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ZAPAD 2017: Russia Demonstrating its Combat Readiness to NATO

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The joint strategic military exercise— Zapad-2017- was conducted between Russia and Belarus from 14-20 September 2017 in Belarus as well as in Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast and Russia's other north-western areas. 'Zapad' (which means West in Russian) is a joint military exercise that takes place every four years. The weeklong 2017 war games in particular have garnered huge international media attention and criticism from neighbouring pro-Western countries. Two noticeable reasons are: the presence of President Vladimir Putin- the Supreme Commander in Chief of Russia to personally observe Zapad military exercise manoeuvres and Russian military defensive capabilities apart from Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu, and 95 foreign representatives from 50 countries watched the exercise.

More importantly, the aftermath of the 2013 Zapad military exercise led to a confident Russia reclaiming Crimea a year later. This action of Russia has been interpreted as an outcome of its combat readiness through such large scale military exercises to confront any military intervention by the United States led NATO forces.

It is a well known fact that the Republic of Belarus holds high priority status in Russia's foreign policy concept among all other former Soviet Republics. The joint military exercise saw the participation of over 12,700 soldiers with Belarus contributing nearly 7200 of the numbers. Apart from armoured personnel, approximately 70 fighter planes and helicopters, 680 vehicles (including 250 tanks), along with the Russian Baltic Fleet unit participated in the military drills. More importantly, Zapad 2017 witnessed the collaboration of the two countries' electronic warfare forces for the first time. For Russia, this exercise was an opportunity to test its Aerospace Forces¹, a move



that shows that Russia being a continental power relies heavily on its Air Force capabilities, moving away from the traditional importance of boots on ground.

As part of the exercise, a notional battle state was created namely 'Veishnoria'. Accordingly, Veishnoria as the enemy state sought to invade Belarus and instigate rift between the two allies for which Belarus and Russia prepared to counter through this military exercise. A map of the exercise, released during a briefing by Belarusian General Staff on August 29, had Veishnoria in the northwest region of Belarus with two other notional countries namely Vesbaria and Lubenia, located in Lithuania and Poland,² both touted as potential aggressor NATO members by Russia and Belarus.



Source: Defence Ministries of Russia and Belarus http://www.dw.com/image/40427712_401.png

Russia and Belarus together have signalled the readiness of the two countries not only in protecting their borders but also the skill of conducting combat operations in a large-scale war in an aggravated situation in the Western strategic direction. One of the key takeaways from the joint military exercise is the 'testing of new methods of troops control on the basis of experience gained in the latest armed conflicts, in particular, experience obtained in Syria'. The focus was also on enhancing the 'cooperation by all military command and control centers and all units for operative compatibility of command centers of different levels and the interfacing of new systems of troops and weapons control'.³

Russia has once again used the military drills to display its hard power 'defensive/offensive' capabilities as seen in the anti-IS military campaigns. For instance, "the Baltic Fleet of Russia was used for air raids and delivered an artillery strike against naval and coastal targets. The elimination of air targets saw the participation of missile and artillery systems (Tunguska), artillery and missile systems (Pantsir-S1), air defence systems (Strela-1) and other weapons. On the ground, fire support was provided by artillery and armored vehicles, including T-90 tanks, the newest tank support combat vehicles (Terminator), frontline bombers (Sukhoi-24), fighter-bombers (Sukhoi-34) and also helicopter gunships (Mi-24, Mi-28 and Ka-52). It also saw the test of new types of weapons and military hardware such as armoured motor vehicle Kaiman equipped with a machine-gun module, anti-tank missile system Shershen on the chassis of the light armoured vehicle V-1, drone Moskit and multiple rocket launchers Polonez including those co-manufactured by Russia and Belarus."⁴

While Moscow has condemned the 'over-reactive' response of the US led NATO members, the large scale Zapad joint military exercise has caused a stir among the former Soviet state especially Ukraine, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The Western narrative widely interprets Russia-Belarus strategy of using a fake battle state that symbolises NATO member states as a demonstration of their combat readiness and how Russia's experience gained in Syrian operations and joint military exercises such as this will be put to good use to counter the defence system of the NATO allies during a conventional war. Additionally, Zapad 2017 comes in quick succession to the first Baltic naval drills between Russia and China which took place in July 2017. Additionally, in a recently published study for the International Centre for Defence and Security in Estonia, Roger McDermott- a leading Western analysts of Russian military developments— said, "Russia's growing technological advances in Electronic Warfare will allow its forces to jam, disrupt and interfere with NATO communications, radar and other sensor systems, unmanned aerial vehicles and other assets."⁵ Given the fact that NATO too is well equipped with similar and much more advanced capabilities, the key argument is the extent of Russia's revival of its defensive capabilities since Soviet collapse that today it stands to challenge any threats that NATO may pose to its national security including its allies such as Belarus.

Moreover, NATO in 2016 had conducted a ten-day military exercise called Anaconda-2016, which saw the participation of 31,000 troops and thousands of vehicles from 24 countries in Poland. Anaconda-2016 was a prelude to NATO summit in Warsaw on 8-9 July, in order to position significant numbers of troops and equipment in Poland and the Baltic states.⁶ This goes on to show that Russia is re-focusing on its hard power 'defensive' capabilities similar to the 20th century geopolitical strategy as a result of NATO moving more rigorously in expanding the 'defence umbrella' in former Soviet

space apart from the containment policy towards Russia. However, the 21st century geopolitics demands much more than enhancing hard power capabilities. Given the fact that Russia's military resurgence in international relations has boosted its status as a global player, failure to sustain an overall development including economic progress has been an eye sore to its rise.

While Russia has not diverged from its 20th century geopolitical interests, similarly the US policy has not seen any rethinking towards Russia post Soviet disintegration. Both the US and Russia continue to view their relations as hostile and suspicious more than ever. However, on NATO's part, the US cannot continue using Russia's joint military exercise as an alibi to threaten the European region of the dangers of Russia's military resurgence given the fact that there is a shift in attitude of European countries towards Russia. France, Germany and Italy in particular have strongly condemned US' approach through imposition of second round of sanctions on Russia as it would have serious repercussions on European countries associated economically with Russia.

But at the same time, a country such as Sweden which has for long followed a 'no-NATO' membership policy, has in recent times moved closer to NATO to develop strong military ties. In fact, Sweden is all set to hold the biggest military exercises - the three-week Aurora 17 drill— which began on 18 September 2017 alongside NATO as preparation for a 'Russian attack,' with the participation of several thousand more troops than the concurrent Russia-Belarus Zapad 2017 manoeuvres. Given the recent change in the attitude of a 'pacifist' Sweden, a possible NATO membership in coming future would be a major blow to Russia given the fact that Scandinavian countries such as Denmark and Norway are NATO members already. Russia therefore needs to move beyond prioritising military diplomacy as a foreign policy tool and focus on gaining confidence of non-NATO members such as Sweden if it is to 'contain' NATO's expansionist policy not just in former Soviet space but also among countries that support the US hostile policy towards Russia.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Anna Maria Dyner, "The Importance of the Zapad 2017 Exercises", The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 21 September 2017. <http://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-86-1026> accessed on 21 September 2017

² "Chief of General Staff of the Belarusian army promised, until 30 September Russian troops leave Belarus", Radio Svoboda, 29 August 2017. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/zachad-2017-live/28702595.html> accessed on 19 September 2017

³ Zapad-2017 exercise puts Russian army's "nervous system" to test, TASS, 19 September 2017 <http://tass.com/defense/966366> accessed on 21 September 2017

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jonathan Marcus, "Zapad: What can we learn from Russia's latest military exercise?", BBC News, 20 September 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41309290> accessed on 21 September 2017

⁶ "Nato countries begin largest war game in eastern Europe since Cold War", The Guardian, 06 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/06/nato-launches-largest-war-game-in-eastern-europe-since-cold-war-anaconda-2016> accessed on 21 September 2017

