

Russian Military Merges Air Force and Space Command

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

August 03, 2015



Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced the creation Monday of a new branch of Russia's armed forces: the Aerospace Forces, which brings the air force and the recently created Aerospace Defense Forces under one unified command.

"Air forces, anti-air and anti-missile defenses, and space forces will now be under a unified command structure," Shoigu was quoted as saying Monday by news agency TASS.

By merging the responsibilities for space and air operations under one roof — known as the Aerospace Forces — the move represents an evolution in Russian military thinking.

During the Cold War, Soviet air and space forces were separated into different branches with little overlap in command authority. Meanwhile, the U.S. Air Force has historically been in charge of all things above ground.

Shoigu, introducing the new military branch, described the merger of Russia's lofty services as "the best option for streamlining our nation's system of air and space defense," and said the move was prompted "by a shift in the combat 'center of gravity' toward the aerospace theater."

Maxim Shepovalenko, a former Russian military officer and analyst at the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a Moscow-based defense think tank, said this new focus reflects lessons learned in the wake of NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia in the late 1990s.

"Based on what we saw [then], air and space attacks are the first stage of any conflict, be they small, medium or large," Shepovalenko said. "[In this regard], the prime reason for the merger is to ensure a prompt response to any attack coming from the air or space with a streamlined and unified command."

Modern militaries, such as the U.S.-led NATO alliance, consider air and space to be a seamless theater of war. Ballistic missiles travel through both, and air forces are supported by space-based communications and intelligence satellites.

Russia, the U.S. and China are all working on anti-satellite weaponry that could bring war into space, prompting the imperative of new defensive strategies.

Modernization

The creation of the Aerospace Forces comes amid sweeping efforts to overhaul and modernize Russia's armed forces, which in many areas retain their Soviet structures some 20 years after the fall of the U.S.S.R.

Not only is the government pouring 20 trillion rubles (\$320 billion) into replacing 70 percent of the military's hardware with shiny new gear by the end of the decade, it's rejigging its military doctrines and organizational structures to reflect modern Russia's threat perceptions — which in recent years have largely centered on NATO expansion.

Last week, President Vladimir Putin approved amendments to the national naval doctrine that prioritized a focus on countering NATO assets in the Atlantic Ocean with strong fleets in the Arctic and Black seas.

The creation of the new Aerospace Forces builds upon an earlier marriage between Russia's air-defense force and the space force in 2011. Known as the Aerospace Defense Forces, the branch was tasked with defending Russian airspace from airborne and space-borne attacks.

A reported 20 percent of the 20 trillion ruble rearmament drive was set aside to buy new equipment such as S-400 air-defense systems and the developmental S-500, which reportedly will have the ability to intercept targets at the edge of the atmosphere.

It is not immediately clear what kind of budget the Aerospace Forces will have, but with no changes announced to Putin's modernization program, the former air force and aerospace defense budgets are not yet expected to change.

Inter-Service Marriage

With the two branches merged into one, the Aerospace Forces will have a lot on its plate. It will be responsible for commanding the hundreds of planes in the air force arsenal and managing air and missile defenses. Added to that is complete responsibility for all aspects of Russia's military space operations, from launch to the operation in space of intelligence and nuclear missile warning satellites.

Air force chief Colonel General Viktor Bondarev was named head of the new Aerospace Forces. Bondarev began his career in the Soviet air force in 1981, and served in Afghanistan as a senior attack pilot. He later headed up a major training center and rose through the ranks to become head of the air force in 2012.

The mergers bring the new Russian Aerospace Forces closer in line with the organizational structure of the U.S. Air Force, but with one key distinction — in Russia, control over nuclear missiles remains under the purview of a completely separate military branch, the Strategic Rocket Forces.

“It is an incomplete integration,” Shepovalenko said. “Compared to the U.S. Air Force, which wields both the sword and the shield, we will be incorporating only the shield.” This indicates that the focus of Russia's new branch is on countering advanced U.S. missiles currently under development as part of the Prompt Global Strike program — a project to field a hypersonic missile capable of hitting anything on the globe in 30 minutes — while offensive nuclear missiles will be kept under a separate command, Shepovalenko said.

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Original url:

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