

RUSSIA HIT MULTIPLE TARGETS WITH ZAPAD-2017

KEIR GILES | JANUARY 2018

Despite the extraordinary level of Western media and analytical interest in September 2017's Russian-Belarusian Zapad military exercise before it began, key lessons and implications from it have only become clear after it ended. This discussion considers some of the longer-term issues highlighted by, or arising from, Zapad. It does not offer a blow-by-blow account of activities undertaken during the exercise, which has been adequately provided by other sources.¹ Instead it aims to identify lessons and themes that will be important in advance of other scheduled major Russian exercises, including how best to assess and respond to them, as well as drawing broader conclusions for dealing with a Russia that perceives itself to be in confrontation with the West.

HYPE AND HYPERBOLE

Zapad is a routine, scheduled exercise that returns to Belarus every four years, alternating with Union Shield, another quadrennial Russian-Belarusian joint exercise that takes place only in Russia. It received greater attention this year than its previous iteration in 2013 primarily because of greater recognition of the challenge that Russia poses to European security, while the seizure of Crimea and offensive action against Ukraine are still current issues. In this respect, it resembled Zapad-2009, held when the armed conflict with Georgia was still fresh in Western minds and, just as now, fervid speculation swirled as to the identity of Russia's next target.

Western media and analytical commentary on Zapad-2017 focused on the anticipated number of Russian military

personnel taking part, speculated on whether Moscow was using the event as cover to launch a real attack against neighboring states, and promoted the notion that Moscow would leave some of the deployed forces in Belarus after the exercise's conclusion. Previous Russian exercises on the scale of Zapad left troops in position for undertaking military operations immediately afterward—against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.² As a result, in Poland, Lithuania, and especially Ukraine, some feared that this year's Zapad could provide cover for preparing another Russian military adventure.³ Various theories were put forward for how Russia might exploit troop movements during Zapad to gain some kind of military advantage. At their most extravagant, they included the mounting of an actual military attack on Russia's neighbors that are NATO members.⁴ However, the Georgian and Ukrainian precedents were each precipitated by a political crisis that, in Russian terms, posed an immediate security threat, and there was no such crisis ahead of Zapad along Russia's northwestern periphery.

Confusion over reporting of the number of rail wagons that Russia would be using to transport its units to and from Belarus lent weight to the suggestion that its troops could remain there at Zapad's conclusion,⁵ posing a new and enhanced threat to NATO members.⁶ But this too would have required essential preconditions that were absent, including the necessity of cooperation with and agreement from Belarus, which would not fit with the latter's track record of resisting attempts at increasing the amount of Russian military infrastructure in the country.

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This article is part of a collection of publications by prominent U.S., Russian, and European experts on pressing challenges in Russia's troubled relationship with the West. It is intended to expand the range of views represented in ongoing debates about transatlantic security, Russia, and U.S.-Russian relations. This project is supported, in part, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Throughout the lengthy buildup to Zapad, Western media reporting and even official commentary succumbed to a spiral of alarm and speculation. Instead of raising awareness, some media outlets raised anxiety, overreacting and thus magnifying the intimidatory potential of the exercise.⁷ To have Europe alarmed at the prospect of new Russian military adventurism is an entirely comfortable position for Moscow; it is the desired result of its consistent rhetoric and regular dropping of hints at direct military action against its neighbors or competitors further afield. By remaining silent on the scope and scale of the exercise, Russia encouraged the Western media, including even normally sober and reliable sources,⁸ to do its work for it by circulating speculation and alarmist theories that became further and further divorced from the underlying facts.

The issue of how many Russian servicemembers were to be mobilized for Zapad became a particular subject for alarming assessments expressed confidently but with no visible evidence. According to one detailed assessment, the number of Russian troops involved reached approximately 48,000, of which around 23,000 were active in the areas officially reserved for the exercise.⁹ Similarly, U.S. analyst Michael Kofman estimates a total of 45,000, spread across a number of military districts.¹⁰ In addition, according to a briefing by Belarus on the penultimate day of the exercise, 10,175 personnel were involved on Belarusian territory, of which approximately 3,100 were Russian.¹¹ However, figures in six digits were quoted in the West well before the exercise began, and 100,000 became the standard number quoted by senior NATO figures ahead of the start date, including by German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.¹² This figure persisted despite the absence of any visible evidential basis for it even after the exercise was over and it was becoming apparent that it had been much smaller.

As a result, the size of Zapad-2017 may become one of the persistent myths that bedevil analysis. In the same way that it is commonly accepted, but not necessarily true, that Zapad-2009 ended with a simulated nuclear attack on Warsaw,¹³ so it may in the future be taken as fact in the West that Zapad-2017 “involved sending 100,000 troops to Belarus and the Baltic.”¹⁴ In addition, in December 2017 a report by the German tabloid *Bild* quoting unnamed sources that claimed to be linked with

a Western intelligence service suggested Zapad-2017 had practiced an all-out invasion of northern Europe.¹⁵ Despite this scenario being noticeably at odds with the movements and behaviors observed during the exercise itself, it gained considerable attention within Europe and will therefore likely form a persistent part of Zapad apocrypha.¹⁶

Obsessive focus on the actual numbers risks obscuring more significant aspects of Zapad. Russia’s persistent misreporting of the number of troops involved in exercises is an established means of evading its Vienna Document transparency obligations and is hardly news.¹⁷ The exercise has only brought this consistent practice over recent years to the greater attention of a wider audience.¹⁸ In addition, assessing the number of troops involved in Zapad without the benefit of actually sitting on the exercise’s planning committee will always be compromised by the difficulty of determining which concurrent military activities over a huge area of Russia are actually given the Zapad brand name and which are not. It is tempting to call everything within the appropriate time frame part of Zapad, and hence to conclude that it is a huge undertaking. But the same approach applied to NATO would lead to the false conclusion that a large number of small and unrelated exercises actually formed part of a single coordinated whole.

WHAT ZAPAD IS FOR

Zapad-2017 practiced countermeasures for two of Russia’s perceived greatest vulnerabilities: protection of its border regions and prevention of hostile actors exploiting fissures in Russian society or in the alliance with Belarus.

Viewed from the West, Zapad may well have represented Russia seeking “to prevent things the West has no intention of doing or the capability to accomplish.”¹⁹ In June 2017, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu noted that the security situation on Russia’s western borders was deteriorating “because of the increased military activity of NATO countries in Eastern Europe. The North Atlantic alliance is building up its presence in the Baltic countries, improving the infrastructure of their sea ports, airfields and other military facilities.”²⁰ The notion that NATO’s relatively modest defensive preparations could in some way pose a threat to Russia seems far-fetched when viewed from Brussels. But despite being deeply misguided, the idea that Western powers might have the eventual

aim of triggering state collapse in Russia does not seem so unrealistic from Moscow.

Viewed through the Russian prism, there is a logic to seeing the United States, and its extended arm in the form of NATO, as an interventionist power that uses subversion and armed attack to achieve regime change—and in the process causes chaos and destabilization whether or not its initial objectives were achieved. To Russian minds, there is no other power that does this on the same level of scale and ambition, and it requires a leap of faith to believe that the consistently dire outcomes of interventions led or encouraged by the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya were the product of a sequence of unfortunate accidents rather than of deliberate iterations of a master plan. For Russia, observing the pattern of Western activity, it is prudent to assume that interventions of this kind will continue and therefore to train to resist them. Thus Zapad showed how Russia would go to war to prevent a repeat in Belarus of the events in Ukraine in 2014. But it also reflected an even deeper concern. Russian media noted that the exercise practiced countering “NATO-supported subversive terrorists bent on regime change in Belarus and maybe in Russia.”²¹ In short, Zapad was “aimed at keeping the Russian army ready to react against the main fear of the Russian ruling class. That fear is the repetition of the fates of Milosevic, Hussein or Qaddafi.”²²

A notable feature of the Zapad scenario was the speed with which operations against the adversary, initially described as “terrorists, illegal groups, and saboteurs,” developed from counterinsurgency into conventional high-intensity warfighting, complete with media references to destroying NATO forces. The inference was that the response to Ukraine-style social upheaval in Belarus or in Russia itself would not be to address the discontent that causes it but to resort rapidly to military solutions to shut down popular uprisings and prevent reinforcement from hypothetical foreign backers.

The underlying threat scenario was similar to that of Zapad-2013, but the response demonstrated was different. Compared to its predecessor, “Zapad 2017 was less an exercise of brutish intimidation.”²³ Moving large numbers of ground forces to the right place for high-intensity conflict was less prominent in comparison with testing command, control, and communications; isolating the operational area; and

resilience to counterattack. The exercise demonstrated planning for local and more widespread escalation, with strong emphasis on anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) to prevent enemy reinforcements reaching the conflict area, mobilization of forces as far from Belarus as the Arctic Circle, and testing of defense and resilience against air and missile attack across the whole of Russia.²⁴ As anticipated, there was strong emphasis on electronic warfare, including practicing operating in degraded communications environments—in effect, Russia jamming its own side.²⁵ This caused spillover effects far from the notional exercise zones. Disruption to civilian communications and navigation systems, including GPS, from Latvia to the far north of Norway,²⁶ underscored Russia’s already demonstrated willingness to use electronic warfare tools to interfere with and suppress critically important services on a systematic basis.²⁷

Defensive measures included “working to keep NATO out of Russian airspace . . . and deploying naval forces to deny access to Russian maritime approaches.”²⁸ Overall, the exercise demonstrated Russia’s preparation to counter any deterrence by punishment on the part of a global force capable of carrying out an aerospace attack—in other words, NATO led by the United States. Zapad also showed attention to maintaining escalation dominance. Demonstrated Russian A2/AD capability might not be sufficient to prevent a determined NATO force from reaching its destination, but it could deter it from setting off in the first place if casualty-averse NATO leaders are sufficiently overawed by the reputation of Russia’s defensive systems. During the exercise, Russia successfully isolated the fictitious statelet of Veishnorica from external support. It also practiced rapid and determined escalation, which in a real crisis would be a powerful factor working against achieving a NATO consensus.

In addition, in order to draw conclusions on Russia’s preparations for conflict Zapad should be considered in the context of other Russian exercises and drills, both scheduled and unscheduled. According to one intensively researched Lithuanian study, the emphasis on defense and resilience across Russia results from Zapad being the defensive phase of a much longer sequence of exercises, other sections of which have practiced offensive action where Russia initiates conflict. While so far unsupported by other research, this assessment

would be consistent with Russia appearing to practice for resisting full-scale counterattacks by the West, which is otherwise incongruous with the Zapad scenario.²⁹

Besides practicing repelling threats, Zapad also served secondary and demonstrative objectives. Some of its activities conducted in Russia, with access provided to the Russian media, were in effect firepower demonstrations rather than meaningful exercise components. According to one observer, this was to convey two different messages to two distinct audiences.³⁰ First, the use of equipment types not currently in service with the Russian armed forces constituted an arms show for potential buyers. Second, domestic audiences were shown what the vastly increased defense budget is being spent on; the subtext being that the standard of living of Russian citizens may still be depressed but in compensation the national military capability is much improved.

THE ROLE OF BELARUS

Although analysis and media commentary described the country as a passive participant or even a victim of the exercise,³¹ Belarus organized Zapad jointly with Russia. The exercise, however, drew uncomfortable attention to the two countries' widely divergent security priorities.

Belarus is in the difficult position of being officially an ally of Russia but not sharing the latter's antagonism toward the West. The challenge for Minsk is thus to maintain stable relations with its increasingly bellicose partner while not antagonizing or alarming its other neighbors or jeopardizing its aspirations to neutrality.³² Nevertheless, Russia demonstrated both before and during Zapad, possibly deliberately, disregard for Belarus's security concerns and desire for stable relations with NATO.³³ This included taking steps considered by Belarus to be unfriendly or unhelpful, such as suggesting that the launch of an Iskander-M missile on September 18 was part of Zapad,³⁴ or that the entire 1st Guards Tank Army was on the move toward Belarus at the outset of the exercise.³⁵ NATO's own missteps in handling Belarus, by contrast, are largely limited to the field of diplomacy and often seem to stem from inconsistency or confusion rather than malicious intent—such as the extraordinary inviting then uninviting of Belarus to the Strategic Military Partners conference in Bucharest in October 2016, or suggesting that Belarusian invitations to NATO

to observe Zapad should be submitted through the NATO-Russia Council (of which Belarus is not a member).³⁶

Surrounded by military buildups, Belarus shares NATO's concern at the danger of inadvertent conflict in the region, and it is looking for ways to avoid inflaming the situation. One way of doing so was to site the exercise in ranges across the middle of the country, as opposed to in close proximity with the Polish, Lithuanian, or Ukrainian borders. This was to reduce the chances of misinterpretation or incidents if Russian troops and aircraft were to come close to NATO borders or to Ukraine, which was understandably concerned at the prospect of an increased Russian presence on its northern flank.

In addition, as part of a general trend of increasing military transparency,³⁷ Belarus invited military observers and defense attachés from a large number of NATO and non-NATO countries as well as from international bodies like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Red Cross to observe portions of the exercise.³⁸ It also conducted advance briefings for NATO and Western countries on how the exercise was to run, in parallel with the information being provided by Russia.³⁹ Consequently, in contrast with Russia's evasion of transparency obligations in order to avoid having to invite foreign observers to portions of the exercise held on its own territory, the opportunities for studying the proceedings in Belarus were better than ever before—in particular because of the latter's emphasis on making the exercise open and transparent. In addition, major Western media were invited to cover Zapad by Belarus, but emphatically not by Russia. According to one assessment, it was this transparency that led to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Shoigu remaining in Russia rather than viewing the exercise with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.⁴⁰ In addition, unsubstantiated anecdotes suggest that Russian senior officers participating in the exercise did not join their Belarusian colleagues in celebratory toasts at its end. If true, this would be a significant indicator of strained relations between two countries where vodka forms such a substantial part of shared military culture.

Nevertheless, Belarus's attempts at openness were not sufficient to dispel suspicions that Zapad had been used as cover to redeploy Russian troops onto its territory. According to

Belarus's Ministry of Defense, the last of the Russian troops that took part in the exercise left the country on September 28.⁴¹ But, despite intensive observation by Western military analysts,⁴² a week later NATO was still officially uncertain whether they had gone.⁴³

Not taking part in Zapad is not a realistic prospect for Belarus. The country's interests in continuing stability require managing its relationship with Russia, including continuing to exercise with the Belarusian armed forces' major training and education supplier, with which they have a substantial commonality of equipment. Although according to Belarusian sources the final number of Russian troops in Belarus for the exercise was even lower than anticipated, Russia provided a disproportionate amount of equipment; for example, 98 of the 138 main battle tanks used.⁴⁴ Belarus provided logistical support and ground forces for the joint maneuvers; Russia brought the most modern and sophisticated weapons systems that it wanted to test. The exception to this pattern was in special operations forces, where the greater reliance on the caliber of troops than on equipment has traditionally led to a prominent role for Belarusian units and close cooperation with their Russian counterparts.⁴⁵

LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Messaging and Responses

As noted above, excited speculation about Zapad by Western media was highly effective in delivering and amplifying the deterrent message of the exercise. According to Kofman, while Zapad formed "part of a sustained political message to the United States and the [NATO] Alliance, seeking to establish coercive credibility should a crisis arise. . . . Western reactions proved an incoherent mix of prudent vigilance and ill informed alarmism, a visible area for future improvement."⁴⁶

Such improvement could include greater clarity on the basis for predictions by senior NATO figures, as with the example of the speculation on the size of Zapad, in order to provide the media with a clearer understanding of their certainty or lack of it, and to avoid the post-Zapad situation of journalists and politicians blaming each other for alarmism. It could also include closer alignment between the public and private responses of Western countries. The practical steps taken by the armed forces of NATO members to prepare for Zapad,

besides intensive study of the proceedings, were calm and restrained in comparison to official commentary. Although the United States made small temporary increases in the number of its troops and defensive assets in place in the Baltic states as a precaution,⁴⁷ NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence formations were not placed on heightened readiness. The Estonian Defense Forces reportedly "advocated that Exercise 'Zapad' should be largely ignored, for fear of developing reactive responses to what is in effect choreographed external activity."⁴⁸

The strategic communications handling of the exercise also points to significant lessons for Ukraine and even Belarus. While Ukraine had reasonable grounds for concern over the location and possible outcome of Zapad, Ukrainian commentary before, during, and after the exercise reinforced the perception of the country's authorities as unreliable, alarmist, and almost as untroubled by considerations of plausibility as their Russian adversaries. Unsubstantiated claims—that Russia would mobilize 240,000 troops for Zapad,⁴⁹ that the exercise tested the readiness of Belarusian units to operate under Russian command,⁵⁰ and that Russia had moved a larger number of troops to Belarus than officially stated and then failed to withdraw the majority of them⁵¹—served only to discredit their sources and make them less likely to be trusted in future. They also substantially alienated Belarus, for no evident benefit to Ukraine, and led to tense military-to-military discussions between the two countries through November 2017.

In the case of Belarus, intensive strategic communications efforts were not sufficient to prevent a general depiction of the exercise as "Russia is moving troops into Belarus."⁵² Although some Western media recognized the country's greater openness, they also noted its outmoded approach to engagement.⁵³ In particular, during the pre-exercise period of growing alarm, when its efforts could have been most effective at calming speculation, Belarus appeared to think that official bilateral discussions and private protocol statements would be sufficient. It entirely neglected public outreach with the result that the Belarusian position was effectively invisible in Western media coverage. A direct appeal to journalists by Chief of the General Staff Oleg Belokonev at a briefing (not even a press conference) on the eve of the exercise was too little, too

late.⁵⁴ In effect, in its inability to get its message across to foreign media, Belarus found itself in a position similar to that of Russia during its armed conflict with Georgia in 2008. It follows that, in order to institute effective strategic communications, Belarus needs to overhaul its information operations just as Russia did after that experience.

Prospects for Arms Control

Speculation over the number of troops involved in this year's Zapad and Russia's evasion of commitments under the Vienna Document obscured a more important point—the Vienna Document is worthless without trust and intent to comply, both of which are demonstrably lacking in the case of Russia.⁵⁵ While the exercise has sparked renewed interest in arms control in Europe,⁵⁶ it has also highlighted the number of existing treaty regimes and international agreements that are on life support or already de facto null and void because Russia is ignoring them. Some of these are defunct, such as the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, and others have lost all relevance, such as the NATO-Russia Founding Act. In some cases, there are strong arguments for salvaging agreement if possible, such as with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. But in all cases it must be recognized that Russia has no interest in being constrained in its rearmament program while the global balance of power, despite all its military modernization to date, is still greatly in favor of the United States. Proposals for the restoration of arms control regimes tend to assume that Russia has a common interest with the rest of Europe in a stable military framework, governed by dependable rules based on defined shared interests, and underpinned by trust based on dialogue and verification.⁵⁷ Russia's behavior suggests there are no grounds for this assumption.

Avoiding Tunnel Vision

Zapad-2017 has reinforced an apparent Western fixation on the Baltic states as the most likely candidates for the next Russian military intervention. This ignores the fact that there is a wide range of regions where Moscow could perceive or present a security challenge, and that the West does not have a vote in where Russia may choose to act. Distracted by problems on the alliance's southern flank, NATO's Mediterranean members have difficulty enough expressing solidarity with

their Baltic allies, and they might be hard-pushed to focus on areas, such as the High North, where the perception of threat to their own security is even slighter. As demonstrated by the intensified naval activity by Russia during Zapad,⁵⁸ its challenge need not even be on land.⁵⁹ Official Norwegian sources discounted reports that Russia practiced an attack on Svalbard during the exercise,⁶⁰ but the archipelago has been highlighted as a potential flashpoint by Russia.⁶¹ This presents one example of where in Europe Russia could put forward a spurious claim to legitimacy of action under a fanciful misinterpretation of existing treaty arrangements. When looking for points where it can be subjected to pressure, NATO needs to consider the entirety of Russia's western periphery and beyond, not only the Baltic states.

The Russian Way of War

The real value of Zapad-2017 lies in understanding how Russia is considering responding to perceptions of threat and vulnerability. Critically, this includes recognizing the vulnerability of its relationship with Belarus, which remains one of the many potential triggers for offensive action by Russia. If at any point swift and substantial political change in Minsk with a possible reorientation to the West appeared possible, this would undoubtedly be construed by Russia as just as immediate a security challenge as Ukraine in 2014, necessitating just as rapid and forceful a response.

In the event of more generalized conflict with Russia, the nature of the response practiced in Zapad should give further cause for concern to the West. The early stages of the exercise saw a demonstration of Russia's habit of using heavy firepower in counterinsurgency. Doing so against small groups is a consistent Russian approach, and in war has been accompanied by what seems to Western eyes an arrant disregard for collateral damage or civilian casualties. This approach caused shock and revulsion when used in Syria in 2015–2016,⁶² but it has also been used against Russia's own population, as when twenty years earlier, Russian forces, having surrounded a group of Chechen terrorists in a southern Russian village, used artillery to destroy the village together with its civilian inhabitants.⁶³

The fictitious scenario of Zapad, like the real campaigns in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, was a reminder that Russia has its own views on the law of armed conflict, on the

value of civilian life, and on what constitutes proportionality overall. The Russian approach is sometimes explained as the end justifying the means, especially if the end is bringing the fighting to as swift a conclusion as possible. This means

that in the event of a future conflict in Europe, the actions of Russia's armed forces should not be expected to be any less repugnant to Western values than previous Russian or indeed Soviet practice.

NOTES

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U.S.-RUSSIA POLICY OPTIONS FOR THE LONG HAUL

With the U.S.-Russian relationship badly frayed, what are the biggest risks for escalation, deterioration, and miscalculation? What, if any, opportunities exist for halting a continued downward slide?

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perspectives beyond the relatively narrow confines of the current discussion in Washington and other capitals. The papers highlight the glaring differences between Russian and Western approaches to and perspectives on transatlantic, European, and Eurasian security.

The search for mutual understanding and dialogue is all the more challenging at a time when many of the long-established communication channels between Moscow and the West have been suspended as a result of what is increasingly described as a new cold war. Many of the perspectives in this collection differ, at times fundamentally, from the consensus view held by Western policymakers and analysts. Nevertheless, it is all the more vital for policymakers, analysts, and opinion-makers in the West to be informed about views held by their Russian counterparts, as these views oftentimes reflect and inform official Russian policy.



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