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Russian Military Exercises: Preparation for Expeditionary Operations

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In the past two months, Russian armed forces carried out intensive exercises including Centre-2015 and Union Shield manoeuvres, which were the biggest tests of the combat readiness of the Russian army this year. Troops also took part in Slavic brotherhood and international military competitions. Exercise scenarios indicate that Russia is strengthening its rapid reaction forces, increasing the ability to intervene beyond its borders, especially in Central Asia, perceived in Moscow as a potentially very unstable region. However, by demonstrating the ability to undertake expeditionary missions, and at the same time increasing its military presence in Syria, Russia also shows to the West its willingness to return as one of the key players in the Middle East, i.e., through the construction of a new coalition against the Islamic State.

Russian armed forces took part in strategic, command and headquarters manoeuvres during the summer. In August alone, the army took part in more than 80 different kinds of exercises, the scenarios of which were considerably varied. The most important aims of the exercises were to test military capabilities and preparedness to participate in rapid response and anti-terrorist operations, to deal with mass social protests and illegal armed formations, and to increase the logistic capacity of rail and air transport, in order to enable the faster deployment of troops and equipment inside and outside Russia. These measures show that Russia learned from its involvement in Ukraine and wants to increase its readiness for possible military intervention in Central Asia, endangered by destabilisation arising from Islamist groups, and to reinstate its former position in the Middle East. Military involvement in Syria and the building of a plausible new coalition against the Islamic State could serve such a purpose.

Centre-2015. Centre-2015 manoeuvres, which took place from 14 to 20 September in the 20 training grounds of the Central and South Military Districts, were the biggest of this year's tests for the Russian armed forces. They were preceded by the unexpected move of putting forces on alert and raising troops stationed in the CMD to combat readiness. The active phase of the exercises were attended by 95,000 soldiers and 7,000 military hardware units including 170 aircraft, 20 ships, more than 90 tanks, 250 infantry fighting vehicles, 130 armoured personnel carriers and 20 multiple rocket launchers. Soldiers participating in Centre-2015 participated in a training operation that was focused on a fictitious international conflict in Central Asia. According to the scenario, the Russian armed forces were required to combat illegal terrorist armed formations. The manoeuvres were also a test of troop relocation capacity (at a distance of up to 5,000 km), and of the speed of setting up communications and command systems.

Exercises such as Centre-2015, also allowed the armed forces to check new equipment, which they have received recently. The army tested new drones, enabling reconnaissance and the real time transfer of operational data to command centres. They also tried out the latest Su-34 and Su-35S aircraft, as well as innovative electronic warfare methods, which may in future become a challenge to NATO countries. Iskander systems were also used, with the R-500 cruise missile, the range of which, according to some sources, is 2,000 km (which violates the INF Treaty).

Manoeuvres on this scale also strengthen coordination on an inter-ministerial level, between the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, and local entities and institutions such as the Federal Security Service, the Federal Protective Service and the Russian Railways.

Exercises with Belarus. Russia's shared military manoeuvres with Belarus, called Union Shield or West, are almost an annual tradition. This year's Union Shield exercises lasted from 10 to 16 September and were attended by more than 6,700 soldiers from Russia and 1,300 from Belarus, as well as 400 items of military hardware including approximately 100 tanks and 80 combat aircraft and helicopters. Soldiers of both countries trained in the proving grounds located in Leningrad, Pskov and Kaliningrad oblasts, as well as in the Baltic Sea. Manoeuvres included anti-sabotage exercises, and cooperation between air and naval units. Moreover, Belarusian and Russian special air forces will take part in tactical exercises in Belarus, in September.

Union Shield, although much smaller than the exercises undertaken by the West, shows that the two armies constantly cooperate with each other. This is particularly important for the Belarusian armed forces, for which activities with Russia are the biggest test of combat readiness. It should also be noted that the joint exercises increase the skill level of the Belarusian army and its ability to cooperate in crisis situations with Russian armed forces, which is important for the defence of the Union State. This, together with Moscow's efforts to establish a Russian air base in Bobruisk, also shows the military importance of the Belarusian territory for Russia.

On Land, at Sea and in the Air. The two biggest manoeuvres were preceded by a series of varied smaller scale exercises. In early August, formations from 17 countries (mainly from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation) took place in international military competitions. These included armoured troops, navies and marine units, air force units, reconnaissance, and military engineers. Russia won most of the competitions. From 2 to 5 August, Russia, Belarus and Serbia carried out exercises called Slavic Brotherhood, aimed at combating mass demonstrations. From 24 to 29 August, procedures for the mass deployment and rearrangement of troops and securing the battlefields were tested, in Central and Western Military Districts, in the framework of strengthening logistics. From 23 to 28 August, the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Force (KSOR) took part in exercises called Interaction 2015. They were attended by 2,000 soldiers from all CSTO countries, who took part in local armed conflict scenarios very similar to the situation in Donbas. In the last ten days of August, in the Russian Far East (the Sea of Japan), the Sino-Russian maritime manoeuvres Interaction-2015-II took place, during which the navies of both countries practiced maritime and anti-aircraft defence and landing operations (part I took place in May, when both fleets took part in rescue exercises in the Mediterranean Sea). Moreover, Russia and Egypt plan anti-terrorist exercises for airborne troops, in Egypt, from the end of October to the beginning of November.

During Centre-2015 and Union Shield exercises (on 15 September), the summit of leaders of CSTO countries took place in Dushanbe. The theme of the meeting was to prepare the countries of this organisation for a common fight against terrorism and extremism. Changes in the documents regulating the operation of the CSTO, aiming to increase its reactivity, can be expected in the near future.

Conclusions. Russian military manoeuvres that took place in recent months indicate that Moscow is afraid of repeating another "colour revolution" in the post-Soviet area, of its destabilisation due to the conflict overflowing from Afghanistan, and of the growing threat of Islamic terrorism stemming both from Afghanistan and from the Middle East (the Islamic State). In the event of a crisis in Central Asia, Russia does not hide the possibility of intervention to defend its strategic interests in countries with which it has close associations, and which Moscow considers key to its security and economic development. Therefore, attempts to strengthen the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and especially its rapid reaction forces, should be expected.

However, by building its armed forces' capacity for expeditionary missions, Russia also hopes to build, together with the West, a new coalition aimed against the Islamic State. The possible creation of such an alliance will strengthen Russia's potential to influence international relations in the Middle East, which is another strategic goal that Russia has already begun to realise by rapidly increasing its military presence in Syria.

The scenarios of the military exercises also allow the assumption that Russia is preparing for military engagement far beyond its borders, especially in the Middle East. This is indicated by the strengthening and testing of rapid reaction forces, transport, aviation and reconnaissance units. It seems that, through technological modernisation (via the State Programme of Rearmament) and military exercises, Russia wants to regain credibility as a global player capable of projecting power and, at the same time, to halt the self-perceived ebb of its influence on the European international environment.

The manoeuvres led by Russia were also an opportunity to test new types of armaments, including very modern tools of electronic warfare, which were introduced or will be introduced in the near future, especially to the air, space and land forces. In addition, the Russian exercises were a response to similar actions by NATO countries, albeit to a significantly higher degree (this year's largest NATO exercise will be attended by 36,000 soldiers). At the same time, looking at the scale of Russia's exercises in previous years (such as East-2014 and West-2013), it can be seen that the country has increased its mobilisation capacities significantly, and improved procedures for the deployment of equipment and soldiers, which increases their ability to conduct expeditionary operations.