

Dealing with the Russian Bear: Improving NATO's Response to Moscow's Military Exercise Zapad 2017

by Guillaume Lasconjarias and Lukáš Dyčka

Major military exercises are never a simple routine but carry important political significance. This is the case with the recent Russian military manoeuvres of *Zapad 2017*, which took place in Belarus as well as in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad – bordering the territory of two NATO Baltic States – on 14-20 September. The exercise was closely monitored by European and US military and political elites and caused considerable concern in Poland and the Baltic states.

Officially, just 12,700 soldiers participated, supported by 680 armoured vehicles and 200 artillery systems, a limit under which there is no mandatory declaration to the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to send observers to oversee the exercise. Since the end of the Cold War, Western states and Russia

agreed on a OSCE document – the Vienna Document – based on a belief that increases in military transparency (especially when it comes to military exercises) augment security by diminishing the risks of miscalculation and misperception.¹ Yet, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, an increased number of military incidents have been registered across the Euro-Atlantic area (more than 60 between 2014 and 2016),² rising tensions and spurring memories of historical

¹ See the Vienna document for specifics: OSCE, *Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures* (FSC.DOC/1/11), 30 November 2011, <http://www.osce.org/fsc/86597>.

² Łukasz Kulesa, Thomas Frear and Denitsa Raynova, "Managing Hazardous Incidents in the Euro-Atlantic Area: A New Plan of Action", in *ELN Policy Briefs*, November 2016, http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/managing-hazardous-incidents-in-the-euro-atlantic-area-a-new-plan-of-action_4211.html.

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analogies: some commentators recalled the simulated nuclear attack on Warsaw during a previous exercise (*Zapad 2009*)³ and the long-standing tradition of using military manoeuvres to hide an impending attack (as occurred in 1968 Czechoslovakia or more recently in the case of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014).

The rhetoric coming from Moscow demonstrates how *Zapad 2017* – which means “West” in Russian – is meant as a signal that Russian interests are to be taken seriously. From a NATO perspective, as stated by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the core concern was a lack of transparency, a fact underlined by the invitation of only three experts from the Alliance to observe the exercise.⁴

The recent hysteria in western media surrounding *Zapad 2017* might well have been one desired outcome of the Russian manoeuvres. Understanding the true nature and objectives of these exercises as well as their function in a larger Russian military strategy is therefore critical.

The first objective of any military exercise is to assess operational progress. For *Zapad 2017*, it was the

³ See Stephen Blank, “Moscow Pulls Back the Curtain on Zapad 2013”, in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 118 (21 June 2013), <https://jamestown.org/?p=18387>.

⁴ NATO, *Press point by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council*, 13 July 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_146220.htm; Daniel Boffey, “NATO Accuses Russia of Blocking Observation of Massive War Game”, in *The Guardian*, 6 September 2017, <https://gu.com/p/76jx8>.

turn of the Western Military District to be placed under scrutiny: how well could its units perform after being the main beneficiaries of the recent transformation of the Russian armed forces? In the past four years, the Western Military District has seen a massive built-up of forces with the creation of an army headquarters, three army corps, four new divisions and an impressive number of rapid reaction battalions and companies.⁵ *Zapad* brought these new components together to create a coherent force and test its capabilities. In this sense, such manoeuvres represent a normal adaptation and learning cycle, common to the armed forces of any country.

The second message is obviously political. By highlighting Russian military capabilities and demonstrating the level of professionalism and preparedness achieved by certain units (artillery and precision-strike missiles for instance), Russia aims to reassure allies and deter adversaries. To the former (in this case Belarus) the message is clear – and aims at preventing a rapprochement with the West. To the latter – in this case NATO and the US – it demonstrates how the Russian military has progressed and modernized despite Western sanctions imposed since 2014.

This sabre-rattling cannot be overlooked. Yet, both NATO and the US would do well not to overreact.

⁵ Andrzej Wilk, “The Zapad-2017 Exercises: The Information War (For Now)”, in *OSW Commentaries*, No. 249 (1 September 2017), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2017-09-04/zapad-2017-exercises-information-war-now>.

Obviously, the first thing to avoid is slipping in to an uncontrollable military escalation. Western actors should therefore carefully measure their response. In this respect, and partially overlapping with Russia's *Zapad* exercise, Poland and Sweden launched their own military exercises.⁶ Cooperating with a large number of nations – seven in the case of Sweden's *Aurora 17* exercise for a total of about 21,000 troops, and 17,000 for Poland's *Dragon-17* coming from nine NATO countries plus Georgia and Ukraine – the two countries sought to demonstrate their own capabilities and strong international backing as a means to deter potential Russian moves.

Another potential response would be to pursue a revision of the Vienna document. Since its adoption in 1990, the document has served as a consensual means of arms control in Europe. Nevertheless, the document has a particular status: it is not an international treaty but a political agreement. Therefore, non-compliance, non-conformity or violations of the provisions of the document do not constitute breaches of international law. Updated several times, the document was considered effective until Russia decided, in 2016, to block its further review. Interestingly, at the time, one of the proposals was about further reducing the threshold of personnel and materiel requiring prior notification to the OSCE (from 9,000 to

⁶ See "Militaries Flex Their Muscles in Poland during Dragon-17", in *USA Today*, 21 September 2017, <https://usat.ly/2wKQVPQ>; and the official Swedish MoD presentation of *Aurora-17*: <http://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/activities/exercises/aurora-17>.

5,000 troops). This threshold may no longer be relevant however, given the transformations of modern warfare and Russia's recent behaviour, including Moscow's 2015 decision to withdraw from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Even if reopening the negotiations would prove difficult – due to the nature of the OSCE where the full consensus of 57-members is needed for progress – engaging Russia could serve to revive the cause of multilateral dialogue on arms control and potentially improve the damaged relationship.

A third option is to take a deep breath and try to be less emotional every time a Russian soldier moves. Some media outlets have raised anxiety, while they should only have been raising awareness. By over-reacting, the West is playing Moscow's game, demonstrating a lack of resilience and self-confidence. Rather, NATO and the US should continue to thoroughly analyse real and long-term strategic implications of largescale military manoeuvres and Russian military doctrine, but not exaggerate the implications of what is ultimately a form of muscle flexing by Russian elites.

This last option is probably the most attractive. While being careful to avoid a new arms race, Western states could act as a sort of accountant of Putin's military effort by taking tabs on how much all this is costing the Russian economy. Such an effort would help dissolve the smokescreen and assess Russia's ability to absorb the costs of military involvement in Ukraine, Syria and at home in the long-term. After all, Russia has a tradition of "Potemkin villages"

and it is worth underlining that real Russian capabilities are undoubtedly much less developed than what is trumpeted by the media. Moreover, Russian elites have to be convinced that their country risks repeating the Soviet experience if Moscow continues with excessive military spending and an unsustainable mobilization of the economy.

Ultimately, *Zapad 2017* is an example of what military exercises truly are, what messages they send and how they need to be understood in a broader context. It also provides some interesting insight into how Russia intends to use its army: as the sharpened instrument of a defensive foreign policy, able to intervene pre-emptively to protect Russian interests. However, what NATO should be worried about is not so much the display of "fireworks", but the hidden, subversive and "hybrid" actions that make up the new Russian strategic posture. Military exercises are more than a show of force when potential adversaries are already weakened and destabilized by subversive domestic manoeuvres: those are the real threats and these are what NATO and its allies must prepare against.

12 October 2017

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