



ANALYSIS

DEFENDING THE UNION

ZAPAD-2021

| KONRAD MUZYKA |

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Cover page photo: Russian logistics vehicles moving through the Mulino Training Range, Mulino, 10 September 2021. © Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license](#).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BTG	Battalion Tactical Group
CAA	Combined Arms Army
CMD	Central Military District
EW	Electronic Warfare
GTA	Guards tank Army
JSC	Joint Strategic Command
MD	Military District
MLRS	Multiple Launch Rocket System
MoD	Ministry of Defence
RGF	Regional Group of Forces
SAM	Surface to Air Missile
SMD	Southern Military District
SOF	Special Operations Force
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
WMD	Western Military District

INTRODUCTION

The command-staff exercise Zapad, held every four years in Russia's Western Military District (WMD), stress tests how Russia and its ally Belarus would fare against a NATO-led attack on Belarus in a regional conflict scenario. It tests the abilities of the Russian and Belarusian armed forces to mobilise, generate forces, deploy, maintain their forces in the field, and conduct operations across the entire spectrum of conventional warfare. From the Russian perspective, Zapad also seeks to integrate the Belarusian armed forces into the Regional Group of Forces (RGF)—a Russian-Belarusian land forces grouping designed for combined combat operations. The RGF is a Joint Strategic Command (JSC) West-commanded body, which includes the entire Belarusian land forces and, on the Russian side, the 1st Guards Tank Army.

The international community largely focuses on the active phase of the exercise, which this year took place between 10 and 16 September. However, in the weeks leading up to the active phase, Zapad offers opportunities to observe how Russia mobilises its troops, how it generates new formations, and which areas it might seek to strengthen ahead of a conflict with NATO. Zapad also goes beyond strict military operations. While not perhaps state-wide, it is certainly large enough to assess how civilian structures, especially those responsible for emergencies, perform in conflict-like scenarios.

This analysis seeks to examine Zapad from the perspectives of both long-term preparations

and short-term military operations. The first chapter introduces Zapad and other Russian command-staff exercises. It also looks at the 'war scares' associated with this particular exercise and compares the 2017 and 2021 contexts for Zapad.

The second chapter describes the scenario for Zapad-2021. The third chapter focuses on the broader military and civil exercises conducted in the weeks leading up to the active phase of Zapad-2021. From a Russian perspective, these fall within the period during which Russia and Belarus would need to mobilise to ensure that their armed forces could deter, and if necessary, defend against an attack on their territories. At the same time, drills are also conducted in other military districts (MD), which ultimately support (either directly or indirectly) the operations against NATO exercised during Zapad.

Zapad tests the abilities of the Russian and Belarusian armed forces to conduct operations across the entire spectrum of conventional warfare

The fourth chapter analyses the active phase of Zapad-2021, while the fifth draws initial conclusions from the exercise and identifies lessons for NATO. The analysis closes with a general conclusion.

1. AN INTRODUCTION TO ZAPAD

Every year in late summer, Russia conducts a strategic command-staff exercise—the largest exercise of the year. It marks the peak of the summer training schedule and tests how the Russian armed forces and Russian state in general would cope in a regional conflict. The exercise rotates between MDs and is led by the respective JSC headquarters.¹ In 2018, the Eastern MD organised the Vostok-2018 exercise. In 2019, the Central MD held Centre-

¹ JSCs have operational control of all district-based forces (apart from Strategic Rocket Forces) to facilitate joint and combined-arms military operations on a given axis.

2019, and in 2020, Kavkaz-2020 was conducted in the Southern MD.

Each exercise has a unique theme. Vostok has, despite the official Russian narrative, historically practised combined-arms, high-tempo operations against China. The role of the Central MD is that of a swing or reserve MD, providing additional manpower and equipment to any district engaged in combat operations. The Centre exercise thus practices deployments over long distances and strategic mobility. The Southern MD focuses on several threats. There is still a concern, albeit significantly lower than in the mid-2000s, that terrorist cells could penetrate Russia's borders from the south and carry out attacks on civilian targets. Southern MD-based forces practise operations against these threats, as well as conventional operations against Georgia and Ukraine. Also, in

Zapad has historically had an anti-NATO character

line with the Zapad narrative, units from southern Russia train for operations against sophisticated conventional opposing forces, such as NATO, that could attack Russia from the Black Sea.

Zapad has historically had an anti-NATO character. The first two exercises of the series, conducted in 1981 and 1984, were intended to be the largest exercises conducted by the Soviet Union. The third iteration occurred in 1999 at the height of NATO-Russia tension over the Kosovo crisis. The fourth Zapad was organised in 2009, a year after the Russian invasion of Georgia.² The four-year rotational cycle initiated at this point saw Zapad also organised in 2013 and 2017.

² Zapad-2009 reportedly simulated a pre-emptive nuclear strike on Poland, but this information is derived from a single source and has never been independently verified. See Bruno Tertrais, "[Does Russia really include limited nuclear strikes in its large-scale military exercises?](#)" The Survival Editors' Blog, 15 February 2018.

1.1. ZAPAD WAR SCARES

Zapad tends to generate war scares. Due to the nature of the exercise, the capabilities tested and the focus on NATO, there have been periodic concerns that Zapad may mask a build-up of Russian troops whose real goal is to invade neighbouring countries—Ukraine, Belarus or the Baltic states.³ While the Russian

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General Staff likely has plans for offensive operations against its neighbours, it is perhaps questionable that it would execute such plans during highly publicised, and therefore observed, military exercises such as Zapad.

Nonetheless, there are historical examples of the Soviet Union and Russia using the cover of military exercises to do just that. For instance, the Warsaw Pact countries conducted exercises in the months and weeks before the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.⁴ Also, in early 2014 Russia conducted a large-scale readiness exercise in the WMD that masked the deployment of special and airborne forces into Crimea.⁵

Russia also conducted the Kavkaz-2008 exercise just ahead of the invasion of Georgia in 2008. The exercise officially ended on 4 August, a week before "a sustained Georgian artillery attack struck the town of Tskhinvali" in South Ossetia.⁶ Yet, despite the occurrence of the exercise so close to the war, there is evidence

³ "[Who's Afraid of Zapad 2017](#)," Warsaw Institute, 29 August 2017; Roger McDermott, "[Zapad 2017 and the Dangers of Crying Wolf](#)," Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 14, Issue 105, 5 September 2017.

⁴ Cynthia Grabo, "[Soviet Deception in the Czechoslovak Crisis](#)," Central Intelligence Agency Historical review Program, Volume 14, (Spring 1970), 29-32.

⁵ Konrad Muzyka, "[When Russia Goes to War](#)," International Centre for Defence and Security Analysis, January 2020, 9.

⁶ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, "[Report, Volume I](#)," September 2009, 10.

that as Kavkaz-2008 ended, Russian units and personnel began returning to their bases and that the poor performance of the Russian armed forces in the war caught Moscow by surprise.⁷

Numerous concerns were thus raised during Zapad-2017 about a potential Russian attack on Belarus or the Baltic states.⁸ The entire narrative seems to have rested on one story about logistical preparations for the exercise claiming that the Russian armed forces had rented 4 162 flat rail cars to deliver military cargo to Belarus (and back), which was presumed to allow the deployment of an additional motor rifle division. Even if deployed, this extra division would certainly have been too small to change Russia's military posture from defensive to offensive. At best this should have been regarded as a signalling effort, rather than a genuine attempt to conduct offensive operations against a neighbouring state.

At the same time, in late August and early September, Russia also deployed battalion tactical group (BTG) formations into Belarus. Although highly manoeuvrable, BTGs are also too small and have insufficient firepower for the conduct of high-tempo operations against NATO forces such as the Polish army, or the armed forces of the Baltic states supported by NATO's enhanced Forward Presence.

The context For Zapad-2021 was starkly different. In March 2021, Ukraine had moved additional military equipment towards the eastern parts of the country, seemingly in response to an uptick in ceasefire violations that resulted in the deaths of Ukrainian soldiers and increased sightings of advanced Russian weaponry in Donbas.⁹ At the time, Ukrainian Chief of the General Staff, Colonel-General Ruslan Khomchak, commented that while Kyiv

could retake Donbas, such an operation would undoubtedly trigger a Russian response.¹⁰

Also in March, and presumably in response to these Ukrainian actions, the Russian armed forces began what turned out to be the largest mobility exercise not directly connected to any ongoing military operation since the end of the Cold War. Within a few weeks, Moscow had deployed sizable elements belonging to the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) to the Pogonovo Training Range, south of Voronezh. Simultaneously, airborne subunits and elements of the 58th CAA were deployed to the Opuk Training Range in Crimea, and a portion of the 58th CAA's artillery assets was deployed to Novoozerne, also in Crimea.

By mid-April, Russia had elements of four CAAs deployed near Ukraine with additional airborne units in Crimea.¹¹ Elements of the 90th Tank Division (one BTG) and a surface-to-surface missile battalion from the Iskander-equipped 119th Missile Brigade were a particularly noteworthy presence. Altogether, the 41st CAA deployed five BTGs to Pogonovo supported by the abovementioned Iskander subunit, a Buk-M3 surface to air missile (SAM) system, and two artillery battalions.

The Russian force posture that emerged in late March and early April thus suggested preparations for multi-front combat operations against Ukraine. Even if the personnel deployed were no longer present after Zapad, their equipment remained at Pogonovo until mid-October when it was transferred to Yelnya, near Smolensk.¹²

Although Pogonovo was officially listed as one of the ranges where Zapad would take place, most of the assets sent there remained unoccupied throughout the exercise. Notable exceptions were the BTG from the 90th Tank

⁷ C W Blandy, [Provocation, Deception, Entrapment: The Russo-Georgian Five Day War](#), Advanced Research Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Caucasus Series 09/01, March 2009, 7; Michael Kofman, ["Russian Performance In The Russo-Georgian War Revisited,"](#) War on the Rocks, 4 September 2018.

⁸ McDermott, "Zapad 2017".

⁹ Andrew E Kramer, ["Fighting Escalates in Eastern Ukraine, Signaling the End to Another Cease-Fire,"](#) The New York Times, 30 March 2021.

¹⁰ Talha Yavuz, ["Ukraine denies it is 'preparing to attack Donbas',"](#) Anadolu Agency, 9 April 2021; ["Ukraine's military chief elaborates on risks of offensive to retake Donbas,"](#) Unian Information Agency, 30 March 2021.

¹¹ This included the 41st, 58th, 8th and 20th CAAs. The 8th CAA is deployed near eastern Ukraine and covers the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The 20th CAA is responsible for the north-eastern flank with its units scattered from Smolensk to Voronezh.

¹² Konrad Muzyka, ["Yelnya Barracks – Analysing Maxar's image,"](#) Rochan Consulting, 2 November 2021.

Division and the Buk-M3 battalion that were deployed to Mulino and Ashuluk respectively. As of early December 2021, the role of units deployed first to Pogonovo and then to Yelnya remained unclear. Although their presence was more likely related to the developing situation around Ukraine, than Zapad as such, Zapad is very broad in scope and seemingly unrelated drills, for example in 2021 in the Southern Military District (SMD), were actually integral components of the exercise.

2. ZAPAD-2021 SCENARIO

2.1. OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Belarusian and, especially, the Russian side made little effort to provide information about the goals of Zapad. The Belarusian Chief of the General Staff, Major General Viktor Gulevich, held a press conference in late August to present the political background of the exercise, but failed to provide detailed information. According to Gulevich, the theme of the exercise was how groupings of forces might be used to ensure the military security of the Union State. He added that Zapad aimed to

The Belarusian and, especially, the Russian side made little effort to provide information about the goals of Zapad

enhance the training of troops from the regional grouping of forces that provides security in eastern Europe. Zapad had a defensive character, and sought to strengthen regional security and Belarusian adherence to allied obligations with the Russian Federation.

Major General Yevgeny Ilyin, First Deputy Head of the Main Directorate of International Military Cooperation of the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), claimed on 20 August that Zapad would involve 200 000 personnel, but again offered no information on the operational scenario.¹³

¹³ [“Около 200 тыс. военных примут участие в стратегических учениях «Запад-2021»](#) [About 200 thousand soldiers will take part in the strategic exercises ‘Zapad-2021’],” *Izvestia*, 20 August 2021.

The Belarusian MoD reported in late July that the first Russian combat units had begun to arrive in Belarus. By mid-August Russia had deployed three BTGs to Belarus with additional units moving in until the active phase of Zapad started on 10 September. Combat and support units also began arriving in the Mulino Training Range near Nizhny Novgorod.¹⁴ Belarus too called up reservists and created at least one reserve motor rifle battalion.¹⁵ In August, Belarusian units began to move to various training ranges in mainland Russia, and to Sary Shagan in Kazakhstan.¹⁶

It was not until a day before the exercise started, that Belarusian press outlet Smartpress published detailed information about Zapad from a Belarusian MoD-organised press conference. As Smartpress was the sole publisher of this information, it was most likely a controlled leak by the Belarusian MoD.

2.2. ZAPAD GEOGRAPHY

For command and staff exercises, the Russian General Staff uses exercise geographies that closely represent real countries. Three new fictitious countries were created in 2017 and used again in 2021. Vesbaria and Lubenia are, essentially, Lithuania and Poland, while Veishnoria represents the Grodno region of north-western Belarus. Compared with other parts of the country, Grodno is more nationalistic and predominantly Roman Catholic. More importantly, the fictitious Veishnoria region overlaps areas that predominantly supported Alexander Lukashenko’s opponent during the 1994 presidential elections. Historically and culturally the region has maintained close links with Poland and Lithuania and includes citizens of Polish descent among its population. The

¹⁴ Including elements of the 90th Tank Division and 27th Motor Rifle Brigade.

¹⁵ [“Во второй день учения «Запад-2021» на полигоне Обуз-Лесновский территориальные войска отражали наступление условного противника](#) [On the second day of the Zapad-2021 exercise at the Obuz-Lesnovsky training ground, territorial troops repulsed the offensive of the mock enemy],” *Sb.by*, 11 September 2021.

¹⁶ [“Беларусские ракетчики отстреляются в Казахстане во время «Запад-2021»](#) [Belarusian missilemen shoot back in Kazakhstan during Zapad-2021],” *Reform.by*, 27 August 2021.

scenario thus had an ‘enemy within’ element, with forces from Veishnoria attacking mainland Belarus and Russia, most likely with NATO support, in the hope of seceding from the Union State.

Exercise Unit Designations

Maps that depicted operational plans and scenarios to be practised during the exercise included elements such as the Russian 11th Tank Army, 51st CAA, and 30th CAA. These are not real Russian units. The Russian and Belarusian armed forces added 10 to every unit number to create exercise units. Thus, for example the exercise’s 11th GTA represented the real 1st GTA and the 51st and 30th CAAs represented the 41st and the 20th CAAs.¹⁷

According to the Polish defence analyst Jarosław Ciślak, the real numbers of military units taking part in exercises have, since Soviet times, been increased by a set value, which may be different for different types of unit, but remains constant throughout the exercise.

For clarity, this analysis uses only the real numbers of units engaged in Zapad-2021.

In real life, Grodno, with the active support of its local government, turned out to be the most anti-Lukashenko region during the summer 2020 protests.¹⁸ Reflecting the Zapad-2021 scenario, Belarusian armed forces exercises

The scenario thus had an ‘enemy within’ element, with forces from Veishnoria attacking mainland Belarus and Russia

took place around Grodno during this period, aimed at preparing forces for (defensive) actions in the Grodno tactical direction.¹⁹

¹⁷ Konrad Muzyka, “[Zapad-2021 Strategic-operational exercise – part 15 \(Unit numbers\)](#),” Rochan Consulting, 22 September 2021.

¹⁸ Ivan Nechepurenko and Anton Troianovski, “[In Belarus Town, People Tasted a Bite of Freedom. It Lasted 2 Days](#),” The New York Times, 21 September 2021.

¹⁹ Konrad Muzyka, “[IMINT Analysis – Grodno Training Range](#),” Rochan Consulting, 28 August 2020.

The scenario also featured new notional combatants, created for the exercise. The northern group of states included the Republic of Polesie, denoting Belarus, and the Central Federation, which represented the Russian Federation.²⁰ The western group comprised three states—Nyaris, Pomorie and the Polar Republic—and was also supported by international terrorist organisations.²¹

2.3. THE EXERCISE NARRATIVE

The Zapad-2021 scenario was based on the idea that Poland and Lithuania, supported by other NATO forces, could invade Belarus to overthrow Lukashenko. It was thus more concrete than the 2017 iteration, although both featured anti-Belarusian actions. There were, however, notable changes in the force structure deployed to Belarus by the Central Federation (Russia). In 2017 this was predominantly based around the 6th Tank Brigade with additional artillery support. In 2021 the Federation envisaged the deployment of as many as three army groupings, including one tank army, providing significantly greater manoeuvrability and, above all, firepower.

According to the exercise, the western group of states had organised provocations that sought to expand its own influence in the region and deprive the Central Federation of a strategic partner and military ally, the Republic of Polesie. The western group also intended to change the regime in Polesie and to annex its western parts to Nyaris through hybrid means. If this coup and civil war did not gain traction, the western group would begin a military operation against Polesie. The northern group’s aim was to ensure stability in the region and, according to the norms of international law, preserve territorial integrity and the independence of their union state.

²⁰ Polesie is a real geographical region covering parts of southern Belarus, northern Ukraine, Poland, and Russia.

²¹ In Russian, the Nyaris (or Viliya) river rises in northern Belarus passes through Vilnius and flows into the Neman River; Pomorie is the Polish Pomorze—the southern shore of the Baltic Sea in Poland and Germany; the Polar Republic is also part of Poland.



Figure 1. Exercise map provided at Belarusian Ministry of Defence press conference. Source: Smartpress.²³

The western group failed to achieve its objectives and forward deployed combat forces to the border with Polesie, disguised as exercises. On 1 September, they issued an ultimatum demanding the resignation of the top leadership of Polesie and the immediate withdrawal of all formations of the armed forces of the Central Federation from Polesie's territory. This was rejected.

From 2-5 of September, the western group conducted five air and missile strikes on Polesie and the Central Federation.²² On the 6th, it began a ground offensive into Polesie which, by 10 September, had advanced 150 kilometres. During this period, the northern group conducted defensive manoeuvres, generated the regional group of forces and repelled airstrikes. At this time, the 1st Tank Army and 41st CAA were already in Polesie, and the 20th CAA was preparing to enter.

²² The strikes were aimed at specific targets: the concentration areas of the 11th Tank Army and 51st CAA, the airbase in Baranovichi, S-300 batteries around Minsk, Machulishchi Air Base, the 43rd Communications Centre of the Russian Navy in Vileyka, and the railway junction in Luninets. Five of these targets were reportedly attacked by the western coalition; in reality, a NATO attack on Belarus and Russia would entail hundreds, if not thousands, of strikes.

The defensive stage of Zapad followed. It was primarily conducted on training ranges in Belarus and lasted three days, 10-12 September. Air defence training took place at the Ashuluk Training Range in Russia under the disguise of the Commonwealth of Independent States Combat Commonwealth-2021 exercise. This involved several Russian and Belarusian air defence units and sought to test interoperability as units engaged numerous air threats including high- and low-altitude targets and ballistic missiles "in the full range of altitudes and speeds."²⁴

During the defensive phase, the Central Federation and Polesie halted the offensive and prepared for a counteroffensive which took place at the Mulino Training Range in Russia from 13-16 September.

²³ "Республика Пolesье и Центральная Федерация будут обороняться от "Западных" и террористов: как пройдет учение "Запад-2021" [The Republic of Polesie and the Central Federation will defend against the "West" and terrorists: how will the exercise "Zapad-2021" proceed]" Smartpress, 9 September 2021.

²⁴ The exercise also involved personnel from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Ministry of Defence (Russia), "Участники совместного учения «Боевое Содружество-2021» заступили на боевое дежурство по ПВО [Participants of the joint exercise 'Combat Commonwealth-2021' took up combat duty in air defence]," Mil.ru, 30 August 2021.

The exercise counteroffensive took place on four axes of advance along main rail lines and roads against the defensive line of the northern group of countries (see Figure 1). The 41st CAA moved along two axes: one through Baranovichi towards Brest; and the second from Baranovichi to Slonim, Volkovsk and Bialystok. To the north, the 1st GTA also moved along two axes: one from Maladzyechna through Lida and Grodno towards Augustów in Poland; and the second axis from Vilnius through Marijampolė towards Kybartai.

In total, the exercise was set to take place at 11 training ranges in Russia and Belarus, although the number of areas where exercise-related drills took place was undoubtedly higher.

2.4. ZAPAD-2021 AS AN INFORMATION OPERATION

The map published by Smartpress presented the counter-offensive part of the exercise.²⁵ But it also contained references that together amount to a form of information provocation by the Russian side. For example, the area around the city of Białystok in contemporary Poland, which on the map belonged to Polesie, came under Soviet occupation in 1939 when Soviet forces entered Poland following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Vilnius and its surroundings were also included as part of Polesie. The purpose may have been to provoke Polish and Lithuanian anti-Russian sentiments, a form of signalling or strategic communication, which sought to anger Warsaw and Vilnius.

In addition, this phase of the exercise was broadly suggestive—in its notional geography and lines of advance of main formations—of an operation to close the Suwałki corridor from the south and surround the Polish capital from the north and south. The operation implied would involve enough forces to quickly achieve tactical and operational success by cutting off the Baltic states, linking with Kaliningrad, and destroying the Polish defence.

²⁵ “Республика Пolesье и Центральная Федерация будут обороняться от “Западных” и террористов: как пройдет учение “Запад-2021” [The Republic of Polesie and the Central Federation will defend against the ‘Western group’ and terrorists: exercise ‘Zapad-2021’],” Smartpress, 9 September 2021.

However, this operation would be unlikely in reality. It is doubtful, for example, that Russia would go to war against Poland and NATO with the 41st CAA as a first echelon force, especially

This phase of the exercise was broadly suggestive of an operation to close the Suwałki corridor from the south and surround the Polish capital

as the much more capable 20th CAA is already deployed near Belarus. The role of the 1st GTA in the implied operation is also implausible, as the terrain is unsuitable for mechanised and armoured formations.

The Zapad-2021 scenario should thus be seen, in part, as an information operation, rather than an indicator of Russian plans to attack Poland. Russia’s strategic exercises seek to test interoperability, command and control, unit cohesion, synchronisation, and procedures. Units need to be able to effectively conduct defensive and offensive operations regardless of where they find themselves and terrain is simply the background.

3. WIDER ZAPAD

The Russian military dictionary defines the period of threat as “a time interval of varying length immediately preceding the start of a large-scale (regional) war”. This period is characterised by a sharp deterioration in relations between the parties, which can be used by a Russian adversary to complete military preparations for war. During this period, of typically several weeks, Russia will take steps to prepare for war. These can include “introduction of martial law or a state of emergency in the country or on part of its territory, full or partial strategic deployment of the armed forces, organisation and coordinated conduct of political, diplomatic, informational, economic and other types of struggle, adoption and implementation of decisions on the preparation and conduct of military operations, or the transfer of the country’s economy, its branches and organisations of transport and

communications to work in wartime conditions.”²⁶

Ahead of Zapad-2021, between late July and early September, Russia tested parts of these state-level and armed forces capabilities.

The exercise tempo of the Russian armed forces was heightened throughout August and early September and sought to test the entire range of warfighting capabilities, rear support services and mobility. For instance, artillery units conducted strikes against command posts and a missile brigade conducted electronic Iskander launches against similar targets.²⁷ Airborne units conducted landings behind enemy lines, while logistics services established areas for equipment and weapons repair.²⁸ South of Mulino, four bridges were established on the Klyazma River to test river crossing capabilities—part of one was purposefully placed underwater to give the impression that it had been damaged and was out of use.²⁹

²⁶ Ministry of Defence (Russia), “[Угрожаемый период](#) [Period of Threat],” [encyclopedia.mil.ru](#).

²⁷ Ministry of Defence (Russia), “[Артиллеристы ЗВО на учении в Тамбовской и Нижегородской областях учились уничтожать укрепленные пункты управления противника](#) [The artillerymen of the Western Military District learned to destroy fortified enemy command posts in an exercise in the Tambov and Nizhny Novgorod regions],” [Mil.ru](#), 7 September 2021; Ministry of Defence (Russia), “[В Ленинградской области расчеты ОТРК «Искандер» ЗВО провели ночные электронные пуски ракет по заглубленным командным пунктам условного противника](#) [In the Leningrad region, crews of the Iskander WMD operational tactical missile complex conducted night electronic missile launches at the command posts of a simulated enemy],” [Mil.ru](#), 6 September 2021.

²⁸ “[Под Нижним Новгородом разведчики танковой армии ЗВО десантировались в тыл условного противника с высоты более 1,5 км](#) [Near Nizhny Novgorod, scouts of the WMD tank army parachuted into the rear of the exercise enemy from a height of more than 1.5 km],” [Mil.ru](#), 1 September 2021; Ministry of Defence (Russia), “[В Нижегородской области в ходе учений был развернут район комплексного восстановления вооружения](#) [In the Nizhny Novgorod region, during exercises, an area for complex repairs to weapons was established],” [Mil.ru](#), 28 August 2021.

²⁹ Ministry of Defence (Russia), “[Во Владимирской области военнослужащие ЗВО навели мост через реку Клязьма](#) [In the Vladimir region, military personnel of the Western Military District built a bridge over the Klyazma River],” [Mil.ru](#), 28 August 2021.

There was also much military activity in Transnistria, the unrecognised breakaway region of Moldova, including an exercise involving a motor rifle battalion, 350 military personnel and 30 pieces of equipment.³⁰

Zapad encompasses various other exercises including logistics, military-civil, and National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*), that fall into the general scenario of armed confrontation with NATO.

The exercise tempo of the Russian armed forces was heightened throughout August

For instance, on 24 August, a logistics exercise was conducted in a port in Vyborg. The scenario assumed that the military authorities had taken over a civilian port and commandeered civilian cargo vessels and ferries to transport military equipment and personnel. Protective cover was provided by two Mi-28N attack helicopters, a Pantsir-S1 short-range air defence system, BTR-80s, and several Raptor-class patrol boats. A field hospital was also deployed. The exercise involved border guards, customs officers, personnel from the Ministry of Emergency Situations and Ministry of Internal Affairs, and military personnel. As part of the exercise, around 10 T-72B3Ms, BM-21s, and some Ural trucks were loaded onto the Kholmogory General Cargo ship and moved to Kaliningrad, probably rehearsing the withdrawal of equipment from the storage facilities of the WMD’s 1060th Material-Technical Support Centre to reinforce Kaliningrad in times of tension.

Another example is the Zashchita-2021 exercise around Arkhangelsk and Severodvinsk, where a joint emergency group was deployed in response to a simulated radiation hazard at the Belomorsk naval base. The group comprised personnel from the Russian state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Emergency Situations,

³⁰ Ministry of Defence (Russia), “[В Оперативной группе российских войск в Приднестровье начался полевой выход мотострелкового батальона](#) [A field exit of a motorized rifle battalion began in the Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria]” [Mil.ru](#), 6 September 2021.

Sevmash and Zvyozdochka shipyards, and local government employees.

A similar exercise was held near Kursk where the 27th NBC Brigade was deployed to Kurchatov, to deal with a simulated accident at the Kursk nuclear power plant.³¹ The drill involved 700 personnel from the armed forces, the National Guard, the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of the Consequences of Natural Disasters, and from the Kursk region administration. One of the fundamental goals of the event was to rehearse interdepartmental coordination.

A further example is the Zaslou-2021 exercise, an 18-day National Guard drill in the Central, Volga and Southern Federal Districts, which sought to test the readiness of the force to neutralise threats to state and public security.³² These forces are tasked with providing rear-area security, but also conduct kinetic operations, usually against 'armed bandits' and 'terrorists'. In a combat scenario, they can take the role of a highly capable third-echelon force tasked with controlling occupied territories and conducting low-level operations against insurgents. Their tasks in Zaslou-2021 included protecting strategically important state sites, neutralising armed groups, conducting search operations, and retaking occupied buildings.³³ The exercise also gathered 4 000 National Guard personnel and 700 pieces of equipment (including 12 Mi-8, Mi-24, and Mi-26 combat and transport helicopters, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), armoured vehicles, and special engineering equipment) at the Kadamovsky training ground near Rostov. The scenario here involved retaking an artillery weapon

warehouse and a small settlement from a large detachment of terrorists. Over a period of about two hours, personnel used mortars and fire support assets, deployed mobile assault groups to destroy opposing forces evacuated civilians, and processed detainees.³⁴

Forces from other MDs are engaged in a wider Zapad scenario

One of the less obvious training activities related to Zapad concerned the testing of a new financial system to support military units during wartime when IT systems may not function.³⁵

3.1. EXERCISES IN THE SOUTHERN MILITARY DISTRICT

While Zapad tests Russian and Belarusian warfighting capabilities in the European theatre of war, forces from other MDs are engaged in a wider Zapad scenario. For instance, in August elements of the 61st Naval Infantry Brigade from the Northern MD were deployed to Kaliningrad to practise operations with the local 336th Naval Infantry Brigade. A Cossack territorial defence company of the mobilisation reserve was also airlifted from Rostov to Kaliningrad.³⁶

A command and staff exercise held in the SMD in the days leading up to Zapad perfectly illustrated the notion that preparations for a conflict with NATO will involve several MDs. Other districts are additional (second echelon) force providers.

According to the Russian MoD, in late August many missiles and artillery rounds were distributed from one of the arsenals located in the SMD in conditions as close to combat as possible. This drill was a part of a larger logistics

³¹ Антон Алексеев, ["Спецобработка – дело профессионалов"](#) [Special processing is the business of professionals], "Красная звезда", 2 August 2021.

³² ["Росгвардия ликвидировала условную бандгруппу в Новоуральске в ходе учений 'Заслон-2021'"](#) [Rosgvardia liquidated a bandit group in Novouralsk during exercise 'Zaslou-2021'], "Tass", 21 July 2021.

³³ ["Спецназ Росгвардии провел тренировку в рамках учений «Заслон - 2021» в Подмоскowie"](#) [Special Forces of the Russian Guard held a training session as part of exercise 'Zaslou-2021' in the Moscow region], "Moscow Region Government", 22 July 2021; ["Тяжело в учении: в Приморье объявлен «Заслон-2021»"](#) [Hard training: 'Zaslou-2021' announced in Primorye], "Primgazeta.ru", 2 August 2021.

³⁴ ["Под Ростовом в учениях "Заслон-2021" участвовали 700 единиц техники"](#) [Near Rostov, 700 units of equipment took part in the exercises 'Zaslou-2021'], "Российская Газета", 29 July 2021.

³⁵ Андрей Гавриленко, ["Порядок, учёт, контроль..."](#) [Order, accounting, control ...], "Красная звезда", 11 August 2021.

³⁶ ["Казачья рота территориальной обороны вернулась с предварительного этапа российско-белорусских учений «Запад 2021»"](#) [Cossack territorial defence company returned from the preliminary stage of the Russian-Belarusian exercises 'Zapad 2021'], "Official Portal of the Government of the Rostov Region", 27 August 2021.

exercise organised in the SMD involving 10 000 personnel and 25 training ranges.³⁷ Simultaneously, air defence assets were busy repelling airstrikes, while rear services organised support for troops deployed at training grounds providing them with equipment, and repair and evacuation capability.³⁸ New command posts were also established to provide secure communications between commanders and front-line formations.³⁹ As part of the exercise around 250 main battle tanks (probably T-62s) were withdrawn from a storage and maintenance base in Kamensk-Shakhtinskiy, presumably to form new tank units.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[В ходе учения подразделений МТО ЮВО была организована массовая выдача ракет и артиллерийских боеприпасов](#) [A mass distribution of missiles and artillery ammunition was organised during an exercise of the units of the logistics department of the SMD]," Mil.ru, 26 August 2021.

³⁸ Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[Расчеты ЗРС С-300ПМ и ЗРПК «Панцирь-С1» защитили военный аэродром от бомбардировщиков условного противника](#) [Crews of the S-300PM air defence missile systems and the Pantsir-S1 air defence missile system defended military airfield from the bombers of a simulated enemy]," Mil.ru, 24 August 2021; Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[В Абхазии тыловики ЮВО обеспечили полную автономность войск в полевых условиях](#) [In Abkhazia, the rear servicemen of the Southern Military District ensured full autonomy of troops in the field]," Mil.ru, 24 August 2021 (this also included standing up a field artillery depot, a mobile bakery, food and clothing warehouses, a bath and laundry plant, a field fuel depot and a drinking water reserve storage facility: Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[Районы тылового обеспечения будут развернуты на спецучении соединения МТО ЮВО](#) [Logistics support areas will be deployed for special training of the SMD material-technical supply system]," Mil.ru, 18 August 2021; Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[На специальном учении технические ракетные базы ЮВО обеспечат боеприпасами войска](#) [At a special exercise, technical missile bases of the Southern Military District will provide troops with ammunition]," Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[Подразделения МТО ЮВО в полевых условиях отработали эвакуацию и ремонт техники](#) [Subdivisions of MTO SMD practised the evacuation and repair of equipment in the field]," Mil.ru, 27 August 2021.

³⁹ Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[Специалисты связи и РЭБ Южного военного округа организовали защищенные системы управления войсками](#) [Communications and electronic warfare specialists of the Southern Military District organised protected command and control systems]," Mil.ru, 10 September 2021.

⁴⁰ This number is enough to stand up slightly less than three tank regiments, although the quality of these tanks leaves much to be desired to due to their age and obsolete combat capability.

Combat instruction started in early September and involved Iskander missile strikes, suppression of opposing forces' command and control channels, deployment of aerosol teams as parts of BTGs to hide their movement, and deployment of motorised personnel into the battle via helicopter airlift. Forces practiced combined arms operations with air support against superior forces.⁴¹

The active phase of the drills, which ended on the 18th of September, involved at least 10 000 ground force personnel (12 BTGs) and additional soldiers from the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla.⁴² Logistics preparations were also made in anticipation of a 'strategic operation', which presumably began in early September.⁴³

⁴¹ Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[Военнослужащие ЮВО из Северной Осетии совершают марш на полигон в Ставропольском крае в рамках тактического учения](#) [Servicemen of the Southern Military District from North Ossetia march to the training ground in the Stavropol Territory as part of a tactical exercise]," Mil.ru, 1 September 2021; Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[В практику подготовки войск ЮВО введены новые способы, повышающие боевую эффективность](#) [New methods have been introduced into the practice of training the troops of the Southern Military District that increase combat effectiveness]," Mil.ru, 3 September 2021; "[Расчеты термодымовых машин ЮВО скрыли аэрозольной завесой командный пункт от ракет условного противника на полигоне Капустин Яр](#) [The Southern Military District's thermo-smoke machines concealed the command post with an aerosol curtain from the imaginary enemy's missiles at the Kapustin Yar range]," Mil.ru, 13 September 2021; Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[Мотострелки ЮВО с помощью воздушного эшелона отразили массированный удар «противника» в Ростовской области](#) [Motorised riflemen of the Southern Military District repelled a massive attack of the 'enemy' with the help of an air echelon in the Rostov region]," Mi.ru, 7 September 2021.

⁴² Ministry of Defence (Russia), "[В двустороннем полковом учении мотострелков и танкистов 150-й дивизии ЮВО впервые задействовали тактические группы родов войск](#) [Tactical groups of combat arms were used for the first time in the bilateral regimental exercise of motorized riflemen and tankmen of the 150th division of the Southern Military District]," Mil.ru, 19 September 2021.

⁴³ A strategic operation is a joint operation that integrates operational formations from different branches and arms to project power across the theatre of military action with the intent of attaining strategic effects. See: Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Dmitry Gorenburg, Mary Chesnut, Jeffrey Edmonds, and Julian Waller, "[Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts](#)," Center for Naval Analyses, August 2021, 4.

The activities conducted in the SMD in August and September thus amounted to nothing less than another Zapad-like exercise, albeit at a smaller scale. Even so, the numbers of units and troops involved in SMD-based exercises undoubtedly exceeded the number of Russian troops deployed to Belarus in July, August, and September. As such, in September the Russian armed forces were conducting at least three

The activities conducted in the SMD in August and September thus amounted to nothing less than another Zapad-like exercise

large-scale exercises linked to Zapad and in support of operations in the western theatre of military action.

4. THE ACTIVE PHASE OF ZAPAD

The active phase of Zapad is divided into two major phases. First, a defensive one, which aims to stop NATO's ground attack on Belarus and survive the first waves of air attacks on joint forces. Forward deployed forces are further reinforced, notably by airborne forces, which fulfil quick-reaction roles and are deployed to the most threatened areas of the front. At the same time, defending forces conduct a so-called manoeuvre defence including counterattacks along selected axes to disrupt offensive operations.⁴⁴

The second phase includes joint forces counteroffensive operations, the retaking of captured territory and the destruction of the enemy. Escalation is both horizontal and vertical in that it includes the deployment of additional ground forces to the frontline and the opening of new axes, alongside air force strikes on the NATO rear to

disrupt operations. The main events of the two phases are analysed below.⁴⁵

4.1. THE DEFENSIVE PHASE

The main goal of the northern group of forces was to hold a defensive line against an enemy offensive that had pushed up to 150 km into their territory. This involved manoeuvre defence operations to pull the attacking forces' initial echelons into an operational envelopment, deflect their air attack, and prepare the battlefield for a counterattack.⁴⁶

4.1.1. GROUND OPERATIONS

Units subordinated to the RGF included elements of Russia's 4th Tank Division and 76th Air Airborne Division, the Kazakh 35th Airborne Assault Brigade, and Belarusian mechanised formations (including a newly stood up motor rifle battalion). Russian and Belarusian units practised river crossing operations and, under the cover of air and artillery strikes, manoeuvred their way to the main defensive lines.

The ground elements held their lines throughout the defensive phase, rehearsing manoeuvre defence operations such as withdrawing to avoid being pinned down and to establish better fighting positions along echeloned lines. Some armour units engaged

In September the Russian armed forces were conducting at least three large-scale exercises linked to Zapad and in support of operations in the western theatre of military action

enemy forces to degrade their capabilities and took part in a complex set of coordinated strikes involving different elements of the joint forces. These included artillery assets such as the 2S3 Akatsiya, Urugan multiple launch rocket system, and BM-21 Grad. In support, aviation

⁴⁴ Michael Kofman, "[Zapad-2021: What To Expect From Russia's Strategic Military Exercise](#)," War on the Rocks, 8 September 2021

⁴⁵ A full analysis of the active phase of Zapad with a day-by-day description of activities can be found on Michael Kofman's [blog](#).

⁴⁶ Michael Kofman, "[Zapad 2021 – Day 4 \(September 13\)](#)," 16 September 2021

was tasked with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance activities and air-to-ground strikes across the entire depth of the opposing force's concentration area.

Electronic warfare (EW) featured heavily. An EW group from the 1st GTA suppressed the radio signals of opposing forces using active jamming assets: R-934BVM Borisoglebsk-2, R-330Zh Zhitel, and R-378BVM. EW units also conducted a radio-electronic strike against enemy lines of communication (radio) and suppressed about 100 enemy targets that could conduct radio-electronic operations against Russian communication assets.

While ground operations were predominantly focused on the defensive aspects of maintaining echeloned defence lines, reconnaissance units also penetrated enemy concentration areas to identify command and control points, an airbase, fuel and ammunition storage sites, railroad hubs for unloading equipment, and armour concentration sites. This data was relayed to supporting artillery and aviation for strikes conducted jointly by Russian and Belarusian aircraft.

Among the major events of the defensive phase, elements of the 4th Tank Division conducted an ambush to thwart an enemy offensive

A Belarusian special operations forces (SOF) unit rehearsed search and destroy operations, including locating an enemy base and capturing and killing personnel. In the days leading up to Zapad, another Belarusian SOF unit along with some personnel from the 98th Airborne Division had conducted an exercise focused on reconnaissance operations in unfamiliar terrain and the destruction of enemy objects.

Military police were predominantly tasked with destroying diversionary and saboteur groups that had infiltrated command posts and bases, and with managing vehicle columns.

Among the major events of the defensive phase, elements of the 4th Tank Division conducted an ambush to thwart an enemy

offensive. Separated from the main forces, camouflaged T-80 tanks fired at the advancing enemy columns, which were represented by moving targets.

Some 600 personnel from the 76th Air Assault Division conducted a night drop to seize an enemy airbase and defend it against a counterattack during the day.⁴⁷ This operation was heavily supported by air cover from Su-30SM, Ka-52, and Mi8AMTSh helicopters, and

Electronic warfare featured heavily

air control from A-50U AWACS and Il-22-SURT. Following the night drop, elements of the division marched 100 km to reach defensive lines.

At the same time, an airborne battalion from the 106th Airborne Division was getting ready for its own drop, and the 31st Air Assault Brigade was preparing to deploy via its robust tactical airlift capability. In Kaliningrad, elements of the 11th Army Corps undertook combined arms operations, which integrated Russian aerospace forces' air defence assets and Baltic Sea Fleet aviation, with the support of organic artillery pieces.

Finally, a Belarusian air assault battalion from the 38th Air Assault Brigade conducted a river crossing operation to flank opposing forces and cut off potential escape routes. This operation seems to be linked to one conducted the previous day by a Russian company from the 15th Motor Rifle Regiment. They too crossed a river and flanked the opposing force from an unexpected direction, occupying territory and blocking escape routes.

4.1.2. COMBAT AIR AND AIR DEFENCE OPERATIONS

Air operations during Zapad-2021 were mostly executed by the 6th Air and Air Defence Army, which conducted a dispersal drill and deployed to forward and operational airbases.

⁴⁷ The Division's units were heavily engaged during Zapad with at least three BTGs forward deployed (two in Belarus and one in Kaliningrad).

Altogether, this drill involved almost all types of Russian front-line and logistics units, including those operating and supporting Su-35S, Su-30SM, MiG-31BM, Su-34, Mi-8, Mi-35, Ka-52, and Mi-28N platforms. Russian aircraft also teamed up with Belarusian units and prepared for joint air operations.

The air forces conducted air patrols and airspace control operations, but also practised massed airstrikes against the attacking forces' command structures and critical infrastructure. For example, Tu-22M3 and Su-34 aircraft conducted bombing runs on armoured vehicles, concrete shelters, and camouflaged and fortified underground command posts. MiG-31s were used to intercept enemy UAVs and prevent strikes on Russian powerplants. Rotary-wing assets (Ka-52, Mi-28N, and Mi-8) were also engaged in aerial reconnaissance, and in destroying enemy forces and providing close air support for ground units.

Concurrently, air defence batteries repelled a range of targets. Russian and Belarusian SAMs operated within a unified air defence system, which included all forces, units, and assets tasked with early warning and air engagements. More importantly, these assets were controlled from one centre, which sought to automatically identify, distribute, and engage air threats. Coalition SAM units also exercised operations in a highly contested EW environment in conditions of radio suppression and radio jamming in various frequency ranges.

As part of the exercise, a Belarusian air defence unit (the 147th Air Defence Regiment) rehearsed the provision of anti-aircraft cover for ground troops, shielding them from air attacks. This included a live-fire exercise with missiles engaging high-speed, small-sized, and low-altitude air targets.

4.1.3. MARITIME OPERATIONS

Various Zapad activities also took place in the maritime domain. A Northern Fleet exercise, that began a few days before the active phase of Zapad, involved 8 000 servicemen, 800 pieces of military equipment, 120 drones, and 50 ships operating in the Murmansk region,

Barents, Kara, and Laptev Seas, and along the Frantz-Josef Land and New Siberian Islands. The goal was to defend sea lines of communications such as the northern sea route, to protect strategic economic infrastructure, and to train an expeditionary Arctic group whose task is to destroy diversionary forces and terrorists. This

Around 15 combat and support ships were deployed into the Baltic Sea where they undertook anti-submarine warfare, air defence, and counter-mine warfare operations

group also engaged an enemy surface action group in the Barents Sea using a mix of assets including sea- and ground-based platforms.

Around 15 combat and support ships were deployed into the Baltic Sea where they undertook anti-submarine warfare, air defence, and counter-mine warfare operations. Coastal missile forces conducted a simulated electronic launch against an approaching amphibious landing group, and Baltic Sea Fleet aviation intercepted cruise missiles with air-to-air missiles.

A bilateral exercise in Kaliningrad involved elements of the local 336th Naval Infantry Brigade and the Northern Fleet's 61st Naval Infantry Brigade.⁴⁸ The latter conducted an amphibious operation to seize a bridgehead, while the former defended beach areas. Although it has not been officially confirmed, it is likely that all naval, ground, and air operations conducted around the Kaliningrad were linked as one operation.

⁴⁸ In 2019 the Russian ground forces placed bilateral exercises at the centre of their combat training curriculum. Bilateralism, in this context, means pitting a (sub)unit commander against his counterpart during an exercise. This forces the commander to think unconventionally and seek new solutions on the battlefield. It also teaches the conduct of operations against a real opponent, in a real, not scripted, scenario

4.2 THE OFFENSIVE PHASE

The overarching goals of this phase were to conduct a counteroffensive, destroy opposing forces, and deploy tactical and tactical-operational airborne units to bypass enemy-controlled areas.⁴⁹

4.2.1. GROUND OPERATIONS

The main offensive scheme involved a 137th Airborne Regiment (106th Airborne Division) airborne attack as the opposing forces were deploying reserves into the battle. At the same time, the 104th Air Assault Regiment (76th Airborne Division) conducted manoeuvre defence operations to lure the enemy into an ambush where it was destroyed. Elements of the 45th Special Purpose Brigade were deployed to control aviation strikes and reconnoitre the landing zone in advance of the airborne assault.

A Belarusian T-72B tank unit also practised manoeuvre defence, together with Russian motor rifle detachments, weakening the opposing force and forcing their main body to move in an unfavourable direction, which had been heavily mined and was under constant

The main offensive scheme involved an airborne attack as the opposing forces were deploying reserves into the battle

artillery fire. According to the Russian MoD, 12 2S19 self-propelled howitzer battalions were simultaneously employed to slow down the enemy.⁵⁰

Combat engineers also set up a dummy tank battalion in defence, along with dummy Buk and S-300 units. This allowed them to lure enemy forces into attacking the wrong sector and mislead the enemy into attacking the dummy air defence battalion from the air. Meanwhile, a Russian missile brigade

⁴⁹ Michael Kofman, “Zapad 2021 – Day 4 (September 13),” 16 September 2021.

⁵⁰ The MoD claimed that 12 battalions altogether fielded 140 artillery pieces, which is incorrect. Organisationally, this number should be 216.

conducted a grouped missile strike against enemy command points and other critically important targets using 9M723 SRBM and 9M728 cruise missiles.

Despite these efforts, it seems that the Belarusian unit needed support to prevent breakthroughs by opposing forces and to fill gaps or reinforce key areas that might

The Belarusian unit needed support to reinforce key areas that might otherwise have been overrun

otherwise have been overrun. Consequently, the 31st Air Assault Brigade was deployed using Mi-8AMTSh transport helicopters with cover from Mi-24, Mi-28N, Ka-52 attack helicopters. The brigade brought in Sarmat-2 ground mobility vehicles to rapidly seize key positions and D-30 122mm howitzers for artillery support. These light units worked in conjunction with an air assault battalion mounted on BMD-4Ms, and a Belarusian tank BTG fielding T-72B1s.

In Kaliningrad, elements of the 76th Air Assault Division conducted a parachute drop to seize and defend a bridgehead, and to destroy forward enemy detachments. Su-27s of the Baltic Fleet had achieved air superiority, allowing military transport aviation to fly in, and bombed enemy ground forces before the landing party arrived.

Also in Kaliningrad, the 336th Naval Infantry Brigade assault detachments and supporting artillery engaged amphibious forces using 2S9 Nona 120 mm gun-mortar systems and BTR-82A armoured personnel carriers.

The 45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade and airborne units from Belarus and Kazakhstan conducted a night-time drop. After landing, paratroopers practised diversionary actions behind enemy lines, raiding, reconnaissance, and destroying objects in the enemy rear. Another airdrop exercise involved Belarusian and Russian paratroopers, who landed to block three bridges, preventing enemy forces from disrupting the deployment of the main Russian-Belarusian forces.

4.2.2. COMBAT AIR AND AIR DEFENCE OPERATIONS

Russia's Aerospace Forces executed their own massed aviation strike against enemy forces, involving more than 60 aircraft and a mix of tactical and long-range aviation. Su-24MR conducted strikes and reconnaissance of enemy targets, and Su-35S engaged in air-to-air combat against enemy fighters. Enemy air defences, deployed in starting positions, were destroyed with 48 high-explosive fragmentation bombs delivered by Su-25SM3. Four flights of Su-34 were also in support, destroying

Russia's Aerospace Forces executed their own massed aviation strike against enemy forces, involving more than 60 aircraft and a mix of tactical and long-range aviation

important targets further behind enemy lines with 500 kg bombs. Six Tu-22M3s from the 22nd Heavy Bomber Division flew sorties, dropping 1 500 kg bombs in pairs on enemy command centres from an altitude of 1 000-2 000 metres.

In air defence, an Osa-AKM-equipped battalion from the 147th Air Defence Regiment was joined by an S-300PS battalion from the 377th Air Defence Regiment in engaging enemy aircraft, helicopters, and UAVs. Emphasis was also placed on camouflaging firing positions and securing the air defence units' equipment.

4.2.3. MARITIME OPERATIONS

Elements of the Northern Fleet's 14th Army Corps, including the 200th Motor Rifle and the 80th Arctic Motor Rifle Brigade, practised amphibious operations against enemy forces on the Kola peninsula. The exercise included camouflage, the employment of EW assets to create false targets, and testing of signals and communications equipment. It also featured a mass artillery strike against opposing forces with 2s1 Gvozdika and mortars, manoeuvre defence, ambushes, combat engineer support, and elements of air defence. The Corps was also reinforced with airborne units.

On the sea, the Northern Fleet deployed a surface action group for anti-submarine warfare tasks and the nuclear-powered submarine K-266 Orel conducted a live-fire exercise with the P-700 Granit anti-ship missile. A second surface action group composed of the *Kirov* class battlecruiser, *Pyotr Velikiy*, and the *Slava* class guided-missile cruiser, *Marshal Ustinov*, engaged an amphibious landing group with P-700 Granit and P-1000 Vulkan cruise missiles.

In the Baltic, enemy saboteur seizure of moorings required the employment of elements of the 61st Naval Infantry Brigade (Northern Fleet) and the 313th PDSS (Russian Navy Special Forces) to recapture the areas and neutralise the threat.⁵¹ They were deployed by fast boat.

Another exercise involved preventing diversionary forces from penetrating the Baltic Fleet base during a loading operation. Kaliningrad's maritime channel was continuously patrolled by PDSS personnel in speedboats, by divers, and by unmanned underwater vehicles.

Zapad-2021 re-affirmed that Russia considers NATO to be its primary threat in the west and that Russia will protect its political-military interests in Belarus, including by deploying forces if necessary

5. LESSONS FOR NATO

It is possible to draw some initial conclusions for NATO based on what occurred in Zapad-2021, and its Russian and Belarusian press coverage. It re-affirmed that Russia considers NATO to be its primary threat in the west and that Russia will protect its political-military interests in Belarus, including by deploying forces if necessary. Zapad-2021 also reaffirmed

⁵¹ Each naval base has its own PDSS unit to conduct underwater combat, mining, and clearance diving operations.

the deep cooperation between the two countries in the military sphere, which spans the tactical, operational, and strategic aspects of joint operations.

The exercise showed that in a conflict with NATO, Russia would involve units from other military districts to ensure its supremacy, particularly in numbers, and significantly increase its chances of victory in the shortest possible time. To this end, Russia would also mobilise units from the Northern, Southern, and Central MDs.

In this regard, Zapad demonstrated once again that Russia would rely on rail transport to move its mechanised and armoured forces and that it can deploy and sustain a large part of its forces in the western military direction for as long as necessary. Elements of the 41st CAA were deployed at Pogonovo between March and

Zapad demonstrated once again that Russia can deploy and sustain a large part of its forces in the western military direction for as long as necessary

October, and lead elements of the 1st GTA arrived in Belarus almost two months before the active phase of Zapad commenced. Russia could maintain a sizable deployment in Belarus indefinitely should such an agreement be reached between Moscow and Minsk.

The larger issue is that for Russia, Belarus serves as a forward logistics hub. The country hosts around 30 storage facilities, providing everything needed for military operations against NATO.⁵² There is at least one known instance of equipment being moved from storage/factory in Russia into Belarus in preparation for Zapad, although the scale of these undertakings was undoubtedly larger. This approach increases the readiness of Russian forces that are earmarked for

⁵² This includes all equipment needed to sustain military operations: from tanks and fighting vehicles, through missiles and artillery shells, to fuel, lubricants, clothing and food.

operations in the western direction as they will be able to rely on full logistical support from Belarus.

Russian forces that are earmarked for operations in the western direction will be able to rely on full logistical support from Belarus

The Belarusian armed forces themselves are not expected to conduct independent operations, except perhaps for some SOF components. The ground forces will only fight as a part of a larger Russia-led grouping. One episode practised in Mulino during Zapad-2021 saw Russian heliborne mobile forces reinforcing a sector where the Belarusian 19th Mechanised Brigade was deployed. It is unclear to what extent this was a sign of a lack of faith in Belarusian capabilities, but it is apparent that Russia expects to have to reinforce the Belarusian armed forces and their interoperability with Russian units must thus be high.

Zapad-2021 also confirmed Russia's focus on airborne operations. When dropped with their organic equipment, Russia's airborne forces can conduct flanking raids, hold critical terrain until heavier ground force units arrive, or delay opposing forces' reserves.⁵³ In this regard, Zapad emphasised the role of the 31st Air Assault Brigade as a rapid reaction, mobile strike unit—a high-readiness, flexible force that can reinforce a part of the front. Meanwhile, the exercise showed that the addition of tank battalions to airborne forces divisions can allow them to be used in the front line in support of combined-arms operations.

This year's exercise did not appear to include a nuclear element. It featured only one Tu-95, which was used to test air defences in the WMD. There were some short-range ballistic missile launches, which could hypothetically

⁵³ Michael Kofman, "[Zapad 2021: What We Learned From Russia's Massive Military Drills](#)," Moscow Times, 23 September 2021

have included nuclear elements, but this has not been confirmed. However, there is certainly too little evidence to conclude that Moscow feels that its conventional capabilities are sufficient for the conduct of high-end conflict with NATO.

Manoeuvre defence seems to have been the main concept exercised during defensive operations. This seeks to force the enemy to move in a favourable direction from the Russian point of view, limit its movement through the employment of minefields, and then destroy its forces by artillery strikes. Although the number

Poland and the Baltic states have very limited capability to engage air targets at short range and no real capability to attack targets at medium ranges

of artillery units deployed to the exercise was likely exaggerated, Russia's artillery capabilities were again showcased at their full might. The armed forces can conduct concentrated strikes across the entire operational depth of the opposing forces' concentration and rear areas.

The Russian military leadership is apparently still concerned about massed missile-aviation strikes in the initial period of a war, which could cripple the Russian and Belarusian forces and degrade them to the point where a conventional military response would be ineffective.⁵⁴

Lastly, although NATO would enjoy superiority in air warfare, Russia is now exercising its own mass airstrikes against ground targets. Poland and the Baltic states have very limited capability to engage air targets at short range and no real capability to attack targets at medium ranges. They also have no capability for missile defence. The alliance should consider rapid deployment air defence exercises into Poland and the Baltic states to fill these capability gaps.

⁵⁴ Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Dmitry Gorenburg, Mary Chesnut, Jeffrey Edmonds, and Julian Waller, "[Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts](#)," Center for Naval Analyses, August 2021, 21.

CONCLUSIONS

In September 2021 Russia practised going to war with NATO. In the exercise scenario, the conflict itself was short but had been simmering for months. The Alliance had tried to change the regime in Belarus using hybrid means and, when it failed, resorted to attacking the country militarily. But using conventional capabilities only, the joint Russian-Belarusian group of forces managed to stop NATO's advance and conduct a successful counteroffensive to retake lost territories.

This all took place in a tense real-world international context. Russia-NATO relations are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War with little chance of normalisation in the short term. And in the aftermath of the August 2020 Presidential elections, the EU has sanctioned the Belarusian regime while vehemently supporting the Belarusian political opposition as the crackdown at home ensued.

Every single military unit from the WMD was likely involved in the active phase of Zapad or in preparations for it. The addition of elements from the Central MD and concurrent exercises the Southern MD further inflated the size of this strategic command and staff exercise. Zapad-2021 was thus probably the largest command and staff exercise conducted in the WMD since its creation in 2010 and the largest in western Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The deployments of highly mechanised and heavy elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army to

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Belarus eight weeks before the active phase commenced escalated tensions, even if they fitted in a larger Zapad scenario. The author estimates that the Russian armed forces deployed some 4-5 000 military personnel to Belarus in support of its operations during the

active phase even though, according to Belarusian authorities, the number was not to exceed 2 500.⁵⁵ This leads to a larger question on the size of Zapad. Did it really involve 200 000 military personnel as claimed by the Russian MoD?⁵⁶ Considering the Zapad-related activities in the Western, Southern and Northern MDs, which began in mid-July and involved not only armed forces personnel but also other government bodies and the National Guard, the figure is certainly plausible.

Compared to Zapad-2017, this year's exercise was less focused on civil defence aspects and apparently lacked nuclear elements. But on the conventional front, Zapad ticked all the boxes. Russia practised moving the country to a war footing. It forward-deployed combat units with all necessary logistics support, generated new formations, practised riverine and river crossing operations and activated all rear-support formations to ensure the steady flow of equipment to the frontlines.

Zapad-2021 has confirmed that the degree of integration between the Belarusian and Russian armed forces at all levels is high. From the planning and operational perspectives, Belarus is a part of the Russian WMD and in times of conflict, all Belarusian units will be subordinated to the Russian JSC West. The military integration processes, already very advanced, will accelerate. In late August, Russia deployed elements of its S-300PM2 SAM systems to Grodno, while some Su-30SMs flew to the airbase in Baranovichi. From NATO's perspective these movements mean little as Russian access to Belarusian territory, especially in times of crisis or war, would not be prohibited anyway. They are more reflective of the deepening defence integration of the two countries than they are of the current NATO-Russia relationship.

According to the Russian Minister of Defence, the new military doctrine of the Union State will be approved "in the near future", further

⁵⁵ Александр Холод, "[«Запад-2021» – учение оборонительного характера](#) ['Zapad-2021' is a defensive exercise]," [Exercise.mil.by](#), 6 August 2021.

⁵⁶ "[Russia, Belarus Launch Massive Military Drills as NATO Watches](#)," [The Moscow Times](#), 10 September 2021.

cementing the Russian-Belarusian axis in its attempts to retaliate against "military threats [and] political and economic pressure from Western countries."⁵⁷ Depending on what is included in the doctrine, the scope of Russian military activity in Belarus could increase in the short term, which could translate into increased Russian military presence in Belarus, a larger number of joint exercises, and an

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amalgamation of staffs. This will increase the readiness, force cohesion and interoperability of Russian and Belarusian forces in combat operations, not only against NATO but against any other regional enemy they could face.

⁵⁷ "[Новая Военная доктрина Союзного государства РФ и Белоруссии будет утверждена в ближайшее время - Шойгу](#) [New Military Doctrine of the Union State of the Russian Federation and Belarus will be approved in the near future - Shoigu]," [Interfax-AVN](#), 20 October 2021.

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