



Training for War

Russia's Strategic-level Military Exercises 2009-2017

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Relations internationales

Before 2009, Russia was dealing with armed conflicts and local wars. Since 2009, military exercises have shown an increasing ambition and capacity to deal with regional wars. Russian strategic-level military exercises, surprise combat readiness inspections (ISCRs) at the district or military service level, as well as the annual strategic-level exercises (STRATEX) 2009-2017, reflect a determined and persistent political and military effort to improve the combat strength of the Russian armed forces.

Suggested translation :

Analysis of these exercises, based on the ability to carry out the assigned missions, the complexity of command and control, the quantities of soldiers and equipment involved, and the state of combat readiness, shows that the combat strength of the Russian armed forces has clearly increased during this period. Russia's war against Ukraine and its involvement in Syria demonstrate a growing willingness to use military power. Russia's political leaders in 2018 have a more credible military tool at their disposal and a greater ability to influence other countries, either indirectly, by threatening or coercing them, or directly, by attacking them, than they did ten years ago.

The curriculum on Russia and Eurasia (Russian Foreign, Defence and Security Policy, www.foi.se/russia) of the Swedish Defence Research Agency (JTF) has published numerous articles since 1999 on issues related to Russia's military power, including military capabilities and political, economic and social developments. Since 2008, Russia has repeatedly used its military power abroad. What might the use of Russian military power look like in the future? The description and analysis of Russia's strategic-level military exercises can be used to illustrate the combat power of the Russian armed forces and their ability to launch and conduct combat operations in a theatre of war. The size, scope and content of military exercises indicate what a force is expected to be able to do and also how it can actually perform in operations. This report by Johan Norberg shows

that exercises hardly predict where, when and against whom Russia can use armed force, but certainly illustrate how and with what forces.

1 Introduction

Russia has only two allies: its army and its navy. Alexander III (1845-1894)

The Russian conception of a state's military power considers the combat strength of its armed forces to be a key element. Many accounts of military power include what the state actually has in terms of the number of aircraft, ships, tanks and soldiers, as well as the extent to which its demographics, science, economy and industry can be transformed into military forces in the future.

Such quantitative accounts often say little about what these forces can actually do. Russia's armed forces nominally have up to one million personnel in major conventional and nuclear forces. They are scattered throughout the Eurasian landmass. Its potential adversaries include alliances such as NATO or major powers such as China, which will ultimately be engaged in regional or even global wars ¹.

If such wars were to materialise, Russia would probably wage them in terms of strategic operations by its armed forces. The present report therefore focuses on the strategic level. It examines how Russia is developing the combat strength of its armed forces through two types of military exercises - annual strategic exercises ² (STRATEX) and comprehensive surprise combat readiness inspections (ISCR) - and what this may say about how Russia is preparing to fight.

The aim is to analyse the evolution of the combat strength of the Russian armed forces in the context of Russian strategic-level military exercises. The research question is how the conduct of these two types of exercises in the period 2009-2017 contributed to the combat strength of the Russian armed forces. This in turn raises three subsidiary questions.

First, what are the Russian conceptual frameworks for military and combat power?

Secondly, how do military exercises fit into these frameworks?

Thirdly, what do official statements and Russian media reports during the period 2009-2017 reveal about exercises in terms of participating services, weapons and formations, command and control, as well as their declared size in terms of the number of participants and equipment?

The combat strength of the Russian armed forces is based on their human and material resources and on their organisation into services, weapons, formations and units (Norberg and Westerlund 2016:23-59).

(Norberg and Westerlund 2016:23-59) Accounting for human and material resources and organization, however, only partially explains what a state's political leadership is unable to do, wants to be able to do with its armed forces, or what those forces can do in terms of combat.

The assumption here is that the exercises illustrate two things:

First, in peacetime, military exercises reflect a potential combat power in wartime. Forces that conduct tactical exercises only at the tactical unit level and do not have a higher level of command and control may find it difficult to conduct operations at the strategic level.

Second, exercises are an indication of a state's ambition for its armed forces. If a state conducts exercises at the strategic level, it probably wants to be able to conduct operations at the strategic level. This study does not focus on the assets or organization of the Russian armed forces, i.e. what they have, but rather what they can do with what they have.

One of the reasons for studying exercises is that they are essential to the creation of deployable military forces. The tactical performance of the Russian armed forces in the 2008 war against Georgia was widely considered to be poor (Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2010). In 2014, observers were surprised by the boldness and speed of the Russian operation in the Crimea, even though it had unique characteristics that favoured Russia (Norberg, Westerlund and Franke 2014). Russia also used its armed forces to wage war on Ukraine in Donbas and to intervene in Syria in 2015. This leap forward is the result of a decade of determined efforts by Russia's political and military leaders to improve the combat strength of the Russian armed forces.

In 2009, the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD)³ launched a major reorganisation of the armed forces to replace a force based on mobilisation with more combat-ready units that can be deployed without mobilisation. Defence spending roughly doubled between 2005 and 2015 (Oxenstierna 2016:133). Reorganization and increased spending are essential structural preconditions, but they alone cannot explain the improved performance.

Between 2011 and 2014, the Russian Army⁴ regularly carried out exercises related to major combat operations (Norberg, 2015), i.e. strategic-level exercises that concern operations at a strategic level, i.e. affecting most of a continent. Strategic-level exercises place high demands on the participating forces, both in terms of command and control and at the level of units and formations.

Arguably, one of the results has been an increase in the number of combat-ready units, such as those employed in the Crimea, Donbas and Syria.

This report extends the period of analysis to cover the nine years from 2009 to 2017 inclusive. The inclusion of an additional five years allows for further discussion of long-term trends in military exercises and the development of the combat strength of the Russian Armed Forces.

Few other studies, if any, cover Russian military exercises for the period 2009-2017, particularly from a Russian perspective and within a Russian conceptual framework. The present report aims to fill this gap⁵.

The topic of Russian strategic military exercises deserves to be studied for three reasons:

Firstly, Russia's military doctrine for 2014 emphasizes their importance. Paragraph 14g (14r, in Russian) qualifies as a military threat the "demonstration of military force in exercises on the territory of states neighbouring Russia or its allies".

Secondly, politically, exercises can reassure allies and deter potential adversaries (Heuser, Heier and Lasconjarias 2018:9-25). (Heuser, Heier, and Lasconjarias 2018:9-25)

The question here is what exercises mean for a credible capability to initiate and conduct combat operations. The political aspects of exercises are not the focus here, but only indirectly addressed.

Thirdly, below the political level, the structures of the armed forces depend on processes such as the procurement of equipment, the recruitment of personnel and their training. Exercises bring these elements together to create forces capable of fulfilling the missions assigned by the political leadership of the State. This may require complex tactics that require high levels of training and skill (ibid. and Biddle 2014:49), which are tested in exercises. What a force trains for in peacetime exercises reflects its potential capabilities and behaviour in combat operations.

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1 The notion of world war corresponds here to the more abstract Russian term for large-scale warfare. A war between Russia and NATO is regional in this context, but it would clearly be on a large scale for the states involved which, unlike Russia and the USA, are not major military powers.

2 This includes operational, strategic and strategic exercises.

3 In this report, the Ministry of Defence refers to the Russian Ministry of Defence, unless otherwise specified.

4 The term "military" here refers only to the forces under the Russian Ministry of Defence. Forces belonging to other Russian ministries and agencies are not included unless explicitly stated.

5 An earlier version of Chapter 4, which did not cover 2017, was the author's contribution to Heuser, Beatrice, Heier, Tormod and Lasconjarias, William (eds) "Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact", NATO Defense College, Rome, 2018. This book and "Wargames: from Gladiators to Gigabytes" by Martin van Creveld, Cambridge University Press, 2013, are key attempts to understand the role and nature of military exercises.

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