



BULLETIN

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Russia Demonstrates Its Strength Also in the East

Anna Maria Dyner

The Russian army has concluded its biggest exercises this year, “East 2014,” in the Eastern Military District. The manoeuvres are designed to test the readiness of the armed forces and civilian administration for action during potential conflict with China or Japan, which are perceived by Russia as major potential threats in the eastern strategic direction. On one hand, the exercises demonstrated the increasing combat capabilities of the Russian Federation’s armed forces, while on the other showed gaps in the defence system on Russia’s peripheries.

The Eastern Blade of Russia. “East 2014,” which were concluded on 25 September, were this year’s biggest test of the combat capabilities of the Russian army, as well as the biggest ever such exercises in the Asian part of Russia. They were preceded by Eastern Military District (EMD) being placed on full combat readiness this year, for the second time. These were successive manoeuvres, carried out in the EMD in the past few months, which shows that this area, difficult to defend because of geographic conditions, is particularly important in Russian military doctrine.

The scenarios took into account the potential risks for Russia, arising mainly from Japan and China. Russia which is involved in a territorial dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands, clearly increased activity of strategic bombers on the Japanese border this year. The minister of defence, Sergey Shoygu also, recommended building a base for Borei class nuclear submarines (two of which will enter service in 2015), in the village of Rybachiyin Kamchatka. Together with the planned entry into service in the Pacific Fleet (PF) of two Mistral class ships this would mean a significant increase in Russia’s ability to project power in the region of the Kuril Islands and Japan.

Another challenge for Russia is the growing power of the Chinese army and the protection of the 4,250 km long Russian–Chinese border. Although Russia regulated border disputes with China and both countries have strengthened political, economic, and military cooperation, focused on reducing the influence of the United States, Russia still treats China as potentially the greatest military challenge in the area of Siberia and the Far East.

The Aim of the Manoeuvres. Approximately 155,000 soldiers (including reservists) took part in the manoeuvres, which included the use of 1,500 tanks, 632 planes and helicopters and 80 ships. Among others, the 5th, 29th, 35th and 36th armies of the Eastern Military District, air force, army air defence and the Pacific Fleet (PF) trained for combat. A few units from the Western Military District (moved without weapons and equipment) had the task of crossing 6,000 km of the exercise area as quickly as possible, and test their combat abilities on unfamiliar ground. The main task of the EMD troops was to defend the coast and islands of the eastern part of the country from attack. Verification of army logistics capabilities, including moving people and equipment over long distances (1,000 or more km) at high speed also played a key role. The system of cooperation in crisis situations, between the armed forces and other state institutions, such as the railways, police, Ministry of Emergency Situations and Ministry of Health was also tested.

Exercises on Land. The most important part of the land phase of the exercise was held at the Sakhalin training grounds. The main task of the EMD mechanised forces, supported by artillery and armour, was to defend its territory against enemy landings. The actions of ground troops were supported by the air force and Airborne Forces. Military formations also practiced cooperation with the police in the detection and neutralisation of groups of saboteurs. At the same time, Iskander-M missile systems were successfully tested in the Jewish Autonomous District.

Before and during the exercises, special attention was paid to mobilising and transporting military units and their equipment as quickly as possible, and the whole transport network (rail and road) located in EMD, as well as long-range transport aircraft, were used.

Operation at Sea. The main sea phase of the exercises took place on the coast of Kamchatka. More than 6,500 soldiers took part, along with 1,000 units of military equipment including three nuclear submarines. The scenario, analogous to the land operation, was called saw an attack on “North Federation” by eastern neighbour “Missuria,” based on the territorial claims of a third country. The task of the troops was to prevent the enemy landing on their territory and to repel air attacks.

Defensive actions at sea were led by the PF ships, including three cruise missile submarines (during exercises cruise missiles were launched) and naval aviation, using Ilyushin-38 (NATO reporting name: May) anti-ship planes and Ka-27PL helicopters to detect and destroy enemy submarines. On land, air defence troops, which used S-300 systems among other equipment, practiced repelling an enemy air strike.

A Test for Air Force and Air Defence Troops. The air force not only supported the army and marines in repelling the enemy landing, but also practiced responding to an enemy attack on the army air defence positions. Mig-29, Su-27, Su-30 SM, and Su-35 fighters, as well as Il-76 transport aircraft, Tu-95 strategic bombers, and Mi-24, Mi-8 and Ka-52 helicopters belonging to the air force of the Pacific Fleet, army and air defence were used. New Mi-8 ATMSz helicopters equipped with additional fuel tanks, flew more than 1,300 km (twice their normal range), staying in the air for approximately six hours. The supply of secure missiles to combat units operating in different parts of Russia was also tested. Technical missile bases acting as warehouses for rockets, will be placed in each of the four Russian military districts).

Directions of Development of the Russian Army. “East 2014” was part of a series of intense exercises, which, together with the introduction of new types of weapons, has raised the combat capabilities of the Russian army significantly in the past few years. The exercises were a sign that Russia is not only ready to defend its territory, but wants to have the full spectrum of political and military tools focused on the eastern strategic direction. In this way, Russia could increase pressure on Japan, which calls for the return of the Kuril Islands and has actively participated in the international sanctions aimed at Russia after the annexation of Crimea. A credible capability to defend the territory and respond to successive stages of escalation of tensions is also a response to the potential threat from China. Russia wants to avoid a situation in which it would play a subordinate role in the Sino-Russian alliance, and China could use a dominant position to exert political and military pressure on its neighbour. Testing of the Iskander-M system also shows that Russia is prepared to use tactical nuclear warheads against an opponent using predominantly conventional forces.

The manoeuvres also showed that Russia is developing the ability for rapid deployment of troops in the western strategic direction, and to conduct operations beyond its borders. Increasing the range of the Mi-8 ATMSz helicopter to 1,300 km may be an attempt to obtain the ability to conduct special forces missions, for which the American army uses the Bell-Boeing V-22 Osprey aircraft, with a range of 1,600 km.

However, the manoeuvres also showed the weaknesses of the Russian logistics system, which in south-east of the country relies to a large extent on the Trans-Siberian Railway, running along the border with China and thus easy to destroy. Moreover, Russia does not have sufficient transport aircraft, especially the largest, the An-124 Ruslan (NATO reporting name: Condor), which cannot be produced without cooperation with Ukraine.

“East 2014” showed, therefore, that Russia will focus on investments in military infrastructure necessary to protect its Asian part, which will probably mean further projects under the Programme for the Development of the Far East and the Baikal Region. The main directions of modernisation of conventional armed forces will focus mainly on air transport, air defence systems, and the navy. Thus, in the coming years, an increase in the pace of development and of spending on the extension and modernisation of the defence industry should be expected, despite the probable economic problems in Russia.

Alongside this, it should also be expected that Russian policy, especially in foreign relations, will be further militarised. This will have consequences for both Europe and Asia, and especially for the countries of the former Soviet Union. With a strong army, Russia has gained a very important instrument to make a non-economic impact on neighbouring countries. It can therefore be expected that it will be used increasingly as part of the Russian integration plans in post-Soviet area, and in extreme cases as an important part of the so-called hybrid war, to which not only Ukraine, but also Moldova and the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia will be exposed. The increased capacities of the Russian army will also serve to neutralise external pressure or force concessions from other countries and organisations, including the United States, NATO and the European Union.