

ACTIVITY REPORT



NOVEMBER 13, 2019

Summary of a Roundtable Event hosted at École nationale d'administration publique, Montréal

Zapad, Vostok, Tsentr: Russian Military Exercises, Alliances and Capabilities

Dr. Mathieu Landriault, Adam MacDonald, and Thomas Hughes

This event was organized as a roundtable to provide context and analyze the most recent Russian military exercise, Tsentr 2019. This roundtable was sponsored by the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN), who facilitated transportation and accommodation for speakers, with the support of the Observatoire de la politique et la sécurité de l'Arctique (OPSA), based in ÉNAP – Montréal. The conference was the initiative of Mathieu Landriault, post-doctoral researcher with NAADSN and director of OPSA, who acted as a moderator. Andrea Charron (associate professor, University of Manitoba), James Fergusson (professor, University of Manitoba), Adam MacDonald (doctoral candidate, Dalhousie University) and Thomas Hughes (doctoral candidate, Queen's University) were invited to share their thoughts with the audience. The roundtable attracted 20 attendees in total, with about a third coming from the Canadian Forces or the Department of National Defence.

Tsentr 2019 has taken place in the military district covering the Center part of the Russian territory. The exercise brought about 13000 soldiers to react to different scenarios, from many countries: Russia, China, India and many Central Asian countries to only name a few. Some scenarios took place in or near the border with Central Asian countries while others were deployed in the Russian Arctic, with the Northern Fleet and Arctic Joint Strategic Command. Scenarios included anti-terrorism manoeuvres, evacuation of civilians and inspection of ship in the Northern Sea Route. Tsentr was performed in 2019, following similar exercises in the Eastern part (Vostok 2018) and Western part (Zapad 2017) of Russia in previous years.

Andrea Charron began the roundtable by describing the strategic context that prevailed in the Arctic region, to better understand how Tsentr 2019 fits in the broader Arctic security environment. She highlighted that Arctic security is pretty secure and the governance system, especially through the Arctic Council, is promising an orderly and stable regional order, with Arctic states including Russia actively cooperating and working together. Professor Charron pointed however that there are

stressors that have the potential to change this picture on a medium to long-term horizon. A first stressor is the globalist/nationalist divide that pits non-Arctic states to push for global rules and frame the Arctic region as a global common while Arctic coastal states are pushing to keep their preeminent position and are emphasizing for national jurisdictions to prevail.

Moreover, she pointed out that there exist disagreements between Arctic coastal states, Asian non-Arctic states and European non-Arctic states. These disagreements constitute potential conflicts as there is uncertainty about Asian states' intentions, especially with China. The fact that China feels emboldened and developed ambitious projects, such as the Polar Silk Road. Further, Western states are facing specific challenges linked to their membership to NATO. With such an alliance, it is harder to bring forces together to exercise and to act as a unified force.

Adam MacDonald described how Tsentr 2019 but also Vostok 2018 and Zapad 2017 fit in Russia's grand strategy. In particular, MacDonald argued Russia is pursuing an 'anti-hegemonic' grand strategy in order to create a sphere of influence where Russia has preponderant influence within its near-abroad with respect to military, economic and political developments. Russia is not striving to be a global power and hegemonic rival to the US but rather desires a global reconfiguration of world power towards a multi-polar order where Russia is a significant major power and respected within a concert of powers. MacDonald underlined that Russia was very much a weakened power in the 1990s after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Russia started to reemerge in the 2000s with military capabilities but is still faced with daunting challenges as far as its economy, demography and geography are concerned. With Western sanctions, the Russia economy has been hit hard in recent years while its population continue to age. Its geography makes it vulnerable to various threats on different theaters of operation but also act as an advantage since Russia cooperates and has shared interests with many countries, including India, China and Central Asian countries.

MacDonald added that Russia practiced alongside other countries' personnel in all three of the most recent annual strategic exercises. These exercise participants, however, were differentiated by region (with Belarus in Zapad 17, China and Mongolia in Vostk 2018, and a number of Central Asian states plus China, India and Pakistan in Tsentr 19). This was in part to achieve different objectives within each region which includes signaling not only to NATO and the West but towards its 'allies' and partners as well. MacDonald stated Zapad 17 was a reminder by Russia to Belarus who the senior partner was in their relationship to prevent Minsk from migrating further towards the Western orbit whereas exercises with the Central Asian states was to further and assert Russia's region leadership role security and political-wise. MacDonald noted the closer military cooperation with China in multiple theatres but cautioned against perceiving the time as or moving towards any sort of alliance given divergent grand strategies, specifically whether China will respect Russia's attempts to carve and maintain a sphere of influence in regions Beijing in increasing interested and active in such as Central Asia and the Arctic. With this in mind for the Arctic portion of the Tsentr 19 Russia only deployed its own troops to respond to exercise threats, including inspecting a vessel in the Northern Sea Route and

deploying on land at Novaya Zemlya. Although Russia has cooperated with China to develop the economic potential of the Northern Sea Route and natural resources present in the Russian Arctic, they are still unwilling to give a military role or importance to China in this strategic area. Mathieu Landriault added that recent landmark projects in the Russian Arctic also suggest that Russia is trying to attract a diversity of investors to develop its Arctic resources. The LNG 2 project in the Yamal Peninsula saw companies from the United Kingdom, France, and Japan joining Russian and Chinese forms to develop a major gas field.

Thomas Hughes provided a brief historical recap to contextualize the recent Russian military exercises with previous maneuvers held in the past few decades. Western states and the Soviet Union agreed to common rules for the notification of certain exercises at the 1975 Helsinki Accords, ostensibly to avoid the potential that exercises were incorrectly perceived to presage an invasion and such misinterpretation led to pre-emptive strike or other accidental escalation. This regime, initially called “Confidence-Building Measures”, made military exercises more predictable and transparent with similar disclosure norms on both sides. Despite initial reluctance, the Soviet Union agreed to the regime, albeit with significant modifications to the original proposals. This confidence-building regime was updated in the Stockholm Document in 1986, incorporating the requirement to invite observers if the size of an exercise reached certain thresholds. This new regime of “Confidence- and Security-Building” was further developed and updated in successive Vienna Documents, but is now being tested by Russia stretching the spirit of the regulations and failing to offer full transparency within its maneuvers. Russian obfuscation of its exercises includes appearing to under-report the total number of participants in large exercises when they occur in areas covered by the Confidence- and Security-Building Measures, ensuring that the reported size is under the threshold at which observers must be invited. As a result, although Russia usually invites observers on an informal basis, they are not always given the freedom of movement that is required by the 2011 Vienna Document. Furthermore, although the Measures are broadly intended to improve transparency and provide notification of forthcoming large-scale maneuvers, they also include a clause that allows for notification to be withheld if troops involved in the exercise are not informed before it starts. Russia has made significant use of these ‘snap’ exercises, again avoiding the notification and observation requirements. Hughes underlined that Russia maintains a degree of compliance sufficient for it not to be in full violation of the rules, but undermines their initial purpose.

Hughes noted that Russia sees its exercises as the crown of combat training, and they are rarely intended as traditional shows of force intended to provide overt signaling to potential adversaries. Similarly, Hughes warned against seeing the tactics and procedures conducted within exercises as being a definitive sign of Russian practice for forthcoming active operations. Hughes also indicated that while it is important to be aware of Russian exercises, particularly given the rapid and recent increase in their frequency in the context of broader concerns about Russian security posture, we should not automatically perceive them as reflecting aggressive intent.

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For his part, James Fergusson argued that Russian military exercises are big because it seems to be in their strategic culture to hold impressive displays of force. He explained that we often read too much into the meaning or significance of these drills although there is signaling involved in organizing these deployments. Professor Fergusson added that Russia was breaking the norm on noticing other countries and allowing observers to be present for these exercises. However, you cannot hide anymore, due to satellite coverage; Western countries, including the United States, are aware of troop movement and deployment for forces by other states. Professor Fergusson is downplaying the consequences of these exercises for Canadian and North American defence. The information available publicly does not suggest that NORAD or NATO are facing radically different Russian military capabilities and forces.

Finally, all panelists agreed that we must pay attention to see if Russia will continue with these major military exercises. The nature of future Russian military exercises is uncertain and can help us figure out the capabilities and scenarios that the Russian state perceives as credible and requiring training and coordination.