

Zapad 2017: How should the West respond?

Russia's next wargames do not mean war is coming

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Russia has always conducted military drills more numerous and larger in scale than NATO's. Zapad ("West" in Russian) is the exercise sequence that generates most concerns for NATO, not only because of its proximity but also because of memories linked with the huge 1981 iteration, the largest exercises the USSR had ever held, which showcased in all its might the power of its new operational manoeuvre groups. Zapad 2017 will be held in September and is perceived as a potential threat to the security of the region, especially by the Baltic Republics, not least because both the invasion of Georgia and that of Ukraine were preceded by major military exercises. Is the threat credible, and is the fear of an opportunistically expansionist Russia justified in this context?

Analysis: The Character of Russian Military Exercises

Russia regularly conducts military drills of two types. First, there are regular strategic exercises involving an entire military district (MD) on a rotational basis to simulate a large-scale operation, often coupled with smaller-scale drills that together simulate a mock regional war. Second, "snap exercises" or inspections are brief military wargames conducted with no forewarning and, unlike the previous category, do not necessarily involve all military branches (or even internal security services) but just specific types of units.

Zapad belongs to the first group of exercises and is typically held in the area between Belarusian territory and the exclave of Kaliningrad. In the history of post-Soviet Russia, this exercise has been run twice before: in 1999, when it was one of the largest military exercises ever in Russia's Western MD; and in 2013, at a time when Lithuania and Poland already felt more anxious about Russian intentions. Even if on this last occasion, Moscow diplomatically stated that the drill was aimed at the repulsion of "terrorists" – a word that means everything and nothing in Russian parlance – the hypothetical enemy to be fought in both cases was clearly NATO.

In fact, *Zapad's* multifaceted scenarios were evidently devised to stage a large-scale conventional confrontation against a technologically-advanced adversary across a front stretching from central Russia all the way to the Arctic. They test Russia's capacity to deploy all its arms of service, from the Strategic Rocket Troops to the Interior Troops within the same strategic direction along different operational lines and at every level. The emphasis is on inter-service and inter-agency coordination, with a particular accent on strategic mobility, reserve mobilisation, and civil-military cooperation.

Outlook: The (Im)Possibility of an Opportunist Russia

The Kremlin has not yet announced the number of units that will take part in this year's exercise, but it is likely to be at least as large as in previous years (between 12,000 and 70,000 soldiers) – if not larger. Given the poor state of East-West relations, it is probable that, helped by its propaganda, Moscow will do its best to send a powerful message to the West, concretising the harsher tone of its recent statements and strategic documents. Indeed, one can argue that one of the main objectives of *Zapad* is precisely to keep the West in a state of alert, while intimidating NATO allies and at the same time satisfying Russia's own "Great Power" self-image. However, this should not lead us to believe that Moscow would seek war in the Baltic today.

If we consider *Zapad* together with the large number of other military drills conducted, it reflects the sense of insecurity that – justified or not – is key to Russian strategic culture. While many wars start because of feelings of insecurity, this is not the case here for at least three reasons. First, the Baltic area is objectively outside Moscow's list of contestable territories. Second, this area could be better influenced via less costly and less risky non-military means – especially economic ones. Third, an open war there would mean that Russia would be drawn into a wider confrontation that it could not win.

Notwithstanding that its military has been considerably modernised since 1991, Russia still suffers from several key limitations. It could not win a full-spectrum confrontation against NATO in the Western MD, where the *Enhanced Forward Presence* signals a drastic reduction of Moscow's conventional advantage. In addition, the best Russian troops are already scattered across Ukraine and Syria, undermining its ability to conduct decisive operations in the initial phase of a hypothetical conflict in the Baltic. Their relocation would be time-consuming and costly. Already affected by its own structural disequilibria, Russia would not be able to sustain a new war effort without terrible cost to its economy and, consequently, its internal stability.

Recommendations: The Need for Cool-Minded Observation and Alliance-Building

- ◆ To prepare for a war says nothing about the actual willingness – or possibility – to start one. While NATO must maintain its guard, it would be equally useful not to fall prey to Cold War hysteria.
- ◆ The magnitude and frequency of Russia's war games should not lead us to think that, now that it is the Western MD's turn to be tested, an apocalypse is about to be unleashed. To give too much credit to Russian posturing and rhetoric, actually contributes to the success of Moscow's attempts to manipulate the West.
- ◆ *Zapad* can instead be an opportunity better to understand the evolution of Russian military thinking and practice, so as better to calibrate Western defensive planning.
- ◆ A mindful political approach and reasoned strategic analysis could also be conducive greater unity within NATO. An Alliance seemingly strong in its commitment to self-defence and solidarity is better placed to frustrate Russia's efforts to play its *dividi et impera* strategy.

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