Go West: Analysing ‘Zapad’

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Author: Konrad Muzyka

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Russia conducted its quadrennial operational-strategic exercise, ‘Zapad’, together with Belarus between 14 and 20 September. Konrad Muzyka reports on this latest iteration of the exercise and what it reveals about current Russian military thinking

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's ‘Zapad’ (‘West’) manoeuvres have been held three times: in 1999, 2009, and 2013. Following each ‘Zapad’ Russia has adopted a new military doctrine, although it is unclear whether there is any correlation between these two things. Each exercise tests how prepared the Russian military and civilian structures are to fight conventional and asymmetric opponents in Russia and its periphery.

The exercise this year was the first in a western operational direction since Russian forces occupied Crimea and instigated combat operations in eastern Ukraine. For this reason there were concerns that ‘Zapad’ could serve as a tool to increase the readiness of the Russian armed forces and to conceal the forward-deployment of combat and logistics units that could be used for offensive operations against countries in Russia’s western operational direction. Analysis of previous instances where Soviet and Russian forces operated in this way, most notably in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Afghanistan in 1979, Georgia in 2008, and Ukraine in 2014, demonstrates that Russia is a status-quo power and that it uses its armed forces during times of acute political and/or military crisis when Moscow’s interests are threatened. There is no crisis in Eastern Europe and there is little to suggest that one will materialise in the near term. A decision to deploy troops would also need to meet strict military doctrinal criteria, which at the moment it does not.
The scenario

Since ‘Zapad’ traditionally tests the operational and strategic capabilities of the Union States of Russia and Belarus, it should not come as a surprise that it has a general anti-NATO character in that it tests performance against platforms similar to those found in the NATO inventory. Indeed, despite official pronouncements that joint forces train against ‘armed bands’ or ‘terrorists’, the scale of deployments, platforms used, and scenarios practised indicate that both countries are preparing to fight a high-tempo conventional conflict with technologically sophisticated opposing forces that employ combat aircraft, strategic bombers, and submarines. Another important feature of the exercise is its nuclear dimension, which also points to the real potential of opposing forces. That said, the West should not be fixated on the idea that ‘Zapad’ prepares its forces in Joint Strategic Command (JSC) West to fight NATO.
Three new fictitious countries were created for the purposes of this year’s training. Vesbaria and Lubenia were located in Lithuania and Poland and Veishnoria was placed in northwestern Belarus, more or less along the lines of the contemporary Grodno region. The location of Veishnoria is peculiar. Compared with other parts of the country, Grodno is more nationalistic and predominantly Roman Catholic. More importantly, the fictitious Veishnoria region overlaps areas that predominantly supported Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s counterpart during the 1994 presidential elections. Historically and culturally the region has maintained close links to Poland and Lithuania. This is the most populated area, with citizens of Polish descent and Belarusian speakers making up most of the population. Therefore the scenario has an ‘enemy from within’ element, with Veishnoria’s most likely NATO-supported forces attacking mainland Belarus and Russia in the hope of seceding from the Union State. Officially the drill was set to take place at 11 training ranges in Russia and Belarus, although the number of areas where exercise-related drills took place was undoubtedly higher.

The scope of the ‘Zapad’ exercise, however, goes beyond conventional operations that are practised by the Union State units because strategic exercises tend to mix deterrence with war termination goals. At present, although increasingly capable, the deterrent role of the conventional elements of the Russian armed forces has been limited. As a result nuclear weapons, be they tactical or strategic, are the mainstay of Russia’s deterrence posture.
The 2009 iteration of the exercise, for instance, reportedly practised a nuclear bombing run on Warsaw, Poland, to ‘escalate to de-escalate’ the conflict and to effectively terminate it on Russia’s terms. The 2013 exercise also had a nuclear element attached to it and evidence continues to emerge that a similar scenario was practised this year.

‘Zapad 2017’ and exercises that preceded it demonstrated conventional capabilities taking the lead and that the leadership has growing faith in its armed forces. The exercise also tested the entire top-down command-and-control (C2) chain from the president to individual soldiers.

**Period of threat**

The Russian political-military leadership believes that there would be a period of increased tension between Moscow and an opponent and that relations between the states would deteriorate before the breakout of conflict. During the Cold War the Soviets believed that warning indicators would provide them with enough time to populate skeleton units with reservists and increase the readiness of the entire armed forces. However, the display of military power in US-led military operations in Iraq in 1991 and Kosovo in 1999 demonstrated to Moscow that a devastating conventional attack could happen much more quickly than previously thought, which would significantly affect any warning period and decrease the state’s ability to defend itself.

Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine added a new role for the armed forces, other troops, and authorities during the period of threat that included “implementation of measures for territorial defence and the performance of the established order of measures to civil defence”.

In September Russia was a victim of hundreds of hoax bomb threats that resulted in mass evacuations of railway stations, airports, schools, universities, and hospitals. According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL), on 13 September 100,000 citizens were evacuated from various buildings in areas surrounding Moscow. Within a week 80 cities across the country were affected. Kremlin-linked local press reports claimed that either Ukraine, Islamic State militants, or even a radical Orthodox group was to blame. However, it is more than likely that fake bomb threats were a part of ‘Zapad’ and sought to test the ability and readiness of civil defence forces to conduct mass evacuations of Russian citizens during a period of threat or war. Concurrently, it tested internal organisational processes and procedures and the interoperability of government bodies, such as the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES), the Federal Security Service, the police, the Ministry of Justice, and the Russian Guard (Rosgvardia), to manage emergency situations and protect public safety and order.

The MES ran another large-scale emergency response exercise at Rostov nuclear power plant during 19–22 September that was based “on the worst combination of many adverse events – natural disasters, failures of power unit systems, and other emergencies”. However, because the exercise involved representatives from Belarus, Bulgaria, Finland, France, South Korea, and Sweden, it is not clear whether it was related to scenarios practised during ‘Zapad’, although it is possible that it was loosely linked to the overall training campaigns undertaken around it.
Airborne troops en route to an Il-76 transport as part of ‘Zapad 2017’. (Russian MoD)

It is uncertain when exactly the Russian armed forces moved from a peace-time posture to a threat-based stance because the activities of its components, especially in the Western JSC, have been heightened all year. This has included tens of small- and large-scale exercises designed to improve mobility, enhance readiness and mobilisation, and test forward deployment. These drills included all arms and branches of the armed forces from company/battalion to division level. Since May Belarus and Russia have conducted exercises to test electronic warfare (EW), logistics, engineering, C2, CBRN, and air-defence units. All of these capabilities were later tested during ‘Zapad’. Elements belonging to the 6th Combined Arms Army (CAA), the 1st Guards Tank Army, and the Pskov-based 76th Airborne Division are understood to train almost constantly.

On 4 September Russia included a nuclear dimension in the pre-‘Zapad’ preparations when 11 Strategic Rocket Forces (SRF) regiments were simultaneously sent out to conduct a dispersal drill, which seems to have tested how the SRF units could deal with chemical weapon-equipped ‘saboteurs’ seeking to destroy mobile launchers. This fits into the overall ‘Zapad’ scenario where an enemy would be seeking to destroy elements of the Russian nuclear triad to limit its strike capability. This culminated with a Yars intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test on 12 September, likely used as a deterrent exercise within the pre-‘Zapad’ scenario.

Three days later almost the entire JSC West short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) force was put on alert, forward deployed, and practised electronic launches. The drill involved the Iskander tactical ballistic missile-equipped 26th and 112th Missile Brigades and the 448th Missile Brigade that deploys the OTR-21 Tochka-U SRBM. Exclusion of the Chernyakovsk-based 152nd Missile Brigade from the exercise was likely related to the fact that its base is being renovated and that it will soon be converted to the Iskander system.

Lastly, as part of the strategic deployment the armed forces generated (mobilised) additional manpower to increase the number of personnel in front-line units and support elements. This indicated a theoretical transition from a peace stance to one reflecting the breakout of hostilities. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the size of reservist call-ups for ‘Zapad’ was significant enough to warrant concern. Some personnel were summoned to undergo ideological and limited combat training. At the same time, as a part of force generation actions, no additional units were understood to have been created, but some existing formations were brought up to a war footing. In terms of areas where call-ups were distributed, they expanded beyond the regional parameters of ‘Zapad’ (Karelia for example), but they were limited to the Western JSC.
During the threat part of the exercise Russia also forward deployed its core elements to exercise areas and some Belarusian airborne subunits were moved to Pskov, where they practised with the Russian 76th Airborne Division.

Forward engineering units of the Russian land forces arrived in Belarus in mid-August to prepare training areas and set up lodgings as well as weapon and lubricant facilities. Soon afterwards the final exercise involving logistics units from both countries was held during 21–25 August in Belarus (in the Minsk, Vitebsk, and Mogilev regions) and in Luga Oblast, Russia, and included 3,000 personnel. This also involved personnel belonging to the Federal Agency for State Reserves and OAO Transneft, which is responsible for transportation of oil and oil products through pipelines in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

![Airbus Defence and Space imagery showing a support and observation complex on the Luga training range.](image)

*Support and observation complex on the Luga training range*
Deployment site at the Luga training area ()

An air-defence exercise in late August was, on the other hand, used to forward deploy some Kursk-based 14th Aviation Regiment MiG-29SMT and Su-34 fighter aircraft. In the meantime, the Belarusian Air Force trained for the dispersal of combat aircraft to highway airstrips. By the time the exercise began, Russia had deployed elements of the 76th Airborne Division to the Kaliningrad Oblast. Some subunits were also moved to the Strugi Krasnye training area during the night hours on 28 August. The 60 km march using organic assets involved about 570 vehicles, of which 20 (or 4%) broke down on the way to the exercise area. For unknown reasons this deployment also resulted in significant damage valued at USD550,000 to the surface of a highway.

A Don Cossacks reservist company was also airlifted to the region. Parts of the 288th Artillery Brigade of the 1st Guards Tank Army (1 TGA) were deployed to eastern Belarus. There they joined battalions from the 275th Artillery Regiment and the 6th Tank Brigade as well as a company from the 137th Reconnaissance Battalion. The forward deployment of the 6th Tank Brigade is interesting because it demonstrated how the general staff could use more manoeuvrable brigades during initial hostilities. Being the only brigade with a motorised battalion attached to the 1st TGA, the 6th Tank Brigade would be tasked with repelling penetrations and mounting limited counter-offensive operations. Due to its organic logistics and artillery assets the brigade is more manoeuvrable than a division, but possesses enough firepower to maintain pressure on opposing forces, especially in the medium spectrum of ground operations, such as Veishnoria’s advance toward Belarus proper. In addition, as ‘Zapad’ showed, a brigade was reinforced with a reconnaissance battalion to increase battlefield awareness and an artillery battalion to provide enhanced manoeuvre support. If needed
divisions would then provide additional combat power to reinforce brigade operations along the battlespace area.

**Initial period of war**

The main part of the exercise commenced in the early morning hours on 14 September when elements of the 1st TGA were ordered to deploy to combat areas after “illegal armed formations” were detected on the territory of one of the regions of the Union State. A Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) press release indicated that the unit in question was the 6th Tank Brigade, which is based in Mulino. Deployment of elements of this unit, likely a couple of battalions, was as much a development of a second-echelon exercise as it was a strategic mobility drill. Mulino is located more than 1,000 km from Osipovichi, where the unit, transported by rail, reportedly appeared within 24 hours. This aligns with previous mobility exercises whereby a motorised battalion required about 100 flat railcars, including passenger cars and cars with air-defence equipment, for movement.

Several battalions from the 76th, 98th, and 106th Airborne Divisions, which constitute the entire Western JSC airborne force, were airlifted to engagement areas, with some landing behind enemy lines near Pskov. However, the engagement of Russian airborne forces (VDV) in the conflict in eastern Ukraine showed that the role of these forces has been expanded and now includes front-line infantry. It is likely that some VDV battalions were used in this capacity during the exercise to support tank and motorised subunits belonging to the 6th CAA. Forces that deployed in the enemy’s rear suppressed movement of opposing units and conducted counter offensives in three directions. The airborne forces continued to test the Andromeda-D division-to-soldier C2 system that provides a network-centric capability in real time. This, in particular, refers to the 106th, which had received an Andromeda-D-equipped battalion set of BMD-4M airborne assault vehicles and BTR-MDM armoured personnel carriers before ‘Zapad’ commenced. Another novelty was the testing of the newly delivered P-230T C2 vehicle that is based on the Tigr-M multipurpose high-mobility vehicle. It is a control post for lower-level airborne commanders that provides real-time battlefield awareness and can secure a communication service in stationary and moving positions.
A column of Russian BMD-2 airborne infantry fighting vehicles on the move during ‘Zapad 2017’. The role of Russian airborne forces has been expanded. (Russian MoD)  

In Glubokoye, located within Veishnoria, local authorities announced a state of emergency, introduced a curfew, and erected control points. A territorial defence headquarters was established that commanded regional police and military forces, including a reduced-strength reserve motorised rifle battalion. Saboteurs operating in the nearby area were engaged by Belarusian special forces with their newly procured Mil Mi-17V-5 helicopters.  

In this phase of the exercise, which lasted three days, the armed forces of the Union State had several important tasks to accomplish. It is understood that the National Defence Management Centre was the C2 body responsible for running and co-ordinating all operations during ‘Zapad’. The Andromeda-D control system was used to provide the centre with real-time information on the status of the VDV forces. Auxiliary army-level C2 posts were set up in Belarus around the Regional Group of Forces Command as well as elements of the 1 TGA in Belarus. Setting up reliable communication systems, free from electronic interference, allowed the military leadership to get an accurate picture of the battlefield and battlespace. This also involved Belarusian units, in particular the country’s S-300 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems.  

The air-defence aspect during the first phase of ‘Zapad’ clearly pointed out defensive operations against a very capable opponent. Union State forces defended against, and repelled, air- and cruise-missile strikes. This involved elements of the 6th Air and Air Defence Army based around Saint Petersburg, most likely the 1,448th Air Defence Regiment and the 500th Anti-Aircraft Regiment. Both regiments field S-400 SAM systems that provide long-range strategic air defence for the Saint Petersburg area. The former unit also deploys the S-300PS for barrier defence while the latter fields the Pantsyr-S1 short- to medium-range SAM/anti-aircraft gun system that is tasked with protecting higher-level batteries from low-flying guided munitions. A similar air-defence configuration has been deployed to Syria to provide an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble to protect Russian forces stationed there. However, not only did ‘Zapad’ test the country’s ability to provide A2/AD zones, but perhaps more importantly, during the initial period of hostilities, the armed forces sought to establish a complex A2/AD bubble that integrated an entire spectrum of anti-access assets such as gun and missile artillery (including SRBMs), combat aircraft, anti-ship weapons, and naval vessels, which extended the range of anti-access reach. A similar scenario was practised in the Baltic Sea.  

Although officially not involved in ‘Zapad’, Northern Fleet vessels also went to sea to avoid being destroyed while alongside. A force was deployed that included 20 surface vessels, about 10 submarines, 20 support ships, and 30 aircraft. A similar development occurred during the previous exercise, which confirms that Russia is concerned by the potential for opposing forces to destroy a significant part of Russia’s maritime fleet and its nuclear components. A Russian anti-submarine warfare (ASW) task force also detected and destroyed an enemy submarine using a “conventional torpedo” and other assault forces. This was achieved through integration of multiple sensors from surface assets, submarines, and aircraft.
A part of the fleet was redirected to the New Siberian Islands in the Arctic to conduct amphibious assaults there, which indicates that Moscow has concerns that a future conflict could also involve Arctic areas. Jane’s understands that personnel from the 80th and 61st Independent Motor Rifle Brigades, both earmarked for Arctic operations, were also involved in ‘Zapad’. However, it is possible that these units never reached the New Siberian Islands and instead were used to practise a simulated amphibious assault on Svalbard: a Norwegian archipelago located midway between mainland Norway and the North Pole. Combat aircraft, for instance, were reportedly deployed extensively to saturate and exhaust Norwegian quick-reaction alert capabilities to facilitate an unhindered simulated amphibious assault on Svalbard. According to a Norwegian defence news website, Aldrimer.no, the country’s intelligence services were caught by surprise and were able to provide little or no warning about Russian air and naval operations in the Barents Sea.

This would also explain why some subunits were deployed near the border with Finland and Norway, where they fought “saboteurs”. Due to the close proximity of the border to the Northern Fleet main base in Murmansk, it is likely that these units trained to counter conventional forces that sought to attack Northern Fleet naval bases from the land. They were also reinforced by VDV personnel.

Although from a military exercise point of view the co-operation between Russian and Belarusian units was efficient during the first phase, there were two events that cast doubts on the political aspect of ‘Zapad’. On 16 September Belarusian journalist Dzyans Ivashin published a list of 137 Russian agents of influence operating in Belarus. The list included Belarusian military personnel holding the ranks of general, colonel, lieutenant colonel, and major. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that such a list was published during the joint exercise. Neither is it likely that such a list would be released without Lukashenko’s consent. In a larger context this fits into the slow but steady degradation of relations between Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin since Moscow annexed Crimea. Occasional rumours circulate that Russia may try to replace Lukashenko with a more amicable politician. Ivashin’s actions could be looked at through the prism of events that unfolded on 14 September when the Russian MoD announced additional deployments, likely follow-on and second-echelon forces to Belarus. In response to this news the Belarusian MoD categorically stated that all Russian forces taking part in ‘Zapad’ had already been deployed into Belarus and that no additional reinforcements were planned. A Jane’s source in Belarus stated that Russian units did arrive at the border, but were not let in by the Belarusian border guards because their deployment was not agreed with Lukashenko. However, Jane’s has not been able to confirm the veracity of this story. That said, the Belarusian MoD later announced that an agreement was reached with the Russian MoD that any follow-on forces would train on Russian training ranges only.

**Counter offensive or war termination?**

Press reports indicated that some EW assets were used before and during ‘Zapad’ and were directed at Sweden’s Gotland Island or the Finnish Aland Islands. Although the government in Stockholm claimed that no communication devices in Sweden were affected, NATO officials confirmed that Latvian communication networks in some western parts of the country were jammed. Jane’s assesses that the subsequent amphibious landing exercise that took place at the Khmelevka range in
Kaliningrad actually simulated amphibious operations against one or both of the above-mentioned islands. Capturing Gotland, in particular, would enable Russia to control sea and aviation movement in the Northern Baltic, especially if anti-access assets were moved into the area. This would significantly impair the movement of NATO troops into the Baltic states in times of crisis or war.

Simultaneously, as reported by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, before the exercise and throughout its duration GPS receivers in Norway’s Finnmark region were jammed, affecting the movement of civilian aircraft. Initially officials claimed the EW beam was not directed at Norway per se, but it was clear that the electromagnetic spectrum was used to hinder the movement of NATO aircraft or ships that were operating in the area during the exercise. However, Jane’s assesses that the Russian use of EW assets went far beyond what has been reported in the media and that they were used extensively to mask the simulated attack on Svalbard. Russia undoubtedly tested its EW capabilities during both phases of the exercise to complement its A2/AD zones in an effort to hinder the movement and operation of opposing forces in the Western strategic direction. This is especially relevant given NATO’s C4ISR edge over Russian forces. Employment of EW assets provides an asymmetrical response to this informational superiority, but at the same time, given the reliance of NATO on electronic systems for C4ISR, the role of Russian EW troops will only increase over time. As Roger M McDermott, a Senior Fellow in Eurasian Military Studies at the Jamestown Foundation, pointed out, “[The] EW component is represented organically within the brigade structure, which means that the Russian Ground Forces do not move or conduct operations without EW support.”

One of the novelties that appeared during the latter stage of ‘Zapad 2017’ was the RB-109A Bylina EW system that provides brigade-level automated C2 of EW assets. It reportedly fields an artificial intelligence system that manages and gives orders to all EW platforms and automatically chooses the assets best placed to suppress enemy platforms, according to McDermott. At a tactical level
some special forces personnel also used the Strelets individual soldier C2 system, which is a part of the Ratnik (Warrior) soldier system. This features a wearable computer system that serves as an integrated communications, target identification, and information device. The system also has location reporting for improved soldier C2 and blue-force tracking.

The naval component of the second stage of the drill focused on coastal defence activities undertaken by the Northern and Baltic Fleets. In both areas, Russian units managed to sink four enemy submarines. In the north the fleet worked on the interoperability of ‘Oscar II’- and ‘Kilo’-class (Project 877) submarines with Tu-142 and II-38 maritime reconnaissance and ASW aircraft. A similar exercise, albeit on a smaller scale, was undertaken in the Baltics, where a Ka-27PL ASW helicopter destroyed an enemy submarine and was subsequently included in a larger task force comprising Steregushchiy-class corvettes to attack another boat. Nevertheless, throughout the second stage the Northern Fleet integrated its assets into a battle surface action group to conduct offensive and defensive operations to prevent any amphibious operations against mainland Russia. To this end a wide array of anti-ship missiles were used, including P-700 Granits and P-270 Moskits. Simultaneously, the Bastion-P mobile coastal defence missile system was deployed against incoming forces. Naval infantry units that were previously deployed to the Arctic were also tasked with coastal defence against surface and air targets.

In terms of engagement and looking at ground operations of the Union State forces in Belarus and mainland Russia, the width of the front during ‘Zapad’ was more than 600 km. If efforts were to be made to defend such a wide area, Russia and its allies would need to deploy about eight to 10 divisions, or two-tank/motorised armies. Jane’s sources have stated that Russia is working to establish a second tank army east of Moscow, which would allow it to employ such a force.

However, before this occurs Russia will continue to rely heavily on artillery fire to reinforce motorised brigades and regiments on the main axis of attack. Concentration of combat power along an opponent’s main line of advance, in the Russian view, provides the commander with maximum flexibility to influence the battle in his area of responsibility. As a result artillery supporting manoeuvre operations played an important role in the exercise by allowing opposing forces to be stalled to give time to develop a counter offensive.

There were reportedly three SRBM/cruise missile launches during ‘Zapad’. One electronic employment involved Iskander and Tochka-U missiles, likely by the 26th and 448th Missile Brigades, and live tests occurred at the Kapustin Yar test range. However, the latter launch was only reported by Russian media and not by the country’s MoD, so it is unclear if it was actually part of the exercise. The last employment occurred on 18 September when an R-500 (3M14 Club-K) cruise missile was launched. The question is whether any of these launches, real or electronic, involved personnel from the 12th Main Directorate of the MoD, which is responsible for the storage, transport, and delivery of nuclear munitions to armed forces units.
There were reportedly three SRBM/cruise missile launches during ‘Zapad 2017’. The Russian MoD stated that the 9K720 Iskander-M system was used, with this image from the exercise showing an Iskander-M launching a 9M728 cruise missile. The Iskander-M can also launch the 9M723-1 ballistic missile. (Russian MoD)

Facilities used by the 26th Missile Brigade: an Iskander unit near Luga in Russia’s Leningrad region. Transporter erector launchers (TELs) for the Iskander missile system are visible.
Jane’s assesses that during the 2013 iteration of the exercise a tactical nuclear strike was indeed practised as an ‘escalate to de-escalate’ strategy designed to terminate hostilities. However, this year the Iskander launch from the Luzhsky range occurred relatively late in the exercise and, unusually, it was accompanied by images released by the MoD (but with no explanation of the purpose of the launch).

Military vehicles taking up positions on 18 September at the Luzhsky training ground in Russia’s Leningrad region during ‘Zapad 2017’. (Vasily Maximov/AFP/Getty Images)

Given that a tactical nuclear strike formed part of the exercise in 2013, it is likely that the Iskander launch on 18 September also fulfilled a nuclear role. The same is likely of the 20 September RS-24 Yars ICBM test on the last day of the drill. In this context ‘Zapad’ could be considered to have included a war termination exercise because it demonstrated that Russia could seek to escalate a potential conflict by using nuclear weapons to terminate the war on its own terms. The launches on 18 and 20 September indicate that ‘Zapad’ was used as a test to determine how and at what stage Russia could terminate a conflict by choosing the nuclear option.

Analysis
As with ‘Zapad 2013’, the scenario of this year’s joint Russian-Belarusian drill was based on events that preceded the Arab Spring. A scenario where externally supported forces aim for secession and regime change was played out in which Russia and its ally were pushed towards an armed intervention to protect the status quo. Since NATO and EU countries supported certain Arab Spring uprisings against Russian client states, as well as Ukraine in 2014, Moscow’s assumption is that the West will continue its expansion eastwards, threatening Russian interests and forcing it to react militarily.

Indeed, throughout ‘Zapad’ Russia and Belarus carried out tasks throughout the entire spectrum of military operations, from anti-saboteur operations and asymmetrical responses up to high-end, high-intensity manoeuvre operations that culminated with the possible employment of nuclear weapons. At the same time, interoperability was tested, not only between Union State units but also between the Russian services by establishing expanded anti-access areas and conducting combined air-naval-ground operations.

Russia has been implementing a cost-effective means of hindering movement against technologically more advanced opposing forces by supplementing its A2/AD bubbles with EW assets, which were tested and their effectiveness confirmed during the exercise.

Although the potential for a NATO-Russia conflict remains low, the strategic message during the exercise seems to have been one of the increased prowess of the Russian military and its determination to maintain influence in its sphere of privileged interests.