



Russian and Belarusian armed forces participate in joint strategic exercise ZAPAD-2021 on 12 September 2021 at a training ground in Belarus. The drills were held at nine training grounds in Russia, in the Baltic Sea, and at five training grounds in Belarus. (Photo by Henadz Zhinkov, Xinhua/Alamy Live News)

Building the Russian Concept of Operations in the Baltic Sea Region An Experimental Approach

Maj. Frederik Wintermans, Royal Netherlands Army

Dan G. Cox, PhD

Much debate regarding Moscow's intentions in the Baltic Sea region preceded the quadrennial Russian military-strategic exercise ZAPAD-2021.¹ With the backdrop of increasing NATO-Russia tensions over the past few years, some believe the Kremlin desires to seize and control the Baltic States. On the one hand, Russian officials regularly dismiss such fears of NATO allies as anti-Russian "hysteria." For example, in March last year, Sen. Aleksey Pushkov said this hysteria is merely a pretext for NATO military expansion.² One of the best ways to examine Russian intentions is to analyze their largest military exercise conducted near the Baltic states, ZAPAD-2021. While military and intelligence agencies note Russian troop movements when they are clearly visible, none of the analysis of unit movements is put into a cohesive whole. Intelligence gatherers and military planners within NATO miss a vital opportunity to glean the operational approach that Russia may be signaling from such a large exercise. This article fills that hole by examining Russian tactical movements during ZAPAD-2021 and deducing what operational approaches are most likely from such an exercise. Strategic implications can also be speculated after operational approaches are described. Is Russia attempting to deter what it sees as further NATO aggression, or is Vladimir Putin rehearsing a potential incursion into one or more Baltic States? Answering important questions like these is a driving force behind this research.

The Russian General Staff conducted the active phase of ZAPAD-2021 from 10 to 16 September 2021. The exercise scenario allowed for practicing interoperability, training basic military tasks, and experimenting with new equipment on the battlefield. More importantly, the scenario permitted the General Staff to evaluate the contribution of tactical activities to the operational level of warfare.³ Unfortunately, the body of knowledge on the Russian concept of operations in the Baltic Sea region is limited. Antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD), the gray zone, and the Gerasimov doctrine are topics of Russian military power that received intense scrutiny over the years.⁴ However, if there is such a thing as an A2/AD strategy, a zone that is gray, or a doctrine designed by one person, they provide little utility to Western military planners and commanders in the Baltic Sea region. A better understanding of the

Russian concept of operations derived from the most recent ZAPAD-2021 exercise would be more helpful.

Building the outline of the Russian concept of operations in the Baltic Sea region allows military planners and commanders to increase understanding of its premises. Insufficient knowledge of the adversary's course of action is detrimental to success. A better understanding of Russian operational planning in the Baltic Sea region is critical because it partly determines the outcome of the unlikely event of an Article 5 scenario on NATO's eastern flank. Article 5 of the NATO charter states that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all."⁵

So, what is a concept of operations? According to the Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, a concept of operations is "a verbal or graphic statement that clearly and concisely expresses what the commander intends to accomplish and how it

Maj. Frederik

Wintermans is an international student at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He is an infantry/military intelligence officer serving in the Royal Netherlands Army. His interests include nuclear weapons, escalation management, and operational planning.

Dan G. Cox, PhD, is a professor of political science for the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies Program. He has three published books: *Terrorism, Instability and Democracy in Asia and Africa*, *Population-Centric Counterinsurgency: A False Idol*, and *Stability Economics: The Economic Foundations of Security in Post-Conflict Environments*. He has published in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Peace Research*, *Parameters*, the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *Orbis*, *Interagency Journal*, *Special Operations Journal*, and *Congress and the Presidency*. His work has also appeared in journals such as *Joint Force Quarterly*, *Terrorism Monitor*, the *Strategy Bridge*, the *Art of Strategy*, and *Small Wars Journal*. Cox has also served in the NATO Partnership for Peace Program helping to improve the professional military education system of the military of the Republic of Armenia.

will be done using available resources.⁶ We suggest a new approach to increase knowledge on the Russian concept of operations. First, using open sources, we sketch out a rough disposition of Russian units during ZAPAD-2021 and determine their tasking. Second, we outline the Russian concept of operations in the Baltic Sea region, drawing from Russian military thinking, the Russian force design and battlefield array, and unit tasking during ZAPAD-2021. Finally, we make recommendations for military planners and commanders to help them navigate the complex venture of operational planning.

The data collection method uses open-source outlets such as Russian newspapers, websites, and Twitter to determine the location and tasking of units during ZAPAD-2021. For example, the website informnapalm.org mentions the 76th Guards Air Assault Division (unit number 07264) training on the 230th All-Military Range in Obuz-Lesnovski.⁷ Despite Russian media outlets having a bad reputation for disseminating disinformation, we assess open sources of this kind to be sufficiently valid. However, this approach has drawbacks. First, it is less precise than using intelligence agency assets. Second, it is a far cry from comprehensive. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this article, we assess it more than suffices. Further, intelligence agencies increasingly use open-source data to aggregate large amounts of relevant data easily.⁸

We do not consider cyber and information operations in this article, nor the space domain, in building the Russian concept of operations in the Baltic Sea region. Open-source data collection is not possible, but one can imagine Moscow using resources in these domains in any military conflict with NATO.

Units and Tasks during ZAPAD-2021

The first two steps in our methodology for discerning the operational approach from the Russian ZAPAD-2021 exercise are determining disposition and unit tasking. Disposition of forces means determining the location of specific units that are the resources to execute a concept of operations. The benefit of knowing an opposing force's disposition is that it generates a clearer view of the adversaries' intention of the military operation. During ZAPAD-2021, the Russian General Staff deployed numerous units, and unfortunately, it is an impossible task to locate all of them. With its collection capabilities, generating the complete disposition

of all units deployed during ZAPAD-2021 is daunting even for the intelligence community. Nevertheless, a first glimpse of the disposition emerges from Russian social media, local newspapers, and the Russian Ministry of Defence website and is depicted in figure 1 (on page 9).⁹

The restriction of deploying to training ranges during ZAPAD-2021 limits the disposition value. After all, military units deploy wherever they are assigned a task in wartime. Two observations are interesting. First, consider the extensive use of the 1st Guards Tank Army elements in Belarus. Armor units are suitable for an offense with a high operational tempo. Their deployment in Belarus, near the borders of Poland and Lithuania, with just a short march to Kaliningrad, is no coincidence. Defense of Russian sovereign territory is a key element of the Kremlin's defense policy. Second, during ZAPAD-2021, there was a relatively large number of airdrops. Airborne operations help take control of vital terrain in enemy territory, which indicates offensive rather than defensive operations. They need a link up quickly with maneuver units because they lack proper sustainment. The combination of the 1st Guards Tank Army with the 76th Guards Air Assault Division indicates a counteroffensive in the scenario of ZAPAD-2021 that supports the defense of Russian territory. A tank army and an air assault division are primary ingredients for an offense from Belarus to Kaliningrad. For example, an airdrop in Kaunas, Lithuania, increases operational tempo.

The next step in our examination is to look at unit tasking. The authors assigned some tactical mission tasks in addition to the disposition and drawing from military theory and force design (see figure 2, page 10).

A key addition to Russian military thought, especially from Alexander Svechin, is the concept of the deep operation.¹⁰ During the Cold War, Soviet planning provided for tank divisions to penetrate NATO defenses and race to the North Sea. Nowadays, the Russian General Staff does not have enough ground forces to reach the North Sea. Instead, for the deep operation, the concept of SODCIT is applied in planning: the strategic operations to destroy critically important targets.¹¹ Essentially, dual-capable cruise missiles and ballistic missiles fired from maritime, air, and ground platforms target airports, harbors, and political and military installations. The actual Russian target list is classified. But one can imagine



(Figure by authors)

Figure 1. Generated Disposition of Forces Deployed during ZAPAD 2021

Green are the 1st Guards Tank Army elements, yellow are airborne troops, and light blue are military aircraft. The black hooks are defensive exercises of the Baltic Fleet and the 14th Corps. The top left picture is the mobile coastal defense system Bal, the bottom left is the 9K720 Iskandr, and the bottom right is the air-launched cruise missile KH-101/102.

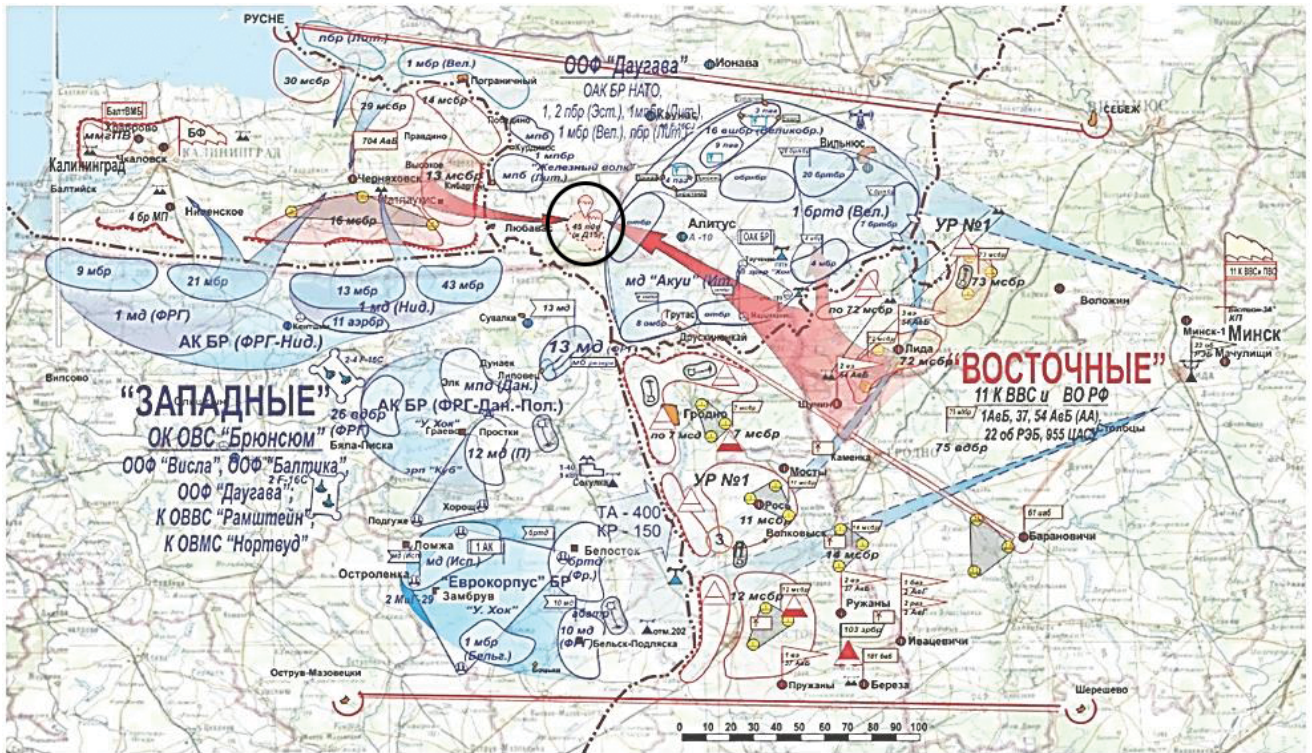
rewarding targets like SHAPE headquarters, Joint Forces Command Brunssum, and NATO headquarters in Brussels. NATO is particularly vulnerable with these commands and headquarters as they have become static and are at well-known locations. As noted in figure 1, ZAPAD-2021 practiced launching the cruise missile KH 101/102, which is a resource for applying SODCIT. The rationale for a Russian deep operation against Western European targets is to degrade NATO command and control and delay the mobilization of NATO's full military power. The Kremlin believes U.S. divisions pouring into Western European ports will tip the scales against them.

Unfortunately, one key element that has not changed in Russian operational planning is the reliance on nuclear

weapons. Almost all Russian precision-guided munitions are dual-capable: they can be equipped with a conventional or a nuclear warhead. This adds an existential threat to any Russian operation and may provide Moscow deterrence that prevents retaliation if they again, like they did in 2014, surprise the West by seizing all or part of another nation-state, even if it is a NATO member.

Building the Russian Concept of Operations

We explored the disposition and the tactical unit tasks of some of the deployed Russian forces during ZAPAD-2021. These two ingredients provide insight into the last part of the definition of a concept of operations: how it will be done using available resources.



(Figure by V. V. Aristov et al. in "The Army Aviation Units Fire Missions Performance Effectiveness Estimating Methodology in the Dark Time of the Day Taking into Account Meteorological Conditions," *Aerospace Forces: Theory and Practice* [2019])

Figure 3. The Close Operation with an Intermediate Objective

Similar to figure 2, the main effort of the close operation links Kaliningrad with Belarus and utilizes an airdrop operation in southern Lithuania (see circle).

produce destructive effects in a deep operation that could include some or all the NATO headquarters, key ports, airports, and other deployment sites if Russia feels threatened by a potential western military response. These capabilities are dual-capable, long-range, precision-guided ballistic and cruise missiles.

Arranging operations. Supporting (or enabling) operations will likely be blocking and interdiction effects to support the main effort. Also, the counterattack leaves open flanks toward Poland and Lithuania. A possible supporting operation is a flank cover that violates the territory of either of these two countries.

Center of gravity. From the perspective of Moscow, the center of gravity is most likely the slow decision-making process of NATO. If Article 5 is triggered, the General Staff will likely grab the initiative and seize key military objectives before the heads of state of NATO-nations reach an agreement on responding to Russian aggression.

When using some of these elements of operational design in combination with the disposition and tactical unit tasking, a clearer picture of the Russian concept of operations in the Baltic Sea region emerges (see figure 4, page 12).

Russia's Desired End State

Now that we have a basic grasp of the intention of Zhuravlyov, we can infer Russia's desired end state and explain the scenario of an exercise like ZAPAD-2021 and why Moscow wants to reintegrate Kaliningrad.

The erosion of strategic depth worries the Russian political and military leadership. Since the end of the Cold War, its strategic depth has decreased significantly with the loss of key buffer states like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Militarily, this created several challenges for the General Staff.



(Figure by authors)

Figure 4. Elements of the Russian Concept of Operations in the Baltic Sea Region

Of interest is the deep operation, which includes special operations to destroy critical infrastructure targets. To give an idea, four possible targets are Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum, Aviano Airbase, and the port of Felixstowe.

First, from a Russian perspective, the encirclement of Kaliningrad by a military alliance (NATO) poses a great threat to the existence of a small piece of Russian sovereign territory. Kaliningrad is difficult to defend. As a mental exercise, imagine Vladivostok, a city in southeastern Russia, as American territory. That would create a complicated security dilemma for the United States.

Second, less strategic depth reduces military reaction time. Russian fears of a preemptive first strike, decapitating Moscow's political and military leadership and thereby disabling the Russian nuclear second-strike capability, sounds paranoid, but Russian history has taught leaders to fear invasion. Russia has suffered

numerous invasions, including the German invasion in World War II and Napoleon's invasion in 1812. This historical fear, paranoid or not, is culturally ingrained in the minds of Russian leaders. Figure 5 (on page 13) depicts this fear, where Russian military leadership speculates the United States will use sea and ground-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles against Moscow, decapitating political and military leadership.¹⁵

Last, military infrastructure creeping up to the Russian border increases NATO's operational reach. Some of the historical invasions just mentioned culminated due to insufficient operational reach. NATO's ability to use the Baltic region as a staging area is frightening



(Figure by Russian Ministry of Defense)

Figure 5. Slide from a Briefing at the Moscow Conference on International Security in 2017

About one hundred countries gather annually at this conference to discuss the state of international security. Deputy commander of the Directorate of Operations of the General Staff Lieutenant-General Viktor Ploznikhir gave the briefing.

for Moscow. Russian leadership remembers all too well the utility of Operation Desert Shield. There are more military challenges to the General Staff than the three listed above, but these are especially problematic.

Conclusion

This article aimed to take the first step toward designing the Russian concept of operations in the Baltic Sea region. First, we determined the disposition and the tasking of Russian military units during ZAPAD-2021. Second, using elements of operational art, we got a glimpse of the commander's intention of the Operational-Strategic Command West in Saint Petersburg. Last, we explored the reason behind the Russian concept of operations. In sum, Russia's historical utility of its depth, the reduction of reaction time to a preemptive military strike, and the encirclement of

Kaliningrad created challenges that the General Staff addressed. The Russians built a concept of operations that secures its sovereign territory and manages NATO's weakness: its slow decision-making process.

Using open-source data, especially real-time data often gathered by normal citizens in Russia and Belarus or local newspapers, this article emphasizes that intelligence gathering cannot simply end with gathering and interpreting the forces. Military intelligence analysts must work in conjunction with other members of an operational planning team to synthesize the relevant intelligence and form theories of the potential concept of operations that an adversary is using in their exercises.

The next step would be for planners to assess the strategic intentions behind the concept of operations. To accomplish this effectively, an operational planning

team must view the concept of operations from the adversary's social, political, cultural, and historical context. Is Russia practicing a potential future offensive operation? Is Russia showing force and capability simply to deter what it views as further aggression from NATO? Perhaps it is both simultaneously. These are the questions that must be asked.

Recommendations

First, NATO's concept of operations should address the challenges posed by its Russian counterpart. To do this, it must focus on the weaknesses of Russian military power. For example, one can think of its lack of sustainment or potential difficulties in responding to NATO's opening of a second front.

Second, mitigating measures must be thought out to address the Russian deep operation. Moscow's

deep operation is important because it degrades decision-making and isolates Western Europe from the United States. Russia focuses on Western European critical infrastructure, airfields, ports, and headquarters such as SHAPE, using dual-capable precision-guided munitions. One way to mitigate this threat is to start thinking about fixed locations for air defense to protect these critical infrastructures, logistical, and headquarter nodes.

Third, we might look to alleviate the fears of the Russian leadership, which are rooted in history, culture, and rational observations about how close NATO nations now are to Moscow. De-escalatory attempts at reconciliation, like joint exercises, military exchanges, and diplomatic engagements might go a long way toward turning a tense situation into a far less threatening one for both Russia and NATO. ■

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