ANALYSIS

WHEN RUSSIA GOES TO WAR

MOTIVES, MEANS AND INDICATORS

KONRAD MUZYKA

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<td>Battalion Tactical Group</td>
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<td>Heavy Flamethrower System</td>
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<td>Vozdushno-desantnye voyska Rossii (Russian Airborne Forces)</td>
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In 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin infamously stated, “the fall of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” This immediately prompted concerns that Moscow would, in the longer term, seek to rebuild the strength and influence it once had by conquering territories belonging to its previous incarnation, the Soviet Union. Since then, Russia has, indeed, deployed combat troops into Georgia and Ukraine, as well as into Syria, while Russian private military companies are present in the Central African Republic, Libya, Mozambique, South Sudan and Venezuela. Despite the ongoing regime of sanctions against Moscow, its influence in world affairs has grown and—fuelled by Russia’s application of a range of political, economic, and military means—can be expected to continue to do so.

There is, however, little consensus among analysts and observers about the meaning of Russia’s behaviour, or how far it may go in pursuing its interests. Many questions remain unresolved. Is Russia, for example, actively seeking to rebuild a version of the former Soviet Union? Is there an ideological underpinning for such an endeavour? Does Russia have both the political will and the necessary military capability to go to war? Under what circumstances might Russia be prepared to commit combat troops? What steps does it or could it take to be ready to conduct high-intensity military operations in its neighbourhood?

This analysis will consider these questions as they relate to Russia’s immediate neighbourhood, also known as the ‘near abroad’, and in particular to the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Russian interests in the near abroad are clearly visible; here Moscow has already twice deployed troops to pursue these interests in clear contravention of international law.

The analysis is based on a study of the open literature, and on a series of non-attributable interviews with Russian military experts. It is divided into three parts: the first examines Russia’s fundamental motivations and justifications for waging war in its neighbourhood; the second considers how Russia might wage war in the Baltic region; and the third describes some of the indicators that might suggest it is preparing to do so.

1. A Post-Imperial State

Russia’s foreign policy decisions are driven by a desire to preserve a sphere of privileged interests, mostly in its near abroad. This sphere of privileged interests serves several purposes. First, Russia hopes to once again become the main broker in and the key decider on regional affairs, ultimately elevating its position on the world’s stage. Second, Moscow seeks to maintain—and preferably to expand—its strategic depth to ensure that in a conflict initial hostilities will be conducted away from Russia proper. Third, it hopes to create an effective cordon sanitaire to stop the spread of Western ideology and values into Russia.

Putin, however, unlike Stalin, Trotsky and Lenin, and even Catharine II—all of whom, murderous and brutal though they were, sought to expand the territories under their control in the name of ideas and beliefs—is not driven forward and outward by any set of principles or ideology. Indeed, no such principles are evident in contemporary Russia. Russia today exports only fear, weapons, gas, and oil.

The current Russian political system—whether it is called kleptocracy, oligarchic capitalism, or authoritarianism—is too exclusive to build an empire upon. Instead, through information and disinformation campaigns and outlets such as the Russia Today TV station, Russia is trying to advance and protect its view of the ‘Russian World’. The idea of the ‘Russian World’ on its own, however, is simply not attractive enough to entice closer cooperation with the Russian state. Moscow’s failed attempts to integrate with Belarus in the framework of the Union State is perhaps the best case to illustrate the lack of appeal Russia has for countries in its neighbourhood. Ultimately Russia needs to resort to conflict or operations below the threshold of war, to pull countries into its orbit and hold them there.

In the immediate aftermath of military operations in Georgia, then Russian President Dmitri Medvedev set out five principles that drive Russia’s domestic, foreign, and defence policies, and provide the justification for Moscow to intervene militarily, especially in the near abroad. According to Medvedev:

- Russia recognises the fundamental principles of international law;
- unipolarity, and the domination that comes with it, are unacceptable. The world should be multipolar;
- Russia does not seek confrontation with other countries;
- Russia will protect the lives and dignity of its citizens, wherever they are located; and
- Russia has regions in which it maintains privileged interests.5

Although some of these principles have been severely criticised in the West, they have served—the last two especially—as the political underpinning for Russia’s military incursions into Georgia and Ukraine. They are likely to be invoked again in the event that Moscow decides to deploy troops to any country in the region where it considers its interests to be under threat.

More recently, Russia’s military doctrine has clearly stated that Moscow reserves the right to use its armed forces to “protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens,” as well as, “to protect citizens of the Russian Federation abroad from armed attack on them.”6 This narrative has been advanced in particular since 2008 and will likely continue to be used by Russia to justify its military operations abroad. Interestingly, TASS used a similar argument in September 1939 to explain and justify the entry of Soviet troops into Poland. The TASS release was explicit in saying that the Soviet troop deployments were intended to protect Belarusians and Ukrainians from the “horrors of war.”7 In 1939, it had long been recognised that the Soviet Union was trying to export communist values to the rest of Europe and then the world. In 2019,

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5 President of Russia, “Интервью Дмитрия Медведева российским телеканалам [Russian TV channels’ interview with Dmitry Medvedev],” 31 August 2008.

7 Piotr Zochowski, Tweet, 18 September 2019.
however, there are no values that the Russian regime is trying to export.

The notion of protecting Russian citizens, meanwhile, places ethnicity at the heart of foreign policy objectives and marks a fundamental and historical change in the drivers of Russia’s traditional expansionist policies. Such an approach also effectively limits the number of countries Russia could potentially invade (as opposed to intervene in militarily to advance its interests) to those in the post-Soviet bloc only, where a large number of ethnic Russians still live.

Despite the belligerent rationale set out in its military doctrine, Russia’s incursions into Georgia and Ukraine should be interpreted as signs of weakness rather than strength: Russia needs to resort to conflict to maintain its interests in the near abroad. The country is thus post-imperial, rather than neo-imperial. Its actions are not strictly offensive in the classical, military sense, in that Russia is not actively seeking to conquer new territories. They are, rather, attempts to assume or maintain control over strategically important regions (Donbas, Abkhazia, South Ossetia), which then allows Moscow to influence domestic decision-making processes within the target countries.

They are also responses to the regime’s sense of insecurity prompted by, for example, its fears of NATO’s and the EU’s growing political presence in Russia’s neighbourhood. In Russian thinking, there is no such thing as self-determination if Russia’s vital interests are thought to be at stake. And to defend those interests, and perhaps more importantly to prevent any country—the US in particular—from curbing its influence, Russia is both willing to and capable of going to war.

Russian belligerence is thus not driven by a desire to become an empire once again, but by an attempt to rebuild fragments of the imperial privileges that the Soviet Union once possessed—to reclaim the status, and influence that would allow Russia to again play a dominant role in the region and beyond.

Far from being a new development, however, this is merely a contemporary manifestation of what in the 1960s was known in the West as the Brezhnev Doctrine. A month after the Prague Spring was crushed, the Soviet ideologue, Sergei Kovalev, wrote an article in Pravda which defended the use of force against progressive socialist movements willing to deviate from the Leninist-Marxist line.8 Brezhnev later reaffirmed these views adding that, “when internal and external forces hostile to socialism are threatening to turn a socialist country back to capitalism, this becomes a common problem and a concern of all socialist countries.”9 This paradigm was later used to justify Soviet troop deployments into Afghanistan in 1979.

There is no communism today and Russia has lost its military and political influence in almost all of the former Warsaw Pact countries. Yet it still claims ‘privileged status’ in the post-Soviet space and will continue to leverage its position in the near abroad through economic, political, and military means, including armed invasion.

Russia’s incursions into Georgia and Ukraine should be interpreted as signs of weakness rather than strength

Russia will continue to leverage its position in the near abroad through economic, political, and military means

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8 “Without question, the peoples of the socialist countries and the Communist parties have and must have freedom to determine their own countries’ paths of development. Any decision they make, however, must not be inimical either to socialism in their own countries or to the fundamental interests of other socialist countries.... The sovereignty of individual socialist countries cannot be set against the interests of world socialism and the world revolutionary movement. . . . Each Communist party is free to apply the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism and socialism in its own country, but it is not free to deviate from these principles.... The weakening of any of the links in the world system of socialism directly affects all the socialist countries, and they cannot look indifferently upon this.” Quoted in: Mark Kramer, “Beyond the Brezhnev Doctrine: A New Era in Soviet-East European Relations?” International Security 14 no. 3 (Winter 1989), 25.

9 Ibid.
The position of the Baltic states, however, should be looked at through a different prism. When Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the Euro-Atlantic structures in 2004, they permanently detached themselves from the direct tools of Russian influence. Russian military operations against the Baltic states are very unlikely in the current security environment. A sharp deterioration of relations within the Euro-Atlantic community, one which would seriously call into question the NATO’s collective defence mechanism, is one of only a few scenarios that could plausibly encourage Russia to contemplate military options against the three states. On the other hand, the large Russian diaspora living in these countries makes them targets for Russian propaganda, especially amongst those citizens who may be sympathetic to the Russian cause and tempted by the Russian view of the world. Russia will thus attempt to use active measures to infiltrate and influence decision-making processes in the Baltic states.

2. HOW MIGHT RUSSIA FIGHT IN THE BALTIc REGION?

While Russian military operations against the Baltic states are unlikely, an analysis of how Russia might initiate high-intensity, high-tempo combat operations against a technologically advanced, near-peer adversary in this theatre can help to illuminate the scope of preparations that it would need to make—and hence the indicators of imminent conflict that may be detectable by the West. Russian military objectives in the Baltic states could not be limited: Moscow would be unlikely to attack with limited force to achieve a limited objective, such as seizing only one of the Baltic states. Such an operation would sacrifice strategic surprise, and would have little or no military value. It would give the Baltic states and NATO time and space to develop their forces and conduct a counterattack.

Russia’s goals in the opening stages of a conflict would thus be the total destruction of the opposing forces and their combat potential. Any Allied forces in north-east Poland would also need to be engaged and destroyed to prevent timely reinforcement of the Baltic states. Russian forces in the Kaliningrad Oblast would play a supplementary role in this mission. The oblast is a valuable asset from which Russia can project power in different domains across the theatre, but it is also a vulnerability. There is not enough space to conduct effective defensive operations here, or to avoid artillery fires from both Poland and Lithuania. Russian forces would thus need to expand their depth by leaving the oblast and possibly moving into Poland.

In this scenario, Russian anti-access capabilities based in the Kaliningrad Oblast would no longer be the main problem for NATO as the battlespace would have expanded significantly. Allied forces would need to deal with forces coming from Kaliningrad, Belarus (see below) and additional assets deployed into the Baltic states to protect already captured territory.

The Crimean scenario, in which Ukrainian personnel surrendered the peninsula without firing a single shot, would not be repeated in the Baltic states. Russia could not be certain how its operations in this theatre would develop, whether conflict here would be short or protracted, or whether nuclear weapons would be involved. Consequently, Moscow would

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prepare for all possible contingencies, especially in its rhetoric that would undoubtedly include nuclear threats.

2.1. Capabilities in the Western Military District

This analysis assumes that Russia’s steady upgrading and build-up of military capabilities in the Western Military District (MD) would allow it to initiate hostilities from a mostly peacetime posture, without drawing substantially on reserve personnel. Additional personnel would be used to populate existing units and expand their posture to full wartime strength. This pertains particularly to the 20th Combined Arms Army (CAA) (HQ in Voronezh), the 6th CAA (Sankt-Petersburg), the 1st Guards Tank Army (GTA) (Odintsovo) and the 6th Air and Air Defence Army (Sankt-Petersburg), which Moscow would rely on during the initial weeks of combat. There are also motor rifle, artillery, special forces, and air defence brigades stationed in the Western MD, which report directly to the district’s commander. Additional brigades and divisions redeployed from the Central MD would serve as a strategic reserve. With the passing of time, draft and reserve training would increase, allowing additional tactical-, operational-, and strategic-level formations to be created.

The most recent iterations of Russia’s Zapad and Tsentr strategic exercises provided evidence that its basic warfighting strategy continues to rely on the principle of mass—the concentration of combat power at a particular time and place to ensure a rapid breakthrough of the defence’s tactical positions. The reported establishment of new TOS-1 heavy flamethrower battalions to support the operations of its tank divisions gives further credence to this notion.

Russian VDV (Vozdushno-desantnye voyska Rossi - Russian Airborne Forces) forces are one of the most combat-ready units in the Russian Armed Forces, and their deployment requires little preparation time, especially for airdrop missions. Unless, however, Baltic-based air defence systems were destroyed on the ground by diversionary forces or air strikes, it is unlikely that Russia would attempt large-scale air drops of VDV personnel due to fears of aircraft (and personnel) losses. VDV forces could, however, take part in the initial stages of the conflict as mounted infantry alongside CAA motorised brigades.

The 6th CAA remains the only army in the Western Joint Strategic Command (JSC), to be composed solely of brigades. With organic logistics and artillery assets, brigades are more manoeuvrable than divisions, but still possess sufficient firepower to maintain pressure on opposing forces, especially in the medium spectrum of ground operations. The current peacetime structure of Russia’s motor rifle brigades is bound to change during wartime, as their Tables of Organisation and Equipment (TO&E) will be expanded to include additional organic subunits, such as tank battalions. Units operating along main advance routes would also be supported by supplementary subunits (for example, armour, VDV, artillery, and reconnaissance) to ensure a decisive attack and the destruction of the defence’s will and capabilities.

Once the defensive line had been ruptured, the second-echelon forces would move to exploit success and pursue any remaining defence forces. These follow-on units would include large tank formations belonging to the 1st GTA, which would be responsible for capturing and holding territory until the third echelon arrived. The third-echelon role could be filled by troops of the Rosgvardia (National Guard of the Russian Federation), which is tasked with counter-

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11 Including one motor rifle, one air defence, and two artillery brigades as well as two special purpose brigades (Spetsnaz).
12 Alexey Ramm and Bogdan Stepova, “Система выжигания: в армии создадут батальоны тяжелых огнеметов [Flaming system: battalions of heavy flamethrowers will be created in the army],” Izvestia, 22 October 2019.
sabotage, both in Russia proper and abroad, and able to assume occupation duties in captured areas.

As of 2019, the capabilities of the Russian forces belonging to the 1st GTA, and 6th and 20th CAAs are sufficient to allow them to seize the Baltic states, in particular as Russia would likely enjoy air superiority in the theatre in the early stages of any conflict. Given the importance of the Western MD to the Russian political-military leadership, it is safe to assume that each motor rifle and tank brigade or regiment in this MD is able to deploy two high readiness battalions with a third manned—and probably in peacetime underrunmanned—by conscripts. During preparations for war, short as they may be, this third battalion of these units could be quickly brought up to strength. Warning is a key issue: the more time Russia has to mobilise reserve personnel, the more robust its wartime posture will be. Within 5-7 days of a mobilisation announcement, each motor rifle brigade or regiment could deploy not three, but four combat-ready battalions.

The recent focus by Western commentators on Battalion Tactical Groups (BTG) as the main Russian ground combat unit has had the unfortunate effect of diverting attention away from the capabilities of motor rifle and tank brigades and regiments. The employment of BTGs in Ukraine was both a necessity (because of a lack of manpower and equipment to field full brigades) and a choice (as full brigades would provide more evidence of direct Russian involvement in the conflict). This situation is unlikely to be repeated, especially in conflicts with a near-peer adversary, such as NATO, where combat potential, manoeuvrability, the density and concentration of fires, and decisiveness in attack would be crucial to achieving tactical and operational success.

Brigades may have less firepower than divisions, but can rely on their flexibility and manoeuvrability to attain immediate objectives, especially when their TO&E is augmented with additional subunits, such as artillery and reconnaissance. The need to retain flexible options against NATO forces could be one of the reasons why Russia maintains brigades within the 6th CAA.

2.2. BELARUS

Russia’s chances of seizing the Baltic states could be significantly raised by using Belarus (and preferably also its armed forces) as a springboard for operations into Kaliningrad and northern Poland. A common argument is that while the so-called Suwałki Gap is already vulnerable to Russia’s short-range artillery, it is only by establishing a line of communications between the oblast and Belarus that Russia can ensure that NATO forces in the Baltic States are cut off and cannot be reinforced by land. But more than this, operations from Belarus would allow Russia to open up new fronts into Poland, Kaliningrad (to link up with its forces there) and Lithuania. Belarus could also serve as a key logistics hub for Russia. Perhaps more importantly, from the operational and strategic perspective, the inclusion of Belarus in the conflict would expand the manoeuvre and battlefield space, adding new axes of advance and allowing Russia to augment its forces with new (Belarusian) personnel. This, in turn, could spread NATO’s forces thinly along the frontline, at least during initial hostilities, and necessitate the deployment of a greater number of troops for counteroffensive operations. NATO’s target list would also need to be significantly expanded, adding time—and the need to maintain momentum—to its operations.

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13 The peacetime TO&E gives a standard tank regiment two tank and one motor rifle battalion. A motor rifle regiment comprises two motor rifle and one tank battalion.

2.3. LONG-RANGE WEAPONS

Russia’s acquisition of long-range, stand-off systems has allowed it to expand the depth of battle significantly. Tests of its Reconnaissance Strike Complex in Syria have showcased Russia’s ability to fuse high-precision, long-range missiles with precise targeting from real-time intelligence data. Russia is thus able to shape strategic outcomes, especially in the initial period of war when precision strikes can degrade the ability and willingness of opposing forces to fight, destroy its leadership, and cause significant disruptions to civilian economies (by, for instance, attacking power stations, fuel hubs, ports, and bridges).

The Russian Armed Forces can strike any NATO forces in Europe simultaneously and unexpectedly. The Iskander (SS-26 Stone) system, even if its range is limited to 500 km, can effectively engage all regional air bases, command and control centres, surface-to-air missile sites, ports, and hardened targets. Air- and sea-launched cruise missiles will allow Russia to engage most, if not all, targets in Europe. This does not necessarily mean that Russia may be tempted to strike targets in, say, France, the UK or even Germany. But it will be poised to destroy targets in Poland and thus hinder the movement of reinforcements and demonstrate its resolve and commitment to fight.

2.4. ELECTRONIC WARFARE

Electronic Warfare (EW) components would be used extensively during the build-up period and during the initial phases of war to mask the deployment of Russian forces and reduce the opponent’s ability to use advanced sensors (for example, electronic intelligence and signals intelligence gathering assets, unmanned aerial vehicles) to track Russian military movements. Active and continuous experience with EW capability in Ukraine and Syria has allowed Russia to rehearse its use both in achieving purely military outcomes (such as the degradation of communication systems) and as an effective psychological operations tool to influence the enemy’s morale and will to fight.

Experience with EW capability has allowed Russia to rehearse its use both in achieving purely military outcomes and as a psychological operations tool

Tests in Syria have showcased Russia’s ability to fuse high-precision, long-range missiles with precise targeting from real-time intelligence data

the civilian population to disrupt their daily lives—this technique was practised, for example, during Zapad 2017.

2.5. THE MARITIME DOMAIN

The Baltic Sea Fleet in this scenario would prove crucial in blocking any reinforcements coming in by sea. A preferred option for Russia’s naval forces would be to seize Bornholm Island and deploy anti-access assets there. However, this would risk an uncontrolled escalation of the conflict and, in any case, the Baltic Sea Fleet has insufficient lift capability to deploy a sizable force and assets to Bornholm and insufficient warfighting capability to protect it once there.

Russia could carry out amphibious landings, but these would be limited to Lithuania or Latvia, and require theatre air superiority. Lithuania would be the preferred choice as vessels conducting amphibious operations there could be protected by Kaliningrad’s S-400 Triumf (SA-21 Growler) air defence systems.

15 For more about Russia’s combination of strike and reconnaissance to shape strategic, operational and tactical outcomes see: Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, “The Russian Reconnaissance Fire Complex Comes of Age,” Oxford Changing Character of War Centre, May 2018.


17 The current composition of the Baltic Sea Fleet includes 4 landing ships, 2 small landing ships, and 9 landing craft.
The Kalibr-NK- and Onix-equipped Buyan-M and Karkurt-class small missile ships of the Baltic Sea Fleet would also need to operate close to shore due to a lack of organic medium-range air defence capability. They would, nevertheless, be important for attacking ground and sea targets at long distances. Their operations close to

**The Northern Fleet has too few ships to pursue sea lines of communication interdiction operations in the North Atlantic**

Baltysk also means that they could quickly replenish cruise missile stocks. Meanwhile, the stationing of Bastion and Bal-P coastal defence missile systems allows Russia to protect and defend Kaliningrad and its sea approaches. These systems could also engage airborne reinforcements or ground targets in theatre. Sea denial could be augmented by minelaying operations, especially close to ports, to further hinder reinforcements.

Russian submarine operations in the Baltic Sea, though, would be limited. The Baltic Sea Fleet fields only one submarine (Project 877EKM Kilo-class), indicating the relatively low level of attention being paid to this fleet’s capabilities.¹⁸ The political-military leadership has never had the incentive to allocate funds to the development of the Baltic Sea Fleet due to the inherent weakness of other regional navies, the Polish Navy in particular. However, it is only a matter of time before the submarine force is re-equipped with new vessels, either the new Project 677 Lada-class or Project 636.3 Varshavyanka.

An important issue to consider is whether some of the Northern Fleet’s assets would be deployed to the Baltic Sea to support naval operations there. The amount of warning and thus the time Russia has available to deploy these ships would be one issue. But perhaps the key consideration is that the Northern Fleet is not only the home of the country’s sea-based nuclear deterrent, but also guards the sea approaches from the north that would permit naval forces to threaten Russia proper from this direction—it is thus perceived to be of critical importance for the survival of the state. Furthermore, its current strength in surface combatants and submarines does not allow for out-of-area operations in a conflict that could escalate beyond a regional war. The 39 surface ships of the Northern Fleet, would most probably be continually engaged in protecting ballistic submarines and their bastions throughout the period of hostilities. These numbers also make it unlikely that the Northern Fleet would pursue sea lines of communication interdiction operations in the North Atlantic. There are simply too few ships, particularly submarines, to undertake such operations.

**3. INDICATORS AND WARNINGS**

Preparations for the type of operations described above may be visible to the West, providing advance notice of hostilities and allowing a response to be initiated. Possible indicators and warnings of Russian military actions are described in this section of the analysis and also tabulated in Annex A.

**3.1. TELLING TAILS**

Perhaps one of the most telling indicators of impending Russian belligerence would be visible logistics preparations to support military operations. These would start with an increased number of exercises of the rear services and the mobilisation of logistics personnel to be deployed in support of combat troops. New rear services battalions and brigades would also need to be generated to provide a continuous stream of materiel to combat units. For instance, new units tasked with laying pipelines would need to be established: there are presently only three

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¹⁸ *“Project 877,”* Russianships.info.
pipeline battalions in the Russian Armed Forces (one each in the Western, Eastern, and Southern MDs) compared with the 24 pipeline brigades and six pipeline battalions that existed in 1992.

There are at least seven large storage and repair bases in the Western MD alone, which would also see a lot of movement and activity as equipment was brought to operational status, and allocated to under-strength units and forward assembly points. Stored equipment would also be used to fill existing units so as to increase their readiness and improve the status of their TO&E.

New roads and rail tracks would need to be built to allow for faster deployment of troops along the main offensive axes and also to provide for new attack routes. A typical Russian offensive plan calls for the deployment of military assets along a high-capacity road and a rail track. Although this limits the number of routes of advance, it allows for speedy reinforcement of frontline units. For example, in the run-up to the conflict in Georgia, between late May and late July, Russian Railway Troop units restored 54 kilometres of track, repaired eight railway bridges, replaced more than 10 000 railroad ties, and repaired a tunnel to open up a possible axis of advance.

Furthermore, the very scale of the logistics required to move manoeuvre units would ensure that preparations for war would be visible to Western observers—even though Russia would do its utmost to conceal the true extent of these preparations. For instance, a motor rifle or a tank division movement requires between 30 and 40 trains, each with 65 cars. The West’s poor understanding of the logistics preparations needed to move just one division, let alone one army, amplified Russia’s strategic messaging in the weeks and months before the Zapad 2017 exercise, creating uncertainty over Russia’s intentions: to conduct an exercise or an invasion.

As a further indicator, all of these activities would have a disruptive impact on the day-to-day activities of Russian citizens. Personnel would be called up for exercises or be mobilised, for example, while transportation systems and networks would be negatively affected.

3.2. Sharpening the Teeth

In the weeks before Zapad 2017, Russia and Belarus conducted a range of exercises of the rear services. Russia also exercised frontline units, including elements of the 1st GTA, 76th Airborne Division, 288th Artillery Brigade and 137th Reconnaissance Battalion. Only when Zapad officially started were some airborne battalions of the 76th, 98th, and 106th Airborne Divisions (which constitute the entire airborne force deployed in the Western JSC) airlifted to their deployment areas. The Zapad scenario was not, however, limited only to the Western operational direction (the Baltic states and Poland) but also involved personnel from the 80th and 61st Independent Motor Rifle Brigades, both of which are earmarked for Arctic operations. In the event of a conflict with NATO in the Baltic region, Russia may intend to conduct offensive operations against Norway and Finland to extend its defensive perimeter and ensure the survivability of its Northern Fleet naval assets based around the Kola Peninsula.

The days before Russia’s invasion of Crimea were also marked by increased military activity on a scale incomparable with anything it had done before or has since. On 26th February Russia began a ‘comprehensive readiness check’ which included units from the Western MD, the

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19 The storage and repair bases are located in Petrozavodsk, Vyborg, Luga, Mulino, Kandalaksha, Buy, and Sapavnnye.


2nd Army of the Central MD and Airborne Troops, involving a total of some 150,000 military personnel.\(^2\)

The Russian Armed Forces also redeployed 80 helicopters to operational airfields located more than 500 km from their permanent deployment positions.\(^3\) It redeployed 80 vessels from the Baltic and Northern Fleets and moved forward elements of the 1\(^{st}\) GTA’s 6\(^{th}\) Tank Brigade.\(^4\) According to the press reports, 80 aircraft were involved in this exercise, supported by Il-78 air-refuelling tankers to ensure round-the-clock combat duty along Russia’s borders. Air defence assets were also deployed to operational sites and put on high combat alert.\(^5\) All these activities, alongside the start of a Russian naval blockade of Sevastopol, were strong indications that Russia’s intent was not defensive, but offensive.\(^6\)

Holding a readiness exercise at this particular time served several purposes. First, in a characteristic move, it allowed Russia to mask the increase in readiness of its airborne units and conceal their deployment into Crimea, which occurred on 28\(^{th}\) February, two days after the check was announced. Second, it served as a deterrent against any possible Ukrainian military response to the military occupation of Crimea.

Third, it demonstrated Russian resolve and commitment to the eventual annexation of the peninsula and showed that Russia, at least officially, was willing to escalate the conflict to protect its interests in Ukraine.

The Russian MoD made at least one attempt to soften the image of troops pouring out of military garrisons during a period of political instability, claiming that readiness checks boost morale and, “bring units together.”\(^7\) However, to conduct such exercises during a period of heightened tensions is clearly not conducive to bringing stability to hot spots and merely confirmed that Russian intentions were belligerent.

In the Baltic region, the type of forces deployed for an operation against NATO would depend on how much time Moscow has to prepare its units. There is an understanding within the military establishment that warning time would be minimal, especially compared to the Cold War years when the Soviet Union’s force posture relied to a large extent relied on skeleton-strength units, which needed weeks and months to be declared combat ready. The establishment of permanent readiness brigades and regiments, especially in the Western operational direction has allowed the short warning issue to be mitigated to an extent.\(^8\) From NATO’s perspective and based on the conduct of military operations in Crimea, the biggest surprise can come in the form of an

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\(^2\) “Более 80 боевых вертолетов Ми-24 и Ми-8 с авиабаз 3ВО перебазируются на оперативные аэродромы” [More than 80 Mi-24 and Mi-8 combat helicopters from Western MD air bases relocated to operational airfields], Mil.ru, 28 February 2014.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) “Северный и Балтийский флоты в рамках внезапной проверки боевой готовности наращивают состав сил в акваториях Баренцева и Балтийского морей” [As part of a sudden check of combat readiness, the Northern and Baltic Fleets increase their strength in the waters of the Barents and Baltic Seas], Mil.ru, 27 February 2014.

\(^5\) “Военнослужащие 6-й танковой бригады на полигонах Мулино готовят бронетехнику к отправке железнодорожными эшелонами” [Soldiers of the 6th tank brigade at the Mulino training ground prepare armored vehicles for deployment by train], Mil.ru, 27 February 2014.

\(^6\) “Самолеты истребительной авиации 3ВО ведут постоянное патрулирование воздушного пространства в приграничных районах” [WMD fighter aircraft constantly patrol airspace in border areas], Mil.ru, 27 February 2014.


\(^8\) “Военнослужащие 3ВО считают практику проведения внезапных проверок необходимой, сплачивающей воинские коллективы и поднимающей боевой дух” [WMD military personnel consider surprise inspections to be necessary, bringing together military units and raising morale], Mil.ru, 27 February 2014.

Press reports claim that all motor rifle brigades can now deploy two fully ready BTGs. For more information on BTGs see: Charles Bartles and Lester W. Grau, Russia’s View of Mission Command of Battalion Tactical Groups in the Era of ‘Hybrid War’ (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, June 2018).
airborne unit attack, either from land or air. A traditional VDV operation—a parachute landing behind enemy lines—would require the airborne forces to be reinforced by mechanised and armour units once key objectives had been seized. Tracking strategic airlift flights and assembly air bases, and the logistic preparations of mechanised and armour formations may be another useful indicator of Russian intentions.

The 2019 iteration of the Tsentr strategic military exercise revealed the scale of effort needed to airlift and deploy a full VDV regiment with its organic equipment. In total, 71 Il-76 strategic lift aircraft were used to move 2,000 personnel and 200 pieces of equipment of the 98th Airborne Division’s 331st Airborne Regiment. It can be surmised that moving the Division’s two manoeuvre regiments would require around 140 Il-76s, but the Russian Aerospace Forces fleet totals about 110 at present; the strategic airlift of one full VDV regiment is thus perhaps the maximum that can be achieved.

VDV units are testing a remedy to this deficiency, which involves giving airborne units organic rotary-wing assets to improve flexibility and readiness. Large-scale redeployment of helicopters near the bases of airborne units may thus also be indicative of preparations for offensive actions, or at least a sign of efforts to increase readiness for rapid deployment.

More broadly, the exercise tempo of conventional forces, especially those that would be tasked with operations during the first days of conflict, would be increased. An exercise in itself is not necessarily a negative sign—as long as troops are training, they cannot be used in battle. However, the cessation of all drills could be a very ominous sign, perhaps indicating that training preparations were complete, that stocks were being replenished and personnel being readied for departure.

The key to understanding Russian war preparations, however, is to recognise the context within which specific events take place. A large-scale military exercise that occurs during a (relatively) peaceful period in relations between Russia and the West is not equal to a large-scale military exercise that takes place when tensions between Russia and NATO are very high.

A case in point is the Zapad 2017 exercise. In the months and weeks leading up to this exercise, there were concerns in some analytical circles that it was a deception activity, whose main goal was to build readiness and capability to allow an invasion of Belarus or the Baltic states. However, in the summer and autumn of 2017 there was no reason for Russia to contemplate such a move, as NATO-Russia and Russia-Belarus relations were not in crisis—especially by comparison with the previous three years. Moscow believes that any large-scale use of military power will be preceded by a period of increased tension between Russia and an enemy. This period, though,
has become progressively shorter: in the case of Czechoslovakia in 1968 it was several months; in Ukraine, it was several weeks. This shortened warning period has had a major impact on the reforms of the Russian Armed Forces, which seek to increase peacetime readiness and to ensure that as few units as possible will require augmenting before they can be committed to the fight.

If Russia was preparing to go war, the scale of the forward deployment of troops would be significant enough to warrant concern: the build-up would be in excess of a reasonable deployment for an exercise and would be a further indicator of probable preparation for offensive action. Moscow might seek to explain mobilisation activities as defensive measures being taken to prepare for a crisis. However, as one analyst comments:

any large-scale build-up of combat strength, particularly major deployments of ground force units, which is in excess of a reasonable defensive requirement for the area, should be considered a probable preparation for offensive action.  

Concurrently, as these forces are on the move, Russia may be very active in negotiating activities, which on the surface, will imply Moscow’s willingness to decrease tensions. This, however, could be a deliberate action to deceive the West as to the real scope of Russian military preparations and the country’s resolve. As long as there are no clear indications that troop movements have been stopped and reversed, the likelihood of a war will be high.

3.3. COMMAND AND CONTROL

The Western JSC would probably direct all military activities in the Baltic theatre, reporting directly to the Russian High Command through the General Staff. Depending on the extent of the conflict—for example if there was a horizontal expansion to include the high north—an intermediate-level command could be established between the High Command and the JSC to manage operations in both theatres and leaving the JSC to command army-level operations. Command personnel of the CAA, meanwhile, would be divided between forward, main, rear, alternate (for both main and rear) and possibly auxiliary Command Posts (CP).

The number of CPs created would depend on the scope of military operations and the main axes of advance. For the Baltic scenario considered here, main, forward, and alternate CPs would most likely be established, with supplementary CPs added if a new offensive route away from the thrust of the main attack thrust was opened. CPs would be located in hardened command bunkers that are camouflaged and dispersed to provide a degree of protection against conventional and unconventional strikes.

3.4. NUCLEAR READINESS

The High Command’s reserve forces include strategic missile units, long-range aviation, and airborne troops. Authorisation from the President of the Russian Federation is required for a nuclear release, both on the tactical and strategic level.

During mobilisation, Russia would increase the exercise tempo of units tasked with nuclear missions at sea, on land and in the air. This, in turn, would imply an increase in surprise drills of an exceptional scale. They included delivery systems of strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons. Exercises during this period included simulated nuclear release and tested procedures for the massive and simultaneous use of nuclear missiles, including launch-on-
warning missile strikes, and countering a nuclear attack by missile defence systems.37

Further evidence of Russia’s readiness to apply the nuclear dimension in the run-up to military operations came in September 2017, ahead of the Zapad exercise. Two weeks before the drill, a Strategic Rocket Forces exercise was organised in which 11 regiments were simultaneously sent out to conduct a dispersal drill. The exercise culminated with an RS-24 Yars (SS-29) intercontinental ballistic missile launch. A few days later a short-range ballistic missile exercise included all but one missile brigade in the Western MD. These brigades were put on alert and deployed forward to practise electronic launches. Short-range ballistic missile brigades are reported to be able to carry missiles equipped with nuclear warheads and their electronic employment pre-Zapad could be related to a nuclear mission these units were tasked to fulfil as part of strategic messaging.38

According to Russia’s 2014 military doctrine, Moscow reserves the right to use nuclear weapons “in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.”39 In this regard, the Russian Armed Forces exercise the employment of the nuclear triad on an annual basis. There seems little doubt that in the case of a military attack on Russian territory, even if it was limited to, say, the Kaliningrad Oblast only, Moscow would resort to nuclear weapons to defend the territorial integrity of the state. In this context, there seems to be limited realisation in the analytical community that the loss of Kaliningrad, sometimes broached as a means of countering the long-range weapons stationed there, may provoke a Russian nuclear response.40

3.5. THE HOME FRONT

A key indicator of Russian plans to attack the West will be a sharp increase in propaganda activities aimed at demonising the West in the eyes of Russian citizens. Such actions would be similar to those pursued by Moscow in February-April 2014 concerning Ukraine and the Crimea referendum.41 However, they would be more prolonged, and would specifically aim to prepare Russian citizens for war, and everything that goes with it: death, hunger, and sacrifice.

Apart from seeking the support of its citizens for a prolonged war effort, the leadership would also be looking to garner international support and political—and possibly military—assistance. This would be evident in increased diplomatic activity by the Russian Foreign Ministry within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and with other countries that could be (persuaded to be) sympathetic to the Russian cause.

On the home front, large-scale war preparations would need to include civil defence. Increased activity by civil defence organisations, for example large exercises, would probably be one of the most significant strategic indicators. Such

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37 Ibid.
41 Vladimir Sazonov, Kristiina Müür and Holger Mölder, eds., Russian Information Campaign Against The Ukrainian State And Defence Forces (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016), 83.
activities would include large-scale evacuations, and increased efforts through television, social media, the press and radio to educate the population on what to do in the case of an armed attack. Exercises would be very large in scope, involving thousands or tens of thousands of people, and therefore unlikely to be unnoticeable. These exercises, alongside the tightening of security, would also significantly disrupt economic activity and cause general nuisance: this too would be observable.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last two decades, Moscow has lost almost all the strategic depth that allowed it to conduct warfare far away from its borders. Military action in Ukraine has further exacerbated Russia’s strategic position vis-à-vis the West—in the long term, Kyiv’s pro-Western approach threatens to place Western troops on Russia’s southern flank too. Nonetheless, Russia continues to claim a sphere of privileged interests in its immediate neighbourhood, and is ready to use military tools to defend its right to determine and influence political decisions in those countries.

Michael Kofman points out that, “Russian thinking is based around a theory of war that posits the adversary as a system with key subsystems or nodes.” Russia will try to influence all aspects of this system (civilian, economic, and military) to maximise its chances of winning any conflict. War would thus require the mobilisation of the entire state’s resources. Indeed, even as it prepares its armed forces to fight high-end and technologically advanced enemies, Russia is actively using disinformation and propaganda in social media to shape and advance its narratives.

Whether Russia is willing and able to go to war in any particular circumstance ultimately boils down to the answers to five questions set out by Cynthia Grabo:

1. Is the national leadership committed to the achievement of the objective in question?

2. Is the objective potentially attainable, or the situation potentially soluble, by military means?

3. Does the military capability exist, and/or does the scale of the military build-up meet doctrinal criteria for offensive action?

4. Have the political options run out?

5. Is the risk factor low, or at least tolerable?

Clearly the Russian leadership felt able to answer positively to each of these questions in 2008 and 2014. Since 2011, Russia’s military reforms have increased its capability to conduct large-scale, high-intensity combat operations. Meanwhile, its lack of heavy air and sea lift, along with its continued reliance on rail transport for troop movement, indicate that the only credible options to use this capability are in its immediate neighbourhood.

In the event of a war in the Baltic region, Russian military objectives could not be limited, but would need to ensure the total destruction of forces to prevent the possibility of a counterattack. Troop deployments into assembly areas in the border regions would need to be substantial to ensure that enough firepower was amassed to conduct effective military operations. Military preparations, logistics in particular, would be necessary for large scale operations. Indicators and warnings of an imminent attack would thus be available to the West, offering the possibility—provided that it is ready to act upon them—of implementing a credible response.

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43 Grabo, Anticipating Surprise, 155.
## Annex A. Indicators of Possible Russian Intent to Conduct Large-Scale Combat Operations Against its Western Neighbours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Military</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major defence activities (deployment of air and ground defence) near major road/rail bottlenecks, bridges, ports, airports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Movement of supplies, materiel from strategic storage bases; drawdown of existing depots</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heavy movement near and emptying of weapons storage depots</td>
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<td>Departure from bases of ballistic submarines, accompanied by surface vessels and submarines</td>
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<td>Significant mobilisation of ground force units</td>
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<td>Force generation in undermanned units</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased rail, truck, communications, air traffic between forward-deployed units and HQs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activation of airborne command posts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased combat air traffic in border regions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change from peacetime to wartime command posture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activation of wartime HQs and main, alternate, dummy and support command posts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in deception activity, such as dummy assembly areas</td>
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<td>Increased reconnaissance activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisation of large-scale civil defence exercises</td>
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<td>Increased military rail and road traffic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westward deployment of mechanised and armoured units</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deployment of combat units to assembly areas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naval blockades, minelaying operations in the Baltic Sea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased rear-services exercises in Southern, Western, and Central JSCs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased number of command and control exercises</td>
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<td>Increased number of disaster response unit exercises</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased number of Strategic Missile Forces exercises</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Economic / Logistics</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Unusual Aeroflot activity (disruptions to civilian services, requisition of aircraft)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disruption of civilian merchant shipping operations</td>
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<td>Requisitioning of medical supplies, drugs, doctors and medical personnel</td>
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<td>Increased food imports</td>
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<td>Increased blood collection activities</td>
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<td>Requisitioning of heavy repair equipment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requisitioning of railcars and trucks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction of new pipelines and rail tracks</td>
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<th><strong>Propaganda / Deception</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in domestic hostile propaganda</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deployment of friendly journalists to target countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in international propaganda through outlets such as Russia Today</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in web-based pro-Russia and anti-Western commentary planted by bots and ‘trolls’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spread of disinformation through text messages or pamphlets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in pro-Russia narratives by NATO- and EU-based pro-Russian parties</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cyber attacks against critical infrastructure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terrorist attacks and kidnapings</td>
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