

Vostok-2018: about the Russian military's brain, not its muscles

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The key point of a Russian annual strategic military exercise (STRATEX) such as this year's *Vostok-2018* is not what it displays in terms of forces, but what it implies about command and control and the scope of operations. To use a simile, it is not only about muscles, but about the brain and nervous system and what an entire military body can actually do.

On 20 August 2018, President Putin ordered the forces in Russia's Central and Eastern Military Districts into full combat readiness. This was done through a Surprise Combat Readiness Inspection (SCRI), putting 262,000 servicemen, roughly a quarter of Russia's Armed Forces, on alert for deployment. Defence Minister Shoigu noted that the SCRI prepared forces to take part in the upcoming strategic exercise, *Vostok-2018*, in September. Taken together, the conduct of both such an SCRI and a STRATEX pertain to launching and executing strategic-level war-fighting operations in a war theatre, i.e. across greater parts of a continent.

After some three weeks of amassing forces from the two geographically vast military districts (MDs) and from other parts of Russia, the active phase of *Vostok-2018* took place 11–17 September. The total time, some four weeks, illustrates how fast Russia plans to be able to assemble forces to launch and wage a strategic-level war-fighting operation in Asia, where Russia's transport infrastructure is less-developed than west of the Ural Mountains.

Russia's annual STRATEXes always prompt debate about their actual size and what they signal, and where Russia's military power could be employed. Without hard data and access to Russian decision makers, both Russian and international observers can only speculate about whom Russia may use

military force against, and when. Annual STRATEXes say precious little about that. It is better to ask what they say about how and with what Russia may wield military power in the world.

Moscow wants to use its military to project power abroad, primarily in the former Soviet Union, and to manage the escalation of any conflict with potential peer adversaries. This requires versatile conventional forces, forces that take time to build. Since 2010, the scope of STRATEXes illustrates a long-term political and military effort to increase the fighting power of Russia's Armed Forces. STRATEXes are the crowning event of the annual military training cycle and rotate between the MDs. So, what do the STRATEXes say about "with what" and "how"?

First, with what? The annual STRATEXes involve large parts of Russia's military organisation. This military organisation encompasses Russia's Armed Forces and paramilitary forces (such as the Border Troops and Interior Troops) as well as civilian ministries and agencies. This whole-of-society approach to war-fighting reflects two things. For war fighting, Russia needs to move and supply large forces across huge territories. Also, these are not preparations for the armed conflicts or local wars Russia has seen since 1991, but for regional wars requiring large and prolonged national war efforts. Strategic nuclear forces are not explicitly part of the STRATEXes but often participate in exercises held about a month afterwards.

The Russian Ministry of Defence's (MoD) figures about STRATEXes are always published for a purpose. Mass and social media in Russia and abroad pass these figures on with few questions asked. For example, the MoD insisted that the *Zapad-2017* STRATEX had fewer than 10,000 Russian participants, probably as a



rebuttal of Western concerns about Russian military power and avoidance of Vienna Document inspections. This year, the number stated was 297,000 – for the same type of exercise. Furthermore, although the figures are precise, they are vague when it comes to categories. The MoD only says that “servicemen” participate. Are they from the MoD Armed Forces, only, or are paramilitary and civilian participants included? Do all participants deploy to the field or are support staff at bases included? The MoD’s figures are actually only saying that *Vostok-2018* was big. Russia has plenty of soldiers and equipment, both active and in reserve, and can probably mobilise 300,000 soldiers to fight a war. The answer to “with what?” is simply “a lot”, that is, with a lot of muscles from the entire military organisation, depending on the mission at hand.

Second: how? The key point is what the STRATEXes reveal about command and control (C2). In Russia, C2 (*upravlenie*) and forces (*voiska*) are often mentioned separately. A simile is that C2 (commanders, their staffs and support units) are the brain and nervous system of a military body, while units are muscles that together form limbs in the shape of formations. Muscles can train separately, but it is the brain and nerve system that enable muscles and limbs to function coherently as a body. Logistics are the bloodstream that ensures that muscles get what they need to function.

Units can exercise separately near their bases. C2 is what brings them together in time and space in an operation above tactical level. If you have umpteen battalions on exercise, what is it that makes them into a strategic-level exercise and not just umpteen tactical-level exercises? C2 forms these battalions into tactical formations (regiments/brigades/divisions) and shapes tactical formations into operational-level formations (armies, flotillas). C2 at the operational-strategic level and above brings together ground, air and naval formations into force groups (*gruppировки voisk i sil*) tailored to a specific mission in a strategic operation.

Each operation is unique and requires an ability to tailor forces to a task. Russian STRATEXes entail shaping an operation in one war theatre by moving units from other parts of the country to form force groups. The General Staff noted that *Vostok-2018* saw the creation of force groups to carry out operations – ranging from the comprehensive SCRI in August to the active phase of *Vostok-2018* in mid-September. Major logistics exercises supported the transports across Russia, to and from and during the STRATEX.

A key C2 aspect of *Vostok-2018* was to command and prepare inter-service force groups for war fighting. Two-sided manoeuvres were conducted on all levels. There were two operational-strategic-level force groups; the Eastern MD and Russia’s Pacific Fleet stood against the Central MD and the Northern Fleet. This enabled training with independently acting adversaries, a more realistic feature than that offered by a scripted exercise. Assembling two force groups simultaneously is a major C2 challenge. The attempt to do so indicates a high level of confidence in both command and control and the forces’ abilities.

STRATEXes are thus about the brain and bloodstream of a military body. Russia’s MoD publishes extensive information about live-fire parts of the STRATEXes and invites foreign observers to observe them. In effect, these observers will only be watching a flexing biceps without seeing much of the rest of the body or what it can do and for how long. The *Vostok-2018* STRATEX is not about tactical-level shoot-outs. It is about preparing for protracted strategic-level war fighting operations.

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