



## Vostok 2018 Exercises: The Largest Manoeuvres in Russian Federation History

Anna Maria Dyner

*Russia's armed forces have finished this year's most important exercises, Vostok 2018. Taking place in eastern Russia, the drills showed the readiness of the Russian army to carry out military operations on a full scale. At the same time, they confirmed the Russian perception of the U.S. as the biggest challenge also in Russia's eastern strategic direction. This was evidenced not only by actions taken near U.S. borders but also by the participation in the exercises of the Chinese People's Liberation Army.*

**Scenario and Course of the Exercises.** *Vostok 2018* took place on 11-17 September on the training grounds in the east part of Russia. According to Russian data, 297,000 troops, about 36,000 vehicles, 1,000 aircraft and helicopters, and 80 vessels were involved. During the exercises, the forces of the Eastern and Central Military Districts (EMD, CMD, a total of seven armies combined), aerospace forces, airborne troops, special operations forces, as well as the Pacific and Northern fleets were used. The manoeuvres were also attended by units from China (about 3,200 troops, 900 weaponry units, 30 aircraft and helicopters) and Mongolia. Thus, *Vostok 2018* were the largest drills in modern Russian history.

Because of the participation of units from the two military districts, the manoeuvres were commanded not by the chief of general staff but by the Russian defence minister. The preparatory phase, 16 small-scale exercises lasting from 20-25 August, was attended by more than 260,000 troops from the EMD and CMD that had been put on full combat readiness. During *Vostok 2018*, Russia also carried out a series of related exercises in the western part of the country.

According to the drill scenario, units from both districts formed two opposing groups. The aggressors were the "Westerns", represented by the units from the CMD and the Northern Fleet, while the defenders were the "East" comprised of EMD troops and the Pacific Fleet, supported by Chinese and Mongolian units.

The first phase of the manoeuvres included command-and-staff exercises. In the second phase, the army practiced both defensive and counter-offensive operations, including massive air attacks, anti-aircraft and missile defence, sea landing, or destroying enemy ships, with some exercises taking place in the Arctic. An important element of *Vostok 2018* was the activity of rear and technical units. During the exercises, a significant role was attached to logistics (use of aviation and railways), with which the Russian armed forces had the most problems during the *Vostok 2014* manoeuvres.

**Purpose of the Drills.** *Vostok 2018* also had an important propaganda dimension directed to the international community and Russian society.

The manoeuvres were designed to be an important message for the U.S. The activities carried out both during the exercises and the preparatory phase—including long-range strategic bomber activities (flights near the coast of U.S. state of Alaska)—were a demonstration of the Russian capabilities to conduct operations near American territory. Another important message was the demonstration of increasing Russian-Chinese cooperation in the

military dimension, which may become a strategic challenge for the U.S. Russia also invited China to participate to avoid accusations from the Chinese side that the exercises were aimed at it.

Just like four years ago, *Vostok 2018* was a clear message to Japan, with the deployment of Su-35 fighters to the disputed Kuril Islands and other Russian aviation operations in this area. The countries still have not signed a peace treaty from World War II and the main subject of the dispute remains the Kurils. Although Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed signing a peace agreement without preconditions during the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok (11-13 September), which was attended by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, the Russian armed forces' actions show that Russia will not consider any major concessions involving returning the disputed territory. Moreover, according to declarations from 2017, in the archipelago Russia intends to create a new base for the Pacific Fleet. This will increase the military pressure on Japan, which is also in China's interest.

The exercises were also intended to strengthen Russian-Chinese military cooperation, including responding to security threats in Central Asia, where both countries perceive threats from "colour" revolutions, separatism, and Islamic terrorism. Joint military actions have become common practice: since 2003, the armed forces of the two countries have trained together about 30 times, although Chinese units took part this year for the first time ever in strategic manoeuvres. The Chinese side emphasized that its military cooperation with Russia is treated as a partnership but not an alliance.

In showing the strength of the Russian army to its public (the drills were widely commented in the press and television), the aim was to divert attention from the country's social problems, raucous protests associated with the recent increase in retirement age, or the country's economic problems. This also contributes to increased militancy among the Russian public.

**The EMD's Defensive Importance.** The EMD covers about 41% of Russia (7 million square kilometres) and about 160,000 troops are assigned to it. Its structure includes four combined armies, an air-defence army, airborne and coastal-defence troops, as well as the Pacific Fleet. Since 2017, the district has been under the command of Col. Gen. Alexander Zhuravlyov, who earlier led Russian troops in Syria.

In 2016, Russia's action plan for the EMD to 2020 opened. Its aims are to adapt the structure of the military's units to the needs of the district, increase the number of soldiers serving there, and modernise its equipment. According to Russian Ministry of Defence plans, in 2018 the EMD is to receive about 1,600 pieces of various weaponry to increase the percentage of modern equipment to 53%.

Despite these changes, the EMD remains the least-equipped district with the poorest military infrastructure. Due to its geography it is also the most difficult area to defend. At the same time, the Russians consider U.S. policy one of the biggest challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, including American military support for Japan and South Korea, along with missile threats from North Korea.

**Conclusions.** By holding such large manoeuvres, Russia aimed to prove it has military capabilities not only in the western part of the country, where most of its military facilities are located, but also in the east, where the majority of the country's natural resources are located and the infrastructure much less developed. These exercises can also be treated as Russian preparations in the event of a full-scale armed conflict.

Russia has shown that it is increasing its combat capabilities in its eastern strategic direction, and in the Arctic, which in the future may be a challenge for NATO countries—especially the U.S. and Canada. The exercises also revealed the importance the Russians attach to the rapid transfer of troops, possibly to use them in the western part of the state, such as the offensive operations conducted by CMD units, which, among others, are responsible for supporting the Western and Southern MDs.

Military cooperation between Russia and China and possible preparations for mutual military support in the event of a crisis may cause additional difficulty for the U.S. in its current policy in the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, the U.S. may increase the pressure on European countries (mainly France and the United Kingdom), expecting political and military support and readiness to carry out joint activities in this region. The U.S. could also demand European NATO states strengthen their independent defence capabilities to relieve U.S. military forces and allow them to become more involved in the Asia-Pacific region.

Russia perceives the demonstration of the strength of its military to be a very important, non-economic instrument of influence on neighbouring countries. It also treats it as an important element of its foreign policy, strengthening its position in the international arena. Thus, in the coming years, similar actions by Russia may be expected, though probably on a slightly smaller scale.