

# Russia Goes to War

## *Exercises, Signaling, War Scares, and Military Confrontations*

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### *Executive Summary*

In September, Russia and Belarus will hold their quadrennial “Zapad” or Western operational-strategic exercise. Last held in 2017, this exercise comes at a time when Russia’s relations with the West are at their lowest point following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and combat troop deployment to Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Russian force and equipment repositioning near Ukraine in April 2021, as well as the Russian government’s announcement that it will deploy 20 additional military units to its Western Military District (WMD), indicate that the exercise will be particularly large. This will be an important exercise to better understand Russian-Belarusian military integration and the potential future use of Belarusian territory by Russia.

### *Telling the Difference: An Exercise or Changing Force Posture?*

In April this year, the Russian Armed Forces conducted a readiness exercise, the scale of which was unprecedented. It involved a redeployment of troops that would be able to conduct a strategic-level exercise at best or create a new axis of advance against Ukraine at worst. The main component of the exercise was a mobility drill, which involved a redeployment of approximately 20,000 to 30,000 Russian forces from its Southern, Western, and Central Military Districts into the Persianovskiy and Pogonovo training ranges near Ukraine and Opuk and Novoozerne in Crimea. The sudden and large scale of the deployment and the ambiguity surrounding the drill’s goals raised concerns that Russia was preparing to militarily intervene again in Ukraine. What the most recent troop redeployments into the Western Military District (WMD) have highlighted is that, within a month, Russia can redeploy units from other districts to create a favorable conventional balance ratio at chosen axes, including against the Baltic States. However, not all Russian large-scale, strategic-operational, or readiness exercises are a prelude to military intervention. Some Russian military exercises are simply training activities; others seek to signal Russian resolve to maintain the status quo; and the rest serve domestic and international propaganda purposes. The upcoming “Za-

pad-2021” exercise is likely to tick all of these boxes, although the main focus could be placed on the defense of Belarus, highlighting the advances made in the Belarus-Russia defense relationship.

What separates training exercises and signals from a change in force posture and preludes to Russian military intervention? Several factors help distinguish the two, but the most relevant factors for understanding Russia’s recent movements near the Ukraine border and Zapad-2021 are threefold: (1) significant movement of personnel and equipment close to borders; (2) significant positioning of the equipment and personnel near the areas of the Zapad-2021 exercise; and (3) hostile international context and threats to Russia’s political interests.

### COUNTING TRAINS AND PLATFORMS

Closely examining logistics preparations and, in particular, the movement of military trains can provide better quality assessments of the true nature of Russian military activities and their size. In early 2021, there were some 66,000 working flat railcars available on Russian rails, which is more than enough to transport the equipment of the entire Russian Ground Force units.<sup>1</sup> This availability allows the Russian General Staff to redeploy its forces at any given moment and with frequency, especially under pre-war or wartime conditions when disruption of civilian rail traffic is not a big concern.

Indeed, the scale of the most recent movement of Russian units along its western and southern borders caused a shortage of railcars which, in turn, caused disruptions to civilian companies’ ability to supply their customers with agricultural machinery. These problems and disruptions are surprising, especially given that the redeployment stretched over a month and only involved elements from two army groups and an estimated five air-borne/air assault regiments.

To understand the importance of the rail component to Russian military mobilization on its western flank, one must focus on the three Railway Troop brigades in the WMD and the two brigades in the Southern Military District (SMD)—each of which is subordinated to their respective MD commanders. Their tasks are mostly technical and include restoration, barrage, demining, technical cover, construction of railways, and increasing their survivability and throughput. They also provide floating railway bridge capability for land forces.

At a tactical level, moving a 120-vehicle motor rifle battalion with personnel and air defense assets by rail requires some 78 to 80 flat rail cars, which necessitates the utilization of two train echelons per battalion. Redeployment of the entire motor rifle brigade would require 16 to 18 military echelons.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it takes around three to five hours to load one train with equipment. This means that the process of redeployment of a brigade-level unit would take several days, depending on their access to platforms, prior warnings of movement, and troops’ proficiency with the loading process. The pace of movement also depends on air defense conditions imposed by opposing forces’ air operations. Deep rear or unimpeded transportation can cover a distance of 1,000 to 1,200 kilometers within 24 hours. Therefore, the effective functioning of railway troops is key to ensuring combat and mobilization capacities of the Armed Forces and ground forces in particular.

When examining videos posted on various social media sites in April 2021 of the movement of Russian military

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1 It is understood that Russian Railways, the state-owned rail company, does not own any freight cars. They belong to railway operators, whereas Russian Railways owns infrastructure and locomotives. See Aleksandr N. Litvinenko, “Vzaimodeystvie Organov Voennogo Upravleniya I Organov Grazhdanskogo Upravleniya Pri Osushchestvlenii Voinskih Perevozok Zheleznodorojnym Transportom,” *Nauchnye Problemy Material’no-Tekhnicheskogo Obespechinya Voorujennih Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, no. 2 (2020): 79.

2 The total size of a military echelon depends on the gross weight of cargo it is moving, but a standard echelon should not exceed 57 conventional wagons or 800 meters in length. A conventional wagon corresponds to the length of a standard gondola wagon with a length of 14 meters.

equipment toward the Ukrainian border and Crimea, it appears that each Russian military train moved up two company-strong formations.<sup>3</sup> Cumulatively, Russia had redeployed more troops than for any other exercise since 2014. To understand the scale of the build-up, it is important to assess this movement in the context of previous Russian operational-strategic exercises. In preparations for the annual military district exercise in the Russian Far East—Vostok-2018—the Ministry of Defense (MoD) utilized more than 60 military echelons and more than 1,500 wagons and platforms, averaging 25 cars per echelon. More than 50 aircraft sorties also airlifted servicemen to various training ranges in eastern Russia. In April, however, the MoD reported that 40 military echelons were used to redeploy the airborne forces out of Crimea alone, in addition to 30 transport aircraft sorties. The additional units deployed to Pogonovo (two brigades, each requiring at least 16 trains) increased the total number of military echelons to 75 to 80, which surpasses the official number of trains used for Vostok-2018 and the number of platforms earmarked for movement into Belarus in 2017.

### PRE-POSITIONED PERSONNEL AND EQUIPMENT NEAR THE EXERCISE

Moscow's decision to leave elements of the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) at the Pogonovo training range near Voronezh means that Russia has heightened readiness units poised for future mobility drills. What is more, Pogonovo is located just 60 to 70 miles away from the maneuver elements of the 20th CAA's 3rd Motor Rifle Division, which is stationed in Boguchar and Valuyki near the border with Ukraine. Consequently, units at Pogonovo could have been used to quickly augment the Russian spearhead force were Russia to have attacked Ukraine. Further south, belonging to the 8th CAA, the 150th Motor Rifle Division

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RECENT MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS OF TWO MOTORIZED RIFLE BRIGADES AND UNIDENTIFIED ELEMENTS.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that echelons that were on the move in March and April did not possess organic air cover. The number of cars did not exceed 57, which is the maximum limit for cars per echelon, according to Russian norms.

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is also deployed near Ukraine. The division covers Donetsk and Luhansk sectors and due to this role, its readiness is expected to be heightened. These two divisions altogether deploy four motor rifle and three tank regiments for a total of approximately 400 main battle tanks and 700 armored personnel carriers/infantry fighting vehicles (APCs/IFVs).

### INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Russia will go to war against a neighboring country or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to shape events politically when it feels it is losing influence. In other words, if there is an international crisis, Russia will resort to conflict only to protect its interests and influence. The key to understanding Russian war preparations is to recognize the context within which specific events take place. A large-scale military exercise that occurs during a (relatively) peaceful period in relations between Russia and the West is not equal to a large-scale military exercise that takes place when tensions between Russia and NATO are very high. Moscow believes that any large-scale use of military power will be preceded by a period of increased tension between Russia and an enemy as well as exhaustion of all other reasonable options to fulfill its objectives. If Russia was preparing to go war, the scale of the forward deployment of troops would be significant enough to warrant concern: the buildup would be in excess of a reasonable deployment for an exercise and would be a further indicator of probable preparation for offensive action. The difference in the buildup of Russian forces in April 2021 and in 2017 during the preparations and execution of Zapad-2017 was the level of tension between the West and Russia and Russia and Ukraine. Despite its proximity to events in 2014 and Russia's Syrian intervention in 2015, the Euro-Atlantic political environment in 2017 was relatively calm compared to today, where Western-Russian and Russian-Ukrainian relations are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

Taken together, the scale of the Russian build-up near Ukraine this year suggested that Russian forces were prepared to undertake deep offensive operations, rather than be used simply as a deterrent against perceived Ukrainian attempts to retake Donbas. After the Kremlin achieved its political objectives (e.g., testing the West and pressuring the Ukrainian government) by other means, it announced a drawdown of some forces deployed at the border. While this decision may have deescalated the situation, pre-positioned Russian equipment at Pogonovo remained unchanged until late July, when Russian forces began to move the equipment in a yet unknown direction. This movement coincided with the introduction of Russian units into Belarus for the September drills. These two developments indicate that Russia is moving and building up its forces in anticipation of the active phase of the Zapad-2021 exercise.

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### *Understanding Zapad-2017 to Predict Zapad-2021*

In 2017, three years after Russia's military incursions in Donbas and military build-up in annexed Crimea, Russia and its ally, Belarus, conducted their quadrennial Zapad strategic-operational exercise. It was the first large-scale drill that occurred in the Western operational direction since Russian operations in Ukraine in 2014. This in part led to public speculation that Zapad-2017 would be a very large and potentially threatening exercise which, following the exercise, was a clear exaggeration by both the Kremlin, Western governments, and the media.<sup>4</sup> Yet in the months and weeks before the exercise, there were fears that Russia could either leave its troops behind in Belarus and dominate the country militarily, or that Zapad was a readiness exercise that disguised a more belligerent plan to attack the Baltic states.

Neither scenario came to fruition. Whereas it was indeed possible that some Russian military presence could have remained in Belarus post-Zapad-2017, it was highly unlikely that the exercise itself was a prelude to military intervention, either against Belarus or the Baltic states. The Zapad-2017 scare nevertheless had an interesting origin. It seems that the entire narrative that shaped Western concerns about the drill rested on one story about logistical preparations for the exercise. It alleged that the Russian Armed Forces rented 4,162 flat rail cars in 2017 for the delivery of military cargo to Belarus (there and back), which would presumably allow the redeployment of a motor rifle division, in addition to what had already planned to be sent to Belarus. However, the new division, even if deployed, certainly would not have changed Russia's military posture from defensive to offensive simply because the force was too small. Deployment of a division-level unit should have been regarded as a signaling effort at best, rather than a genuine attempt to conduct offensive operations against a neighboring state.

Ironically, whereas the focus was on the number of rail cars being moved into Belarus, which was too small to indicate a belligerent intent, it was the exercises held in Russia in the weeks and days leading to Zapad that warranted more attention. It showed the level of preparations Russia could potentially undertake if it were to face NATO. Russian Armed Forces shifted their posture from peacetime to the period of threat and then to the initial period of war. This was manifested by a wide range of exercises conducted in Russia and

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<sup>4</sup> Moscow typically exaggerates the number of troops that take part in annual exercises. Vostok-18 is perhaps the base case to support this point. The exercise officially involved 300,000 personnel, but its size was much smaller, possibly around 35,000.

Belarus in August and September. These included civil defense exercises, field deployments of almost the entire WMD's short-range ballistic missile units, Russian Strategic Rocket Forces dispersion drills, and force generation efforts as a part of strategic deployment of the armed forces.<sup>5</sup> These exercises sought to signal Russian readiness to conduct large-scale military operations against a near-peer adversary.

At the same time, they communicated Russian willingness to escalate the conflict further to bring about a satisfactory conclusion. Indeed, the active phase of Zapad culminated with the launch of the RS-24 Yars intercontinental ballistic missile, possibly as a war termination move. Therefore, the key to understanding Russian intentions is the combination of two factors. On the one hand, there is the quantity of equipment that is moved and on the other, there is the context within which this movement is taking place. Although the state of Western-Russian relations in 2017 was strenuous, there was no political reason for Russia to initiate hostilities. And conversely, in early 2014, with the departure of President Viktor Yanukovich, Russia lost leverage and influence over Ukrainian domestic politics. This, combined with two simultaneous district-level readiness exercises, an increase in the number of air patrols, and the blockage of a Ukrainian port in Sevastopol indicated aggressive intent.

The lessons from the Zapad-2017 exercise exaggeration are twofold. From a political perspective, Moscow benefited enormously from signaling that fueled uncertainty in neighboring countries and in NATO capitals. But from a military perspective, there was little understanding about the scope of military build-up needed for Russia to change its posture. Russia is unlikely to generate forces for limited incursions against an openly hostile country, such as Ukraine, let alone a NATO member. Russian military build-up requires a sustained effort to move and provision sufficient forces so as to deliver an immediate preponderance of power for the swift acquisition of tactical and operational successes. There was no evidence to suggest this occurred pre-Zapad-2017, which meant there were no indications for preparations for a large-scale and sustained conflict. Russian troop deployments into Belarus were limited to battalion- and company-level, instead of the brigades and regiments that Russia is expected to redeploy if it were to engage NATO. Russia will not employ battalion tactical groups in a high-tempo conflict against NATO. Instead, it will make full use of brigades, regiments, and divisions along the wide frontage to expand the battlefield and spread NATO forces thin.

### *Anticipating Zapad-2021*

If the 41st CAA remains deployed near Voronezh and takes an active part in the exercise in September, Zapad will have already expanded significantly in size compared to the 2017 iteration of the exercise. This will come at a time when Russian-Belarusian defense cooperation has significantly accelerated since the August 2020 Belarusian presidential elections, including the establishment of three new training centers (two in Russia and one in Belarus) that will further improve interoperability between Russian and Belarusian units. On top of that, Russian forces will begin air defense "joint combat duty" at one of the airfields in Belarus in 2021. This possibly pertains to the Bobruysk Air Base, which in the past has hosted Russian combat aircraft. Even before elections, the Belarusian Armed Forces were effectively an extension of Russian forces stationed in the WMD, with both militaries integrated on the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.<sup>6</sup> For example, in wartime, all Belarusian land and special forces will be subordinated to the Regional Grouping of Forces (RGF) headquarters commanded by a Russian general. Furthermore, Russia maintains a significant ground troop presence in the form of a motor rifle division deployed in Smolensk and Bryansk Oblasts.

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5 The only unit not included in the drill was the 152nd Missile Brigade from Chernyakovsk (Kalingrad Oblast). The brigade was then in the process of being converted from Tochka-U to Iskander SRBM.

6 A forthcoming paper on Belarusian Armed Forces will be published by the International Centre for Defence and Security.

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Belarusian forces also regularly train in Russia on Russian equipment. In recent years, Belarus has invested in improving military logistics support. Rail lines and railway stations have been renovated to increase their capacity. For instance, the railway station in the city of Urech'ye has six rail lines, which allow for free maneuvering of cargo trains. The city also hosts the 969th Tank Reserve Storage Base with a direct rail link between the base and the railway station. Other storage facilities across Belarus have also been modernized. Almost all Belarusian support bases (food, oil, and weapons) are located near a high-capacity rail line that runs east to west. These developments fit into the 2016–2020 “Development and Improvement of a Unified System of Technical Cover for Regional Railways” program. The initiative sought to create a joint Russian-Belarusian development and maintenance system for regional rail lines to improve transport and mobilization capacity. Concurrently, according to an October 2016 agreement between the two states, Russia is responsible for maintaining appropriate levels of weapons and military equipment in Belarusian storage bases. These supplies will then be used during a war to support Russian and Belarusian combat operations.

The second dimension of analyzing Zapad-2021 is Russia’s military occupation and confrontation with Ukraine. Since 2014, Russia has created two army group formations (20th and 8th CAAs) near Ukraine and strengthened its military presence in Crimea with the 22nd Army Corps. In total, these three formations field approximately 50,000 troops. Further east, the 58th CAA adds 25,000 personnel. Pre-positioning equipment belonging to the 41st CAA at the Pogonovo training range south of Voronezh meant that with relatively little logistical effort, the Russian Armed Forces could mobilize up to 90,000 ground force personnel near Ukraine. The inclusion of four airborne divisions (three stationed in the WMD and one in the SMD) would push this figure to around 110,000. These forces are sufficient to create one front-level grouping and conduct wide-scale ground operations. Forces deployed around Ukraine likely have increased readiness levels, and the military equipment left behind following the most recent deployment belonging to the 41st CAA at Pogonovo has only improved their readiness levels. Personnel could now be airlifted into Voronezh instead of being moved there by military trains.

Consequently, with requirements to enhance Russian-Belarusian military integration and respond to perceived Ukrainian aggression and NATO movements, it is unclear whether Zapad-2021 will have a singular instructive focus or be a mixture of responses. However, it will certainly offer new insights into Russian-Belarusian military integration and the potential future use by Russia of Belarusian territory. It is also clear that Zapad-2021 will be used as a propaganda tool by the Kremlin, as it will be portrayed as a defensive exercise in response to the NATO Steadfast Defender 2021 exercise and increased U.S. and NATO military presence in Poland.

## *Conclusion*

It is unlikely that the upcoming Zapad-2021 exercise will serve as a Trojan horse exercise to set the stage for the Russian invasion of one of its neighbors, but it will be a significant exercise in size, scale, and duration. The exercise will confirm the special relationship between Russia and Belarus and the ability of the two militaries to conduct combat operations against a near-peer adversary across the entire spectrum of warfare—including peacekeeping missions and a nuclear strike. These are the very attention-grabbing parts

of Zapad. Yet the most important but less publicized aspects will occur before and after the active phase of the drill. In June, Russia and Belarus began to organize multiple exercises including logistics, mobility, air defense, electronic warfare, and command and control, which are anticipated to occur pre-Zapad, even if they are heightened in size and tempo. An additional district-level readiness exercise is also possible. These exercises will serve signaling purposes and score domestic propaganda points that will seek to achieve domestic public relations goals. In late July, Russia started deploying elements of its 1st Guards Tank Army to Belarus, confirming the start of strategic redeployment of forces for Zapad. In this context, Zapad does not start and end during its active phase. Drills and exercises held pre-Zapad are an integral, if not more important part than the actual active phase of the exercise. They will show how Russia plans to force generate new units, deploy them, and cooperate with Belarus to attack and defeat NATO. There will be much to learn post-exercise.

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