



Vostok 2018: Implications for Russia and the West

(U) Russia’s Vostok 2018 drills are likely intended to act as a deterrent to Western military pressure in Europe given the drills’ similarities to large scale combat in a European theatre, but will probably only achieve varying degrees of success. Vostok 2018, held in mid-September, is one of the largest war games held in Russian history with 300,000 troops, over 36,000 vehicles, and 1,000 aircraft trained alongside Chinese and Mongolian soldiers in a variety of exercises.¹ Each exercise showcased a different aspect of the Russian military’s offensive capabilities as well as key weapons systems used.

(U) Russia’s Vostok 2018 drills mimic conflict with NATO forces, and are likely intended to act as a deterrent to Western military pressure in Europe, given the drills’ similarities to large scale combat in a European theatre.

- (U) In early September, the Russian Minister of Defense expressed that, “Russia’s policy is defensive in nature,” despite the exercises conducted being almost entirely offensive in nature, with multiple drills specifically displaying preemptive strikes against a technologically advanced enemy.²³⁴⁵
- (U) During the Vostok 2018 drills, Russia conducted offensive exercises when Russian Tu-22 M3 bombers simulated attacks on a simulated enemy airbase, Iskander-M SRBMs launched attacks against enemy command infrastructure, Multiple artillery battalions supported armor advances with a rolling barrage similar to Soviet doctrine of an advance

¹ <https://www.janes.com/article/82648/russia-outlines-massive-vostok-2018-exercise>

² http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12195593@egNews

³ http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12195322@egNews

⁴ http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12195339@egNews

⁵ <https://iz.ru/788180/2018-09-12/bombardirovshchiki-tu-95ms-otstrelialis-krylatymi-raketami-na-manevrakh-vostok-2018>



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into NATO territory, and Tu-95 strategic bombers launched cruise missiles against simulated ground targets from 2,000 km away.⁶⁷⁸⁹

- (U) Russia displayed its ability to use combined arms tactics against a conventional military and the simulated targets of the exercises were likely created to mimic a NATO adversary. Given the current political climate in Eastern Europe, specifically Ukraine, these drills project an image of Russian military might. Additionally, the scale to which these exercises were conducted is an indicator of Russia's logistical and support abilities, necessary for sustained operations against an enemy force such as NATO's.

(U) Vostok 2018 is likely to only have a minor effect on domestic discontent as protests and demonstrations are likely to continue throughout the next four weeks unless Russia adopts significant measures to influence the populace. Historically, Russian politicians have used foreign policy and military activity to distract the public from internal issues and draw support for the government/leader.¹⁰¹¹ Recently, Moscow, especially through its media outlets, has used Vostok 2018 to promote national pride and distract citizens from legislative issues and Putin's peak disapproval ratings.¹²¹³¹⁴

- (U) Since the mid-September drills, ongoing protests have continued as the legislature recently attempted to push through unpopular pension reforms that many Russian citizens

⁶ http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12195593@egNews

⁷ http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12195322@egNews

⁸ http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12195339@egNews

⁹ <https://iz.ru/788180/2018-09-12/bombardirovshchiki-tu-95ms-otstrelialis-krylatymi-raketami-na-manevrakh-vostok-2018>

¹⁰ <https://globalsecurityreview.com/vostok-2018-russias-largest-war-games-since-1981/>

<https://globalsecurityreview.com/diversionary-tactics-russian-foreign-policy/>

¹¹ <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201809131067990304-russia-vostok-2018-drills-counter-acting-significant-threats/>

<https://sputniknews.com/military/201809161068074472-vostok-military-drills-footage/>

¹² <https://rusi.org/commentary/russia%E2%80%99s-vostok-2018-exercise-about-lot-more-war-nato>

<https://globalsecurityreview.com/vostok-2018-russias-largest-war-games-since-1981/>

¹³ For examples, see: <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201809131067990304-russia-vostok-2018-drills-counter-acting-significant-threats/>

<https://sputniknews.com/military/201809161068074472-vostok-military-drills-footage/>

¹⁴ <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>



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have vocalized strong opposition to.¹⁵ Polling suggests that 90% of the public opposes the measures despite the influence efforts of the Russian government.¹⁶

- (U) Despite the apparent efforts, however, protests have still continued through the past few weeks, especially as the legislature recently attempted to push through the reforms.¹⁷ Various opposition parties, such as the Russian Communist Party, have further fanned this discontent particularly because it runs contrary to some of their platforms.¹⁸
- (U) If Moscow takes additional actions to console, rally, or distract the public—such as additional concessions in the pension reforms—it has a roughly equal chance to reduce the discontent (with the precise likelihood depending on the specific actions taken). Additionally, over the next months the discontent over pension reforms will likely fade away, although if a separate/new grievance arises it likely will set the stage for discontent over that.

(U) The expansive size of the Vostok 2018 drills are likely to send a message to the international community that the Russian military remains powerful despite declining military expenditures.

- (U) In 2017, the Russian military budget was reduced by twenty percent from 2016 because of the declining Russian economy.¹⁹ Although the cuts are not always fully felt immediately, such cuts do tend to undermine the military over time.
- (U) On July 30, 2018, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov announced the next generation T-14 Armata tank was “rather expensive” and the upgraded T-72B3M tank

¹⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-pension-reform-vote-passes-reading-duma-protests-putin-kremlin-a8556196.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-protests-pensions/despite-putins-concessions-russians-protest-pension-reform-law-idUSKCN1LI0DU>

¹⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-pension-reform-vote-passes-reading-duma-protests-putin-kremlin-a8556196.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-protests-pensions/despite-putins-concessions-russians-protest-pension-reform-law-idUSKCN1LI0DU>

<https://www.efe.com/efe/english/world/russian-communist-party-protests-putin-s-plans-to-hike-retirement-age/50000262-3757896>

¹⁹ <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/military-expenditure>



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would be sufficient to deter NATO.²⁰ It is very likely the Russian military opted to upgrade the T-72B3M tank because they could not afford the T-14 Armata tank.

- (U) On July 2nd 2018, Broisov also said “The Su-57 is considered to be one of the best aircrafts produced in the world. Consequently, it does not make sense to speed up work on mass-producing the fifth-generation aircraft.” This statement, given cancellation of other projects, suggests that Russia has opted to not mass produce the Su-57 because of military budget cuts, and have utilized Vostok 2018 as a show of force to compensate for the growing perception that their military is weakening.²¹

²⁰ <https://ria.ru/arms/20180730/1525615092.html>

²¹ <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/russia-will-not-mass-produce-5th-generation-stealth-fighter-jet/>

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