



“Kavkaz 2016:” The Next Test of Russia’s Armed Forces

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The military exercise “Kavkaz 2016” was the most important test this year of the combat readiness of the Russian Armed Forces. The scenarios carried out in recent months by Russia and Collective Security Treaty Organisation members included a clear political message addressed to neighbouring countries (namely Ukraine) and NATO members, evidenced by the location and scale of the manoeuvres. In “Kavkaz 2016,” the Russians demonstrated their ability to defend their hold on Crimea, occupied since 2014.

“Kavkaz 2016.” The year’s largest Russian military exercise took place on 5–9 September in the Southern Military District (SMD), including in Crimea and on the Black and Caspian Seas. More than 12,000 SMD soldiers took part, supported by forces from other military districts. In total, 400 pieces of major military equipment (including more than 100 aircraft and helicopters) and 15 warships were used.

During the exercise, “Western Country” attacked the “Federation of the North,” leading to sea and air operations, while the task of the defenders was to stop the attack and move to counter-attack. The scenario also assumed a wide range of tactics, such as rapid mobile defence (involving troops from mobile divisions), defence of the coast as well as the isolation and elimination of enemy sabotage and intelligence groups. Moreover, the command systems dedicated to the various troop units and the cooperation between them and with other state services and local authorities were also tested. Also, it checked communications systems and the level of military training, starting from the individual soldier, to sub-units, to tactical units, as well as the interaction between different troop formations and groups of armed forces.

The “Kavkaz” exercises are cyclical and this year’s edition was announced two years ago. It was the last in a series of strategic manoeuvres in all of Russia’s military districts (“West”/“Zapad” took place in 2013, “East”/“Vostok” in 2014, and “Centre”/“Centr” in 2015) and the culmination of smaller-scale exercises over the summer. Since 2009, when reform of the Russian Armed Forces began, September’s manoeuvres in various military districts are the most important test of its increasing combat capability. Particular attention is being paid to problem-prone areas such as logistics, state mobilisation and expeditionary operations.

Political Dimension. “Kavkaz 2016” aroused controversy even at the preparation stage since it called for the redeployment of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine and in Crimea. They were preceded by a series of smaller exercises that included defence of a Russian sea base in Sevastopol from submarine attack. On 25–31 August, the combat readiness of the armed forces in the Southern, Western and Central MD’s, the Northern Fleet and the commands of the Russian Aerospace Forces and Airborne Forces were also checked. According to international rules, the Russians did not have to offer notification of these drills, but NATO countries objected to them.

“Kavkaz 2016” does not exceed the 13,000 troop threshold at which the Vienna Document says it would be obligatory to invite observers from signatory countries of the agreement. Nevertheless, Russia has given notice of “Kavkaz 2016” and invited military attachés accredited in that country. However, even then there was some controversy, as most of the exercise took place in Crimea (European attachés excused themselves from observation in that area of the drills). Ukraine also strongly objected and in response began territorial defence exercises in Kherson Oblast, which borders Crimea.

Military Importance. The intensification of Russia's military activities observed in recent years shows its armed forces' growing potential. In 2015, about 5,000 drills of varying scale and scope were carried out, including unannounced checks of combat readiness. This year's total is likely to be similar.

The previous year's military exercises and the one this year have been used by the Russians to test new types of weapons, including some with considerable firepower such as thermobaric rounds. It considers presentations of new weapons to be important to new arms contracts. According to SIPRI data, Russia remains the second-largest arms exporter in the world with 25% of the global arms market (the U.S. is first with about 30%). It is also a signal that regardless of problems caused by sanctions, Russia's defence industry can produce modern weaponry.

Exercises Involving Russia. Every year, Russia conducts joint exercises with allied countries, including members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. The intensity of these manoeuvres in recent years is a reflection of the pivotal risks perceived by Russia, such as political instability in the post-Soviet space and the threat of terrorism. The drills also have a clear political context, because when they take place in countries from the former Soviet Union or their armed forces participate, Russia aims to designate its visible zone of influence.

In August, CSTO rapid-reaction forces (KSOR) staged "Cooperation 2016" and the joint Russian-Belarusian exercises "Indestructible Brotherhood 2016" followed. The first involved 6,000 troops (three times as many as the year before) and about a thousand pieces of military equipment. "Cooperation 2016" included not only the KSOR forces but also aviation and artillery support in a scenario aimed at resolving a conflict in one of the regions bordering the state. In turn, the scenario of "Indestructible Brotherhood" contained exercises in which peacekeepers enforcing the observance of a ceasefire between warring sides, which is very similar to the current situation in eastern Ukraine (Donbas).

The "Cooperation 2016" drills were held on the training grounds of the Western Military District (Pskov Oblast) while "Indestructible Brotherhood" was held in polygon-shaped training areas close to the border with Poland and Ukraine. Similar to "Kavkaz," they were a demonstration of Russian capability for NATO countries and Ukraine. This was indicated by the proximity of the polygons to those countries and the scenarios carried out by the Armed Forces, including the use of rapid-reaction troops. At the same time, the strong cooperation between Russia and Belarus in the military sphere provides evidence that the Russians perceive Belarusian territory as their operational space.

In August, the Russian Armed Forces, together with Transnistria troops, carried out manoeuvres in that region, including practice forging the Dniester River with heavy military equipment. There was no notice of these exercises, which was a clear political message to Moldovan authorities and confirmation of increasing Russian influence in Transnistria (a few weeks after the drills, the Transnistrian authorities began adoption of Russian law, seen as the first step in integration with Russia). In the first half of August, international military competitions were held with the participation of military units from 12 countries (Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait, Mongolia, Serbia, Tajikistan, and Venezuela). The range of countries clearly shows the Russian interests in military cooperation and arms exports.

Conclusions. The broad spectrum of exercises conducted during the summer by the Russian Armed Forces is part of a two-track policy. On the one hand, Russia is seeking to break down its isolation in the international arena and have EU sanctions lifted through its involvement in military and diplomatic activities in the Middle East and by shifting onto Ukraine a sense of responsibility for the failure of the Minsk agreements. On the other hand, the Russian authorities aim to use their growing military capabilities to demarcate the country's area of influence as a message to the international community, NATO, and, above all, Ukraine and other countries neighbouring Russia.

Its military manoeuvres on this scale also have a propaganda dimension in terms of the Russian public, which perceives the condition of its Armed Forces as one of the main indicators of the country's status as a world power. According to a Levada Centre poll from the beginning of 2016, 81% of surveyed Russians said that the Armed Forces are able to defend the country from the threat of war, and 65% of respondents considered such a threat to be real. What is more, the scenarios used in the drills are a response to the threats perceived by Russia as both pivotal and corresponding to new versions of its "Military Doctrine" or "Maritime Doctrine." In the case of "Kavkaz 2016," the Russians also demonstrated they have real capability to defend their hold on Crimea, where 24,000 Russian soldiers are stationed and, in the last several months, a significant amount of military equipment has been shifted.