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# ZAPAD-2017



LESSONS LEARNED

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The course of the joint Russian-Belarusian strategic exercises Zapad 2017 confirmed the forecasts of the Warsaw Institute analysts presented in the report of September 13. The Russians did not use the drills to attack any of the neighboring countries, nor did they take the opportunity to start the occupation of Belarus or to deploy any significant forces there. In spite of many concerns, there were no instances of border violations, especially of neighbours belonging to NATO. As expected, Moscow practiced a regular armed conflict against the West with the use of nuclear weapons. The true scale of the maneuvers in terms of the number of troops and the geographical scope, went beyond the officially designated framework. According to the Russians, the drills appeared to be very successful. They managed to show that the army modernisation is advancing at a fairly high rate and, in order to achieve so, Russia uses its military experience gained in Syria and Ukraine. In comparison to the previous exercises, a level of command has been increased; also coordination between army and local authorities has been improved and new types of weaponry have been tested. As for the political aspect of the exercises, some new accents in the Russian policy towards Belarus may be distinguished and they can be potentially dangerous, especially for the latter.



*Borisov (Belarus), 09.20.2017. Belarussian combat helicopters Ka-52 in action during the joint Russia-Belarus strategic military exercises Zapad 2017.*

- According to some official data, the Zapad 2017 military exercises ended on September 20. As it was informed by Russia's Ministry of Defence, the last transport of Russian soldiers left Belarus on September 28. However, Ukraine does not seem to believe in such a statement. On September 29, the Chief of the General Staff Viktor Muzhenko

announced that Russia had withdrawn from Belarus only a part of its military units. On September 30, Muzhenko's statement was commented by the Russian Defence Ministry spokesman, who said that all Russian troops involved in the Belarusian part of Zapad 2017 drills had already returned to their regular places of dislocation. On October 6, also the Defence Minister, Sergei Shoygu, confirmed that all soldiers had gone back to their military bases. At this stage, it is extremely difficult to evaluate the current situation. Even if Russia actually withdrew all troops who officially participated in the Belarusian part of Zapad, it does not mean that all Russian soldiers left the territory of Belarus. It must be taken into account that in Belarus there were also some Russian units which were not reported to participate in the drills. As for Kaliningrad Oblast, there is no doubt that additional troops and weapons have been placed there and they have not been withdrawn, at least so far.

- Some concerns about the Russian presence in Belarus derive to some extent from another controversy on the actual size of the forces participating in the exercises. According to some official information, there were 12,700 soldiers. The Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Petr Pavel, has argued that between 70,000 and 100,000 could have taken part in the drills. On 26, Lithuania's Defence Ministry informed that up to 100,000 troops may have been engaged in the exercises. However, according to the commanding general of the United States Army Europe, Ben Hodges, more than 40,000 soldiers might have been engaged in Zapad 2017. Lieutenant General Hodges criticised Russia and Belarus for dividing Zapad "into all those little exercises", but "they were all connected, because Zapad constituted a comprehensive project".
- The exercises conducted in the territory of Belarus were only a small part of the huge project of the Russian Armed Forces. During the first day, the Russians redeployed three airborne divisions (in total 24,000 soldiers) to its western frontiers in the vicinity of Estonia and Latvia. They did not even hide that such a maneuver was related to the drills. All sorts of training projects had gone far beyond the Western Military District. Exercises and operational readiness evaluation in almost all country were supposed to give the General Staff an overall image of the capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces. Therefore, the Belarusian part of the exercises had for Moscow minimum importance. Instead, its aim was to distract attention from main events in the Russian territory, where military units trained a potential conflict with the West. And, if the Belarusian part of the Zapad 2017 war games had a defensive character, the Russian trained offensive elements. In this case, the enemies were not any saboteurs or terrorists but regular armies of other countries. In order to fight against loose military formations ("little green men"), nobody resorts to massive air strikes (by the use of aviation and missiles) and hundreds of tanks. As stated by the Lithuanian Defence Minister, Russia simulated in fact an attack on the Baltic states, mostly by "raids" by the Lithuanian border and landing in the vicinity of Latvian and Estonian ones. General Petr Pavel stated that the Zapad-2017 maneuvers could be perceived in terms of "serious preparation for a great war".
- There is no doubt in this regard, especially after the analysis of the last day of the maneuvers. On September 20, the greatest intensification of the Russian soldiers' activities could be observed on the "widest battlefield possible" stretching from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea. It could possibly be a simulation of a full armed conflict between Russia and NATO, especially if Moscow trained a nuclear attack with the use of all the elements (so-called nuclear triad). At the Plesetsk proving ground, a Russian armed intercontinental ballistic missile RS-24 Years was launched and two strategic bombers Tu-22M3 flew over the Baltic Sea and the Norwegian Sea; in addition, the Russian submarine Dmitriy Donskoi made an electronic launch of an international ballistic missile from the sea level.
- During the first stage of the maneuvers, the Russians practised the repelling back of massive air attack with the use of conventional means, which confirms the fact that their "opponent" was not a diversionary group of separatists but NATO. The key role was played by the Russian aviation and the air defence of the 6th Army of Air and Air Defence Forces in the Western Military District. Its units employed the A2/AD (anti-access/area-denial) method by moving air defence systems to the West. At the same time, the Russians launched a sea component of A2/AD, the Baltic Fleet unit in Kaliningrad Oblast. The missile tests were conducted simultaneously in northern part of the country as well as in the Laptev Sea and the Barents Sea. They were attended by the Bastion and Rubezh coastal defence missile



systems as well as the vessels of the North Fleet. While using the A2/D2 systems, it was important to mobilise the tactical ballistic missile launchers Iskander-M. The missile test should worry the international community, especially that it could possibly be qualified as a violations of the provisions of the Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF Treaty). Russia's Defence Ministry has informed about a successful test of weapons of increased range for the Iskander-M launchers. The missile was lifted off from Kapustin Yar test range (Astrakhan Oblast), it travelled 480 kilometres and hit the target located on the proving ground in Makat, Kazakhstan. In fact, it concerned a cruise missile system Iskander-K, which may have a range of more than 2,000 kilometres.



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*Borisov (Belarus), 09.20.2017. Belrussian and Russian tanks fire during the joint Russia-Belarus strategic military exercises Zapad 2017.*

- During the maneuvers, the Russians had at their disposal all sorts of the missile and artillery assets such as Tunguska anti-aircraft system, Pantry S-1 system, Tochka-U missile system, Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) and BM-21 Grad, self-propelled howitzers (Msta and Akatsiya) as well as self-propelled artillery (Pion). As for the aviation, it was represented by the Su-24 bombers and various types of attack helicopters, namely Mi-24, Mi-28 and Ka-52. The maneuvers constituted an opportunity to present and test new types of weaponry. Moreover, the Russian took advantage of testing T-72B3 tanks on such a massive scale. In February this year, the first batch of twenty upgraded tanks was introduced within the Western Military District. The production of the most recent version of T-72 tanks started last year. Also such types of tanks as T-90M and T80BWM as well as BMPT armoured fighting vehicles appeared in the Russian army. As for the Belarusians, they could boast of the V1 light armoured vehicle, Caiman armoured vehicle and an upgraded T-72BM3 tank.

- They also tested a system based on reservists of so-called "territorial defence forces". Also sudden call-up to service for the duration of the exercise appeared to be absolutely top secret. It is known that it took place in Kaliningrad Oblast and Pskov Oblast. In April this year, Vladimir Putin signed a decree on call-up of reservists.
- In spite of many concerns, there were no major instances of border violation, with the exception of brief incursion into the Lithuanian airspace done by two Il-76 transport airlifters on September 16. The incident occurred when the Russian aircrafts flew from Russia to Kaliningrad Oblast. As a result, Lithuania's Foreign Ministry sent a note of complaint to the Russian Embassy. However, Moscow explained that the aircrafts sought to avoid the storm. There were no other provocations, neither directed into the members of NATO nor into Ukraine. Nevertheless, due to the Zapad drills, the latter intensified aerial patrols on its northern border.
- For the Kremlin, the Russian army's combat readiness and its potential is not important; it is more relevant to fill Western countries with fear. That is why the Zapad 2017 drills relied mostly on the information. Russia's willingness to impress the West was greater than the number of soldiers and the type of weaponry. In this context, the Ukraine's almost hysterical allegations appeared positive for Russia. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow's main weapon is not the strength of its army, but the fear of other countries. Such a fear is often exaggerated or even unmotivated. It is one of two main reasons (as for the second one, it is the desire to keep some military issues top secret) behind Russia's unclear attitude during the maneuvers. The country accepted foreign observers on its territory only once; on 18 September, Vladimir Putin, Sergei Shoigu, the Russian generals, many foreign journalists and 95 military attachés appeared at the Luzhsky proving ground located in Leningrad Oblast. Due to the terrible weather, they probably didn't see a lot. For foreign observers, it was much easier to monitor the maneuvers taking place on the territory of Belarus. On September 17, fourteen onlookers from seven countries had an opportunity to inspect only some maneuvers at the Ruzhansky proving ground in Brest Oblast. For many years, Russia had led some unclear activities, not only the military ones (in this case, Russia's decision on suspension of Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe seemed extremely important). In this respect, the Zapad 2017 drills were exceptional, not only with regard to Russia's policy towards NATO and Ukraine but also to Belarus.
- The maneuvers' aim was not to show the allies' unity. On the contrary, Moscow tried to discredit Belarus, mostly due to some of its provocations. For example, Russia informed that additional armoured forces had been transported on the territory of Belarus, which appeared troublesome for Minsk. Another problematic issue was a car convoy with Russian nationalists driving through the Belarusian capital. It needs to be added that the event had not been arranged with local authorities. Good relations between Belarus and Ukraine have been recently deteriorated right before the start of Zapad 2017 as the Russian FSB kidnapped son of a Ukrainian military. The incident took place in the territory of Belarus.
- On September 14, that is during the first day of the exercises, Russia's Defence Ministry announced on its website that subunits of the Western Military District had launched a trooping operation to Belarus and the soldiers of the 1st Guards Tank Army who stationed near Moscow were put on high alert and were even directed to a loading point. As published in the press release, troops would act at unknown proving grounds and tanks would be transported within a day. Such a state of matters appeared to be surprising for the Belarusians and some opposition activists even rushed towards the border to block the Russian transport. Of course, it didn't happen. In the course of consultation with the Russians, Minsk explained that the press release had contained an error. It was true that units were transported at Russian, and not Belarusian, proving grounds. Such was the official version but it was clear that Moscow wanted to test how Belarus would react to a potential deployment of Russian troops on its territory. Judging by the reaction of Minsk, Russia has passed the test. The Belarusian authorities appeared to be surprising and indecisive when the car convoy with Russian People's Liberation Movement had driven through the capital.
- Thanks to Zapad 2017, Moscow could notice that the vast majority of Belarusians have either neutral or positive attitude to the Russian army. Their opponents did not manage to organise any important anti-Russian protests. If Moscow sought to test the degree of control and even the knowledge of Minsk about the current activities of the

Russian troops in the Belarusian territory, it should be rather satisfied. It seems that the overwhelming majority of Belarusians do not take seriously into account the Russian threat, and, as for the information war, Moscow is able to paralyze the Belarusian public opinion.

- Not only did such instances of conscious provocation help Moscow to test Belarus but they were also supposed to make Alexander Lukashenko resign from observing the drills along with Vladimir Putin. However, Russia's president did not want to go to Belarus to do so. As a result, leaders of both countries observed the maneuvers separately, unlike in 2009 and 2013. Lukashenko was also humiliated by the fact that the Borisov proving ground (where the president of Belarus inspected the drills) was not visited by aforesaid Sergei Shoygu. It needs to be noted that Minsk and Moscow seemed to speak with different voices. Moreover, there was no one command so, in fact, Belarusians and Russians fought shoulder to shoulder but they did not act together. For the Kremlin, the cooperation with the Belarusian army was of minor importance in the context of Zapad 2017. This shows that Moscow, in its current military doctrine, counts mainly on itself and in Russia there is no longer any political demand for formal allies. In Minsk, it was felt that during the drills the Russians tried to present Belarus not as their ally but rather a satellite; a kind of a proving ground that can be used to attack their neighbours. Zapad 2017 has intensified Belarus's distrust towards Russia. The drills have also complicated the Belarus's relations with neighbouring countries. Not accidentally a dozen days after the maneuvers ended, the Belarusian side unexpectedly returned to one of its greatest fears expressed earlier in connection with the exercises. According to the Belarusian Foreign Minister, Vladimir Makei, his country had no intention of starting the war and it did not seek to deploy any foreign military bases in its territory.

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