

The Increasing Scope and Complexity of Russian Military Exercises

Author- Brian K. Johnston

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“In Bucharest this week, I will continue to make America’s position clear. We support MAP [Membership Action Plan] for Ukraine and Georgia. Helping Ukraine move towards NATO membership is in the interest of every member in the alliance and will help advance security and freedom in this region and around the world.” This remark was made by President George W. Bush in Kiev prior to his final NATO summit later that week in March 2008.ⁱ Less than a decade later, both Ukraine and Georgia were invaded by Russia, indefinitely (possibly permanently) extinguishing any possibility that either country would be granted NATO membership. Russia’s reemergence on the world stage in the last two decades has been a slow but steady progress towards furthering their goals of creating a multipolar world dictated by multiple actors dominating their periphery while vying for global ambitions. Since 2008, Russia has reorganized their military to create more flexible and competent force capable of sustaining multiple military operations simultaneously. Russia has used both Syria and Ukraine as testbeds for 21st century warfare and incorporated these tactics into their annual large-scale military exercises.ⁱⁱ In recent years, Russia has also emphasized incorporating former soviet states and others into its military exercises to legitimize its role more fully in its periphery and potentially serve as a counterweight to the United Nations and NATO to solve global crises. The increased scope and complexity of Russian exercises over the last half-decade showcase the success of Russian efforts to reinforce Russian influence over its periphery.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia lost much of its strategic depth for which it had been forced to rely on multiple times from invasions from Western Europe. This loss coupled with NATO expansion in its former states in the subsequent two decades not only diminished its political and economic power but more importantly severely limited Russia's ability to react in time of crises. Threats of further NATO expansion onto Russia's doorstep from multiple axis simply could not be allowed to progress - the sovereignty of the nation was at stake. In 2008, during the latter half of July, Russia conducted KAVKAZ-2008 a military exercise that was undoubtedly a rehearsal to their invasion weeks later. The exercise, taking place featured joint multi-domain operations, with approximately 8,000 Russian forces counterattacking by air, land, and sea to reinforce "peacekeepers" stationed in the region to protect "Russian" citizens and provide humanitarian aid.ⁱⁱⁱ The exercise featured mobilization of paratroopers from the Western military district, integration of the Black Sea Fleet, and air support in both close air support and air interdiction roles. Following the exercise, Russia kept some of these forces deployed.^{iv} The subsequent invasion mere weeks later featured many of the same tactics and techniques employed during the exercise; with airstrikes crippling Georgian airfields, the Black Sea Fleet deploying troops in Abkhazia and blockading ports, and the Russian 58th Army seizing key towns and cities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia while working its way towards Tbilisi.^v ^{vi} Due to Russia's operational surprise and overwhelming force in the conflict, its long-term strategic goals were safe guarded. The five-day victory advanced multiple Russian interests. Russian President Medvedev in October 2008 stated, "During this time we demonstrated that Russia is a state that can defend its citizens and whose opinions should be taken into consideration by various countries, including by those that protect themselves by making friends with greater states."^{vii} Russia would be the guarantor of all Russian peoples –

whether they be ethnically Russian, Russian speaking, or of Russian citizenry – which will be seen again in Ukraine in 2014 and is a potential for future conflict in the Baltic. Additionally, Russia was able to deny further discussions of Georgia into NATO, thus ensuring another axis of approach would be denied to NATO in the event of war. Lastly, Russia sent a message to NATO both about their encroachment policy and NATO's perception that it could operate freely within the Russian periphery.^{viii}

Following many of the tactical and operational shortfalls with the invasion of Georgia, Russian military leaders recognized to fight effectively in the 21st century, their force structure would have to change. The reorganization eliminated redundancies and focused on increasing its lethality and efficiency by creating a force focused on creating organizations that could work synergistically, a multi-domain force.^{ix} This improved structure was on display during the annexation in Crimea and once more Russian exercises played a pivotal role in their success. On 22 and 23 February, Russian VDV and Spetsnaz forces began leaving their bases and started staging to the east of Crimea to prepare. On 26 February, President Putin ordered a snap exercise involving approximately 150,000 troops in the Western and Southern military district. These movements were not unusual as Russia Defense Minister Shoigu had frequently ordered snap exercises for the last two years to modernize the training of the force. In under two weeks, the entire peninsula would fall to Russian troops and paramilitary forces with no casualties. The snap exercise aided the Russian annexation in several ways. Approximately 40 Il-76 transport planes were able to stage off the peninsula relatively unnoticed due to the size and scope of the exercise. The exercise also provided time for Russia both tactically and strategically. Ukrainian officials were slow to respond to the invasion with the threat of 40,000 troops on their eastern border and the possibility that a full-scale invasion was about to follow given the events in Georgia. The

snap exercises further provided time in the tactical sense for Russian special forces to get to their objectives.^x

In the years following the both the reorganization of the military and the annexation of Crimea, many of the reforms are beginning to take shape which has been evident in their annual exercises over the last three years. In VOSTOK 2018, TSENTR 2019, and KAVKAZ 2020 there have been some underlying lessons the United States and NATO should observe. The first is the use of combination of multinational partners. The Chinese contingent of 3,000 troops, including tanks, fixed wing and helicopters participating in VOSTOK 2018 was the first time Chinese units participated in a large-scale Russian annual exercise.^{xi} This participation has grown for the next two iterations in TSENTR 2019 and KAVKAZ 2020. In TSENTR 2019, China participated with in Russia's largest paradrop operation since the 1980s along with H-6 bombers dropping live munitions alongside Russian fighters.^{xii} This participation by the Chinese is significant for several reasons. It showcases that while Russia might be isolated from the West, it is by no means isolated from the world. Although troop numbers from Chinese participation are only a fraction of its force, the logistical, staff and C2 capability is emboldened and marginal levels of interoperability are achieved during these exercises.^{xiii xiv}

In addition to Chinese participation, Russia has also leveraged its annual exercises to solidify its military relationship with its former soviet states while expanding its relationship with other nations. Both TSENTR 2019 and KAVKAZ 2020 prominently featured participation from the Commonwealth of Independent States including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus, and Armenia.^{xv xvi xvii} Russian intent to integrate with Belarusian and CIS nations increases their interoperability and magnifies Moscow's efforts to project power outside its own borders. As more militaries integrate with Russian forces, they also increase the likelihood they

will be more reliant on Russia for their defense, leading to the possibility of Russian forward basing which is a continuing trend. A successful Kremlin effort to institutionalize joint units in Belarus or elsewhere magnifies the Kremlin's power projection capabilities and would likely enable Moscow to exert direct control over neighboring militaries if needed. Lastly, the integration with international partners offers Moscow the opportunity to conduct peacekeeping or peace-enforcement operations in its periphery and beyond under the guise of a multi-national force, as evidenced by Russia seeking to use CSTO operations under the auspices of the United Nations in as early as 2021. This would legitimize a Russian-centric peacekeeping force, capable of conducting operations to "protect Russian peoples" as seen in Georgia and the Ukraine.^{xviii xix}

A final trend seen in recent military exercises is Russia's ability to operate simultaneously in various military districts. Historically, the annual exercise focuses on one military district with minimal participation from the other districts. This model is now changing based on recent iterations. In each iteration since 2017, there has been involvement in other geographic areas. As many as 297,000 troops from the Central and Eastern Military District were reportedly deployed for the exercise, demonstrating Russia's ability to quickly transport thousands of men regardless of approach axis.^{xx} During Russia's TSENTR 2019 exercise, there was a sizeable focus on the Arctic region whereas the public focus was on the North Caucasus. Russia was intent to display its ability to deny access to adversaries and showcase their maneuverability along the Northern Sea Route.^{xxi} Lastly, KAVKAZ 2020 saw significant contingents of Russian forces not only operating in the Western Military District but also in Belarus.^{xxii} The inclusion of other military districts is a danger for NATO and the nations on its periphery. Moscow could easily use these maneuvers to cover actual deployments as was seen during the annexation of Crimea. Russia can posture forces in one district to divert attention

from the actual strategic interest. Moscow will downplay the addition of forces in other military districts in its information operations which decreases the ability of NATO to accurately determine normal exercise behavior from a combat operation.

These continuing trends that we have seen from Russia, their integration with multinational partners, the integration of lessons learned from continued operations in Syria and Ukraine, and the ability to operate in multiple military districts simultaneously need to be carefully studied by the United States and our allies, specifically NATO. Russia has used their annual and snap exercises effectively to accomplish their strategic goals. The immediate casus belli for both Ukraine and Georgia pertained to them protecting their Russian compatriots, but the strategic causes went well beyond this. Russia has proven to use this as a justification to conduct operations on its periphery and it does not take much imagination to see a crisis in the Baltic escalate using the same reason. NATO needs to take several steps to address these concerns. The first step is to clearly delineate red lines as it pertains to 21st century warfare. Cyber and information operations conducted by Russia or Russia-backed groups against the alliance need to be brought to the forefront of the discussion in a democracy. The severity of a crisis in the Baltic will not be understood by many Americans nor citizens of Europe as to why it affects their national security. NATO needs a cohesive plan to dominate the information sphere and enhance mutual trust. Russia has proven themselves adept at sowing discord into global democratic institutions and it will be the job of NATO to combat this by expanding intelligence sharing between the alliance to prove is aiding internal strife between countries.^{xxiii xxiv} The second action is to increase the presence of NATO in the Baltic, Poland, and Romania. Token forces, specifically in the Baltic need to be more than a tripwire for war. NATO will need an element of numerical superiority if a crisis develops to quickly marshal enough firepower to

delegitimize the Russian argument that they are guarantors of all Russian peoples.^{xxv} This can only be done if NATO soldiers are already in place to provide an accurate picture on the ground in specific villages. Shows of force like the integration of Bomber Task Force missions are helpful to reinforce the notion the United States has global reach and capability, however, this alone does not provide the deterrence needed.^{xxvi} Finally, large-scale NATO exercises, like DEFENDER-2020 are essential moving forward. NATO is more coordinated and interoperable than any multinational force previously seen in the world, but Russia and China are progressing their capabilities and tactics and NATO needs to do the same.^{xxvii xxviii} The challenges the United States facing in 21st century are shared by all NATO countries and only through mutual trust and expertise will the alliance succeed when it needs to most.

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