

**Dominik P. Jankowski<sup>1</sup>**

*Head of the OSCE and Eastern Security Unit at the Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland*

1. *All opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the position or views of the institution he represents.*

The official phase of “Zapad-2017” – one of the biggest Russian-Belarusian military exercises in 2017 – is over. This exercise has been analysed by security pundits for months and indeed may have generated more international interest than any previous Russian exercise since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In fact, there was much speculation about how this exercise will change the regional dynamics and security situation. The aim of this article is to put “Zapad-2017” into a larger strategic perspective. How do the Russian armed forces train and what is the purpose of these drills? What has changed since the previous “Zapad” exercise which took place in 2013? What is there to watch during major Russian military exercises such as “Zapad-2017”?

There are *ten critical elements* that should be taken into consideration when assessing the Russian military exercises, and more broadly the Russian posture of force.

1) Russians train as they fight. This is a crucial element of the Russian exercising posture. In practical terms, this means that the Russian drills are based on a real threat assessment. The scenarios are realistic. They cover the opponents that exist and the military capabilities which match the reality.

“Zapad-2017” confirmed this trend. It evidenced that Russia has been practicing high-tempo, large-scale and deeply echeloned strategic offensive operations. In fact, this time Russia practiced a scenario based on the fast-forming of a joint strike force in the western strategic direction with the ability to launch military action against NATO’s eastern flank.

2) Since 2014 Russia has been directly engaged in two major conventional military conflicts in the vicinity of NATO. Both in the cases of Ukraine and Syria, Russian forces continue to test their military capabilities, chain of command, procedures and level of interoperability on the battlefield. These military operations have helped the Russian armed forces gain solid battlefield experience in a conventional conflict. “Zapad-2017” was yet another chance to verify the lessons learnt from both wars and eliminate existing gaps.

One area that the Russian General Staff paid close attention to was enhanced strategic mobility. Russian interest in this area has surged following Moscow's intervention in Syria, which necessitated the construction of air and sea lines of supply to support Russian forces during ongoing combat operations. This interest is also organic in nature, stemming from the reform of the military logistics system in 2010 and creation of the Material-Technical Support. The system, using improvements drawing on operational experience, was extensively tested in the "Kavkaz-2016" exercise last year.

In fact, "Zapad-2017" tried and tested the improvements to the Material-Technical Support based on the experience of supporting operations in Syria and addressed some of the weaknesses identified during previous exercises. Reportedly, since "Kavkaz-2016" a number of significant improvements have been introduced to facilitate faster and more efficient use of the Material-Technical Support. These include speeding up delivery of spare parts, improving interaction with the defence industry, and greatly aiding the speed of repair and maintenance for deployed units. This also involved linking the Material-Technical Support to automated systems, using improved diagnostic tools to identify problems, and integrating the work of the Material-Technical Support across strategic, operational and tactical levels.

The enhanced strategic mobility plays a crucial role in the Russian way of thinking about NATO's eastern flank. Many senior Russian officers appreciate that if conflict breaks out with NATO on Russia's periphery, speed of action, moving combat units, and denying the arrival of enemy follow-on forces will shape the outcome.

3) The Russian operational engagement gives us some initial sense of the offensive and defensive elements which were exercised during "Zapad-2017". Based on the observation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as well as the Russian operations in Syria one can assume that the following components were tested:

- substantial and integrated ground-based air defence, neutralising air support;
- extensive use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to exercise constant real-time surveillance;
- deployed electronic countermeasures suites to deny the use of UAVs by opposing forces;
- offensive electronic warfare capabilities;
- electronic and cyber-attacks, especially against any connected device brought into an operational area;
- swift targeting by concentrated artillery fire with advanced munitions, including from ranges beyond the reach of counter-battery fire;
- close coordination between signals intelligence (SIGINT), air defence, artillery and electronic warfare.

One of the critical elements in the Russian military operations remains artillery. In fact, in Russian military culture artillery is called the "God of War" and it remains the decisive finishing arm of the land forces. To stress the importance of artillery in the Russian formations, most Russian units have some indirect fire capability. Moreover, over the last years Russia has made vast improvements in its artillery capabilities,

which have been tested on a regular basis. Rocket artillery has a range of munitions that include high explosive fragmentary, top attack anti-armour munitions, as well as mine laying charges, thermobaric, chemical, and nuclear munitions.

4) “Zapad-2017” was of particular importance for the Russian Western and Southern Military Districts. They have become a top priority in the Russian military modernisation program since at least 2012. In practical terms this means that the units in both districts have received the most modern and technologically advanced equipment, which were put to the test in “Zapad-2017”.

Since “Zapad-2013” the Russian formations in the western strategic direction have changed diametrically. In all types of troops and services, the potential for growth has mainly been achieved through extensive large-scale technical modernisation, but also the creation of new units and the expansion of those already existing. In fact, the Western Military District is currently hosting most of the tactical formations which have been newly created in recent years.

Since 2012 two new army headquarters have been created (the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army in Moscow and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in Novochoerkassk), as well as three army corps (the 11<sup>th</sup> in Kaliningrad, the 14<sup>th</sup> on the Kola Peninsula, and the 32<sup>nd</sup> in Crimea). The 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the 32<sup>nd</sup> Corps (both directed towards Ukraine) have received most of the newly created units. New divisions have also been deployed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Army (Voronezh). In total, between 2015 and 2017 four new divisions have been created: three mechanised (the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 144<sup>th</sup> and 150<sup>th</sup> in the western strategic direction, in the Western and Southern Military Districts) and one armoured (the 90<sup>th</sup> in the Central Military District). The Russian army’s tactical formations have been systematically expanded up to wartime status. The newly created divisions each have four regiments of combat potential which are comparable to brigades, and additional regiments have also been created in the previously existing 2<sup>nd</sup> Mechanised Division and 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division of the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army.

The nature and structure of the airborne troops have also been changed. Currently, they are de facto mechanised formations with increased capacity for rapid redeployment, with a destructive force comparable to the classic mechanised formations. Their capabilities will further increase after the tank companies, and ultimately tank battalions, are included in the air assault divisions and brigades. The newly created reconnaissance brigades, which combine various elements including electronic surveillance, enhanced the western strategic direction. As of June 2017, thirty battalion and company tactical groups from the Western Military District formations had the status of immediate response forces. Fifteen of them have also received the status of so-called shock subunits. Finally, in the first half of 2017 the Western Military District received 500 units of offensive heavy weapons, and another 500 units should reach those formations in the second half of the year.

In sum, the substantial changes in the Western Military District pose a direct challenge not only for NATO’s eastern flank, but without a doubt for the whole Alliance.

5) Another key element of the modernisation of both military districts is the creation of the highly sophisticated Anti-Access/Area Denial systems (A2/AD). They encompass the necessary air power, maritime capabilities (including offensive mining), offensive and defensive missile systems – including Bastion (range: 450 km), Iskander (range: 500 km), Kalibr (range: 2500 km), and S-400 (range: 400 km) – offensive electronic warfare, cyber capabilities and information operations. The militarisation of the Kaliningrad Oblast and Crimea led to the creation of the so-called A2/AD bubbles right on NATO borders. Their main goal is to limit NATO's freedom of manoeuvring. In fact, currently, six capitals of NATO allies (Berlin, Copenhagen, Riga, Tallinn, Vilnius and Warsaw) are within the range of the missile systems stationed in the Kaliningrad Oblast. The recent deployment of Buyan-M class corvettes with nuclear-capable Kalibr missiles to the Kaliningrad Oblast changes this calculation and further enhances the A2/AD bubble. In "Zapad-2017" those systems were not only exercised, but in fact – and what is even more important – their level of integration was verified.

Russian doctrine places a great deal of emphasis on aerospace defence as a key component of its overall A2/AD strategy. Though still in development, Russia's 21<sup>st</sup> century integrated air defence systems will be designed to integrate future and existing systems around a central command structure that is designed to promote the interaction of all air defence forces and weapons. Moreover, Russia continues to develop a variety of sea- and aerospace-based programmes that offer a variety of offensive and defensive capabilities that could enable the implementation of its integrated A2/AD strategy. These include the continued production and deployment of coastal defence cruise missiles, air/surface/sub-surface-launched anti-ship cruise missiles, submarine-launched torpedoes, and naval mines, along with Russian fighter, bomber, and surface-to-air missile capability. These are intended to provide Russia with the ability to limit access to its territory and extend its strategic depth by providing long-range kinetic strike capability.

Russia's electronic warfare (EW) capability is an integral part of its A2/AD approach and is clearly tailored to target NATO's C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) and weapons guidance systems. Russia's growing technological advances in EW allow its forces to jam, disrupt and interfere with NATO communications, radar, UAVs and other assets. Be it in the air, maritime, land or cyber domains, NATO in fact encounters an increasingly capable adversary focused on developing and deploying a vast array of EW systems as "force enablers and multipliers".

Russia has consistently invested in EW modernisation since 2009, with modernised EW systems entering service across strategic, operational and tactical levels to augment the capabilities of all service branches and arms. Many of those systems are being introduced in units across all services stationed in the Western Military District. Moscow is stepping up its efforts to renew the EW inventory, and this effort is complemented by changes to organisation, doctrine, command structure, training and tactics, as well as techniques and procedures. Russia actively develops a "total package" of EW systems to include a broad frequency range and other systems. In addition to such systems covering surveillance, protection and countermeasures (jamming), they cover measures to

protect Russia's own usage of the electromagnetic spectrum. Many of these Russian EW systems are highly mobile, including small systems deployable by UAVs, making targeting and neutralising them more complex and challenging.

Finally, the Russian EW capability extends well beyond air defence or even A2/AD, as it is fielding a wider array of systems to assist, for example, psychological operations (PSYOPS) and cyber operations. In practical terms, this means that EW capability will be exploited and effects created well beyond the traditional realms in which NATO's thinking about EW is rooted.

6) The nuclear component was something of particular importance during "Zapad-2017". During the exercise the whole nuclear triad was most probably tested. Russia often merges the conventional and nuclear dimensions into one scenario. In fact, such an approach allows Russia to test its escalation dominance in a potential conflict. This is exactly what NATO does not do as such a policy fuels unpredictability and enhances a lack of confidence. In a broader context, the Russian approach also aims at intimidating European societies.

In "Zapad-2017", surprisingly for many, the High North played a crucial role, especially in the nuclear dimension of the exercise.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the strategic importance for Russia of the High North remains constant, which has been reflected in the continuous upgrade of the weapons systems deployed to the region. The most important new capabilities are the Dolgoruky-class strategic nuclear submarines equipped with Bulava missiles. In addition, there are new types of both sea- and land-based cruise missiles, highly accurate and with long ranges. The new Severodvinsk-class submarines are capable of using missiles with both conventional and nuclear warheads. Another aspect of the strategic scenario in the north is that Russia has forward bases for the deployment, dispersal and support of bombers normally stationed at air bases further inland. Since 2008, Russia has resumed and increased the number of flights involving long-range bombers as well as patrols with strategic submarines.

Yet, the primary reasons for the geostrategic value of the High North are the Russian nuclear submarines and the need to protect them. The submarine patrols are concentrated in areas of the Barents Sea, which is designated as a bastion. One of the prioritised tasks is to protect these bases and patrol areas against hostile forces. In a conflict, Russia will seek to establish control in its vicinity, and to deny others access in the more forward-situated areas. As part of the protection of the strategic nuclear submarine capacity and of Russia in general, a robust aerial defence is also being built in the form of additional air bases, anti-air assets and radar stations for air defence and early warning throughout the whole of the Arctic area, including the Kola Peninsula. In fact, the bastion defence concept was at least partly tested during "Zapad-2017".

7) Since 2013 Russia has significantly changed its combined exercising posture. The "whole of nation" approach to drills was reintroduced. In reality this means that the whole public administration – on both national and regional levels – prepares for a large-scale conflict. The non-military units and agencies train simultaneously with the Russian

2. Operationally the High North encompasses the area ranging from the Northern Atlantic up to the Arctic Ocean.

armed forces. The “whole of nation” approach helps to integrate the military and non-military systems and enhances their interoperability. This concept also aids the boosting of societal resilience and readiness to act in a crisis situation. “Zapad-2017” was yet another example of the “whole of nation” approach where numerous governmental institutions, including in the regions, trained procedures foreseen in a conflict.

8) Since 2013 Russia has also reinstated the practice of organising the so-called snap exercises. These drills come with no prior notification and are predominantly large in scale. They are not subject to the Vienna Document observation provisions unless they last longer than 72 hours. They often happen in NATO’s direct vicinity, especially in the Western Military District, therefore, on NATO’s eastern flank doorstep. They are very hard to trace and could potentially serve as a preparation to the start of a military conflict. For instance, such exercises took place in the Western and Central Military Districts during the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and at various stages of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

The number of Russian snap exercises is constantly growing. In 2013, Russia conducted five snap exercises, 12 in 2014, 13 in 2015, and in January–August 2016, 14 of them. Moreover, the scale of the Russian snap exercises implies that Russia has significantly increased its overall mobilisation capacity and improved procedures for the deployment of forces, thus increasing its ability to conduct expeditionary operations or reinforce various parts of Russian territory in the case of a conflict.

There is no doubt that snap exercises confirm Russia’s strategic political and military unpredictability, as they increase the level of uncertainty and the risk of miscalculation. Indeed, Russia will continue to use snap exercises as a tool of intimidation and coercion in the foreseeable future.

9) Russia’s exercising policy can also be characterised by a lack of transparency. Russia often does not give advanced notice of its exercises which is a standard procedure in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Russia repeatedly splits its large-scale exercises, as in the case of “Zapad-2017”, into smaller ones, either providing a small gap in time or conducting them in different training areas simultaneously with joint command. These tactics allows Russia to avoid the necessity of the notification and invitation of foreign observers. In fact, the Russian armed forces often act contrary to the spirit of the OSCE instruments and use the existing “loopholes”, especially those in the Vienna Document.

Moreover, there are a number of cases where Russia’s reported and notified numbers of troops participating in its exercises differ from numbers provided in Russian media reports, official governmental press releases and, at times, official statements. Russia has also failed to notify about a number of exercises, observed or announced, within the area of application of the Vienna Document that appear to have reached the requisite thresholds.

10) At the same time, Russia uses exercises like “Zapad-2017” to verify the effectiveness of its propaganda machinery. In the media sphere Russia often artificially boosts the number of troops and equipment that

will take part in the exercise in order to test the reaction of NATO allies, neighbouring states (especially Ukraine, Georgia, Sweden and Finland) and European societies. In fact, in the case of “Zapad-2017” Russia wanted to create an impression that this exercise is the only game in town. In fact, it is not. Other operations – including the Russian military engagement in Ukraine and Syria, the Russian hybrid activities in western and central Europe or in the Western Balkans – continue.

