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Russian army justifies its reforms

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The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation have been more active than usual since mid-February this year, holding a number of previously unannounced military exercises aimed at testing combat readiness. They have also maintained, for many months, a Russian warship task force in the Mediterranean in connection with the civil war in Syria. Those activities stand out of the usual training routine of the Russian army. They have no precedent in Russia's recent history in terms of the size of the forces involved, the measures employed, the territorial span, the number of exercises, or the scheduling and mode of carrying out the drills. The last combat-readiness tests on this scale were carried out by the Soviet army in the 1980s. The intensity of the Russian Navy's activities in the Mediterranean and the military means engaged are comparable, in due proportion, with the activities of the Soviet fleet during the Vietnam war. The Russian leadership, including president Vladimir Putin, has been directly following the recent activities of the Russian Armed Forces and their evolution.

Unusually intensive military activity

The Russian army trains in two semi-annual cycles – the summer cycle and the winter cycle. During the winter training period (from 1 December to 31 May), units of all service branches concentrate mainly on basic training of soldiers and units (seamen and crews in the Navy). Those drills are usually designed as preparations to operational and strategic-level exercises of the joint forces (which involve units from at least two service branches), organised in summer and early autumn. Exercises in the winter training period that involve more than one thousand troops and are joint forces drills (i.e. drills in which units of, for instance, the Land Forces and the Air Forces co-operate, rather than simply serving as targets for each other) have been organised only sporadically in the winter period. Firing-range drills are usually

planned at least one year in advance, while deciding the structure of expenses for the given budgetary period, and immediate preparations to such drills take two to three months. Towards the end of the previous decade the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation reached the level of training activity comparable to that of the Soviet army, account being taken of the differences in size. Since then, the scale of exercises and the numbers of troops involved and military equipment employed had remained relatively stable. In this context, the unannounced tests of combat readiness that have been taking place since mid-February have no precedent in the history of the Russian Armed Forces. They have been held in addition to the standard training activities during the winter training season (according to official figures of the Defence Ministry, a total of 10 thousand exercises were held during the 2013 winter training season, includ-

ing 170 firing-range drills¹) throughout the territory of Russia, involving all service branches. Moreover, they have been held as exercises of joint forces. The largest drills (see Appendix) involved anywhere between 1 thousand and over 8 thousand troops, and the participating units had had not more than two weeks to prepare. It should be emphasised that the two-week deadline was reported by the Russian media on the occasion of the most widely publicised exercise which took place in March in the north-eastern part of the Black Sea (and in which Vladimir Putin, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, himself took part) amid allegations that Russian military units were not able to act immediately and that ‘unannounced tests’ to date had in fact been a fiction². As the exercises were in fact held as drills of the joint forces, such a short timeframe must have been a major mobilisation and logistics challenge. The situation has not changed with the beginning, on 1 June, of the summer training period – the combat readiness tests are continuing³.

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The involvement of the Russian Navy in the eastern Mediterranean is a specific kind of activity in this context. Unlike in the case of the drills, which are voluntary, Russia has been forced to build its presence in the region due to the external situation, i.e. the civil war in Syria, Russia’s last foothold in the Middle East. Russia’s presence in the Mediterranean in connec-

tion with the Syrian conflict has been mounting since 2011, but since the beginning of this year it has taken the form of a *de facto* permanent task force numbering, depending on the period, from several to more than a dozen warships and auxiliary units, mostly originating from the Black Sea Fleet. It should be emphasised that the Black Sea Fleet was also one of the main participants of the combat readiness test in March, making it one of the most active formations in the whole Russian Armed Forces next to the Airborne Troops and the air transport units.

Conclusions about the Armed Forces’ condition

The unannounced combat readiness tests and the stepped-up presence of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean are an indication that – in line with the objectives of the reforms – at least some parts of the Russian army have reached the expected level of permanent readiness. One of the main indications suggesting that the results of the tests were satisfactory is the absence of reshuffles, especially in the higher-ranking command positions (other than promotions: some of those who have taken part in the tests have been promoted to higher ranks in a ceremony held on the occasion of the Russia Day celebrated on 12 June). If there had been any serious problems, it would have been necessary to hold someone to account for the shortcomings, especially in a situation in which Russia’s top leadership was directly interested in the outcome of the drills.

The capabilities of the training formations increased with the successive tests and – despite the criticism that has been spelt out – deserve to be assessed as relatively high. Most of the problems occurred during the first, unpublicised large combat-readiness test organised in mid-February in the Central Military District. The drills (marches, firing-range exercises) exposed insufficient co-ordination between the combat units and the support units. They also

¹ TASS, 1.06.2013.

² <http://izvestia.ru/news/547687>

³ More than 500 firing-range-drills have been scheduled in the summer training cycle (starting on 1 June 2013), 40% of which will be joint operations (from battalion level upwards). Interfax, TASS, 30.05.2013.

revealed the poor technical condition of some weapons and items of military equipment (for example, three Mi-24 helicopters, one Mi-8 helicopter and two “Msta-S” self-propelled howitzers failed to start, and two BMD-2 infantry fighting vehicles broke down during as the troops were moving⁴). The announcement made by the Defence Ministry leadership that the exercise in the Central Military District was the beginning of a series of tests allowed the other units to make up for any deficiencies in advance (in particular, to assess the condition of their equipment and arms) and get prepared to possible involvement in drills just in case (irrespective of whether they ultimately participated or not). The official declaration that a se-

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ries of unannounced tests would be launched was a deliberate warning to the commanders of military formations and units. This, however, does not change the fact that the units which took part in the drills demonstrated their ability to take previously unplanned action within a relatively short timeframe. The warning from the Ministry of Defence gave them additional weeks at best, whereas previously, they would know about drills months in advance. Another indication that the combat readiness tests had not been included in the original training plans comes from the announcement of deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin who said on 7 June that it would be necessary to include additional ordnance purchases in the 2013 budget⁵.

This announcement also proves that during the drills, Russian troops used their most state-of-the-art guided weapons (Russian arsenals are still full of Soviet-made munitions).

Based on the outcomes of the unannounced drills and the activities of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean it is possible to name those formations (and their constituent units) which have reached the level of so-called permanent readiness in the current cycle of reforms and – in the case of the conventional forces – meet the criteria for rapid reaction forces. At the core are the Airborne Troops (all formations of this service branch took part in the tests) and the 61st Air Army co-operating with them (providing air transport), as well as the Marines brigades (part of the Navy) and the commandos (SpecNaz GRU). At least some sub-units in the formation of the Air Force and the Aerospace Defence Forces are in permanent readiness mode, and so are units in the land, maritime and air components of the strategic nuclear forces. In the Navy, most units in active service maintain permanent readiness (probably all units in the Black Sea Fleet), with special focus on the anti-submarine component and the amphibious forces (in connection with the operations in Syria). It is notable that the unannounced tests involved the Land Forces to a lesser extent, and mainly consisted in checking their ability to reach higher levels of combat readiness, but with limited firing-range activity⁶.

It is therefore justified to assume that the Russian Army has the capacity to carry out missile and air strikes (and defend itself against such strikes), as well as short joint (air, land and maritime) operations without lengthy, visible preparations. Considering the potential of the Airborne Troops (35 thousand soldiers⁷, armoured fighting vehicles, artillery with 100 mm and higher calibres) and the Marines (8 thousand⁸;

⁴ Interfax, TASS, 22.02.2013; <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2165566>

⁵ Interfax, TASS, 7.06.2013.

⁶ Probably only two brigades of the Central and Southern Military Districts actively participated in the largest exercises that have been reported.

⁷ <http://www.vesti.ru/videos?vid=292242>

⁸ <http://warfare.be/?lang=rus&catid=239&linkid=2240&linkname=Voenna-Morskoyj-Flot>

same equipment as Airborne Troops, plus tanks), the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation would be capable, in an urgent situation, to carry out an operation on a scale comparable with the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.

Conclusions serving to justify reforms

In his comments about the exercise in the north-east region of the Black Sea president Vladimir Putin said in mid-April that he found the outcomes satisfactory, and congratulated the commanders and the soldiers. Similar opinions were expressed about the following exercise – the air defence drill in the Western Military District in May. Nonetheless, the civilian and military leaders of the Armed Forces have formulated a number of critical conclusions, emphasising the need to make up for some shortcomings, especially in the context of the Russian-Belarusian “Zapad” exercise scheduled in September 2013. The official comments, though, were not so much an assessment of actual shortcomings, as a justification for sticking to the current direction of reforms in the Russian army.

The main problem raised in the assessments formulated by president Putin, and also by the first deputy minister for defence, army general Arkady Bakhin (in charge of troops training and reform of the command system) concerned flaws of the command and control systems and procedures, especially during joint operations involving different service branches under single command⁹. According to Bakhin, the tests have also revealed poor preparedness of the combat-support and support units (reconnaissance, engineering, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence and logistics) to take part in general operations (cf. the unit co-ordination problems mentioned before), but in his opinion the blame for this lies with the commanders of the combat formations who

have insufficiently included the support units in their training plans¹⁰. Such criticism should be interpreted as signalling an intention to speed up the modernisation aimed at implementing new, automated command systems (which are officially expected to become fully operational in 2020). More importantly, it should be regarded as a confirmation of the current direction of changes in the military, aimed at transferring command competences to the so-called joint forces commands, as it is the case in the best Western armies, while limiting the competences of the commands of individual service branches (a move that continues to be criticised in Russia).

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Similar criticism has been voiced by the Chief of General Staff, army general Valery Gerasimov, who nonetheless focused more on military technology issues and reasons for the frictions between the Defence Ministry and the arms industry. According to Gerasimov the failures of arms and military equipment proved that the army was right to create overhaul units within its structures. The poor condition of the largely worn-down equipment calls for continued technological modernisation, especially in terms of increasing the budgets for new arms and military equipment purchases. Gerasimov has also directly attacked the arms industry (after the change of leadership in the Defence Ministry in November 2012, the expectation was rather that the army would make concessions to the Military-Industrial Complex, as the com-

⁹ Interfax, TASS, 13.05.2013.

¹⁰ Interfax, 24.05.2013.

panies that overhaul arms have been blamed, not without reason, for the low quality of the products and services offered (the helicopters which failed to start had been overhauled in mid-2012; and defects were also detected in attack aircraft, self-propelled howitzers and radars still covered by warranty)). Gerasimov also reminded that the new products offered by the defence industry often failed to meet the expectations of the military¹¹.

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As regards the heightened activity of the Russian Navy off the coast of Syria, the main conclusion seems to be the decision to create (the Russians use the word “recreate”, referring back to Soviet times) a permanent warship task force in the Mediterranean as of 2014, as announced by admiral Victor Chyrkov, the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy, on the occasion of the 230th anniversary of the Black Sea Fleet celebrated in Sevastopol (such a taskforce has been in *de facto* existence for several months). Not later than in May, the Navy started forming the Staff of the prospective task force, which would ultimately consist of 5 to 6 warships and, possibly, two submarines and a Mistral-class amphibious-assault ship (the presence of the latter unit in the taskforce is currently purely hypothetical)¹². It is possible that the decision to form a permanent taskforce of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean is a mere political demonstration related to the current political situation (once the civil war in Syria is over,

the rationale for activities of Russian warships off the Syrian coast will disappear). However, in view of the fact that the Staff of the taskforce is being created, and that the decision to establish it has been compared to the decision to resume the strategic bomber patrols in 2007, it is reasonable to assume that, subject to its financial capabilities, Russia is thinking about a permanent warship presence in the long term, in the context of its efforts to rebuild its position as a military power (back in the Soviet times, the 5th Escadrille in the Mediterranean, dismantled in 1992, provided counterbalance to the United States’ 6th Fleet).

On 24 May general Bakhin announced that the Defence Minister Sergei Shoygu had asked for corrections to be made in the training plan for the summer period that would reflect the results of the unannounced tests¹³. The corrections, however, are not expected to have a significant impact on the training process (while they will impact financial issues; see below), as the large firing-range drills to be held in the summer period have already been planned in 2012¹⁴ and preparations for them are most probably already underway (joint forces drills have been scheduled in all military districts). Likewise, it is doubtful if more military units will be involved in them on an unannounced-test basis (especially as regards the most widely publicised Russian-Belarusian “Zapad” exercise, whose success is a matter of prestige).

Reasons for the stepped-up activity

The intensified activities of Russia’s Armed Forces should be considered mainly in the context of internal politics. The corruption scandals which have led, in November last year, to the replacement of the Defence Minister, as well as

¹¹ Interfax, TASS, 22.02.2013.

¹² TASS, 13.05.2013.

¹³ Interfax, 24.05.2013.

¹⁴ In the aftermath of the unannounced tests the decision was taken to extend the training time of recruits by one month (to four months) and to step up the intensity of physical training, however, this does not have a direct bearing on the drills planned in the summer training cycle. Interfax, 24.05.2013.

the open criticism of the current direction of reforms (especially the abandonment of the mass army model and changes in the system of command) have done some damage to the image of the Russian army. The readiness tests provided an opportunity to demonstrate that the corruption scandals (which mostly concerned the privatisations of back-up facilities inherited from the Soviet army and the commercialisation of services for the army) had not negatively affected the combat capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces, and that the reforms have increased the army's efficiency. President Putin's comment that one of the objectives of the drills had been to check if the funds for modernisation, including infrastructure, had been well spent and to determine what else needed to be done, was an accurate reflection of reality.

The unannounced tests should also be seen as self-promotion for the current leadership of the Defence Ministry, including in particular Sergey Shoygu (on 27 May he decided that detailed information on the drills should be made available to the media¹⁵), and President Putin himself (modernisation of the army is seen as one of the priorities of Russia's policy, not only in terms of defence, but also in terms of economic and social policy). Putin was directly involved in the Black Sea exercises and issued the order for the drill to start from onboard his plane while returning from South Africa, a fact dutifully noted by all Russian media. He also observed one of the firing-range phases of the exercise – the drill of the airborne units. Finally, in mid-May he held an unprecedented series of meetings with the top commanders of all service branches in the Russian Armed Forces.

As Russia's economic growth is slowing down, forcing the country to seek spending cuts in the coming years, the army's readiness tests should also be seen as a way to justify continued increasing of military spending. It should be noted that if the current financial provisions concerning the modernisation of the Russian

¹⁵ Interfax, TASS, 27.05.2013.

Armed forces are kept in place, military spending will have to grow faster than Russia's GDP in the coming years. This problem has not been solved by the transfer of some funds from the State Armaments Programme for 2011-2020 to the period beyond 2016, agreed between the Ministries for Finance and for Defence¹⁶. The army has suspended purchases because of delays on the part of the defence companies, and the transfer should largely be seen as a way to pressure the producers of arms¹⁷. Major budget savings could be generated by

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addressing the fact, revealed in the course of the unannounced tests, that the army had been overstating its training costs. During the prosperity of the recent years military units would receive funding for munitions, fuels, lubricants, spare parts, etc. in amounts corresponding to their target numbers of posts, irrespective of the actual manning levels. During his visit to the Central Military District on 24 May general Bakhin announced that in successive exercises, the allocations of funds would have to reflect the actual manning levels. In the justification he said that the current practice was blurring the picture needed for the purposes of transitions to wartime manning levels¹⁸.

¹⁶ TASS, 14.06.2013.

¹⁷ In line with the plans that were discussed during works on the current budget, the transfers will most probably affect around 10% of the funds for the years 2014-2016, which corresponds to the percentage of orders that were not completed. http://www.minfin.ru/common/img/uploaded/library/2012/12/FZ216-FZ_ot_031212.pdf

¹⁸ Interfax, 24.05.2013.

The external policy aspect of the tests is of secondary importance. Of the eight largest previously unplanned firing-range drills (as of the end of May), the Russian media extensively covered only two: the March drill in the Black Sea and the May air defence exercise in the Western Military District. This was directly related to the developments between Moscow and Washington (Russia–NATO), and especially the mounting dispute over the way to end the civil war in Syria, and the fact that the United States was continuing works on its missile defence system (the combat-readiness test of the strategic nuclear forces should also be seen in the context of the latter issue). The activity of the Russian Navy off the coast of Syria is the only exception – it has been part of Russia’s external policy from the start.

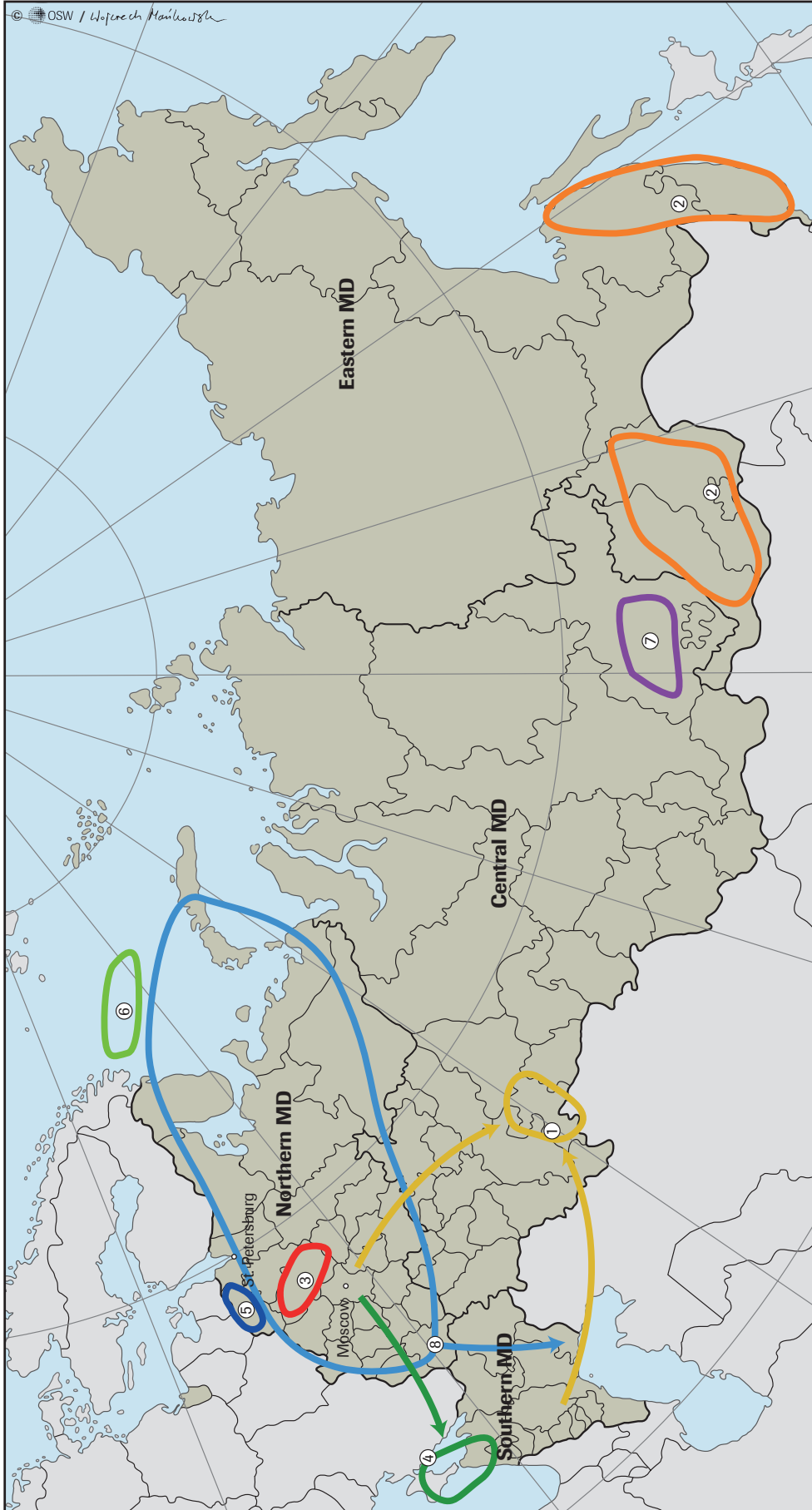
Conclusions

The heightened activity of the Russian Armed Forces has demonstrated that they have a relatively large number of units in different service branches which have already achieved the level of combat readiness defined at the onset of the

current cycle of reforms. Those units are capable of carrying out tasks away from where they are deployed without long and visible preparations, and are in a position to carry out an operation on the scale of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. The unannounced test of combat readiness are intended primarily to demonstrate that the reforms of the Armed Forces, initiated in the mid-2010s, are purposeful and effective, and to provide a rationale for continuing the reforms, including in particular the costly technical modernisation. The latter objective is particularly important in the context of Russia’s slowing economic growth and the need to seek budget savings in the coming years.

The way the military exercises have been covered by the Russian media suggests that they were also aimed at improving the image of President Putin and to build a sense that Russia is under a military threat from the United States (which again can be considered in the context of the need for a rationale to increase military spending). The external dimension of the heightened military activity, related especially to the situation concerning Syria, should be seen as having only secondary importance.

Major unannounced combat readiness tests (before 31 May)



- ① 17–21 February
 - ② 12–17 March
 - ③ 25–29th March
 - ④ 28–31 March
 - ⑤ 16–18 April
 - ⑥ 22–26th April
 - ⑦ 20–24 May
 - ⑧ 27–30 May
- * approximate date of completion of tests

APPENDIX

Major unannounced combat readiness tests (before 31 May)

17–21 February – exercise in the Central Military District (Joint Strategic Command “Tsentr”) with units from the Southern Military District, the Airborne Troops, the air transport units as well as the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan and the 12th Directorate General of the Russian Federation Ministry of Defence responsible for the security of nuclear facilities. Around 7 thousand soldiers, several hundred fighting vehicles and 48 aircraft and helicopters were involved in the firing-range phase.

12–17 March – combat readiness test of the Eastern Military District, involving units of the 36th Army, 3rd Air and Air Defence Forces Command and the Pacific Fleet.

25–29* March – exercise of the 7th Rocket Division of the Strategic Missile Troops (Ozernyy, Tver Oblast)

28–31 March – drills in the north-eastern Black Sea and the Southern Military District involving the Black Sea Fleet, the Airborne Troops, air transport units and the SpecNaz GRU forces.

At least 7.1 thousand soldiers, 250 fighting vehicles, 50 artillery units, 20 aircraft and helicopters as well as 36 warships and support units took part in the firing-range phase of the exercise (on 29 March around 20 warships and 30 support units were de facto at sea, and 20 aircraft and helicopters operated from the bases in Crimea alone).

16–18 April – exercise of the 76th Airborne Division (Pskov)

22–26* April – exercise of the Northern Fleet (Barents Sea)

20–24 May – exercise of the 29th Rocket Division of the Strategic Missile Troops (Irkutsk)

27–30 May – exercise in the Western Military District involving the Aerospace Defence Forces, 1st Air and Air Defence Forces Command, air transport units and strategic air units. The firing-range phase (some drills were carried out in a missile firing range in the Southern Military District) involved 8700 soldiers, 185 combat aircraft and 240 armoured fighting vehicles.

() Estimated end of exercise*

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