Analysis: 'Vostok 2018' – a window on Russia's strategic ambitions

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Russia's 'Vostok 2018' exercises, which took place this month across a vast expanse of Russian territory, were certainly designed to wow the West, but what can be gleaned from the manoeuvres regarding Moscow's military capabilities and strategic intent? *Miko Vranic* and *Samuel Cranny-Evans* report

This month's 'Vostok 2018' manoeuvres, Russia's largest military exercise since 1981, can be characterised as a 'strategic manoeuvre'. The exercise, which took place from 11 to 15 September, is most immediately notable for its sheer size – nearly 300,000 troops, 36,000 ground systems, and thousands of aircraft were claimed by Moscow to have taken part – but this year's manoeuvres also adopted a different strategic scenario.

While Russia's past quadrennial 'Vostok' exercises have usually involved units based in the Eastern Military District (VVO), co-ordinating their actions and engaging a fictitious adversary in the eastern strategic direction, 'Vostok 2018' saw two opposing regions formed – Zapadnuy (western) and Vostochnuy (eastern) – together spanning about 6,000 km.

A column of 2S25 Sprut-SD air-droppable amphibious tank destroyers seen during a 'Vostok 2018' inspection of forces. (Russian MoD)

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The Zapadnuy region, comprising troops and assets from the Central Military District and Unified Strategic Command North, was pitted against the Vostochnuy region units based in the Eastern

Military District, where the exercise took place. Likewise, the Northern Fleet's naval assets, which were deployed through the Northern Sea Route, were pitted against their Pacific Fleet counterparts.

Of further significance regarding 'Vostok 2018' is the participation of 3,200 Chinese troops with 900 pieces of equipment and 30 aircraft. While the Chinese military is well accustomed to joint wargames with Russia, never before has the People's Liberation Army (PLA) taken part in one of Russia's quadrennial exercises, nor has it previously been embedded with the Russian military during such manoeuvres.

The Chinese contingent deployed is thought to have represented one of the mechanised brigades formed during China's modernisation efforts. This process has proved difficult for China, so 'Vostok 2018' will have provided PLA units with an opportunity to learn from their Russian counterparts.

Additionally, Chinese forces have little experience of combat and may be looking to capitalise on the counter-insurgency (COIN) experience gained by Russian forces in Syria. Many of the 'Vostok 2018' exercises have focused on COIN and it follows that this experience will be useful to China as it extends its experience into Africa and the Middle East.

Syrian experience

The tactical and theatre-level experience gained in Russia's ongoing Syrian campaign is being heavily exploited in various 'Vostok 2018' scenarios. Aircraft and their crews that were deployed to Syria, some on multiple occasions, are delivering troops and carrying out bombing runs during the exercise. Although mostly dumb bombs have been dropped in the exercise, teams equipped with KRUS-VR Strelets reconnaissance, command and communications kits, and other reconnaissance assets, such as aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and electronic warfare (EW) equipment, are being extensively used.

Counter-UAV systems, such as the Zhitel and Silok-01, which were operationally tested in Syria, are being employed, while the handheld REX-1 counter-UAV system has made a first in-service public appearance.

It is also presumed that tactical EW and counter-UAV groups (including snipers) that were formed in June 2017 within the Jewish Autonomous Region, Amur Oblast, and Khabarovsk Krai in the Eastern Military District were deployed during 'Vostok 2018'.

Furthermore, gabion systems, commonly employed by Russian forces in Syria, featured prominently in the exercise.

Network-centric aspirations

The modern Russian Army's major network-centric ambitions were clearly pertinently demonstrated during 'Vostok 2018' with UAVs, in particular Orlan-10s and Granat-4s, extensively used for artillery target spotting. This, a tactic proliferating through Russian forces, has been broadly utilised in recent years and continues to be perfected. Although the traditional Soviet approach of target annihilation by unguided munitions was mostly applied following the relaying of targeting co-ordinates, precision artillery strikes with semi-active laser-guided Krasnopol projectiles, as used in Syria, were also employed.

As a testament to the proliferation of Russian communications technology and capabilities, during 'Vostok 2018' communications units of the Russian military set up more than 150 communication links in high-frequency radio bands, spanning some 3,500 km across the equator from Ulan-Ude to

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky and 2,800 km across the meridian from Vladivostok to Anadyr, covering about 9,800 000 km ^{2} in total.

To rehearse, the Russian military's airmobile capabilities troops from three air-assault regiments took part in 'Vostok 2018'. The 31st Independent Guards Air Assault Brigade units were deployed the furthest; they were airlifted about 4,500 km to the east, to the Tsygol range in the Eastern Military District, with more than 20 Il-76MD transport aircraft from their base in the Central Military District. As well as parachute drops, paratroopers were also spotted fast-roping from Mi-8ATMSh helicopters on an arguably unprecedented scale during the exercise. It was reported that 45 Mi-8ATMSh and 2 Mi-26 helicopters were involved in 'Vostok 2018', with the latter probably used to deliver vehicles onto the battlefield.

Moreover, the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) reported that an airborne assault brigade was deployed "with an experimental organisational structure equipped with integrated automated control systems for troops, the latest weapons and special equipment". Details of the unit were not provided by the release, but the Russian Airborne Troops (VDV) are known to operate the tactical-level Barnaul-T air defence command-and-control (C2) system based on the MT-LBu and BTR-MDM BTR-MDM amphibious armoured carriers among other automated systems.