



BULLETIN

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Russian Military Exercises: A Message For Opponents and Allies Alike

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In the last few months, the Russia's armed forces have carried out a series of manoeuvres across the country, checking all manner of troops. The exercises are not only a test of the Russian army amidst reforms but also a demonstration of its military potential. Military tools are becoming increasingly important components of Russian foreign policy, especially in the post-Soviet region, recognized by Moscow as its exclusive sphere of influence. NATO countries should expect continued violations of its airspace and territorial waters to probe for gaps and test the readiness of Allied defence systems.

On Land, at Sea, in the Air. Since autumn last year, the Russian military has visibly increased the frequency of its manoeuvres, from 1 December 2013 to 31 May 2014 about 250 exercises have taken place. This extraordinary increase in activity can only partly be explained by the need to check the combat capabilities of its reformed armed forces. To a greater extent, they are part of Russia's wider policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and NATO, as well as its own allies in the post-Soviet region. This year's series of exercises began at the end of January with Northern Fleet movements. In February, aviation exercises were held in the Central Military District (CMD) and at the turn of February to March, in both the CMD and West MD. Their aim was primarily to check the mobility of the Russian military, with about 150,000 troops, 90 airplanes, 120 helicopters, 900 tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers, as well as 80 ships participating in total.

In March, air defence troops and airborne forces exercised in the West MD. Another operation was held in the Arctic, on New Siberian Islands, where 350 paratroopers practiced landing in extreme weather conditions (-15°C, very strong winds). A month later, a simulation of an Arctic rescue expedition was carried out in which the task was to help arctic explorers and check the ruggedness of military equipment in extreme weather.

In April, on the Volgograd ranges, an artillery exercise was conducted with more than 200 troops, 2S19 "Msta-S" howitzers, the Tornado multiple-launch rocket system, and self-propelled "Khosta" artillery. Moreover, manoeuvres by airborne forces and marines were held in Dagestan, during which the troops simulated a fight against irregular armed formations.

From 21 to 26 May, near the Russian-Ukrainian border, the Aviadarts exercises were held, with 71 airplanes and helicopters (mainly fighters, bombers, and attack helicopters of the Russian Air Force), which practiced rocket and bomb attacks on ground targets while suppressing enemy air-defences.

In June, in response to NATO's "Saber Strike 2014" and "BALTOPS 2014" exercises, Russian airborne troops, aircraft and 24 ships from the Baltic Fleet took to Kaliningrad oblast for manoeuvres. The scenario included protection of the border and maritime transport craft, as well as the organization of air defence and detection of enemy submarines. Moreover, during the exercises, Iskander tactical missile systems probably were used. On 20 June, an unannounced inspection in the CMD began. Some 65,000 troops were put on alert, raised to combat readiness, and the exercises included more than 180 aircraft, 60 helicopters and more than 5,600 other military items. The ability to shift military forces was the primary test.

In July, the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) conducted exercises using 20 ships, more than 20 airplanes and helicopters, plus marines and rocket artillery from the BSF's coastal defence forces. Their mission was to destroy enemy ships and

provide air defences for their own ships and protect coastal infrastructure. The manoeuvres were in response to the “Sea Breeze” exercises conducted at the same time by NATO in Bulgaria.

The Russian army also practiced the liquidation of saboteurs in Abkhazia. The manoeuvres were carried out with neighbouring countries Belarus, Armenia and China. In the coming weeks, exercises that include the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (KSOR, composed of mobile units designed for rapid dispatch in emergencies) of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and antiterrorist operations within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are planned.

Testing the NATO Countries. In recent months, Russia has intensively tested the readiness of NATO members’ defence systems. To achieve this aim, it not only used the Baltic and Black Sea exercises as direct responses to NATO activities but also has multiple times violated the airspace and territorial waters of NATO countries (mostly the Baltic States and Romania), and has provoked incidents in international waters and airspace, aiming to force a reaction from NATO. In the first half of April, in the Black Sea, Russia carried out a false attack with two Su-24 bombers on the American destroyer USS Donald Cook. One element was probably what would be a successful attempt to block out the ship’s Aegis missile defence systems. Moreover, on 23 April, a Russian Su-27 fighter disrupted the flight of an RC-135U reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace near Japan (Pentagon levied a protest in this case). The Russians also admitted that in May, it had sent a Tu-95 strategic bomber near the island of Guam (Mariana Islands), forcing the U.S. to send out F-16 fighters. Also, two other strategic bombers were engaged close to the coast of northern California.

At the same time, the Russians have been very active in information wars. In the Russian press, information about Allied troop movements have appeared very often, i.e., U.S. activities such as its increased presence in the Black Sea or shifts to Europe of several B-52 and stealth B-2 strategic bombers (in connection with the BALTOPS exercise). By putting NATO’s activities on display the Russian side is trying to justify their own manoeuvres to its public. At the same time, Russia continues to express its opinion that the increasing presence of NATO forces in Central and Eastern Europe contradicts the provisions of the Founding Act of 1997.

Conclusions. Aiming to maintain its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area and be recognized as a world power, Russia has increasingly based its foreign policy on military activities. Boosting the number of manoeuvres carried out in different parts of the country is not only meant to test the effects of the military reforms launched in 2010 by former Minister of Defence Anatoliy Serdyukov but also to demonstrate the strength of the Russian army to potential opponents (mainly NATO) and even its allies from former USSR states. The scenarios in the manoeuvres show that Russia not only seeks to defend its territory but also can conduct military operations on a limited scale in order to gain control of areas beyond Russia.

The increased intensity of the Russian exercises in recent months, the diversity of the types of troops and equipment taking part in them, as well as the concentration of forces in the Western and Central MDs also indicates that the manoeuvres are not only verifying combat readiness but also seeking to exert political pressure on neighbouring countries. Despite Russian authorities’ assurances that their forces’ exercises near the border with Ukraine were not related to the political situation in that country, it is clear that the goal was to raise the threat of Russian intervention in Ukraine. Besides signalling support for the separatists in Donbas and enforcing trade restrictions, the manoeuvres were an intermediate form of destabilisation of the internal situation there. Evidence of this was the timing of the Russian manoeuvres, with the first set of manoeuvres held near the border shortly after Ukraine’s then-president, Viktor Yanukovych, fled to Russia and the second held during the subsequent presidential election. The threat against Ukraine has been maintained by the continued concentration of Russian troops close to the border. Russian exercises in Abkhazia were a demonstration for Georgia as an attempt to show it that Russia totally controls this pseudo-state. Moreover, by testing its KSOR forces the Russians have shown their readiness to intervene in neighbouring countries, including allies of Moscow. Russia’s activities in the Arctic, meanwhile, are a demonstration of its military potential in that key region, a likely arena for global competition for resources.

Instability in the post-Soviet area ensures that Russia will not give up the use of military tools in its policy in the region. Therefore, in the coming months Russia is likely to continue to frequently exercise its troops in all military districts and increase joint activities through CSTO. The Russians also are likely to continue to violate the airspace and waters of NATO countries and to provoke international incidents, looking for weaknesses in the defence systems of the Alliance members.

Due to the growing importance of the army in its foreign policy, Russia will increase military expenditures despite unfavourable economic conditions. According to SIPRI, in 2013, Russia spent 4.1% of GDP on its military, while the EU put about 1.35% of GDP to its armed forces. But in absolute terms, there is still a wide difference, with Russia putting up about \$87 billion compared to about \$280 billion in the EU.

The exercises were also a chance to try out new weapons (this year there are plans for three tests of the SS-NX-32 Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missile) and units that have recently come into service were tested. Nevertheless, deficiencies in equipment are visible, related primarily to aviation (helicopters, transport planes) and the ship fleets. To have a full complement of weapons, Russia will have to overcome structural inadequacies in its ability to acquire and develop such systems.