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## Russian Military Exercises

The Russian military has routinely conducted two types of military exercises: annual strategic command staff exercises and combat readiness inspections. Many of these exercises are what most analysts consider part of a military’s normal training routine. Russia uses these exercises to test military readiness, refine operational concepts, assess new equipment and technologies, and improve command and control.

Russia also may use some of these exercises as a form of coercive signaling toward neighboring states and foreign audiences. Some observers are also concerned about Russian use of military exercises as a pretext to mask preparations for potential and actual invasions (see below). In particular, the size and nature of the exercises, including the recently concluded Zapad 2021 joint Russian-Belarusian strategic exercise, have caused concern among U.S. and European observers, including some Members of Congress. Some Members expressed concern about the exercise reflecting Russian aggression toward allies in the region.

### Types of Exercises

Strategic command staff exercises are the culmination of the Russian military’s yearly training cycle (although the Russian military increasingly conducts large scale exercises throughout the year). These exercises test the military’s ability to conduct large-scale operations. The exercises are regular and routinized, rotating annually through Russia’s military districts (MD): Western (Zapad), Southern (Kavkaz), Central (Tsentr), and Eastern (Vostok). Thus, each MD hosts an exercise once every four years. Separately, Russia conducts an annual exercise of its nuclear forces.

#### Russian Strategic Command Staff Level Exercises

- Vostok-2014 (Eastern MD)
- Tsentr-2015 (Central MD)
- Kavkaz-2016 (Southern MD)
- Zapad-2017 (Western MD)
- Vostok-2018 (Eastern MD)
- Tsentr-2019 (Central MD)
- Kavkaz-2020 (Southern MD)
- Zapad-2021 (Western MD)

Note: In 2010, Russia restructured the MDs from six to four. In January 2021, the Ministry of Defense upgraded the Northern Fleet to an MD, bringing the total number to five. However, the Northern Fleet conducted exercises as part of Zapad.

Since 2013, Russia also has conducted surprise combat readiness inspections with increasing frequency. For example, Russian officials stated that the military would conduct more than 4,800 readiness inspections in 2021. The Russian military conducts these inspections throughout the year, and the inspections vary in size from an individual unit (or subunit) to multiple units and service branches across Russia. In contrast to strategic level exercises, readiness inspections focus on testing and improving mobilization and readiness capabilities.

### Coercive Signaling

Russia appears to use military exercises as a form of coercive signaling against neighboring states. Observers note that Russia also has used exercises to obscure the massing and preparation of troops for offensive operations. Prior to Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 occupation and annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea region, Russia massed forces under the pretext of normal military exercises. In March and April 2021, Russia massed significant forces in Crimea and on the border with Ukraine. Russia claimed the buildup was part of its regular training cycle and preparations for the Zapad 2021 exercise. U.S. government officials and observers expressed concerns that Russia was preparing a possible invasion of Ukraine.

Observers note that Russia employs military exercises to demonstrate its military capabilities to foreign audiences. Russia often announces snap inspections to coincide with Western or NATO exercises; some analysts interpret this as a Russian effort to demonstrate its military’s capability to quickly and forcefully respond to threats. Other analysts argue that Russia’s military exercises demonstrate Russian insecurities and concerns regarding whether it can address perceived threats across multiple regions.

Russia’s lack of transparency increases concern regarding its military exercises. Russia is a signatory to the Vienna Document, a series of confidence and security building measures overseen by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. These measures include requirements to share information on military forces, equipment, and military exercises involving more than 13,000 troops. Russia routinely avoids these requirements by claiming that the number of troops involved falls under the reporting requirement or by conducting a series of smaller exercises instead of one large exercise.

### Military Exercises and Russia’s Military Modernization

Exercises are a crucial component of a military’s training and preparation for conflict. In this regard, the Russian military differs little from most modern militaries. Exercises also play an important role in Russia’s military

modernization efforts. The Russian military uses exercises to test and refine operational concepts, command and control, coordination across service branches, logistical support, mobilization and readiness status, and new technologies. A number of concepts are relevant to an analysis of Russia's military exercises:

### Threat Perception

Exercises highlight the Russian military and political leadership's perception of current and projected threats. The scenarios of each exercise demonstrate what the Russian military believes to be likely conflict scenarios and suggest whom Russia views as potential opponents.

### Warfighting

The Russian military uses exercises to test and develop how it will respond and conduct operations during a conflict. Specifically, strategic exercises focus on the Russian military's capacity to conduct complex combined-arms operations across a wide potential battlespace.

### Command and Control

Both types of exercises are designed to improve and refine the military's command and control capabilities. This includes improving interoperability between service branches and joint formations.

### Operational Concepts

Russia, like most militaries, uses exercises to test new operational concepts, changes in its force structure, and the integration of new technologies and weapons systems. The concepts reflect how the Russian military envisions future conflicts. Russian officials say that many of the lessons learned from conflicts in Syria and Ukraine are also tested and evaluated for incorporation into operational concepts and strategies.

### Mobilization and Readiness Levels

The military uses snap inspections to improve and test overall readiness levels. The Russian military states that snap inspections are a crucial tool for improving and maintaining a heightened level of readiness. Exercises also test the Russian military's ability to mobilize and manage the movement of units to potential conflict zones.

### Zapad 2021

Russia conducted the Zapad 2021 strategic command staff exercise from September 10 through 16, 2021. The exercise came amid heightened tensions with its neighbors, including Ukraine, and recent instability in Belarus. The exercise emphasized the integration and coordination of Belarusian armed forces with the Russian military. Due to Russia's previous use of military exercises to disguise preparations for offensive military action, NATO, European, and U.S. government officials publicly raised concerns about the size and lack of transparency regarding the quadrennial Zapad exercise.

To avoid reporting requirements under the Vienna Document, Belarus officially claimed only 12,800 troops were taking part in the Belarus exercise, including 2,500 Russian soldiers. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed 200,000 troops would take part in the exercise. Observers

asserted that this figure was likely inflated, but that the exercise was likely larger than previous Zapad exercises. Russia ostensibly conducted the exercise under different commands to avoid the reporting requirement.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, "The objectives of the exercise were to check readiness levels and the Belarusian and Russian military command bodies' ability to jointly ensure military security and territorial integrity." The scenario imagined an offensive from three Western states to conduct regime change. Russian and Belarusian forces practiced responding to an offensive (in particular defending against the use of a massed aerospace attack), deploying forces, and ultimately launching a counterattack against invading forces.

Belarus and Russia operate a unified regional air defense system, operationally controlled by Belarus during peacetime, but incorporated under Russian control during a potential conflict. During the exercise, Russia emphasized this command and control integration and interoperability element. Russia and Belarus opened several training bases inside Belarus, including an air defense-training center, and introduced two S-300PM2 surface-air-missile systems and several Su-30SM fighters at the Baranovichi air base. Analysts note that these events point to greater integration of Belarus's armed forces into Russian planning and command, but remain far short of merging Belarus under Russian control or permanently basing Russian forces inside Belarus. Instead, analysts note Russia will retain a de facto presence inside Belarus due to the constant rotation of forces for training and coordination purposes.

The Zapad exercise included a significant role for the Northern Fleet in the Arctic, the testing of new technologies and tactics (including air mobile and robotic units), electronic warfare, the heavy use of artillery and rocket forces, air defense, support from helicopter and air assets, and the expansive mobilization and testing of the military's logistics and support capabilities. A central theme was improving coordination and interoperability among the various units, service branches, and systems. Russia also conducted amphibious landings by naval infantry and numerous air-assault and paratroop landings, emphasizing mobility and the rapid movement of troops to emerging conflict areas.

A significant presence of foreign troops was also in the exercise. Some 2,000 troops from India, Pakistan, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Sri Lanka participated.

For related information, see CRS Report R46761, *Russia: Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations*, by Andrew S. Bowen and Cory Welt; CRS Insight IN11651, *Russian Military Mobilization on Ukraine's Borders and in Occupied Crimea*, by Andrew S. Bowen.

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