



Image: Russian armored personnel carriers take part in the military exercises in the Chita region/NBC News

From 11 to 17 September, the Russian armed forces conducted the active phase of the Vostok-2018 strategic military exercise. Throughout the week, Russia's far east hosted a coordinated ballet of troops rehearsing [across multiple strategic directions](#). In a twist, the Chinese People's Liberation Army participated for the first time.

It was an impressive show, but it also offers serious lessons as to Russia's military planning and preparedness and its diplomatic footing towards both China and the West.

## The military dimension

The Vostok 2018 exercise was part of a pre-planned life-cycle of massive drills occurring across all of Russia's military commands that aim to strengthen command and control (C2) and forces integration. Much like [Zapad-2017](#), Vostok is about more than the 'hot phase' observed by international cameras between 11 and 17 September. It started [as early as 20 August](#), when the armed forces went through combat-readiness tests, snap inspections and support units drills.

Like previous iterations in 2010 and 2014, the drills aimed to test and improve troop preparedness, strategic mobility, military logistics and joint operations between army branches. A naval element featured prominently this year across three theatres of operations in the Sea of Okhotsk, the Bering Sea, and in the Avacha and Kronotsky Bays in Kamchatka, illustrating that Russia is testing its ability to conduct operations in multiple theatres.

The 2018 drills emphasized troop displacement over long distances: as many as 297,000 troops of the Central and Eastern Military Districts were reportedly deployed throughout the week across nine distinct training ranges located in Russia's far east. According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, this represented the biggest military exercise since Zapad-1981, when Warsaw Pact forces rehearsed the invasion of Poland.

But it is likely that the number of troops [has been largely inflated](#), as part of the Kremlin's sabre-rattling rhetoric. This emphasis on numbers, rather than on capabilities and intentions, further feeds the Western fixation on the size of Russian forces as well

as Moscow's 'great power' narrative at home.

## Practice makes perfect... again

Still, the breadth of the exercise was impressive. It uniquely involved several major military districts, as troops from the Central Military District and the Northern Fleet confronted the Eastern Military District and the Pacific Fleet. After establishing communication links and organizing forces, live firing between September 13-17 included air strikes, air defence operations, ground manoeuvres and raids, sea assault and landings, coastal defence, and electronic warfare.

The Russian army also deployed its most advanced military hardware. Air defence forces tested a new unified command and control system that connects the S-300, S-400 and Pantsir-S1 systems on the same network, [allowing unprecedented automation](#). As military logistics are increasingly important in these types of operation, the exercise included numerous Logistical Support Units (MTO) and sapper units, which are responsible for supporting early advances of troops.

Not unlike Zapad-2017, Airborne Assault Units (VDV) continued to play a key role in the early stages of the active phase of the drills, when air assault units practised tactical landing and reconnaissance-in-force. Three VDV units [jointly tested](#) an 'experimental organizational structure' with integrated command and control and new hardware.

Lessons learned from the Syrian battlefield (and in Ukraine) prominently featured throughout the duration of the drills. These included best practices on live maintenance of military hardware, with the deployment of engineers from key military-industrial companies, as well as anti-drone electronic warfare capabilities and the deployment of many aerial and urban autonomous systems.

## The China angle

Vostok-2018 offered new strategic insights on the extent of the relationship between Russia and China. For the first time, the Vostok drills hosted People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops at the Tsugol military range in the Zabaykalsky Krai. China deployed some 3,200 troops and numerous pieces of equipment. Both armies conducted joint firing operations and further tested their interoperability.

Inviting the PLA represents a well-organized PR coup for the Kremlin. Previous iterations of

Vostok rehearsed the defence of Russia's far east against a [foreign invasion](#) or various 'terrorist groups' at its eastern borders. Without overtly naming China a threat, Vostok usually sought to [protect Russia \(opens in new window\)](#) from a militarily-assertive PLA.

This year, the scenario was adapted to turn military drills which in the past had the flavour of an anti-Chinese agenda into a strategic exercise *with* China. Including the PLA helped to downplay that element further and [emphasize](#) that the drills are not directed against Beijing.

China's presence allowed the Russian armed forces to judge *in situ* the level of preparedness and adaptation to modern warfare of a country that [has not had combat experience](#) in decades, and [draw conclusions](#). The same can be said for Beijing, as there are many sectors where both armies can learn from each other and [explore further \(opens in new window\)](#) military and technical cooperation. Vostok also showed off Russia's '[combat-proven](#)' [military hardware](#), which could help it secure additional defence contracts with Beijing.

## Signalling the West

According to [Russian media](#), Vostok-2018 enshrined the creation an 'anti-American military alliance'. To drive the point home, the beginning of the active phase of the exercise coincided with [a meeting](#) between presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping at the margins of the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok.

The creation of a military alliance between China and Russia, however, needs to be treated with scepticism. Moscow and Beijing certainly enjoy a 'special', albeit pragmatic, bilateral relationship, but such a formal alliance is unlikely to happen any time soon. Furthermore, Vostok-2018 was not simply a bilateral exercise - although a symbolic token, the drills involved troops from Mongolia, and Turkey were also invited to participate but politely refused, sending observers instead.

The signal intended for the US and the West is quite clear: in times of tension between Russia and the West, Moscow is not militarily isolated and can count on China as an ally. Meanwhile, NATO and the US cannot do military drills [bigger and better](#) than this year's Vostok.

This does not mean that Russia is preparing for war against the West. It is more an element of the show, chest thumping for both foreign and domestic audiences. But despite this, and the limits on the evolving Russia-China relationship, Vostok-2018 has left plenty for the

West to keep an eye on.

*\*Mathieu Boulègue is a Research Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House and he wrote this originally for the [Chatham House](#)*

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