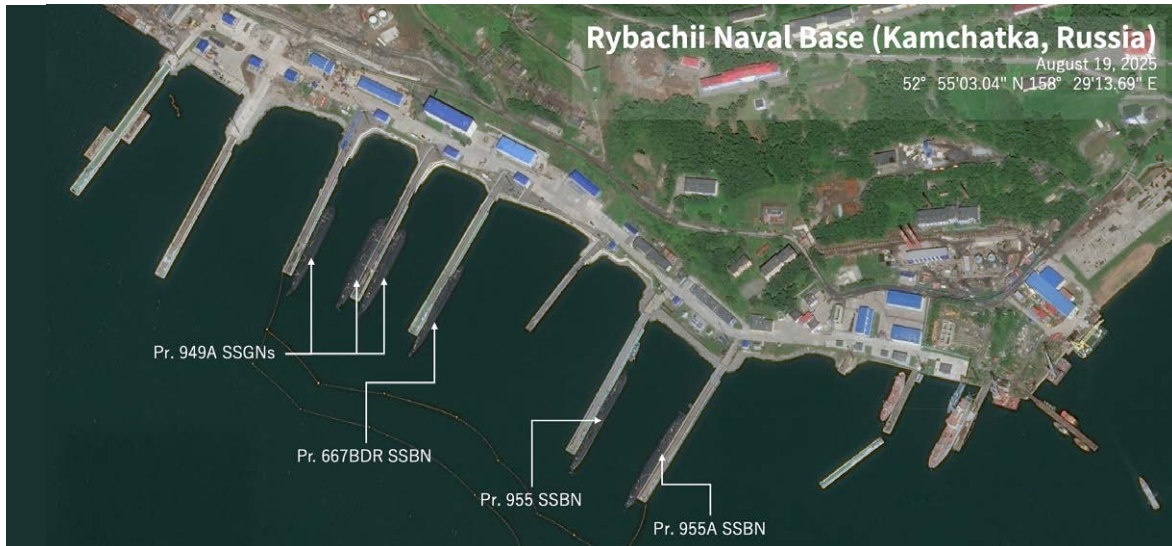


Figure 3. TOF’s submarine forces, Rybachii. Source: Deep Dive.²⁷

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2018	Pr. 955							Pr. 667BDR				Pr. 955
2019				Pr. 955		Pr. 667BDR	Pr. 955					
2020				Pr. 955				Pr. 667BDR	Pr. 955			Pr. 955
2021					Pr. 955		Pr. 667BDR		Pr. 955			
2022				Pr. 955								Pr. 955
2023	Pr. 955					Pr. 955	Pr. 955A					
2024	Pr. 955A			Pr. 955A				Pr. 955A				
2025				Pr. 955A						Pr. 955A		

Figure 4. Russian SSBN patrol pattern (TOF). Source: The Author.²⁷

overlapping).²⁶ Although all SSBNs were briefly observed berthed at the end of August, they subsequently resumed extended patrols by a Project 955A, continuing until mid-November. This suggests a change in the Russian Navy’s SSBN patrol policy.

2.3. INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Infrastructure underpinning military activity is also being strengthened. The largest project within the VVO is the expansion of the submarine base at Rybachii. The enlarged area may house the Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI)’s special-mission nuclear submarines (*Атомная подводная лодка специального назначения, APLSpN*).²⁸

²⁶ In September 2025, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that the Project 955A SSBN Imperator Alexander III had completed a patrol lasting approximately three months. “Атомный крейсер “Император Александр III” вернулся на Камчатку [The nuclear cruiser Emperor Alexander III has returned to Kamchatka],” *Ria Novosti*, 8 September 2025.

²⁷ Deep Dive, *Deep Dive Insight*, No. 001 (August 2025) 19.

²⁸ GUGI’s mission is stated to include underwater surveys (such as topography and sonar placement), physiological experiments, searching for sunken ships and aircraft on the seabed, and submarine rescue operations. Alexey Yakovlev, “Чем занимается управление глубоководных исследований Минобороны? [What does the Ministry of Defence’s Deep Sea Research Department do?],” *Vzglyad*, 4 July 2019.

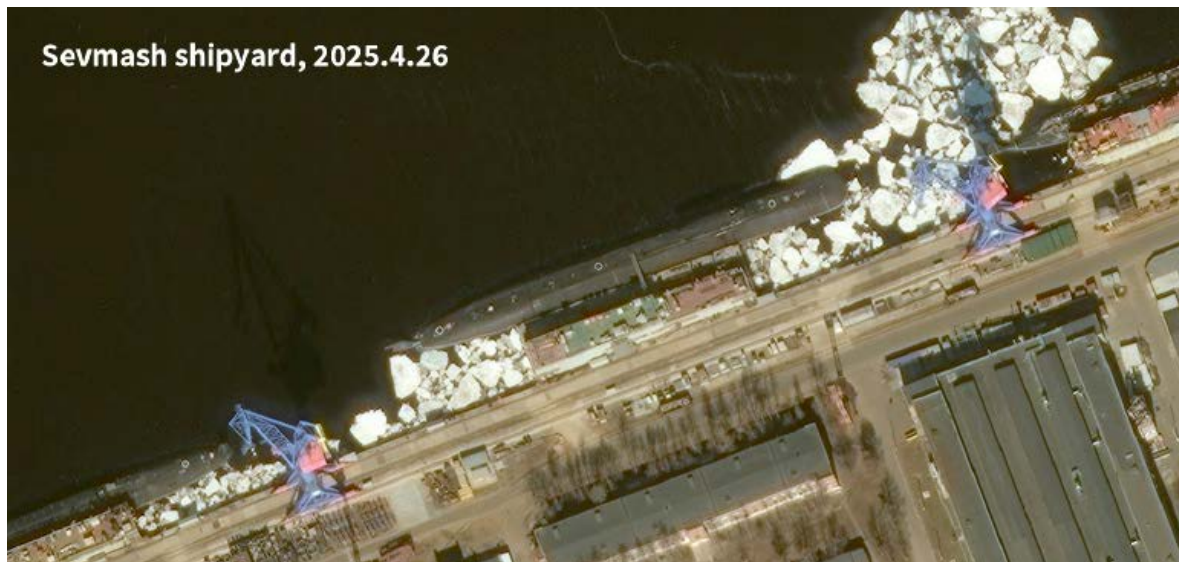


Figure 5. Belgorod (Pr 09852) in Sevmaš shipyard. *Source:* Deep Dive.

Traditionally, GUGI's principal operational formation has been the Northern Fleet's 29th Submarine Division (29 DiPL) based near Murmansk; however, the new Project 09852 APLSpN Belgorod, handed over to the Navy in 2022, was reported from the outset to be earmarked for the Pacific Fleet.²⁹ If so, a new submarine division equivalent to the 29 DiPL can be expected to be formed in the Pacific Fleet, and the expansion at Rybachii would be preparation for that. As of September 2025, Belgorod appears to be undergoing maintenance at the Sevmaš shipyard, but she may be transferred to Kamchatka in the near future.

Belgorod is also widely regarded as the carrier for the nuclear-armed Poseidon (Status-6) autonomous torpedo. In Vilyuchinsk, Kamchatka, new storage buildings have been under construction since around 2022 in the northern part of the ammunition depot area; it is highly plausible that these will be used for Poseidon and its nuclear warheads.

Two military units – the 31268th and the 25030-15th – are located at Vilyuchinsk, both under the command of the 12th Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defence (*12-е Главное управление Министерства обороны*, GUMO). The former is believed to manage nuclear warheads, the latter to store

and service missiles. Procurement documents issued in 2019 for Poseidon-related equipment mention the 31268th, suggesting some relationship with Poseidon.³⁰

Progress in Kamchatka has, nonetheless, been sluggish. When Defence Minister Andrei Belousov visited the peninsula in 2024, the head of the Special Construction Department reported that all works would be completed by the summer of 2025.³¹ Our satellite imagery analysis indicates that reclamation is still ongoing at Rybachii, and completion will likely take several more years. The reasons for the delays are unclear, but in December 2024, labourers reportedly went on strike over unpaid wages – suggesting that corruption, a chronic Russian ailment, is hobbling progress³².

Other noteworthy projects include the expansion of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade garrison in Vladivostok; construction of a new over-the-horizon radar (OTHR) site in Amur Oblast; and a new radar site on Iturup. None of these, however, implies a drastic shift in the VVO's overall force size or posture. Taken together with the analysis in Section 1, it is difficult to foresee Russia becoming an imminent military threat to Japan in the near term.

³⁰ Bmpd via e_maximov, "[Посейдон на Камчатке](#) [Poseidon in Kamchatka]," LiveJournal, 21 February 2019.

³¹ Navy of the Russian Federation, [Морской сборник](#) [Maritime Collection] No. 12 (Krasnaya Zvezda, 2024).

³² "[300 работников стройки в Вилучинске бастуют из-за невыплаты зарплат](#) [300 construction workers in Vilyuchinsk are on strike over unpaid wages]," *AiF Kamchatka*, 23 December 2024.

²⁹ "[Источник сообщил, что объекты базирования носителей 'Посейдонов' будут готовы в 2024 году](#) [The source reported that the facilities for basing the Poseidon carriers will be ready in 2024.]," *Tass*, 27 March 2023.



Figure 6: New nuclear warhead storage under construction. *Source:* Google Earth.

3. MILITARY RELATIONS

3.1. NORTH KOREA

Historically, Russia's relationship with North Korea has been far more distant than often imagined, especially in the military domain, which had largely withered since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006. The United Nations Security Council resolutions prohibited the provision of weapons and military technology to Pyongyang. Russia and North Korea had never conducted a large-scale joint exercise.

Historically, Russia's relationship with North Korea has been far more distant than often imagined

Since Russia's full-scale invasion, however, North Korea has consistently supported Russia. From 2023, Pyongyang began shipping large quantities of artillery shells and rockets to Russia. Using satellite imagery and 3D modelling, the Open-Source Centre (OSC) estimates that between August 2023 and May 2025, North Korea supplied 4.25 – 5.9 mn rounds – sufficient to provide roughly half of

Russia's artillery firepower on the battlefield.³³ North Korea has also very likely provided NK-23 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and M1989 heavy artillery pieces³⁴.

In 2024, the two countries concluded a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership treaty that restored a clause obligating military assistance if either party is attacked. A wartime assistance clause had existed in the 1961 Soviet – North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, but was deleted from the 2000 Russia – North Korea Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation. Pursuant to the new clause, North Korea began dispatching Korean People's Army (KPA) units to western Russia around December 2024 and committed them to combat in 2025. North Korea is the only third country to have deployed combat troops in this war; in this sense, Russia and North Korea now effectively enjoy near-allied ties. This is the most salient geopolitical shift produced by Russia's full-scale invasion.

³³ Open Source Centre, [Brothers in Arms: Estimating North Korean Munitions Deliveries to Russia](#) (Open Source Centre, 2025), 29-30.

³⁴ Lee Minji, ["N. Korea sent 200 long-range artillery pieces to Russia; additional supply likely: Seoul,"](#) *Yonhap* via *Korea Times*, 11 February 2025.



Figure 7. North Korean ammunition shipment from Rason port. *Source:* Google Earth.

What Russia will provide in return remains uncertain. Some believe Moscow will assist Pyongyang’s nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile programmes, but hard evidence is lacking. Ukrainian military intelligence has alleged that Russia is transferring loitering munitions manufacturing know-how to North Korea.³⁵

3.2. CHINA

On the surface, China – Russia relations have not changed markedly. After Russia’s first aggression against Ukraine in 2014 soured its relations with the west, Moscow strengthened ties with Beijing – especially in the economic sphere. In 2023, the first full year after the start of the full-scale invasion, bilateral trade exceeded \$240 bn for the first time (\$244.8 bn in 2024).

China has not supplied finished weapons systems

By contrast, Russian arms exports to China have fallen sharply from their peak. In the 2000s, annual exports reached \$2 – 3 bn; by

the 2020s, they had shrunk to \$300 – 500 mn, and in 2024 to a mere \$30 mn. China’s rapid advances in science, technology, and industry have greatly reduced its dependence on Russian military technology.³⁶

The war has, however, opened a channel in the opposite direction: transfers of Chinese military-relevant technology to Russia. China has not supplied finished weapons systems; rather, it has provided machine tools, semiconductors and other dual-use goods, nitrocellulose used as a propellant ingredient, and commercial drones. China’s continued purchases of Russian natural gas and oil also generate revenues that help finance the war.³⁷

From Japan’s perspective, the most worrying development is Russia bringing a Chinese military presence into Japan’s northern approaches. Traditionally, Moscow has been reluctant to see the PLA operate in the Sea of Okhotsk or the Arctic Ocean – areas linked to Russia’s SSBN bastions. Since 2014, however, Russia has allowed PLA Navy task groups to

³⁵ Howard Altman, “Russia Giving North Korea Shahed-136 Attack Drone Production Capability: Budanov,” *The War Zone*, 9 June 2025.

³⁶ This is a conversion value based on trend-indicator values (TIVs) developed independently by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and does not correspond to actual transaction amounts.

³⁷ Toru Tsunashima, Chris Cook, Max Seddon, and Chloe Cornish, “Russia scours China for second-hand machine tools,” *The Financial Times*, 18 June 2024.

enter the Sea of Okhotsk; in 2024, Chinese and Russian bombers conducted a joint patrol over the Arctic's Chukchi Sea. As noted above, in 2025, PLAN vessels also deployed to Kamchatka. Although the likelihood that China and Russia would collaborate to invade Japan or Taiwan is extremely low, their closer military ties mean Japan must now face Chinese military power on every geographic front. For a country with limited deterrence resources, this poses a serious dilemma.

CONCLUSION

The Russo – Ukrainian War has likely gutted the VVO's ground forces. Estimated VVO casualties of 65 648 – 94 215 are comparable to the peacetime size of the VVO's entire ground component. Together with the marked drawdown of reserve equipment stored at BKhRVT sites, rebuilding the VVO's ground forces will take considerable time.

Nor is the Far East alone in requiring reconstruction: the Russian Armed Forces as a whole have suffered grievous losses, and the depletion of officers and contract soldiers has almost certainly degraded force proficiency. Rebuilding will absorb substantial resources. In these circumstances, the VVO's priority will not be particularly high. The reorganisation plan floated by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in December 2022 emphasised strengthening forces in Russia's northwest (especially along the Finnish border) in response to NATO enlargement.³⁸ In his report to the expanded Collegium in 2024, Defence Minister Belousov,

At the same time, rising tensions with the west have enhanced the importance of nuclear deterrence. The analysis above noted the activity of strategic bombers and SSBNs around Japan; both are likely to become more active and more sophisticated. If a special-purpose submarine such as Belgorod is, indeed, assigned to the Pacific Fleet, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force will need to complement traditional ASW with a seabed-warfare concept to protect critical underwater infrastructure.³⁹

Efforts to uphold international order can no longer be bound within a single geographic theatre

Finally, the war has driven Russia into deeper military alignment with China and – especially – North Korea. The fact that Pyongyang now supports Russia's war effort across the board – from shells to soldiers – is striking. Going forward, it will be essential to monitor what Moscow offers in return, particularly in the military realm. More broadly, this underscores that efforts to uphold international order can no longer be bound within a single geographic theatre. Japan and its partners will need to increase the available deterrence resources (weapons, ammunition, intelligence, etc.) in each region and build mechanisms to swing and surge them flexibly and rapidly across Eurasia.

Rising tensions have enhanced the importance of nuclear deterrence

likewise, outlined a build-up plan premised on the risk of a large-scale war with NATO within ten years. Overall, Russia will likely concentrate its defence investments in western Eurasia.

³⁸ Yekaterina Karacheva, "[Путин выступил на расширенном заседании коллегии Минобороны, подвел итоги 2022-го и обозначил приоритетные задачи на 2023 год](#) [Putin spoke at an expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry's board, summarised the results of 2022 and outlined priority tasks for 2023]," *MSKVremya*, 23 December 2022.

³⁹ Rishi Sunak, *Undersea Cables: Indispensable, insecure* (Policy Exchange, 2017).

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