

Briefing Memo

Russia's Maneuver Exercise Vostok-2018

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Russia has four integrated military districts and conducts large-scale strategic military exercises in each of the military districts in sequence in a four-year cycle. The Vostok exercise in the Eastern Military District was conducted in 2018, following on from the 2010 and 2014 exercises. The Vostok-2018 maneuver exercise held from September 11 to 17 drew much attention as it was announced that the exercise would mobilize the largest number of troops since 1981, would be participated by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), and would coincide with the Eastern Economic Forum and summit meetings in Vladivostok. To assess the extent to which it poses as an issue to Japan, it is necessary to put the exercise into context. This article begins by examining the significance of Vostok-2018 in sending out political messages. It then attempts to deepen understanding of the exercise in the context of Russia's military buildup in the Eastern Military District.

1. Political message: Defense intentions, partnership with China, and limited expression of hostility

Since 2014, Russia and the West have been in a confrontational relationship, and Russia has sent out strong messages and taken firm actions that were nothing short of inciting deterioration in their relationship. Even so, the executive order issued by President Vladimir Putin in May 2018 upon the inauguration of his fourth term as President did not emphasize military issues, contrary to the 2012 executive order. Furthermore, Russia has sought to avoid a long-term increase of defense spending in recent years compared to around 2015, leaving greater room for interpretation that Russia will not follow a hardline military course. Nevertheless, at this timing Russia announced that Vostok-2018 would mobilize 300,000 personnel—the largest number of troops since 1981, 1,000 aircraft, 80 vessels, and 36,000 combat vehicles. It was a signal by Russian authorities to the people of Russia that it will remain a country with strong military capabilities. It was also likely intended to show to other countries that Russia is putting efforts into military preparedness and assert that Russia should not be taken lightly.

To send out a warning, it was critical that 3,500 PLA personnel participated for the first time in a Russian military district-level exercise. In July 2013, immediately after a Russia-China maritime joint exercise finished near Vladivostok, Russia's Armed Forces started a "snap inspection" exercise (according to Russia's announcement, 160,000 personnel, 5,000 combat vehicles, and 70 vessels) and President Putin visited the Tsugol training range near the Mongolia-China border. At the time, I interpreted this as Russia's preparations for potential ground clashes with China, deploying the most number of army brigades to the Eastern Military District, all the while cooperating with China. Since the deterioration of

the Russia-West relationship in 2014, Russia has approached China to a greater extent than before and has exported relatively advanced weapons, such as the Su-35 fighter and the S-400 surface-to-air missile system. As part of Vostok-2018, PLA conducted exercises with Russia's Armed Forces in the Tsugol range, the same place as 2013, and learned from Russia about asymmetric operations and the experience of bombers in Syria, further deepening the interdependent relationship between Russia and China. It is widely viewed that Russia will clash with China at some point. Even if such is the case, most likely Russia wished to signal that the two countries will not become adversaries for some time to come, and that a considerable price would be needed to separate Russia from China.

This raises the question: has Russia basically entered into an alliance relationship with China and is it signaling a confrontational posture towards the Japan-U.S. alliance? At the Eastern Economic Forum held at the same time as Vostok-2018, the MC brought up the issue of the Japan-Russia peace treaty and the Japan-U.S. alliance. President Putin touched upon the problems of missile defense and stated his intention to work towards concluding a peace treaty before resolving the territorial dispute, steering the news coverage. The President did not mention that the U.S. Forces were a threat or that a transfer of islands to Japan would be dangerous to Russia because of the Japan-U.S. alliance. If President Putin had made such remarks at this forum—a meeting for discussing economic cooperation with China's President Xi Jinping and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe—and furthermore, had Russia conducted military exercises on the disputed islands of the Northern Territories at this timing, it would have become clear that the Russia-China alliance adopts a confrontational posture towards the Japan-U.S. alliance. On the flipside, the Abe administration's Russia diplomacy would have lost momentum and Russia would not enjoy the kind of cooperative relationship with Japan it desires.

As such, Russia sent out the message that it is ready to engage in war if the necessity arises and will work with China, but that it will not immediately confront Japan and the United States. Ever since the arrival of President Donald Trump in 2017, the West has taken a firm stance towards Russia and has strengthened sanctions on Russia over the attempted poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in the United Kingdom, suspicions about Russia's influencing of public opinion, and other issues. Nonetheless, Russia has not made maximum use of military confrontations and confrontational rhetoric. Russia may have deemed that this was not the timing for deteriorating the situation.

2. Russia's military buildup: Ground defense and defense of the Sea of Okhotsk

Still, Russia has continued to engage in military preparations even under limited resource consumption. Improvements in Russia's capabilities mean that Russia would have more choices when a crisis occurs and its adversaries would have fewer measures at their disposal. For example, if a conflict were to occur in the western Baltic Sea, it is expected that Russia's capabilities such as missiles, vessels, and aircraft would significantly interfere with NATO's deployment of support troops. This has continued to pose as a fundamental issue to NATO's collective defense. In this sense, attention needs to be paid to the capabilities possessed by Russia's Armed Forces if and when crises occur in the future.

Most of the headlines on Vostok-2018 were about the mobilization of the largest number of troops on the ground. Attention should however be paid to improvements in the ability to quickly command and control (C2) diverse units rather than to the troop size. In 2017, the Zapad-2017 military exercise was conducted in Russia's Western Military District and Belarus. While they claimed that the exercise involved a total of 12,700 people, many news articles estimated that a larger

number of troops was actually mobilized. Mathieu Boulègue, a research fellow with Chatham House, notes that a large-scale troop displacement was already conducted during Zapad-2013 four years earlier, and Zapad-2017 focused on quick C2 of units that were not too large.

Similarly, with regard to Vostok-2018, attention should be paid not only to troop strength but also to unit displacement capabilities. Indeed, unlike Europe which has a troop threshold under the Vienna document (if the number of troops will exceed 13,000, countries are obligated to accept observers to observe the exercise freely), Russia may conduct military exercises employing a large number of troops without being bound by this threshold, in areas east of the Ural Mountains. For this reason, there may have been significance in conducting an exercise in the Eastern Military District by mobilizing troops of a size that would be operational in Europe in a contingency. In addition to the mobilization scale, however, another point worth noting is that, on the ground, the exercise involved C2 of the drills of not only combat vehicles and infantry but also multiple military services and assets, such as helicopter, airborne troops, surface-to-air missile, and bomber. It indicates that Russia's Armed Forces continues to make the shift from the great war model of the past, to modern warfare fought by integrating multiple military services and assets.

In addition, Vostok-2018 commanded the actions of maritime units and verified their ability to take swift actions in a range of scenarios. Maritime defense in the Far East and the Arctic was an actual priority that was highlighted when Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. The logic holds that, even if the primary fronts of Russia's Armed forces are Europe and the Caucasus Mountains, it needs to be prepared for a possible attack against vulnerable regions should military conflicts with foreign adversaries escalate. Up until about 2010, the Arctic and the Far East were low on Russia's priority list and remained in a state of obsolescence since the 1990s. Russia has been strengthening its defense of the Arctic and the Far East since 2012 and their defense is recovering in this context.

The Vostok-2014 exercise four years ago (according to Russia's announcement, 155,000 personnel and 8,000 fighters, vessels, and other assets) presented the notion that the area around the Sea of Okhotsk and the Arctic Ocean area were a contiguous defense front. In the snap inspection conducted shortly beforehand, units stationed on the continent were moved to peripheral areas in the east and north, and then live ammunition drills were conducted in the Vostok-2014 exercise. In the Sea of Okhotsk, two Borei-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (two more to be added later) renovated in Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula are conducting activities. The Sea of Okhotsk is considered a critical base for "second strike" strategic nuclear force for surviving and launching a counterattack in the event of an attack on the mainland. Therefore, the "Kuril Islands" (Russian term for what the Government of Japan calls the Four Northern Islands and Chishima Islands, combined), which serve as a gateway to the Pacific, are included in the line of defense. In August 2016, Minister of Defence Shoigu announced that Russia had a plan to build a coastal defense system in these waters, and made clear that strategic nuclear force would be ensured by securing the safety of navigation in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Bering Strait.

The measures taken by Russia's Armed Forces around this time appear to be part of a process for realizing this concept. Russia's Armed Forces conducted a survey of Matua Island, saying that it would build a new outpost in the middle section of the "Kuril Islands." Russia has installed a runway on Matua Island, and it seems it will establish another outpost on Paramushir Island in the north. Russia's initiative to deploy missiles on the Northern Territories has been reported from

around 2010, and in November 2016, it was reported that a set of anti-ship missiles called the Bal missile was deployed to Kunashiri Island and the Bastion missile to Etorofu Island. In February 2017, the Ministry of Defence of Russia announced that a division would be organized on the “Kuril Islands” as part of its coastal defense system. In July 2017, a Steregushchy-class Sovershenny frigate was deployed to Vladivostok, the first new surface vessel for the Pacific Fleet since the Cold War. Four more new vessels and missiles are expected to be deployed.

Vostok-2018 held from September 11 to 17, 2018 included maritime activities in the northern part of the Sea of Okhotsk but no activities on the Northern Territories islands, contrary to Vostok-2014. The latest exercise did not unveil any concrete vision for the coastal defense system and did not appear to be a military exercise for dealing with maximum situations on the sea.

That said, military exercises covering the Northern Territories islands, which are unacceptable to Japan, were in fact conducted in 2018, with reports of the flight of Su-35 fighters in March and launch of anti-ship missiles in June. The main forces of the fighter units, even if they are on the continent, have begun to be operated using the airfield on Etorofu Island. In this regard, Etorofu Island has certainly become an asset Russia that does not wish to give up, even more than before. In August, Russia conducted a relatively large-scale vessel operation in the Sea of Okhotsk. On September 3, the Joint Staff Office announced that 28 Russian vessels sailed through the La Pérouse Strait on their return to Russia.

The Vostok-2018 exercise did not entail the largest defense operation in waters around Japan. Still, drills were carried out in a section of such waters, and attention should be paid to Russia’s Armed Forces’ continued intention to boost its military capabilities and conduct exercises in waters extending from the Sea of Okhotsk to the Bering Strait.

3. Points of note on Russia’s present situation and future

The Vostok-2018 maneuver exercise was aimed at sending out a political message that Russia attaches importance to having strong military capabilities, as well as enhancing certain military capabilities, such as C2 capabilities for integrated operations and maritime defense arrangements. It should not be interpreted immediately that Russia and China are preparing for warfare involving many troops against Japan and the West. Rather, attention should be paid to the fact that Russia’s confrontational posture is limited at this time and that Russia has military objectives, such as the maritime defense concept, that is not limited to this exercise. In actuality, Russia’s capabilities for asymmetrical operations through the use of small units and non-military means, as seen in Ukraine and the periphery of the Baltic Sea, are posing as challenges. In the periphery of Japan, continued attention needs to be paid to Russia’s intentions and the changes in its capabilities.

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