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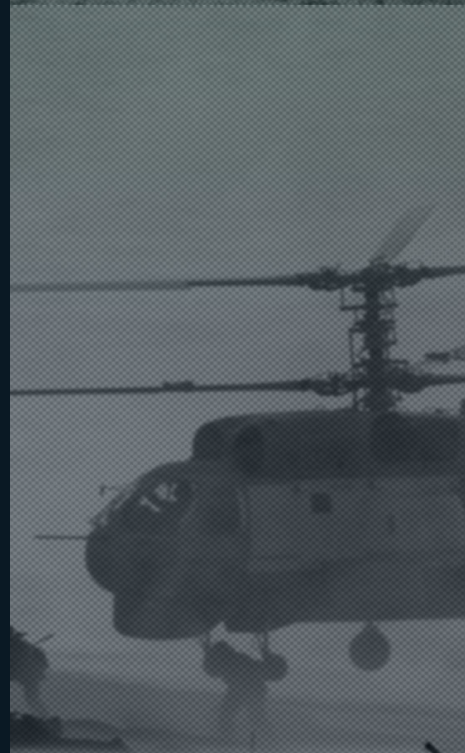


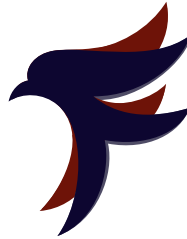
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ZAPAD 2021 **AND RUSSIA'S POTENTIAL FOR WARFIGHTING**

AUGUST 2021





Produced by the Foreign Policy Research Institute exclusively for the U.S. European Command, Russia Strategic Initiative.

The Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI) is a U.S. Department of Defense organization that works with structures throughout the U.S. Government and with public and private think tanks around the world to develop a common understanding of Russian decision-making and way of war that supports the Coordinating Authority's integration that lead to integrated planning, assessments, and action recommendations.

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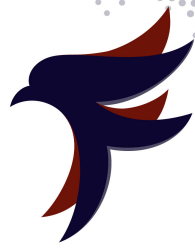
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August 2021

FULLY FUNDED



This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative
U.S. European Command, Stuttgart Germany
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PROJECT SUMMARY

This FPRI project aims to provide RSI with two unique perspectives on how to interpret Russia's Zapad-2021 military exercises. It aims to help equip decisionmakers to understand the implications of Zapad-2021 for Russia's strategic planning, military readiness, and warfighting capabilities. Project deliverables include two papers written by experts in Russian military affairs. Each report is accompanied by a PowerPoint summarizing the paper, a one-page executive summary of the paper highlighting key ideas and graphics, a 30-minute podcast with the author of each paper discussing their conclusions, one 90-minute webinar with the authors. First paper focuses on lessons learned from the Zapad-2017 exercise and assess Zapad-2021 in the context of broader trends in Russian military exercises. The second paper will produce a close reading of Russian military sources and current conversations on Zapad-2021.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Johan Norberg and Natalie Simpson¹

According to press information,² on 10 September 2021, the Russian Armed Forces plan to start the one-week-long active phase of this year's annual strategic-level exercise (STRATEX), *Zapad* (West) 2021, a bilateral³ large-scale⁴ Russo-Belorussian strategic-level exercise, primarily in Belarus and Russia's Western Military District (MD, see map 1). Large-scale Russian exercises understandably attract much attention and speculation both in Russia and abroad. Most Western comments about *Zapad* 2017 addressed Russian and international political aspects and detailed several capabilities employed in the exercise and its scenarios or steps and phases.⁵ Few, if any, addressed what it meant for the potential of Russian forces to fight wars, which these exercises are all about actually.

1 Johan Norberg is Deputy Research Director at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), an agency under the Swedish Ministry of Defence (MoD). The views in this document are his own and may not reflect those of FOI or the Swedish MoD. Natalie Simpson, intern at FPRI, supported the research. Dr Per Wikström at FOI made the maps.

2 "Rossiisko-belorusskie ucheniia «Zapad-2021» proidut v sentiabre," *Izvestiia*, 18 January 2021, <https://iz.ru/1112905/2021-01-18/rossiisko-belorusskie-ucheniia-zapad-2021-proidut-v-sentiabre> (accessed 05 July 2021).

3 Russia's allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a security organisation under Russian auspices, especially Belarus, often take part in Russia's STRATEXes. Since 2018, other countries send small contingents. The contribution to Russia's warfighting capability is, however, is marginal.

4 Russian MoD, "V Voronezhskoi oblasti voennosluzhashchie ZVO gotoviatsia k sovmestnym strategicheskim ucheniiam «Zapad-2021»," 10 June 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12366124@egNews (accessed 05 July 2021).

5 See for example Dave Johnson, "ZAPAD 2017 and Euro-Atlantic security," *NATO Review*, 14 December 2017, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2017/12/14/zapad-2017-and-euro-atlantic-security/index.html>; Mathieu Boulegue, "Five Things to Know About the Zapad-2017 Military Exercise," Chatham House, 25 September 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/09/five-things-know-about-zapad-2017-military-exercise>; Keir Giles, "Russia Hit Multiple targets with Zapad-2017," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 January 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/25/russia-hit-multiple-targets-with-zapad-2017-pub-75278>; Sergey Sukhankin, "Zapad-2017: What Did These Military Exercises Reveal?" International Centre for Defence and Security, 24 October 2017, <https://icds.ee/en/zapad-2017-what-did-these-military-exercises-reveal/> (all accessed 21 June 2021), as well as Andreas Ventsel, Sten Hansson, Mari-Liis Madisson, and Vladimir Sazonov, "Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia's Zapad war games", *Media, War and Conflict*, 2021, Vol. 14(1), pp. 21–39 and Vira Ratsiborynska, Daivis Petraitis, and Valeriy Akimenko, "Russia's Strategic Exercises: Messages and Implications", NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, 2020), https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/ru_strat_ex_29-07-e147a.pdf (accessed 28 July 2021).

Map 1: Russia's Military Districts.



Russia's warfighting potential⁶ is important for the West writ large for several reasons. Tensions between Russia and NATO are increasing. Russia perceives a growing military threat in its west.⁷ Russian strategic documents re-emphasise the importance of military power.⁸ Russia actually uses military force to achieve its geopolitical goals, such as in Eastern Ukraine and in Syria.

6 Terms like “power” (fighting power/combat power) or “capability” (military/combat capability) are common to describe what a force can do in terms of warfighting. This paper focuses on peacetime exercises and thus on warfighting that has not yet happened. Therefore, the term “potential” is preferable. It denotes latent general capabilities that have yet to materialise in a specific context. Addressing context-specific capability or power requires war games, which have not been part of producing this paper.

7 Russian MoD, “V Moskve pod rukovodstvom glavy voennogo vedomstva proshlo zasedanie Kollegii Minoborony Rossii,” 31 May 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12364295@egNews (accessed 12 July 2021) and Russia's National Security Strategy, published 02 July 2021, notes the increasing importance of military power as an instrument to reach geopolitical goals in international relations. President of Russia, “Strategia natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” Russian Government, 02 July 2021, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107030001> (accessed 08 July 2021).

8 Russia's National Security Strategy, published 02 July 2021, notes the increasing importance of military power to reach geopolitical goals in international relations. President of Russia, “Strategia natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” Russian Government, 02 July 2021, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107030001>, para 34 (accessed 08 July 2021). According to an initial Swedish analysis, the strategy stresses domestic aspects of national security. Gudrun Persson and Carolina Vendil Pallin, “Tillbaka till framtiden – Rysslands nationella säkerhetsstrategi 2021” [Back to the future – Russia's national Security Strategy 2020], Swedish Academy of War Sciences, 19 July 2021, <https://kkrva.se/tillbaka-till-framtiden-rysslands-nationella-sakerhetsstrategi-2021/>, in Swedish (accessed 19 July 2021).



The Ground Forces are the biggest service in the Russian Armed Forces and can play a key role in Russian warfighting operations in continental war theatres adjacent to Russia. (Sputnik News)

One way to assess warfighting potential is purely quantitative, examining the number of units, formations, soldiers, tanks, aircraft or ships in a state's armed forces. Another is to compare structural factors such as defence spending or industrial capacity.⁹ These two approaches, however, say little about what the forces involved can actually do or how they would fight. Another indicator is performance on past or current operations, each of which is unique. Future operations are likely to be different for example in terms of adversaries and geography.

Another approach is to study military exercises (hereafter only exercises). An exercise, irrespective of its scale and scope, is about peacetime collective military training to build warfighting potential. The maximum peacetime warfighting potential of a military force arguably materialises in its largest exercises. Such exercises are good opportunities to bring together the material, conceptual and moral factors underpinning a military force,¹⁰ but obviously without the destructive lethal interaction with an adversary that actual warfighting entails.

⁹ Such approaches are common in International Relations when comparing military power of states. See for example the annual Military Balance from the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) in London.

¹⁰ The division into physical, moral and conceptual factors to assess a force's potential for warfighting appears in western doctrinal documents such as the 2017 British "Army Doctrine Publications: operations", https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/605298/Army_Field_Manual_AFM_5_Master_ADP_Interactive_Gov_Web.pdf (accessed 05 July 2021).

This paper proposes a way to do that in three steps. First, it proposes a framework to discuss military exercises and warfighting potential (section 2). Secondly, it explores long-term trends in Russian major exercises to illustrate warfighting potential, since such potential takes many years, if not decades, to build (section 3). Thirdly, it offers brief overview of observable preparations for *Zapad 2021* (section 4) as well as some speculations about what it may entail (section 5). Finally, section 6 offers some conclusions, partly illustrated with a simile of a military body with brain and nervous system (command and control) and muscles (forces).¹¹

This paper builds on open sources available as of July 2021. The exercise data originate from the Russian Ministry of Defence (RMoD) website, a key part of the Russian Government's strategic communication with foreign and domestic audiences. This data is often vague, sometimes inconsistent and always nearly impossible to verify systematically in independent open sources. It is, however an available open source whose origin is clear, but with vetted and managed content. This prompts two assumptions about the website's sufficiency: (i) its data reflects reality in Russian exercises and (ii) its dictionary of military terms¹² reflects Russian thinking.¹³ Realities may indeed be different. Put differently, this paper builds on what the RMoD wants the outside world to see.

Many key parts of exercises are likely not reported. Sun Tzu noted some 2,500 years ago in the *Art of War* "Know thy self, know thy enemy. A thousand battles, a thousand victories."¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, RMoD keeps much information out of public and potential enemies' view. Conversely, providing false information may cloud the situational awareness, judgement and decision-making of potential enemies. Lawrence Freedman notes that deception is an elemental feature in strategy, along with choosing allies and selectively using military force.¹⁵ NATO has long been a part of Russian doctrinal level threat perceptions.¹⁶ Russia's current relations with the West are fraught. Military power is one of Russia's main policy tools in international relations. Russia may thus have reason to inflate its military strength in the eyes of others to intimidate. RMoD statements about the scale and scope of its

11 See Johan Norberg, "Vostok-2018: about the Russian military's brain, not its muscles," FOI Memo 6470 (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, September 2018), <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206470> (accessed 13 July 2021).

12 Russian MoD, "Voennyy entsiklopedicheskii slovar'," <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/list.htm> (accessed 13 July 2021).

13 For simplicity, ensuing occasional comparisons with Western notions build one source, Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare* (Newport R.I., US Naval War College, 2007).

14 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/861176-know-thy-self-know-thy-enemy-a-thousand-battles-a-> _

15 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy – a History* (Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2013), p. 3.

16 Jakob Hedenskog and Gudrun Persson, "Russian Security Policy" in Fredrik Westerlund and Susanne Oxenstierna (eds), *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2019* (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019): <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4758--SE> (accessed 22 April 2021), pp. 79–95; p. 80-81, 90.



Foreign observers at the Luzhsky training ground, Zapad 2017. (kremlin.ru)

activities, including exercises, may well be a part of this.

This paper builds on four general assumptions. First, exercises are a good, if not the best, peacetime expression of warfighting potential. The exercise scope (levels of war in Western parlance¹⁷) is about training for warfighting operations at the corresponding level. Secondly, a regional war with NATO would be existential for Russia and thus demand a maximum war effort. This assumption underpins the focus on Russia's biggest exercises, here called major exercises. Thirdly, it is hard to gauge the actual training effects of exercises from a distance. They are, however, very good opportunities to train and find out what works and, equally important, what does not. The Russian military presumably makes good use of these opportunities. Finally, a working assumption is that the pandemic situation in Russia does not interfere with the exercise in a decisive way. Additional subsidiary assumptions and delimitations appear throughout the text.

This paper does not deal much with political aspects of exercises, such as to what extent they are Russian "signals" aiming to deter or intimidate other countries. Other observers are likely to do that. As for military aspects, the focus is on major exercises (and thus potentially operations), i.e. those pertaining to high-intensity warfighting between major

¹⁷ Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare* (Newport R.I., US Naval War College, 2007), p. IV-3.



The field end of the brain of the army. Staff work in Vostok-2018, Transbaikal Territory, the clearest manifestation of the whole of Russia's military body in recent years.

military powers, which excludes exercises for peacekeeping, counterinsurgency or counterterrorism. Consequently, the notional adversary in major Russian exercises is presumably always the forces of a military peer competitor, no matter what the RMoD claims about the exercise scenarios. Another delimitation is that the effect on warfighting potential of structures other than the Russian Armed Forces (forces from other Russian ministries, other government agencies, Russia's allies and partners) are not analysed. A final delimitation is a focus on conventional forces. The paper thus only briefly mentions Russia's nuclear forces.

Marshal Boris Shaposhnikov, chief of the Soviet General Staff in 1941-42, called the General Staff the brain of the army (*Mozg armii*).¹⁸ Here, building on that simile, a military force is a body with muscles (the forces), a brain (commander and supporting staff) as well as a nervous system (command and control structures). The ability to make all limbs (services, arms of service) act in concert mirrors fighting potential. Exercises are what breathes life into the body.

¹⁸ See Russian MoD, "SHAPOSHNIKOV Boris Mikhailovich," https://structure.mil.ru/management/info.htm?id=11513552@SD_Employee (accessed 14 July 2021).

2. APPROACH

For which maximum scale and scope of military conflict is Russia preparing its armed forces? What factors in exercises are relevant to gauge warfighting potential? Which exercises illustrate that potential? Russian military notions sometimes separate forces (*voiska*) from command and control (*upravlenie*). Broadly speaking, exercise scale here pertains to quantitative aspects such as amount of equipment or soldiers and forces. Exercise scope concerns the level (strategic, operational, etc.) as well as intangible qualitative factors, such as command and control. Here, the approach has three parts. The first is a framework outlining the scale and scope of military conflicts to gauge potential for war fighting. The second part selects some factors for analysing exercises. Finally, the third part discerns which Russian exercises are most relevant to study.

2.1 Type of military conflict

What scale and scope of warfighting operations do the Russians envision? Actual Russian plans are classified. A sufficient proxy is to outline and interpret Russian military notions as seen in Table 1. Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine¹⁹ stipulates four different levels of military conflict (left column). A Russian MoD definition of a military operation²⁰ stipulates different levels of operation (middle column) and corresponding required forces. The right column show examples of assessed minimum required forces at each level of operation. In reality, each operation will of course be unique.

Any military operation abroad potentially has a strategic political effect. The levels of operation (or exercise) in the middle column, strategic, operational-strategic, operational-tactical, roughly correspond to Western equivalents. The scale and complexity of the military objective decide the level of war. The larger and more complex, the higher the level of war.²¹ The Russian definition of an operation exemplifies how many and which types forces each level of operation requires, which underpins the suggested forces and formations in the right-hand column. These suggestions indicate scale and scope, not exact predictions.

19 President of Russia, "Voennaia Doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii", Kremlin, 26 December 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47334> (accessed 06 July 2021).

20 Russian MoD, "Operatsiia," <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=7674@morfDictionary> (accessed 06 July 2021).

21 Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare* (Newport R.I., US Naval War College, 2007), p. II-17—19.

Table 1: Military conflicts and assessed corresponding operations and forces.

Military Conflic	Level of Operations ^a	Minimum required forces (see examples)
Large-scale war	Strategic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All of Russia's Armed Forces (+ reserves) • Force Groupings^b
Regional war	Operational-strategic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Force grouping (1 per MD/JSC) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAAs & air /air defence army/ies • Navy fleet/
Local war	Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One CAA • One army corps • Navy flotill • Air regiments/divisions
Armed conflic	Operational-tactic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Division or brigade • Several navy vessels • Air squadrons

Source: Based on Norberg, Johan and Goliath, Martin: "The fighting power of Russia's Armed Forces in 2019" in Fredrik Westerlund and Susanne Oxenstierna (eds): *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2019* (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019), on the internet: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4758--SE> (accessed 22 April 2021), pp. 57–79; p. 65. Notes: (a) This outline omits the tactical level; (b) a force grouping (*gruppировка voisk*) is tailored for a certain strategic-, operational- or tactical-level mission with its size and composition depending on *inter alia* mission, time, terrain and adversary forces. Here, the focus is on the strategic-level. Abbreviations: CAA- Combined Arms Army, JSC – Joint Strategic Command, MD – Military District.

2.2 Warfighting potential

Two Western notions address what a force can do in war. Combat potential, the assumed potential of a force to accomplish an assigned mission, is either designed, i.e. based on organisation and equipment, or available, the usually lesser potential a commander actually disposes for combat. Combat power is the actual capability of a force generated in the course of mission accomplishment against a given enemy force.²² Both notions focus on the mission, what the force is supposed to be able to carry out. Combat potential is general

²² Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare* (Newport R.I., US Naval War College, 2007), p. III-33–34, GL-5. Another approach is Martin van Creveld's definition of the similar notion fighting power as "[...] the sum total of mental qualities that make armies fight" See Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power – German and US Army performance 1939 – 1945* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 6.



Russian-gauge railways (see map 2) are essential for the strategic and operational mobility of the ground forces.

and assessed before combat actions. Combat power is case-specific in terms of adversary and outcome and thus only applicable in or after an actual operation. When activated in a specific case, general combat potential becomes combat power. Thus, exercises manifest potential, but not power.

Corresponding Russian notions stipulate that a force has a combat potential (*boevoi potentsial*), the aggregate of available means as well as in its material and moral ability to carry out assigned missions.²³ The incarnation of this potential is the force's combat power (*boevaia moshch*), which is:

... [the] most important component of a state's military power, the totality of material and moral factors that determine the condition of the Armed Forces and their operational *ability to carry out their assigned missions*. Combat power is defined by the quantitative and qualitative configuration of the Armed Forces: *how well staffed, equipped and trained they are, the quality and quantity of armaments, equipment and material resources, the forces' combat readiness and capability, the quality of commanders, the effectiveness of command and control systems, the development of military art and other factors.*²⁴ (Author's italics)

23 Russian MoD, "Boevoi potentsial" (combat potential), <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=12694@morfDictionary> (accessed 10 May 2021).

24 See the Russian MoD definition: Russian MoD, "Boevaia moshch," <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=12671@morfDictionary> (accessed 06 July 2021).

A myriad of factors have bearing on warfighting potential. For the purposes here, the italicised parts in the definition underpin a selection of four factors for analysing exercises in terms of warfighting potential. First, missions — the ability to carry out their assigned missions — equals the stated level of the exercise. It is here also a proxy for the political ambition for the scale and scope of the wars Russia wants to be able to fight. The second factor, quantity, is about how well staffed, equipped and trained the forces are; the quality and quantity of armaments, equipment and material resources corresponds to stated data such as number of participants²⁵ or pieces of equipment in an exercise.

The third factor, command and control (C2)²⁶ is intangible and pertains to the quality of commanders and the effectiveness of C2 support systems. C2 is here also a function of the previous two factors, mission and quantity, as well as of specific Russian statements about C2. Just as combat power can be either designed or delivered (see above), C2 in exercises can be designed (scope in terms of stated mission) and delivered (in terms of the scale of forces actually managed). Finally, the fourth factor, combat readiness, the ability to get forces from doing daily peacetime activities in garrisons and bases to being ready to solve initial tasks in operational areas, is here explored in relation to annual strategic exercises.

To sum up, based on the Russian notion of fighting power, four factors underpin gauging war fighting potential: (i) mission, (ii) quantity, (iii) C2 and (iv) readiness. To which exercises can they be applied?

2.3 Which Russian exercises are relevant?

The RMoD key points in the wordy definition of an exercise are that it is (a) the basic form of combat and operational preparation; (b) carried out with forces as well as C2 in all services and arms in the armed forces; (c) a key means for improving combat readiness. Exercises are categorised by scope (strategic, operational-strategic, operational, operational-tactical level); purpose (training, experiments, inspections, demonstrations); training audience (forces, command/staffs, staff); method (one- or two-sided, multi-level) and conditions (sea, land, map, computer).²⁷

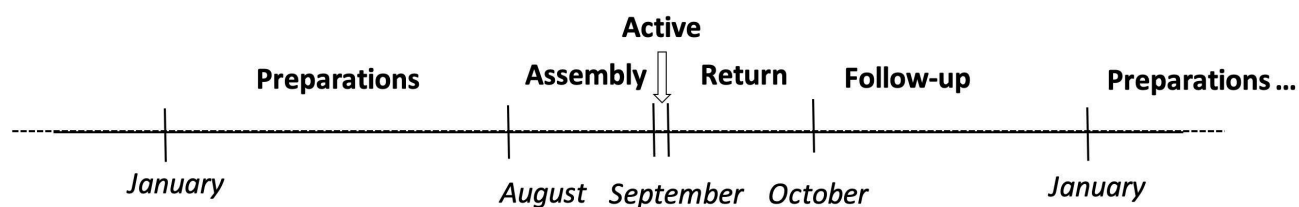
Like all militaries, the Russian Armed Forces train their forces from the individual soldier or sailor to collectives of increasing scale and scope. This means that thousands of exercise

25 The number of participants does probably not refer only to forces in the field units in exercise areas or on ships, but also includes servicemen in support structures for C2 and logistics, etc, perhaps for a long period of time. The exact figure is less important than the order of magnitude. A STRATEX is arguably about exercising the whole machinery for fighting a war against a peer adversary. The size of the machinery is more important than all its smaller individual parts.

26 C2 here represents the Russian term *upravlenie* for brevity, but corresponds to C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance).

27 RMoD Dictionary, "Uchenie," <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=10793@morfDictio-nary> (accessed July 10, 2021).

Figure 1: Assessed phases and timeline for a STRATEX during a year.



activities²⁸ take place throughout the Russian Armed Forces each year. For the purposes of this paper, the most relevant are the biggest ones, here called major exercises pertaining to Russian forces on the MD or service-level. Two types of major exercises are relevant to gauge the warfighting potential of Russia's Armed Forces.

ANNUAL STRATEGIC-LEVEL EXERCISES (STRATEX)

The first type of major exercise is annual strategic-level exercises (STRATEX), the capstone exercises in the annual training cycle of the Russian Armed Forces. Strategic-level exercises in the period studied invariably include forces and C2 structures. Sometime the label is “command/staff” exercise (*komandno-shtabnoe uchenie*), which suggests an emphasis on command and control. The most ambitious version is called manoeuvres (*manevry*), strategic-level two-sided exercises with forces from several MDs or navy fleets.²⁹ In all these types of exercises, all services (ground, aerospace and naval forces) as well as the airborne forces (an independent arm of service) participate, which enables training for inter-service operations.

There is more to a STRATEX than meets the eye during a week in September. As seen in Figure 1 above, a STRATEX has distinguishable but probably overlapping phases in a year: planning, preparations, assembly, active, return and follow-up.³⁰ Given the scale and scope as well as rotational pattern of STRATEXes (see Table 2), there appears

28 For example, Defence Minister Shoigu noted in June 2021 that this year's summer training period included 4,500 [unspecified] exercises and training activities. Russian MoD, “Ministr oborony Rossii provel selektornoe soveshchanie s rukovodiashchim sostavom Vooruzhennykh Sil,” 01 June 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12364567@egNews (accessed 13 July 2021).

29 *Voenny Entsiklopedicheski Slovar* (Voenizdat, Moscow, 1984), p. 422.

30 This outline of phases and time is the author's impression. It is not based in Russian documents. Phases may vary on different levels.

to be a background multi-year planning process for force development and training that underpins the almost year-long execution of each individual STRATEX.

The first phase, preparations, includes planning conferences, exercises and training activities for staffs as well as measures to support mobility and logistics. This phase starts in the spring and accelerates throughout the summer preceding the STRATEX. In the second phase, assembly, the General Staff and the regional Joint Strategic Commands (JSC; one in each MD) alert, assemble, transport and deploy units and formations into the theatre of exercise and exercise areas. This usually starts up to four to six weeks before the STRATEX active phase, depending on from where in Russia forces are coming. The RMoD often, but not always, reports this as surprise combat readiness inspections (see Table 2).

Thirdly, the active and often highly publicised phase takes place during a week in mid-September. It initially includes manoeuvring forces for defensive actions to stop advancing notional enemy forces and then switching to the offensive to evict them from Russian territory. Such realignment of forces is arguably a complicated task for commanders and staffs. A key event is a major live-fire episode, to which Russian and foreign observers and journalists are invited. The fourth phase starts directly after the active phase. Forces return to their bases. The fifth and final phase, follow-up, consists of reporting and lessons-learned activities. The visible result from the last phase is usually senior military officials commenting on the exercise later in the autumn, often when the annual military training cycle finishes at the end of November. Then preparations for next year's STRATEX start in another MD.

Russia has carried out STRATEXes in this format since 2010. The rotation of STRATEXes among the MDs in a four-year cycle (see Table 2 on pg.16) arguably reflects an ambition to be able fight wars in all potential war theatres adjacent to Russia. The scope, i.e. the stated level, was invariably operational-strategic or strategic in the 2012–2020 period. The scale, the stated number of participants, is often in the hundreds of thousands, with recurring anomalies that reflect how Russia handles its obligations under the Vienna Document, one of few regimes for arms control and confidence and security-building measures in Europe (see section 3). A STRATEX encompasses the whole of a military body, namely its brain, nervous system and muscles.

SURPRISE COMBAT READINESS INSPECTIONS (SCRI)

The second type of Russian major exercise is surprise combat readiness inspections (SCRIs), which pertain to the ability to launch warfighting operations quickly. This Soviet-era practice was dormant from the early 1990s until 2013, when the then-new defence minister Sergei Shoigu reintroduced them. Initially, units subjected to SCRIs performed



Piotr Veliki, nuclear-powered battle cruiser from the Northern Fleet. The logo text reads: "Surprise inspection of combat readiness [for the] Northern Fleet and selected units from the Western MD and Airborne Forces." (Russian Ministry of Defense Twitter page)

poorly. In 2018, Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Army General Valerii Gerasimov noted that in 2013, units had been tied to their garrisons and unable to relocate to other parts of Russia.³¹ SCRIs have since then become a part of daily life in the Russian military in addition to regular and scheduled inspections.³² SCRIs take place in all services and arms with each command level usually responsible for checking the next subordinate level. The Russian Armed Forces carry out a large number of SCRIs annually, most of them probably at unit level. Here, SCRIs pertaining to a MD or a service are in focus. The CGS claimed in 2018 that 4–6 such comprehensive SCRIs took place annually 2014 – 2017.³³

31 Russian MoD, "V Natsional'nom tsentre upravleniia oboronoi proshel brifing, posviashchennyi podgotovke i provedeniiu manevrov voisk (sil) «Vostok-2018»," 06 September 2018, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12194442@egNews (accessed 13 July 2021).

32 Johan Norberg, Training for War – Russia's Strategic-level Military Exercises 2009 – 2017 (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2018), <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4627--SE> (accessed 08 July 2021), pp. 53, 75–84.

33 RMoD briefing for defence attaches before Vostok-2018, some 1 min 55 sec into the video. Russian MoD, "V Natsional'nom tsentre upravleniya oboronoy proshel brifing, posvyashchennyi podgotovke i provedeniyu manevrov voisk (sil) «Vostok-2018»" September 6, 2018, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12194442@egNews (accessed 13 July 2021).

At times, the initiating order comes from Russia's supreme commander in chief, the president, such as for the SCRI in the Eastern and Central MDs on 20 August 2018, some three-four weeks before Vostok-2018.³⁴

Based on this author's impressions, the procedure is roughly that the General Staff alerts the HQ of a JSC/MD, which in turn alerts the HQ in a CAA. It continues down the chain of command, say from division to regiment to battalion and then to a unit such as a company, which is ordered into full combat readiness and relocates to an exercise area for a live fire exercise. An SCRI thus enables testing the chain of command from the will of Russia's political leadership down to a company opening fire. Distances over which units relocate in SCRI appear to have increased since 2013, indicating an understandable ambition to increase mobility of forces across Russia's 11 time zones.

In short, SCRI are usually primarily for the brain and nervous system of the Russian military body. Usually, only parts of the muscles (forces) are involved. If preceding a STRATEX, however, more forces are probably involved since they after being alerted deploy to the STRATEX theatre and exercise areas within the SCRI. If an annual STRATEX is about waging war, an SCRI is about going to war. In 2013, they were separate activities, but already in 2014, a comprehensive SCRI preceded the STRATEX *Vostok-2014*, thus merging training to go to war and wage war into one process. Therefore, this paper only outlines comprehensive SCRI in relation to annual STRATEXes.

34 Russian MoD, "Ministr oborony Rossii objavil o nachale masshtabnoi proverki boegotovnosti voisk TsVO, VVO, VDV, dal'nei i voenno-transportnoi aviatsii," 20 August 2018, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12191681@egNews (accessed 07 July 2021).

3. RUSSIAN STRATEXES

2010–2020

Table 2 on the following page brings together the three steps outlined in the previous section. The grey rows at the top contains the four factors for warfighting potential outlined in section 2 above (mission, quantity, C2, readiness). The green row has labels for various aspects of each STRATEX, with abbreviations explained in the notes below the table. More specifically, the column “mission” notes the scope of the exercises, which corresponds to the levels of operation outlined in table 1. The “SCRI” column notes the existence (and sometimes also the scale) of such exercises just before an annual STRATEX. The four columns under “quantity” capture RMoD data about the number of personnel, equipment and platforms in the exercise.

There are two key trends. First, STRATEXES are about Russia as a whole. In 2021, the current rotational pattern between the MDs will complete its third four-year cycle. In the past twelve years, the Russian Armed Forces has thus exercised C2 and forces for warfighting operations all across its vast territories thrice. Most of Russia’s Armed Forces are in peacetime based west of the Urals,³⁵ but they exercise all across Russia, which underlines the importance of strategic-level mobility for forces.

Secondly, the stated level, “mission,” a proxy for political warfighting ambition and designed C2 ability, has been at the strategic level throughout the period. In contrast, participating forces ranged from 20,000 in 2010 to 300,000 in 2018, a fifteen-fold increase. When exercises include more and more people, and thus more formations and units, complexity increases for commanders and staff in terms of coordinating manoeuvres, fires, mobility and, especially, logistics. Over the years, the delivered C2 has increasingly matched the designed C2. Put simply, ability started to match ambition.

There are specific observations for each of the four factors: mission, quantity, readiness and C2. For the factor mission, it seems safe to say that the ability of commanders and staffs to plan and execute exercises at strategic level (and thus corresponding operations) seems consolidated after a decade of iterations.

The factor quantity, the stated number of servicemen, equipment and platforms, sees a regular inconsistency, depending on which side of the Urals a STRATEX takes place. The *Zapad* and *Kavkaz* iterations mostly have significantly lower stated numbers for

35 Johan Norberg and Martin Goliath, “The fighting power of Russia’s Armed Forces in 2019” in Fredrik Westerlund and Susanne Oxenstierna (eds): *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2019* (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019), <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4758--SE> (accessed 22 April 2021), pp. 57–79; p. 66.

Table 2: Russian STRATEXes 2010 – 2020.

Factors for warfighting potential			Command and Control					
			Readiness	Mission	Quantity ^a			
Year	EX	MD ^b	SCRI ^c	Level ^a	Part.	Pcs	a/c	Ships
2010	<i>Vostok</i>	Eastern	-	Op. Strat	20,000	5,000	75	40
2011	<i>Tsentr</i>	Central	-	Strategic	12,000	“1,000s”	50	10
2012	<i>Kavkaz*</i>	Southern	-	Strategic	8,000	320	30	10
2013	<i>Zapad</i>	Western	-	Strategic	11,920 ^d	180	40	10
2014	<i>Vostok*</i>	Eastern	160,000	Strategic	155,000	8,000	632	84
2015	<i>Tsentr</i>	Central	95,000	Strategic	95,000	7,000	170	20
2016	<i>Kavkaz*</i>	Southern	N/A	Strategic	12,500 ^e	400	60	15
2017	<i>Zapad</i>	Western	N/A	Strategic	12,700 ^f	1,130	70	10
2018	<i>Vostok*</i>	Eastern	N/A	Strategic*	300,000	36,000	1,000	80
2019	<i>Tsentr*</i>	Central	N/A	Strategic	128,000	21,000	600	49
2020	<i>Kavkaz*</i>	Southern	160,000	Strategic	79,500	930 (26,820) ^h	N/A (414) ^h	N/A (106) ^h

Source: For 2010 – 2017, see Johan Norberg: *Training for War – Russia’s Strategic-level Military Exercises 2009 – 2017* (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency. 2018), on the internet: <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R-4627-SE> (accessed 08 July 2021), pp. 36, 42 and 57–84; for 2018 – 2020, research by Natalie Simpson, see Appendix A, Table 3. Notes: * two-sided episode in exercise; (a) as stated by RMoD; (b) always include the MD territory, adjacent seas and the airspace above plus reinforcements from other MDs; (c) within some six week before STRATEX or explicitly linked to STRATEX by RMoD; (d) probably up to some 90,000 participants; (e) after the exercise, the RMoD noted that 120,000 servicemen had participated in the exercise at various stages all across Russia, which better reflects the STRATEX’s strategic nature; (f) probably at least 40,000 participants; (g) RMoD called *Vostok-2018* “manoeuvres” and emphasised the large number of participants; (h) numbers in brackets pertain to SCRI preceding STRATEX. Abbreviations: a/c – aircraft (including helicopters and UAV); EX – strategic exercise; MD – Military District; N/A – SCRI activity noted, no specific number available; Op. Strat. – operational-strategic; part. – number of servicemen participating in the exercise; pcs – “pieces of equipment” (here a proxy for ground forces equipment); SCRI – Surprise Combat Readiness Inspection; # - number.

equipment and participants in exercises. These low numbers are not about the actual scale of the exercise or Russia's warfighting potential west of the Urals, but all about how Russia adheres to its Vienna Document obligations, which apply to conventional military forces (ground forces) located in Europe.³⁶ Its limitations stipulate *inter alia* that states should invite foreign observers to exercises where the number of participants equals or exceeds 13,000, with similar restrictions for battle tanks (300), armoured vehicles (500) and artillery pieces with a calibre exceeding 100 mm (250) under a single "operational command."³⁷ The notion "operational command" does not clearly specify a level of war. It would hardly surprise if the RMoD divides a STRATEX into several "operational commands," say under each participating CAA or even division, none of which in and of itself breaches the limitations. Furthermore, the Vienna Document only limits certain categories of ground forces personnel and equipment. Personnel and equipment from Russia's Aerospace forces and Navy are not covered by the Vienna Document, but likely included in the RMoD stated figures of participants in STRATEXes.

It is unlikely Russia's STRATEXes west of the Urals train forces at a fraction of the maximum capacity displayed in STRATEXes east of the Urals, i.e. in half of all STRATEXes. The size of the Russian Armed Forces organisation has remained constant in the past years (around 900,000 servicemen). Training needs (from officer training at all levels to conscripts) are probably roughly the same. It seems safe to assume that a strategic-level exercise always has hundreds of thousands of participants and thousands of pieces of equipment. Stated numbers east of the Urals probably reflect the designed warfighting potential of Russia's Armed Forces better. *Vostok-2018* would thus represent Russia's highest level of warfighting potential in the 2010s. In short, Russia manifests its warfighting potential in the east and plays it down in the west.

The comparatively low stated numbers 2010-2012 probably reflect the early years of the determined and well-financed military reform effort that started in 2008. Part of the reform was a far-reaching reorganisation, which aimed to dismantle the Soviet-era mass mobilisation system and replace it with more readily available forces.³⁹ In those early years, it was probably unclear how well the new organisation and newly created units

36 OSCE, "Vienna Document 2011" (OSCE, Vienna, 2011), para (47.7), p. 28, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/86597.pdf> (accessed 13 July 2021). This document does not specify "Europe" or the zone of application (ZOA) for confidence and security building measures. The US State Department describes the Vienna Document ZOA as including " ... the territory, surrounding sea areas, and air space of all European (Russia from the western border to the Ural Mountains) and Central Asian participating States." US State Department, "Overview of the Vienna Document", undated, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/cca/c43837.htm> (accessed 19 July 2021).

37 OSCE, "Vienna Document 2011" (OSCE, Vienna, 2011), para (47.7), p. 28, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/86597.pdf> (accessed 13 July 2021). Similar restrictions apply to when OSCE member states should notify others about military activities (para 38-46; pp.20-23).

39 Märta Carlsson, Johan Norberg, and Fredrik Westerlund, "The Military Capability of Russia's Armed Forces in 2013," in Jakob Hedenskog and Carolina Vendil Pallin, *Russian Military Capability in a Ten Year Perspective – 2013* (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2013), <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R-3734--SE> (accessed 28 July 2021), pp. 23-72, p 23.

worked. For STRATEXes, it appears reasonable to first test C2 systems at strategic level and downwards during the first years before adding plenty of forces in the field. Another possible explanation is that there was a lack of sufficiently trained tactical level units.

The key point about the factor readiness is that comprehensive SCRI always appear to precede the annual STRATEX. It is natural that several weeks of alerting, amassing and transporting units from all across Russia to the exercise region precedes a STRATEX. For assessing warfighting potential, it is clear that the Russians since 2014 have trained both to go to war and wage war in one process. Such a process is likely to be very complex and demanding, especially for C2. More specifically, in 2014-15, the RMoD stated the number of participants in SCRI before STRATEXes. The participant levels also matched the number in ensuing STRATEXes. This established the pattern with SCRI as a way to amass forces for a STRATEX. In 2016 – 2019, the RMoD reported SCRI activities prior to STRATEXes but without stating numbers. In 2020, it stated a number twice as big as the ensuing STRATEX. An explanation for this is that RMoD chose to reduce participation in the STRATEX due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The exact effect on combat potential of the SCRI effort since 2013 is hard to gauge, but senior Russian military officials sound more confident about readiness than in 2013.

Observations about C2 come in two categories: visible and intangible. In addition to what was noted about STRATEXes and SCRI above, one visible observation is that Russian commanders, staffs and C2 support structures have since 2010 annually practiced planning and managing a strategic-level operation with forces in the field, albeit initially in smaller numbers. A second visible C2 aspect is switching the mode of military actions. A search on the RMoD-website on 17 July 2021 generated mentions of the Russian term *perekhod na nastuplenie*, switching to offensive [actions (from defensive)], in relation to all STRATEXes 2014 – 2020, except for *Tsentr-2015*.⁴⁰ This switch from one mode of military actions to another is arguably a complex matter for commanders and staffs to design and implement among forces. It probably requires starting a new phase in an ongoing operation or even starting an entirely new operation, with all the preparations and planning that entails.

A third visible C2-factor is two-sided episodes in the exercises. A two-sided episode allows each side to train actions against an independently thinking and acting notional peer adversary that intends to thwart one's plans, from platoon to MD-level. Such interaction is harder to simulate in one-sided exercises since they depend more on scripted injects from exercise managers. It is unclear to what extent the RMoD scripts two-sided episodes in advance. The RMoD mentions two-sided episodes in relation to more than half of the

40 Appendix A, Table 4.

STRATEXes (2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2020),⁴¹ pertaining mainly to tactical level.⁴² One exception was *Vostok-2018*, when forces from the Eastern MD faced forces from the Central MD at the *Tsugol* exercise area, some 500 km east of Lake Baikal. The RMoD showed a map to defence attachés in Moscow outlining the field HQs of both the Eastern and Central MDs with three and two subordinated CAA HQs as well as brigade HQs under the CAAs on each side.⁴³ The area is not small, 36 x 24 kilometres,⁴⁴ but it is hard to see that forces corresponding to the HQs outlined above were there in full. More likely is that units from a lower level represented those from the level above, for example a battalion representing a regiment or a brigade. If true, such a C2 set-up with operational-strategic level force groupings with subordinate units “fighting” each other indicates both confidence and ambition.

Regarding C2 at national level, one important C2 aspect is the planning and management of the redeployment of sizeable forces between MDs. Another point is that almost all STRATEXes in the 2010s, irrespective of in which MD they took place, also saw significant parallel exercise activities in Russia’s Northern Fleet, based in the Kola Peninsula and home to most of Russia’s sea-based nuclear triad, i.e. submarines with nuclear armed ICBMs⁴⁵ (not in table 2). Furthermore, late September/October usually sees a major command/staff exercise in the Strategic Missile Forces, the land-based component of Russia’s nuclear triad.⁴⁶ In 2019, the Russian MoD actually called the three-day training event a strategic

41 Appendix A, Table 5. Natalie Simpson observed that two-sided exercises not connected to STRATEXes take place year-round. Since 2015, the RMoD has frequently noted that the number of two-sided exercises is increasing each year. This fact, along with a high number of search results for *Kavkaz-2020*, indicates a possible broad RMoD effort to increase the amount of two-sided exercises to hone tactical C2 capabilities. See Russian MoD, “Ministr oborony Rossii general armii Sergei Shoigu priniial uchastie v plenarnom zasedanii Obshchestvennogo soveta pri voennom vedomstve,” October 19, 2015, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12061214@egNews (accessed 20 July 2021); RMoD, “Ministr oborony priniial uchastie v plenarnom zasedanii Obshchestvennogo soveta pri voennom vedomstve,” 19 September 2016, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096445@egNews (accessed 18 July 2021); Russian MoD, “Verkhovnyi Glavnokomanduiushchii Vooruzhennymi Silami Rossii Vladimir Putin priniial uchastie v rasshirennom zasedanii Kollegii Minoborony,” 21 December 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12331191@egNews (accessed 20 July 2021).

42 Episodes seem to involve ground forces at the regiment/brigade level with support from appropriate aerospace and, near seas, naval forces. One can argue that involvement from several services makes an exercise more than “tactical,” but here the size of the unit formation involved decides the level of operation.

43 RMoD briefing for diplomats before *Vostok-2018*, 15 min 09 sec into the video. Russian MoD, “V Natsional’nom tsentre upravleniya oboronoy proshel brifing, posvyashchenny podgotovke i provedeniyu manevrov voysk (sil) «Vostok-2018»” September 6, 2018, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12194442@egNews (accessed 19 July 2021).

44 See RusTeam Media, “Poligon Vooruzhennykh sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii «Tsugol»,” n.d., <https://rus.team/articles/poli-gon-vooruzhionnykh-sil-rossijskoj-federatsii-tsugol> (accessed 09 July 2021).

45 Johan Norberg, *Training for War – Russia’s Strategic-level Military Exercises 2009 – 2017* (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2018), <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4627--SE> (accessed 08 July 2021), pp. 61–74.

46 RMoD reports give these exercises different labels (exercise, large-scale command/staff exercise, control inspection). The point here is that the timing enables the General Staff to train how to manage the process of launching and waging a regional war with conventional forces that escalates into nuclear war, even if the scale and scope of the nuclear forces exercise varies.



In its briefing to diplomats in Moscow 06 September 2018, the Russian MoD outlined the key event in Vostok-2018: a two-sided exercise between the Eastern MD and Central MD. Blue flags are the Central MD with its 2nd and 41st CAAs, red flags the Eastern MD with its 29th, 35th, 36th CAAs plus a contingent from the Chinese PLA. The text reads (freely translated): “The following forces are deployed to the Tsugol range: from Russia: up to 25,000 soldiers, more than 7,00 pieces of equipment, some 250 aircraft and helicopters; from the PLA: up to 3,500 soldiers, more than 600 pieces of equipment, 6 aircraft and 24 helicopters”. (vg-news.ru)

command/staff exercise, just about a month after the annual STRATEX *Tsentr*-2019.⁴⁷ An article on the Kremlin webpage noted the participation of the president in the exercise.⁴⁸

The RMoD rarely, if ever, explicitly connects these nuclear forces exercises to the STRATEXes. The timing of the parallel Northern Fleet activities and early-mid autumn exercises in the Strategic Missile Forces, however, enables national-level political and military leaders to practice decision-making and managing the whole process from launching and managing a regional war with conventional forces that escalates into nuclear war. Since the Russians emphasise their nuclear weapons, it would surprise if they do not make use of such opportunities. It seems safe to expect that there will be a sizeable exercise activity in Russia’s nuclear triad in October.

An important intangible observation is that for officers and contract soldiers, these exercises have a cumulative training effect over time. These personnel categories can implement lessons learned from one year’s STRATEX the following year, or at least the next time the STRATEX takes place in the same MD. Mistakes from earlier are hopefully not repeated. The success and training effect is impossible to pinpoint accurately, but at least there has been ample opportunity to learn.

47 Russian MoD, “V Moskve proshel brifing, posviashchennyi podgotovke i provedeniiu SKShU «Grom-2019»,” 14 October 2019, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12256831@egNews (accessed 19 July 2021).

48 President of Russia, “Voennye ucheniia «Grom-2019»,” 17 October 2019, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61845> (accessed 19 July 2021).

4. KNOWN PREPARATIONS FOR ZAPAD 2021

Already in January, the Russian press noted that the upcoming STRATEX would include countermeasures against cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and electronic warfare (EW). The press also mentioned airborne landings, switching from one type of combat actions to another, i.e. from defensive to offensive, as well as independent unit-level actions away from the main force (to conduct deep raids, to encircle or bypass enemy forces).⁴⁹ Throughout the spring, the Western MD carried out the preparations phase, including staff-training events.⁵⁰

The RMoD claimed that a concentration of forces near Ukraine in April 2021 was an inspection to evaluate the winter training period. The inspection reportedly included 300,000 servicemen, 35,000 pieces of equipment, 180 ships and some 900 aircraft in all of Russia's MDs and the Airborne forces.⁵¹ SCRIIs were a part of the process. Some inspected units and formations, probably also from the Southern MD 58th and Central MD 41st CAAs, underwent 3,500-kilometre transports on trains, ships or aircraft and on roads⁵² and deployed to exercise areas unknown to participating forces to carry out combat tasks. A key effort was to evaluate the actual capability of C2 structures and forces to carry out assigned missions in times of peace and war⁵³ (and presumably the switch from the former to the latter). Such inspections of training results often take place in April, but not on that scale and scope.

49 "Na ucheniiakh «Zapad-2021» voennye budut protivostoiat' bespilotnikam," *Izvestiia*, 02 January 2021, <https://iz.ru/1107496/2021-01-02/na-ucheniakh-zapad-2021-voennye-budut-protivostoiat-bespilotnikam> (accessed 12 July 2021).

50 Russian MoD, "V Moskve pod rukovodstvom glavy voennogo vedomstva proshlo zasedanie Kollegii Minoborony Ros-sii," 31 May 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12364295@egNews (accessed 19 July 2021).

51 Russian MoD, "Nachal'nik General'nogo shtaba VS RF podvel itogi kontrol'nykh proverok za zimnii period obuchenii i postavil zadachi na podgotovitel'nyi period," 29 April 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12358821@egNews (accessed 19 July 2021).

52 In Russian, *kombinirovannym sposobom*, which roughly equals "[with] combined means of transports".

53 Russian MoD, "Nachal'nik General'nogo shtaba VS RF podvel itogi kontrol'nykh proverok za zimnii period obuchenii i postavil zadachi na podgotovitel'nyi period," 29 April 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12358821@egNews (accessed 19 July 2021).



The God of War (bog voiny). The Russian Ground Forces emphasise the use of artillery fires. (NATO)

The RMoD indirectly linked this inspection process to *Zapad 2021* by noting that equipment from the 41st CAA (probably equal to a brigade or regiment) that was left behind at the Pogonovo exercise area near Voronezh,⁵⁴ some 470 km south of Moscow, was to be used in the upcoming STRATEX. The whole process enabled the Russian Armed Forces to check the viability of moving forces, a possible second echelon built around at least two CAAs, into the Western MD, irrespective of whether this was a dry run for *Zapad 2021* or not.

July 2021 saw some combat readiness training in staffs and field HQs in the Western and Central MDs,⁵⁵ preparations of exercise areas and logistics, and fine-tuning of episodes in the upcoming STRATEX.⁵⁶ The RMoD did not explicitly link these preparations to *Zapad 2021*, and a glance at the RMoD press releases on July 21 indicated that similar activities took place in all MDs. Interestingly, *Rosgvardia* announced that its interior troops would conduct the large-scale operational-strategic level exercise *Zaslon* between 12th – 30th July as a preparation for *Zapad 2021* in September. Formations and units from several its districts⁵⁷ were to be moved by air, train and road transport to exercise areas.⁵⁸

54 Russian MoD, “Ministr oborony RF prinial reshenie zavershit’ vnezapnuu proverku boegotovnosti voisk luzhnogo, Za-padnogo voennykh okrugov i VDV,” 22 April 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12357389@egNews (accessed 19 July 2021).

55 Russian MoD, “V Podmoskov’e v shtabe gvardeiskoi tankovo armii ZVO startovala razdel’naia shtabnaia trenirovka,” 13 July 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12371621@egNews (accessed 21 July 2021); Russian MoD, “Sviazisty obshchevoiskovoi armii ZVO obespechili skrytoe upravlenie voiskami v khode kompleksnykh uchenii,” 17 July 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12372579@egNews (accessed 21 July 2021); Russian MoD, “Bolee 2 tys. voennosluzhashchikh tankovoi divizii TsVO privilecheno k kompleksnoi trenirovke boegotovnosti v dvukh regionakh RF,” 15 July 2021, https://xn--d1acaykgvdf0he1a.xn--90anlfbebar6i.xn--p1ai/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12372101@egNews (accessed 21 July 2021).

56 Russian MoD, “Zamministra oborony RF general-leitenant lunus-Bek Evkurov proveril mesta provedeniia sovместno-go strategicheskogo ucheniia «Zapad-2021» v Belorussii,” 15 July 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12372114@egNews (accessed 21 July 2021).

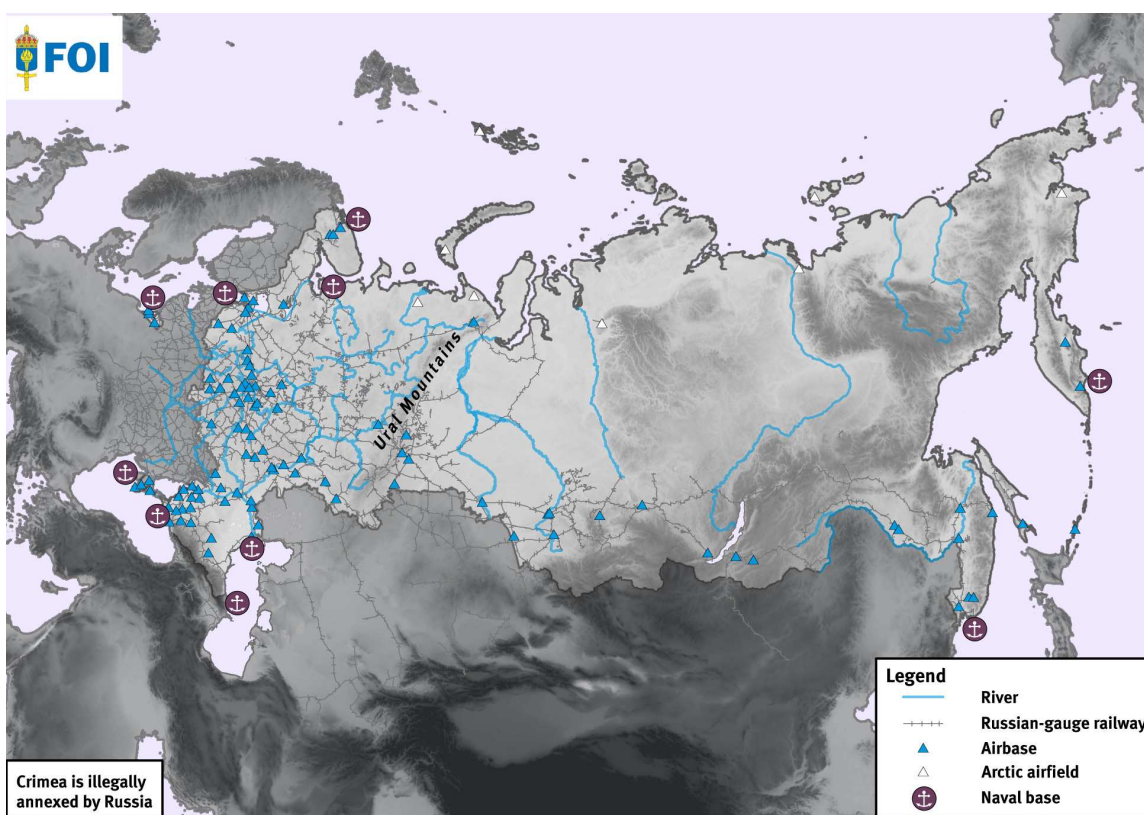
57 These eight districts do not match the five MDs under the RMoD. See Rosgvardia, “Zadachi i funktsii operativno-territorial’nykh ob’edinenii voisk natsional’noi gvardii,” n.d., <https://rosguard.gov.ru/ru/page/index/okrug-a-vojsk-natsional-noj-gvardii> (accessed 21 July 2021).

58 “Rosgvardia, “Uchenie «Zaslon - 2021»,” n.d., <https://rosguard.gov.ru/ru/page/index/uchenie-zaslon--2021> (accessed 21 July 2021).

5. WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM ZAPAD 2021?

Zapad 2021 takes place in a potential war theatre where Russia's preconditions to fight wars are uniquely favourable.⁵⁹ As map 2 shows, west of the Urals is where Russia has the best infrastructure to support military operations. The vast majority of Russia's air and naval bases are here. The Russian-gauge railway network, dense as a spider web here but much more limited further east, facilitates transports of large ground formations in Russia as well as in former Soviet republics and Finland.

Map 2: Preconditions for Russian military operations 2019⁶⁰



⁵⁹ See Johan Norberg and Martin Goliath, "The Fighting power of Russia's Armed Forces in 2019," in Fredrik Westerlund and Susanne Oxenstierna (eds): *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective — 2019*, (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019, pp. 59–77; <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4758--SE>, (accessed 06 January 2019) pp. 63–65.

⁶⁰ Ibid.



Russia's Supreme Commander-in-Chief, President Putin, talks to Belarussian servicemen and to the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Army General Valerii Gerasimov. Parts of Zapad-2021 will take place in Belarus, Russia's ally in the CSTO. (Foreign Brief)

Since many details remain unknown at the time of writing this paper (July 2021) the coming paragraphs are speculative in nature. Based on Russian STRATEXes in the past decade, here follow some expected features of *Zapad 2021* divided into primarily political and military aspects.

Expected political aspects include Russian statements about a growing military threat to Russia from the West and an increasingly aggressive NATO encroaching on Russia's borders. Officials will probably underline the importance of Russo-Belarusian military cooperation, that *Zapad 2021* is planned (possibly to try to disconnect it from the politics of the day), defensive in nature (to try to assuage fears of Russian aggression) as well as in accordance with Russia's international obligations. The by now tedious claims about a Western "Russophobia" will probably be repeated in political statements and commentary, possibly in relation to a debate about the actual number of participants and its relation to the Vienna Document. It would be sensational if Russia would state participant numbers more in line with STRATEXes in the past decade, say around 100,000 – 150,000. The Russian MoD is likely to underline Russian transparency in briefing the diplomatic corps in Moscow and inviting Russian and foreign journalists to the exercise, which usually results in reports from a spectacular live-fire event, which says more about tactical-level coordination of fires than the warfighting potential of Russian Armed Forces on war theatre level. Possible token participation by units from other countries will have more political importance than any actual effect on Russian warfighting potential.

As for military aspects, in addition to the already published information about *Zapad 2021* mentioned in section 4 above, strategic scope, inter-service operations and already ongoing C2 and preparations for transports and logistics (exercises and pre-storage of fuel and supplies etc.), Russia will probably exercise most of its military machinery in Western Russia. The exact scale and scope hard to predict, but based on the above, this author has the following non-exhaustive list of phenomena to be expected:

C2

- SCRIIs possibly as early as from mid-August activating C2-structures and alerting, amassing, transporting forces to designated exercise areas.
- The setting up of 1-2 force groupings tailored to the mission envisioned in the exercises.
- Two-sided exercise episodes, at least at tactical level, for both C2 and forces.
- A switch of mode of military actions from defensive to the offensive in the active phase.

Mobility

- Re-deployments of forces (formations and units from all services) from the Southern and Central MDs, possibly also the Eastern MD, to the Western MD and possibly Belarus with an extensive use of railway and air transports.

Forces

- A stream of RMoD press statements highlighting the participation in the exercise of units from all services, arms of service and special forces (such as railway or pipeline troops) from both combat arms and combat support.
- Reporting may emphasise the air domain and mention the joint Russo-Belarusian joint air defence system as well as air forces, air defence and defence against cruise missiles and other precision-munitions, UAVs and loitering munitions. This may reflect Russian concerns with Western air power, but hardly means that the training needs for example for infantry, armour and artillery units have decreased.
- Airborne operations including parachute landing/s of up to a regiment and helicopter tactical landing of up to a battalion.

Sustainability

- Logistics preparations in primarily the Western MD and Belarus throughout the summer.
- The call up of, say, 5,000 – 6,000 reservists, primarily as individuals, but possibly also whole units up to battalion size.
- Participating forces from other Russian ministries (such as *Rosgvardia* Interior Troops

and FSB Border Troops), as well as coordination with national-level ministries and regional agencies to facilitate sustainability and mobility of forces in the exercises, which reflects Russia's holistic view on how to engage a wide range of state resources for a war effort.

Miscellaneous

- Reports about tests of new concepts, units, systems and technologies may appear. Such reports understandably receive attention in media and commentary. A too one-sided focus on novelties, however, risks missing a key point about Russia's warfighting potential. Equipment holdings are still largely Soviet, i.e. designed or produced in the Soviet Union. In that sense, Russia's Armed Forces are an upgraded and better working version of their Soviet predecessors. Modernisation and new systems can only change that slowly and incrementally.
- *Rosgvardia* carried out a major exercise in July. If *Zapad 2021* follows Russia's standard exercise pattern in the past three-four years with assembly of forces from across Russia into the active phase followed by an exercise in Russia's nuclear triad, contours may be emerging in how Russia views phases in a potential military conflict with a hostile peer adversary. First, the adversary ostensibly fanned unrest in Russia, which requires deployments of *Rosgvardia* interior troops in response. Second, the adversary's forces invade Russia, leading to a large-scale conventional war-fighting. Third, the conventional war escalates into a nuclear one.

6. CONCLUSIONS

For which maximum scale and scope of military conflict is Russia preparing its armed forces? Based on an outline of Russian major exercises in terms of mission, quantity of forces, readiness and C2, it is clear that Russia's warfighting potential has increased in the past decade. Recalling table 1, military conflicts and assessed corresponding operations and forces, and table 2, Russian STRATEXes in 2010–2020, enables two conclusions. First, Russia's *ambition* for warfighting potential as mirrored in exercises has always been to carry out strategic-level warfighting operations against a peer adversary. That corresponds to a potential to fight at least a regional war with conventional forces.

Secondly, in the early 2010s, the *available* warfighting potential for Russian commanders was low. The level of participating forces, some tens of thousands, did not match the C2 scope of the exercises. That available potential in terms of forces in exercises probably enabled exercising forces for at most operational level, which corresponds more closely to the level of local war. Not anymore. The trend since 2014 is force participation in the hundreds of thousands, which arguably reflects the strategic-level ambition for warfighting potential much better. *Zapad 2021* will probably not deviate from this pattern, even if various RMoD statements may probably say otherwise.

It may be tempting to use a Russian STRATEX to comment on current issues, claiming that the exercise is a political signal. That may be the case, but if one cannot verify with both Russian official statements sources that this was the signal sent as well as with potential recipients that it also was the signal received, this easily becomes speculative noise. Such noise may make it hard to see exercises for what they are: manifestations of warfighting potential. Russian STRATEXes outline preparations and a potential to fight a regional war with conventional forces. That potential will remain in the hands of Russia's political leadership even when the exercises are over and political commentary has switched focus to new issues.

In the past decade, Russia's military leaders have used military exercises to put the Russian military body through repeated and increasingly ambitious training for its brain, nervous system and muscles. Limbs have become stronger and better coordinated. Russia's political leadership now has a useful military tool, be it for limited direct interventions such as in Donbas and Syria or as an escalation potential to deter or intimidate other states. Just as one session at the gym does not make a body strong, one STRATEX does not build war fighting potential. Russian STRATEXes since 2010 have in a sense been repeated gym sessions for Russia's military body. Russia's current political leadership probably wants to retain that military fitness. Expect more sessions at the gym for the Russian military body.

APPENDIX A:

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

(by Natalie Simpson)

All search results in this appendix originate from the Russian MoD (RMoD) website and were conducted 1st - 20th July 2021. Other Russian publications such as newspapers (including the military press) largely depend on RMoD for data about exercises. Each article in the search results was reviewed to confirm that the search terms were used in the desired context.

Table 3: STRATEXes 2018-2020:

Year	Exercise	Location	Level	Participants	Equipment	a/c	Ships
2018 ⁶¹	<i>Vostok</i>	Eastern MD (forces from Central MD, Northern Fleet, and Pacific Fleet also involved)	Strategic	300,000 (not including up to 3,500 participants from China and some forces from Mongolia)	36,000	1,000	80
2019 ⁶²	<i>Tsentr</i>	Central MD (Forces from Caspian Flotilla, Eastern MD, and Air Force also involved; actions took place at training grounds in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan)	Strategic	128,000 (not including participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan)	21,000	600	49

61 Russian MoD, "Rossiia zadeistvuet okolo 300 tys. voennosluzhashchikh na uchenii «Vostok-2018»," 28 August 2018, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12193028@egNews (accessed 04 July 2021); Russian MoD, "Bolee 80 skladov s goriuchim i boepripasami, a takzhe 100 prodovol'stvennykh punktov razvernuto dlia obespecheniia manevrov «Vostok-2018»," 06 September 2018, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12194444@egNews (accessed 04 July 2021); Russian MoD, "Manevry «Vostok-2018»," n.d., <https://structure.mil.ru/mission/practice/all/vostok-2018.htm> (accessed 04 July 2021).

62 Russian MoD, "Ministr oborony Rossii podvel itogi ucheniia «Tsentr-2019»" 15 November 2019, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12262127@egNews (accessed 06 July 2021); Russian MoD, "Kitaiskie voennosluzhashchie pokidaiut Orenburgskuiu oblast' posle uchastii v SKShU «Tsentr-2019»," 24 September 2019, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12253854@egNews (accessed 06 July 2021); Russian MoD, "Strategicheskoe komandno-shtabnoe uchenie «Tsentr-2019»," n.d., <https://structure.mil.ru/mission/practice/all/more.htm?id=12251582@egNews> (accessed 06 July 2021).

Year	Exercise	Location	Level	Participants	Equipment	a/c	Ships
2020 ⁶³	<i>Kavkaz</i>	Southern MD (forces from the Black Sea and Caspian Sea also involved)	Strategic	79,500 (not including 858 foreign participants from Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar and Pakistan)	930 (26,820) ⁶⁴	N/A (414)	N/A (106)

These data were collected by searching through the “News” page associated with each STRATEX. Figures for participants and equipment vary. Results here reflect the highest values found.

Table 4: Search results for “*perekhod na nastuplenie*” (“switching to the offensive”) and the name of each STRATEX, 2010-2020:

Year	Number of relevant results
2010	0
2011	0
2012	0
2013	0
2014	1
2015	0
2016	2 ⁶⁵
2017	3
2018	2
2019	2
2020	4

63 Russian MoD, “Ministr oborony Rossii general armii Sergei Shoigu podvel itogi SKShU «Kavkaz-2020»,” 12 October 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12318984@egNews (accessed 08 July 2021); Russian MoD, “Strategicheskoe komandno-shtabnoe uchenie «Kavkaz-2020»,” n.d., <https://structure.mil.ru/mission/practice/all/more.htm?id=12312963@egNews> (accessed 08 July 2021).

64 Numbers in parentheses refer to the SCRI preceding the STRATEX.

65 Neither of these two results directly uses “переход на наступление,” but both reveal that switching to offensive actions remained a part of at least tactical-level thinking in Kavkaz-2016. The first article references how a unit of radiation, chemical, and biological defense troops trained to “create the conditions for a switch to the offensive” for ground troops, though they did not themselves execute a shift to the offensive. The second article uses the term “*perekhod v ataku*” (переход в атаку), or “switching to the attack.” This suggests that a switch to the offensive occurred, but only on the tactical level.

Table 4 indicates two general trends. First, the emergence of references to “*perekhod na nastuplenie*” in 2014, after a dearth of references in 2010-2013, is consistent with the broader increase in the size and complexity of Russian STRATEXes in the wake of the military reform begun in 2008. Second, there has been a consistent focus on “switching to the offensive” in 2016-2020. As the size and scope of Russian STRATEXes grew to match strategic-level ambitions during this time period, so too did the complexity of the C2 scenarios that Russian commanders executed. Military leaders practiced not only coordinating larger numbers of troops, but also directing them to undertake increasingly complicated actions, as would occur in a real war.

Table 5: Search results for “двухсторонний” or “двусторонний” (“two-sided”) and the name of each STRATEX, 2010-2020:

Year	Number of relevant results
2010	0
2011	0
2012	2
2013	0
2014	1
2015	0
2016	2
2017	0
2018	4
2019	1
2020	18

As with “switching to the offensive,” references to two-sided exercises reflect a more complex C2 environment. With the exception of *Vostok-2018*, most two-sided elements in STRATEXes took place on the tactical level. Two-sided elements often appear in smaller preparatory exercises before the active stage of a STRATEX, though these exercises can still involve a high level of C2 complexity. For instance, six of the search results for *Kavkaz-2020* pertained to a two-sided brigade-level tactical exercise by the Black Sea Fleet in August before the STRATEX involving up to 1,500 servicemen, 20 ships and 80

aircraft.⁶⁶ In general, *Kavkaz-2020* represents a significant increase in the number of references to two-sided episodes, with more than four times as many references as any previous year.

In addition to the data listed in Table 5, two-sided exercises that are not specifically connected to STRATEXes take place year-round. Since at least 2015, RMoD publications have often remarked on the fact that the number of two-sided exercises is large and is growing each year.⁶⁷ These publications, along with the high number of search results for *Kavkaz-2020*, indicate that the Russian military is pursuing a broader effort to execute increasingly frequent two-sided exercises, likely with the goal of honing its tactical C2 capabilities.

66 Russian MoD, “Na Chernomorskom flote nachalos’ dvukhstoronnee brigadnoe takticheskoe uchenie podrazdelenii armeiskogo korpusa i morskoi pekhoty,” 24 August 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12309410@egNews (accessed 18 July 2021); Russian MoD “Aviatsiia luVO unichtozhila kolonnu bronetekhniki uslovnogo protivnika v Krymu,” 04 September 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12312315@egNews (accessed 19 July 2021).

67 For example, see Russian MoD, “Ministr oborony Rossii general armii Sergei Shoigu prinial uchastie v plenarnom zasedanii Obshchestvennogo soveta pri voennom vedomstve,” October 19, 2015, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12061214@egNews (accessed 20 July 2021); Russian MoD, “Ministr oborony prinial uchastie v plenarnom zasedanii Obshchestvennogo soveta pri voennom vedomstve,” 19 September 2016, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096445@egNews (accessed 18 July 2021); Russian MoD, “Verkhovnyi Glavnokomanduiushchii Vooruzhennymi Silami Rossii Vladimir Putin prinial uchastie v rasshirennom zasedanii Kollegii Minoborony,” 21 December 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12331191@egNews (accessed 20 July 2021).

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