



Russia's 2019 Military Drills

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The Russian military exercises Tsentr (Center) and Union Shield were the largest combat readiness tests of the Russian army this year. The goal of each was to check the state of cooperation with other countries. The almost simultaneous exercises confirmed that the Russian armed forces are able to operate in two strategic directions (fronts). The exercises demonstrate the country's growing conventional military potential and that will be a greater challenge for NATO, perceived in Russia as the main opponent.

For all of 2019, Russia had planned about 4,000 drills of its armed forces—exercises of various sizes and kinds. The largest ones are traditionally held at the end of the summer training season, and this year it was *Tsentr* in the Central Military District (MD) and *Union Shield* in the Western MD. Compared to similar exercises in 2015 (manoeuvres in individual MDs take place every four years), more soldiers were included. Moreover, during the duration of the drills, the Russian armed forces also conducted exercises in the Arctic. The similarity of the schemes, activities, and scenarios of *Tsentr 2019* and *Zapad 2017* show that the Russian military considers as its biggest threat to be a strong quasi-state with significant financial resources and capable of destabilising the country or Russia's close neighbourhood.

Tsentr 2019. The exercises took place on 16–21 September and according to the Russian Ministry of Defence, 128,000 troops, mainly from the Southern and Eastern MDs, 20,000 equipment units, including 600 aircraft and helicopters or drones, and 15 ships were involved. During the drills, S-300 and S-400 (NATO: SA-21 Growler) antiballistic missile systems and Iskander (SS-26 Stone) ballistic missile systems were employed. *Tsentr 2019* was attended by soldiers from countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—China (which had the largest contingent of 1,600 troops), India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are also part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

The exercise scenario assumed that a terrorist Islamist state was emerging in southeastern Russia. It had attacked neighbouring countries using, among others, ballistic and manoeuvring missiles. The concept resembled the fight against Islamic State in Syria. However, unlike in the Syrian operation, the Russian armed forces used a land component on a large scale. Moreover, the landing of a tactical unit (regiment) level with equipment was also practised. Thus, the Russians tried to combine anti-terrorist activities with the possibility of conducting operations against a specific country.

The manoeuvres took place on eight training grounds in Russia including three in the European part of the country. On the latter fields, according to official data, 12,950 soldiers, 250 tanks, and 450 combat vehicles were involved. Thanks to this trick, Russia avoided the requirement to invite observers, thus limiting access to information about the exercises to its own or intelligence sources. Article 47.4 of the Vienna Document on Confidence and Security-Building Measures stipulates that exercises in which more than 13,000 troops or 300 tanks or 500 combat vehicles are subject to mandatory observation. The *Tsentr 2019* manoeuvres also took place on training grounds in CSTO countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), which substituted this organisation's regular exercises.

Western MD Exercise. On 1–9 August, *Ocean Shield 2019* was carried out in the Baltic Sea with 10,000 troops, 69 ships, including security units and cutters, and 58 aircraft. Their scale and character (and declarations by the Russian military and politicians) show how important this region is for Russia, which is still treated as its window to the world and a sea trade route to Europe, as well as an area of rivalry with NATO.

However, this year's largest manoeuvres in the Western MD were joint exercises with Russia and Belarus called *Union Shield*, which took place on 13-19 September on the Mulino training grounds in Russia (Nizhny Novgorod region). They were attended by 8,000 troops from Russia and 4,000 from Belarus, again slightly below the limits of the Vienna Document. During these drills, about 950 units of military equipment were used, including 230 tanks, 240 artillery systems, and 70 aircraft.

According to the scenario, the armed forces of the two countries had to deal with illegal armed formations attacking the territory of the Union State of Belarus and Russia as well as with hybrid threats. They also tested maintaining communication under conditions of radio-electronic attack. The main aim of the exercise was to check the possibility of using the Regional Group of Forces of Belarus and Russia to provide military security and protect the borders of the Union State. Armoured and mechanised troops, landing forces, special operations forces, and combat security units took part in the activities. Moreover, the manoeuvres confirmed the almost complete integration of hardware and the unification of the command system of the armies of both countries. Preparations for *Union Shield* began at least in March and the exercises were the culmination of a two-year training period for the Regional Group of Russian and Belarusian Forces.

Activities in the North and South. In parallel to the activities carried out in the Central MD and Western MD, large-scale exercises were also carried out in the Southern MD and in the north of Russia.

In the Southern MD at the turn of August to September, more than 8,000 troops took part in activities on 12 training grounds, including in Crimea. During the drills, 2,500 units, including 30 aircraft, 60 helicopters, more than 100 tanks, and ships from the Black Sea Fleet and Caspian Flotilla, were used. The goal was to check the ability of individual types of forces to cooperate in defence of Russia's southern border.

During *Tsentral* and *Union Shield*, 2,000 troops of the Northern Fleet practised, among other things, intelligence activities and precise artillery fire using drones (about 400 units of equipment were used, including aviation and tanks) in Murmansk Oblast. At the same time, in the Barents Sea, Northern Fleet ships practised artillery fire and fighting submarines.

Conclusions. Although in its largest exercise this year, the Russian military did not test new solutions or weaponry, carrying out such large-scale manoeuvres year after year shows that the reform of the Russian armed forces is progressing. It reveals that Russia is checking the readiness of its armed forces to participate in a full-scale conventional armed conflict, which was one of the goals of the reform.

This year's exercises show that the army's potential has increased significantly and it has the mobilisation capabilities and sufficient armament to redirect its focus to any place in the country. This indicates that the Russian armed forces are capable of conducting simultaneous military operations of various types in at least two strategic directions. Thus, in case of a conventional confrontation, Russia will not be forced to quickly escalate to the nuclear level. However, it may strive for horizontal escalation, which means that Russia's growing conventional combat capabilities will be a growing challenge for NATO members and their partners, which should be included in the Alliance's defence planning.

Russia has also proved that despite the involvement of significant military groups in other parts of the country, it has sufficient capacity to protect its interests in the Arctic, which also is of strategic importance to NATO and its members.

The manoeuvres have once again shown that the Russian command attaches significant importance to media disinformation and propaganda, which accompanied the drills. It is treated as part of an information war directed at both the international community and internal needs (among which, one of the most important elements is unifying public opinion).

The exercises gave another opportunity to explore the possibility of cooperation with other countries—Belarus in the western strategic direction and members of the CSTO and the SCO in the southeast. The participation of the SCO countries, including for the first time two countries in conflict—India (one of the largest recipients of Russian weaponry) and Pakistan (for which this is a new element of its foreign policy)—shows that for China and Russia, this organisation may cease to play a role as only an economic and political cooperation forum. By organising the exercises with other countries and continuing extensive cooperation with China, Russia also wanted to prove that it has partners that can provide military support and is not internationally isolated.