

Zapad-2025 and Russia's War Planning

Implications for Germany and NATO

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From September 12 to 16, Russia is conducting its Zapad-25 exercise, which will take place mainly on Belarusian territory – a geographical area Russia may well use as a (partial) springboard for a possible future attack on NATO territory. Correspondingly, this year's exercise will very likely indicate how Moscow expects a war against NATO to play out. While there is no acute danger of escalation, the exercise will provide NATO with important lessons on Russia's concept of a future war. Hence, Germany, in concert with its (European) NATO allies, should not just observe the exercise closely, but also develop measures that address Zapad-25 and how to deter Russia beyond September.

For decades, Russia has been conducting one major military exercise annually in each of its four main strategic directions on a rotating basis. The outstanding importance of the West among them has not changed.

The Zapad (meaning “west”) exercise first took place in 1999. It was held again in 2009 and has taken place every four years since. The last such maneuver, Zapad-2021, was used partially for deploying heavy weaponry and logistics to Belarus, from where these capacities were used against Ukraine in February 2022.

However, Zapad-2017 is more useful for understanding the current exercise, as that [maneuver constituted only a relatively minor part of a larger picture](#), namely how Russia imagined and planned for a war against NATO allies. Formally, the Zapad exercises have always been defensive in nature, but taken together with the other exercises of

a given year, the combined picture has resembled potential preparations for an offensive war.

Another important aspect of the Zapad exercises is that Russia routinely understates the size of its participating forces. That is because the OSCE Vienna Document stipulates that any exercise involving more than 13,000 troops or 300 main battle tanks must be subject to observation, and Moscow wants to avoid this to maintain strategic ambiguity.

Zapad-2025 is no different in this regard. However, instead of simply under-reporting the size of its participating forces, this year Russia will use more complex tactics to mask the real size of its troops in Belarus. In parallel with the Zapad-2025 exercise, three other, formally separate Collective Security Treaty Organization exercises will take place, too. The scenarios of these exercises are expected to indicate the type of warfare Russia is preparing for against the West,

which in all likelihood would partially be launched from Belarusian territory.

ZAPAD-2025 IS ABOUT THE CHARACTER OF A FUTURE WAR

Similarly to Zapad-2017 and 2021, these maneuvers are about preparing for a future conflict with the West; hence, Zapad-2025 will be a part of much larger preparations.

With four exercises running in parallel, the combined size of Russian forces on Belarusian territory may well reach several tens of thousands. In addition, the Belarusian government will conduct large-scale mobilization drills and exercises, including civilian infrastructure and services.

In addition, it is highly likely that the Zapad-2025 exercise will involve some form of training with its new “Oreshnik”

ballistic missile – either simulated or using live firing. Such a deployment would serve both operational-tactical and informational purposes. Russia regularly depicts Oreshnik as its most capable conventional missile, although it is unclear whether the missile is still under development, not to mention in serial production. Under such circumstances, a demonstrative deployment of an Oreshnik during the exercise could well be used as an element of informational deterrence, while Russia could continue to develop the missile in preparation for a future war.

ZAPAD-2025 MAY ALSO ENABLE RUSSIA TO EXPAND ITS MILITARY PRESENCE IN BELARUS

Most of the Zapad-2025 exercise will take place on the territory of Belarus. Belarus has been Russia's close military ally since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its dependence on Russia has gradually eroded its military sovereignty. At present, should a war begin, all of Belarus's ground forces would be subordinated to Russia's military command, while its air forces have already been operating in a fully integrated way for several years.

There were already considerable Russian forces based in Belarus, both on permanent and rotational bases, and in combat and non-combat formations before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia has used Belarusian territory with no real limits for attacking Ukraine. Russia also took hundreds of heavy tanks and armored fighting vehicles from Belarus to replenish its own losses. And Belarusian technicians are working both in Russia and in Belarus to repair Russian armored vehicles and other weapon systems damaged in combat.

Belarus has also become a potential launch platform for Russia's nuclear weapons, indicating a further decline in Minsk's sovereignty. In 2023, Russia

started deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, although these systems remained under Russian command. Moreover, in an August 2025 press conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian leader Aleksandr Lukashenko, Putin said that Moscow may deploy Oreshnik missiles on Belarusian territory on a permanent basis, further subordinating Belarus to Russia's military-strategic objectives.

The entire Zapad-2025 exercise fits this pattern well: It enables Russia to use the territory and military infrastructure of Belarus according to its own needs. While all Russian maneuvers still require the consent of the Belarusian government, this has been mostly reduced to a formality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GERMANY AND NATO ALLIES

NATO allies, particularly those located on the Eastern frontier, should be watching preparations and the actual exercise carefully. Yet, there is little danger of Russia using Zapad as a springboard for a military move against the NATO alliance – for three reasons.

First, most of Russia's land and airborne forces are bogged down in Ukraine. Those capabilities would be required for an attack, even if on a limited scale, most probably against the Baltics. For this reason, it is unlikely that Russia is capable of launching a war against NATO territory at the moment. Yet, this circumstance must not lead to the conclusion that Russia [would wait until the end of the decade \(or to the end of the war against Ukraine\) to test NATO's military readiness](#).

Second, NATO allies are preparing exercises of their own with which to counter Zapad. Poland and Lithuania, for example, will hold a Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) exercise, "Tarassis 25," in Poland at the same time Zapad takes place. The

exercise will focus on defensive and offensive operations, cooperation between the armed forces, and the readiness of the troops to respond to various scenarios. It will be the [largest exercise](#) since the establishment of the JEF, and it appears that [all ten member states](#) – Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom as lead nation – [may participate in the exercise](#).

In addition, the Lithuanian Army will conduct a [national exercise, "Thunder Strike,"](#) which will include tactical maneuvers at various locations. Thunder Strike is part of a series of exercises in which the German Armed Forces have participated in the past or are currently involved in. As part of the "Quadriga 2025" exercise series, contingents of Germany's Armed Forces will also train together with those of 13 other nations from August to September 2025 to protect the Baltic Sea region. [Approximately 8,000 German service members](#) from the Navy, Army, Air Force, Cyber and Information Domain, and Joint Support Service will take part in several large-scale exercises in Germany, Lithuania, Finland, and on the Baltic Sea.

Third, Belarus, in fact, intends to de-escalate potential tensions. In early August, [Lukashenko gave an interview to TIME](#) in which he claimed that Belarus had decided to move the Zapad-2025 exercise further deep inside the country, away from NATO borders. While Belarus does not have the same strategic depth as Russia, the announcement nevertheless indicates that Minsk is not interested in heightened tensions. Belarusian Minister of Defense Viktor Khrenin repeated several times that Belarus is ready to host international observers at the Zapad-2025 exercises. The invitations were sent out to all signatories of the Vienna Document; in addition, foreign military attachés accredited in Belarus will also be able to monitor the exercise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the exercises currently underway in direct response to Zapad, several other measures should be considered beyond September.

- Future exercises must be designed in such a manner that they could be used as springboards for actual defensive actions if Russia were to use another (Zapad or any other) exercise as a gateway to attack NATO territory. Such planning would include having live ammunition on board as well as the supplies necessary for combat (or at the very least contingency plans to transfer the necessary equipment quickly). Such a move has the potential to increase deterrence messaging vis-à-vis Russia.
- Independent of future Russian exercises, NATO allies should conduct their own (snap) exercises to demonstrate their capabilities to Russia, beyond merely honing them for themselves. Such exercises should also communicate the message that the Alliance is willing to incur losses of its own, rather than wait for combat readiness to be fully established. NATO allies should strengthen such messaging by training along Russia's border, thereby leaving Moscow in doubt as to where to station and amass its own troops to readily respond if necessary.
- Future exercises conducted by NATO allies should be more coherently and smoothly coordinated compared to the planning ahead of this year's exercises, which are taking place in response to larger Russian maneuvers similar to Zapad-25. Correspondingly, NATO should consider coordinating its own major exercise, organized in part nationally, instead of a series of smaller-scale exercises.
- All of Russia's military exercises held in regions adjacent to NATO borders must be chronicled and studied carefully as a whole, as elements of a larger puzzle.

This would help establish a comprehensive picture of how Russia imagines a future war against NATO and how it is preparing for one. A key element to watch is how Russia is also preparing for an offensive war (formally, the short Zapad exercises are defensive in nature), against which targets and how it intends to combine overt and covert, regular and irregular components.

- Finally, NATO allies should clearly communicate toward Moscow that in case of any scenario involving a military incursion of allied territory, Russian territory will not be spared in NATO's defensive response measures. Such a line of communication could further strengthen the Alliance's deterrence messaging vis-à-vis Russia.
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