

The effects of ZAPAD 2017 on European Stability and Security

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As soon as ZAPAD 2017 kicked off, many self-appointed Dutch experts crawled at every corner and polluted their entourage with analyzes mirroring the well-known Cold War operational scenarios of the past. In the run-up to ZAPAD 2017 those same experts provided little to none information on Putin's protracted hybrid endeavors to steer the mental state of politicians and affect the public opinion of adjacent countries to take back these states under Moscow's wings. When and where did we identify that as well? In the pre-KAVKAZ 2008 period!

Where were the evaluations providing a clear insight into the obvious political and military effects for Ukraine, Baltic States and Belarus? What about an insight on the expansion of Islamic-extremism in the Caucasus and the violent rise of Jihadism in Central Asia? Spill over developments spiked by returning home-grown veterans from the Middle East? Where were the reports outlining the tentative impact on Putin's poking around actions?

Where were the evaluations of two-way street spillover effects of the Russian intervention in the Middle East, and how should Putin's efforts in Serbia be assessed? Especially given the fact that the disturbing loudmouth from Brussels has stated that the EU is keeping the door wide open for Serbia and Montenegro?

Finally, where were the evaluations of the impact on national policies of unsubdued migrant flows from the Middle East, North- and Sub Sahel Africa to prosperous European countries? Where were the evaluation of alternative human trafficking routes to Eastern Europe through the Black Sea and from the Russian Federation and the role of Russian and Turkish regional and local authorities? Will Moscow follow Ankara's example in exploiting growing migrant volumes as a crowbar to break the Western sanction regime? Did Ankara and Moscow already agree to hammer Europe?

Those missing evaluations are clouding a proper oversight of factors that may impact the stability and unity of European society. Creating cracks as precursors of coming schisms within EU and NATO European member nations as well as widening the transatlantic division in the political and military field.

The Scenario Approach

Not every “expert” might be capable to portray key developments in a proper conceptual context and outline these in a harmonized and synchronized bearing on paper and video in order to paint a balanced picture of the effects ZAPAD 2017 might have on Moscow’s operational approach. However, it is essential to be able to define where, when and how the West should and can neutralize the short and longer term impact of ZAPAD 2017. One may observe a substantial gap between “must” and “able” and it is absolutely key to identify the conditions under which non-kinetic and kinetic instruments can complement each other in order to define European countermeasures in a given timetable.

This narrative starts with an evaluation of the operational impact of ZAPAD 2017 on the current status of neighboring countries; listing potential spillover effects of Moscow’s role in the Middle East and Serbia. The second part will be focused on Moscow’s and Ankara’s role initiating and actively supporting alternative migrant routes; calculating and defining the feasibility of exploiting migrant fluxes as an effective instrument to accommodate European intents and Moscow’s political targets

Context

Repairing historically incorrectly drawn boundaries, creation of a Soviet Union 2.0 and fixing a multi-polar world where the Russian Federation is one of the few superpowers and the West is doomed to a last row position, are the important political targets Putin wants to achieve.

Not daring to risk the involvement of other western-oriented treaty organizations (ASEAN) and subsequently a blockage of all warm water ports of the Black Sea, Northern Arctic Pacific Ocean, Moscow is not targeting a direct armed confrontation with NATO or one of its member nations. Moscow considers the stakes too high in reference to the erratic nature of the Middle East Conflict and incidents in Central Asia.

ZAPAD 2017 should be considered as one of the tools in Putin’s hybrid toolbox, complementary to the kinetic and non-kinetic tools already in it. This large-scale exercise may serve to deepen and expand the identified cracks in Europe and within NATO to soften or to get rid of pending economic sanctions.

ZAPAD 2017, executed predominantly on Belarus territory, may also serve to suppress opposing structures at Belarus territory, to deploy permanently a four-dimensional combat force near the borders of Baltic and eastern NATO and EU member states and to settle the more or less isolated military position of East Prussia/Kaliningrad by closing the Suwalki gap, thus blocking the sole NATO alternative to bring in NATO ground forces to the Baltic region over land.

Given similarities to the start-up phase of the KAVKAZ 2008 scenario, it cannot be precluded that in the aftermath of ZAPAD 2017 Russian units will remain on Belarus territory to strengthen

the proxy armies in the Donbas and/or increase the political pressure on the Baltic States. In any case these units will remain on a high readiness rate.

Given recent developments in the Caucasus, Middle East and Central Asia, it seems that Moscow is adequately managing the situation in those regions. However, that so called “stable situation” may change rapidly, due to the enduring unpredictability of Kadyrov in Chechnya, the expanding Islamic extremism in Dagestan and the increasing impact of returning home-grown Jihadists to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, who are passionately motivated to establish a Wahhabist-oriented emirate, ranging from Afghanistan to the Black Sea. Forced by renewed unrest, Moscow may change its intentions in the European region.

Given the ambition of ZAPAD 2017 reflected in the volume of participating forces, a multidimensional character, dispersion of exercise accents in terms of operational training targets, training of multi operational levels and an extremely complicated control and management mechanism (coordination, harmonization and synchronization of operational spear points), the exercise will probably be divided into three to four vignettes. The execution of each vignette must frequently be evaluated at the military strategic level to list strengths and weaknesses of the execution. Pauses should be integrated in the vignette exercise scenario to evaluate the operational performance and, if necessary, to repeat them. This procedure will take time and affects the net exercise time and consequently the exercise effectiveness.

Given Moscow’s hybrid efforts in the last two years, the tentative scripts of two of the four vignettes will undoubtedly be focused on:

- Vignette 1: Invade and occupy (one of) the Baltic states; close the Suwalki gap and seize the northeastern part of the Polish Baltic Sea coast.
- Vignette 2: Destabilize Ukraine by seizing the industrial and agricultural center and simultaneously or subsequently eliminate the political nerve center in Kiev.

These two vignettes can be complemented by the execution of (parts of) the following:

- Vignette 3: Establish a mobile air defense umbrella for a combined and/or independent ground and maritime operation in order to create the conditions for an intervention while keeping the initiative, ensuring lasting freedom of action and operational speed.
- Vignette 3a: Connected, harmonized and synchronized to the three vignettes, to investigate the complexity of logistic support in a three to four dimensional setting.

Given the ambition of ZAPAD 2017, the planned two-week exercise period may be too restricted to get a balanced oversight of the problems facing the execution of all four vignettes. The actual implementation of the ZAPAD 2017 scenario will probably be limited to the first two vignettes.

An integration of elements of the two other vignettes should be considered as a bonus. The combination of ambition versus available exercise time may create the risk that ZAPAD 2017 is more a demonstration of force than an actual exercise of a combined Russian-Belarus fighting force.

Adjacent States

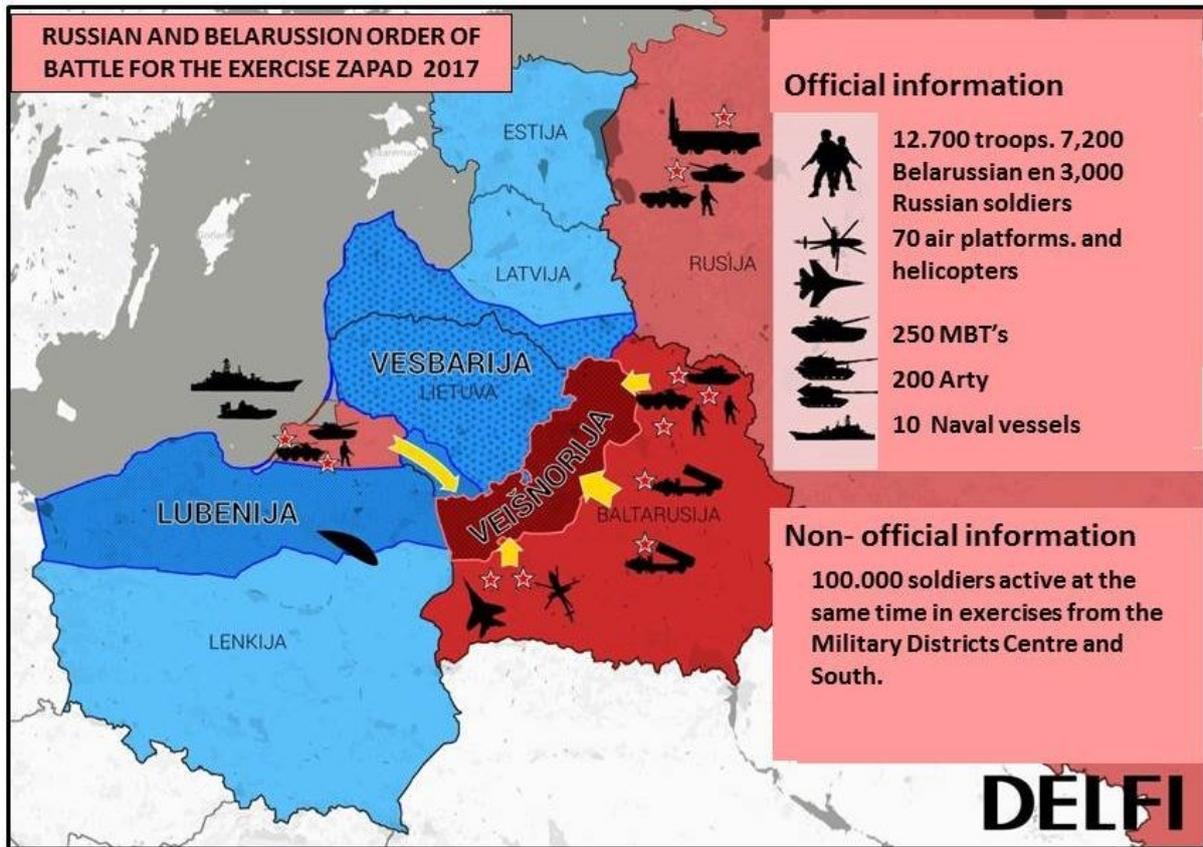
A number of articles published on various websites and journals provided an insight in the effects of Moscow's hybrid activities on the stability of adjacent states as well as the status of western alliances. Summarizing those articles is not an option in this dissertation. Therefore, the current status of those adjacent states will be the starting point to determine the effect of ZAPAD 2017 on their stability.

Vignette 1: The Baltic Region

The Baltic States assume that an invasion of a ground component may have a two-sided multi-dimensional character.

Ground forces will be launched from forward operating bases (FOB) located in the border regions with the Russian Federation (RF), Belarus and/ or East Prussia/Kaliningrad. A ground operation could be reinforced by an amphibious Landing force as part of an Operation from the Sea. If one or even two amphibious operations have been scripted, the Baltic Fleet, considered by Moscow as the oldest part of its maritime component, will be the force of choice. Landing forces will probably try to build bridgeheads in the Baltysk region close to Kaliningrad and the Kronstadt area at the Gulf of Finland west of Sint Petersburg.

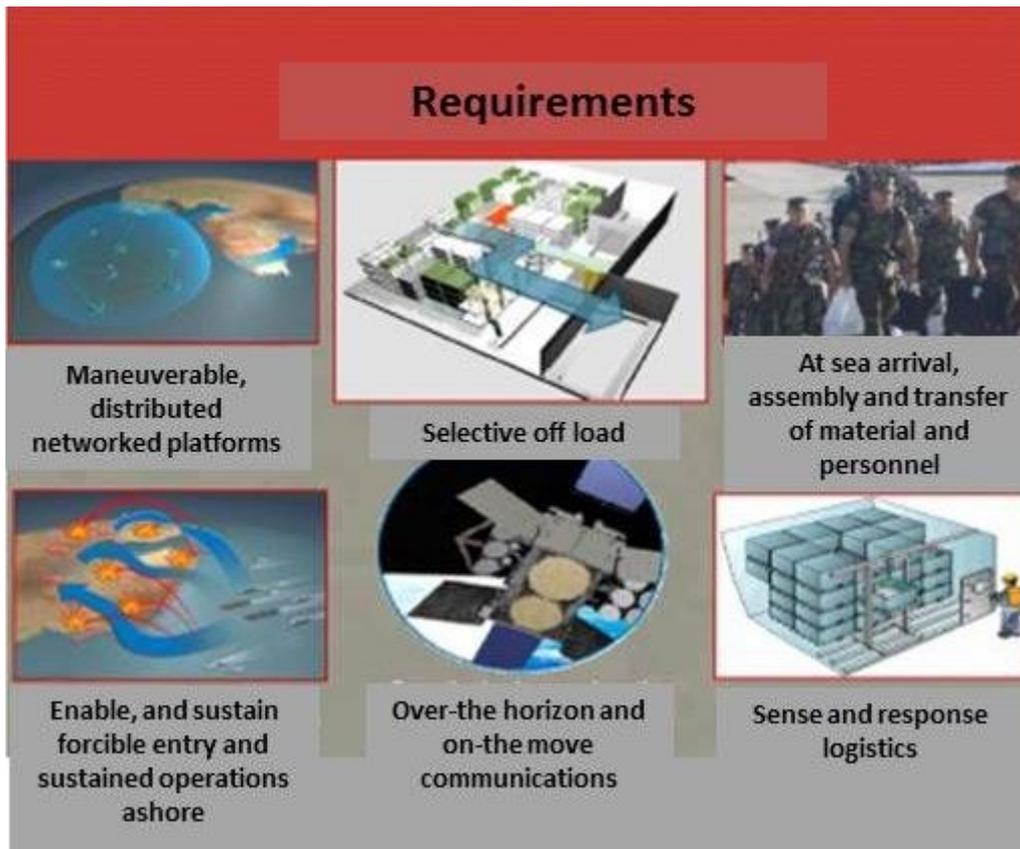
In the run up to ZAPAD 2017, amphibious platforms of the Ropusha version have been identified in Königsberg/ Kaliningrad, strengthening the assumption that an amphibious operation will be integrated in the ZAPAD 2017 scenario. However, it remains unclear where and when one or more amphibious operations will be carried out and if and how these operations will be harmonized and synchronized with any ground and/or air operation in that scenario.



Exercise map which surfaced after the exercise ZAPAD 2017. (Note than there are also attack objectives in the northern part of Poland /Lubenija)

Sea Base criteria

If an amphibious operation is indeed part of the scenario, a Sea Base should be deployed in front of the Kaliningrad or RF Baltic coastline. The Sea Base an US operational finding from WW II is a hub combining communication, logistical and operational components covering a three of even four dimension operation. It is the cornerstone of the Operations from the Sea concept.

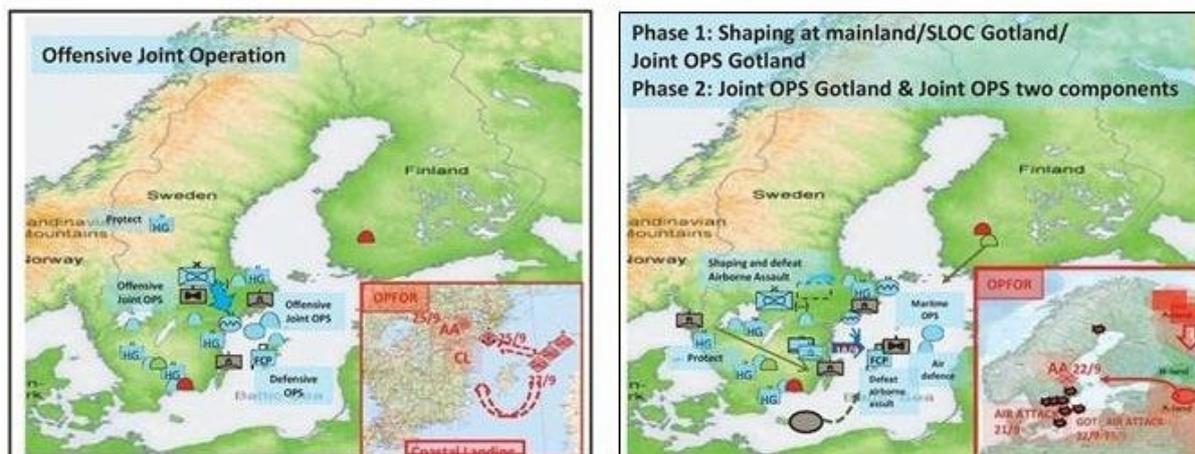


From a conceptual point of view, it is interesting to note if Moscow is capable to master the US-based Sea Base concept as the essential precondition for a successful amphibious landing operation and if the Russian Maritime Component has the conceptual knowledge, the operational experience and the required hard en software to successfully execute a power projection on the East Sea Coast. Particularly, the shift from a hardware oriented Force protection to a hard and soft ware focused Full Dimension Protection including Cyberspace defensive activities, is not only a challenge in the technological field but will be mentally demanding. When Moscow actually ignores this concept, it may be an indication of its technological and technical status of the virtual dimension and in the field of logistics.

The ground component protected by a mobile air defense and top cover of rotor and fixed wing air platforms will target capitals, ports and communication centers of the three Baltic States. Power projection will reflect all the elements of modern warfare e.g. massive, fast and dominant.

It will be interesting to observe if and how Moscow manages to harmonize and synchronize a combined ground, air, maritime and virtual focused operation and tie that integrated force capability to a mobile air defence umbrella with a variety of weapon systems such as S-300, S-400, K-300 Bastion-P I and ISKANDER 9K720 and aerial platforms. It is currently unclear how Moscow is planning to block air and maritime corridors to the Baltic region to inhibit NATO reinforcements strengthening NATO forces already deployed in the Baltic region.

Although a bit late, the west got the picture right and has reacted to the frequent Russian abuse of the Baltic Sea region. Primarily by stationing a number of cadre brigades with rotating subunits in Lithuania and Poland. On top of that by planning a large-scale exercise in the Baltic region.



EXERCISE SCHEDULE. Bron Delfi Lt

Sweden, judging Russian exercises in the Baltic as high risk endeavors, was the dominant factor in planning and preparing a conceptual framework for that large-scale exercise. In a press release Sweden defined the objective of that exercise with the title Aurora 17 as “to deter potential attackers, and force them to carefully consider the risks of attacking our country, ..it is about action the realities of the security situation in our part of Europe. It is an important signal to the Swedish population and also to other countries and partners that we take this security situation seriously, “. More than 20,000 soldiers from Sweden, US, France, Norway, Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania and even Finland contributed to a successful exercise. According to the newspaper Sydöstran, American troops participated in order to issue a statement of intent to show that there is a need for US presence in this region.

Russian long range artillery and rocket launchers can cover all maritime passages to the Baltic region from Gotland, and for that reason the Swedish island has become one of Moscow’s key strategic targets. Therefore, the Swedish exercise focuses on and around Gotland. Sweden has decreased its military presence on Gotland over the years. During the Cold War some 5000 battle ready high readiness troops were deployed on Gotland, but after the implosion of the Soviet Union that force shrunk. Currently not more than 300 volunteers must eventually counter a surprise Russian attack on the island. The Baltic Sea region presents more geostrategic surprises such as Bornholm at the Danish coast and Åland, the Swedish island group between Sweden and Finland. When Moscow is able to seize one of the above mentioned islands, it may control the maritime access to the Baltic Sea region and blocks NATO reinforcements for NATO forces deployed in the Baltic region. In this context, a Russian amphibious operation on one of the Baltic coasts can be very successful.



Putin may search for a peaceful solution for the Donbas. His proposal to deploy an UN peacekeeping force there was applauded by some Western politicians. However, politicians should be aware that Putin is a political rubber-man who strives to get rid of the Donbas millstone by pushing the financial responsibility of the Donbas to the West (but of course not in military terms). Therefore, one should raise the question what Moscow's real intention will be and how that PK force should be composed? Should the Force Commander and operational core of the force have a Russian trademark? In that case, it is useful to keep in mind that Russian Peace Keeping is far more different than the UN version. To Moscow, PK is occupying territory sanctioned by one or more UNSCR's. The international community should decline such a Peace Keeping context, because it may underscore that a shift of the border between Ukraine and Russia closer to the Dnieper, is accepted by the international community.

This scenario has several alternatives: to create Novorossiya by connecting the Donbas with the Crimea; deployment of a Russian oriented PK force in a Russian PK context or in a UN context or a PK force without any Russian contribution. If developments in recent months may serve as a guideline for a scenario of this vignette, a Russian intervention force from the Donbas and Crimea is more likely than Putin's recently launched UN peacekeeping force for the Donbas. Troop movements from other parts of the Russian Federation to the border region of Ukraine, underscores the feasibility of that alternative. Other indications are preparations on the ground in the identified training areas and the apparent relocation of parts of the proxy republics' forces.

Military experts assume that without Russian troops and especially ground and aerial fire support, the proxy republic's forces lack combat strength to penetrate the greatly improved Ukrainian trenching systems and are not strong enough to subsequently build a bridgehead for a safe breakthrough towards the Dniper and/or the Black Sea direction. Those forces may be restricted to support advancing Spetsnaz and reconnaissance units, safeguard a Russian kesselschlacht; at best to carry out a feint, deceptive action or an offensive operation limited in scale, depth and time.

Experts think that two fully equipped Russian Army Corps, supported by a Russian Army Corps from the Crimea, a feint or a deceptive action from Transnistria to Odessa will be enough to realize the desired Novorossyia. If that operation is successfully completed, the forces on Ukraine territory will change their front to the north and move northwards in order to break down Ukraine in various parts. This will force Ukraine to keep its operational focus on Russian troop movements south and east of Kyiv. In that operational setting, Moscow can seize the initiative and move one or two army corps located on Belarus territory closer to the Ukrainian border for a jump to Kyiv: This operation has a stark resemblance to the Georgian operation in 2008 that stopped a few miles north of the build-up area of Tbilisi.

However, it cannot be excluded that Moscow will carry out a PK scenario in any of the identified exercise areas. If that is the case, wording of the mandate and the Rules of Engagement in relevant UNSCRs may indicate how Moscow is planning to carry out an eventual PK operation in the Eastern part of the Ukraine.

The question stands whether the scenario of this vignette will be executed in the border area with Ukraine or another region with similar geographical features, weather conditions, light data and time-space factors. An operation in the border area can only go so far as the unofficial confrontation line. In an alternative training area, the complete offensive including a river crossing supported by ground and aerial fire power is feasible. Given the complexity of an operation towards Crimea and Dnepr reflected by the multi-dimensional character and the need for a detailed time-consuming river crossing, the choice will be an alternative area, further away from the Russian- Ukraine border region, Under the current conditions, Putin will certainly not choose to use the Donbas as a springboard with the intention to push troops forward to Crimea and Dnepr.

Factors affecting ZAPAD 2017

Caucasus

Putin controls the situation in the Caucasus. Georgia, where he actually annexed two provinces and stationed his forces two-hours from the capital Tbilisi, is hardly worth the effort to get nervous. In Armenia some worrying developments may erupt in the near future but the current situation is not alarming. Azerbaijan is actually snatched by a large Russian force in Armenia and has a negligible military, all and all; Putin does not have to worry about it. Any unrest in the country can be solved if necessary by a small-scale military solution. In short, from the south there is no threat that can hinder his plans in Eastern Europe.

The Middle East

The situation in the Middle East provides ample opportunities to impact European and NATO intentions. Anti-terrorism activities can be used as an excuse to Moscow's drive to expand its aggression aimed at anti-Assad structures supporting the west. The decreasing support of the average Russian man and women may hinder Putin's actions in Syria. A study by the Levada Centre (an independent non-governmental research organization) concluded that 49% of Russians will oppose any expansion of military activities in the Middle East. Given that result, the chance that Putin will increase his military efforts in the Middle East seem slim. As a result, Iran can broaden its influence in the western part of the Middle East to drive a wedge between Sunnis and Wahhabism.

The Balkans

Given Juncker's thoughtless remarks referring to a potential membership of Serbia, Moscow's opportunities have increased to confuse the West and to distract the attention from developments in Belarus and Ukraine. Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia offer sufficient options to exploit such a situation. In January of this year, the sudden aggression of Serbia against its former Kosovo province resulted almost in a confrontation between NATO-based NATO units and Russian proxies. Diplomatic intervention could only just stabilize the situation, but it is clear that Serbian ambitions to get Kosovo back under its wings have not disappeared and therefore continue to provide for the well-known Balkan headache.

ZAPAD 2017 effect

At the end of this article a summary is required to get a clear view on the effects ZAPAD 2017 may have on the stability of adjacent states of Belarus.

The exercise name is an indication for Moscow's risk evaluation. ZAPAD means "West". An article in The Guardian explains what the exercise target of ZAPAD 2017 really indicates: "Veishnoria, a fictitious region of Belarus, declare independence and attempt to turn Minsk against Russia, with the help of NATO countries"

Despite Minsk and Moscow's frequent denials, ZAPAD 2017 had been focused on a specific state and Alliance. The exercise script reflected indeed the action-reaction as well as defensive-counteroffensive characteristics of former Cold War scenario's. Baltic observers stressed that the essential exercise target of the counteroffensive had been concentrated on the closure of the Suwalki gap. Obviously to figure out if the counter offensive can be launched and close the gap before the First NATO reinforcements arrive in the Polish-Lithuanian border region. The Suwalki gap is NATO's Achilles heel and experts expect that a RF force does not need more than 36 to 48 hours closure rate to close the gap if an offensive can be launched from Belarus territory under no-threat conditions. The demonstration on the exercise grounds west of Saint Petersburg might be targeted on such a counteroffensive and can be used as a yardstick if a counteroffensive to

close the gap has to be carried out. Obviously the counteroffensive will not be restricted to the Gap but will certainly target the Polish Baltic Sea coast south of East Prussia/Kaliningrad.

Some 3,000 Russian and 10,000 Belarussian troops (under Russian command) and 680 military units have been deployed on Belarus territory. If necessary, that force is strong enough to neutralize the Lukashenko government and the Belarussian armed forces, with and without pre-warning nor a reason. Belarus in its function as training hub was used for a large-scale offensive and operationalizing the Russian garrison in Ostrovets not far from the new nuclear power plant under construction, some 40 kilometres east of Vilnius. In the near future Ostrovets can be exploited as an instrument to expand and strengthen the Russian influence in Belarus and pressure the Lukashenko government so hard that accepting and executing the demands of Moscow without hesitation, will be the only option left.



BUK (SA 11 "Gadfly")



PANTSIR-S1



TOR (SA-15 "Gauntlet")



OSA (SA-9 "Gecko")

Available Russian Air Defense assets for the short- and medium range

In Line with that, rumours were heard that Moscow will deploy a high-quality air defence system in the vicinity of Ostrovets to attack targets at the medium and high level. That air defence system composed of S300 and the infamous BUK can be exploited to hinder air traffic to and from Vilnius by choice in order to achieve political goals.

Picture 6: (Long range air defense):



S-300 (SA 10 "Grumble")



BUK (SA-11 "Gadfly")

Available Medium and long range Air Defense systems

A further step that can be taken within the framework of ZAPAD 2017 is the deployment of advanced air defence systems in the border region of Russia with Lithuania and Latvia. Claiming that a waterproof protection umbrella over Belarus territory is required to ensure the sovereignty of Belarus. In the long run, these air defence systems must be heavily protected by ground forces increasing the Russian troop level in Belarus.

ZAPAD 2017 highlighted the importance of Belarus as a Russian Forward Operating Base and a vast exercise area to execute operations in the context of Moscow's hybrid warfare. Within the framework of a large scale exercise like ZAPAD 2017 Belarus can be confronted with a covert and steadily increase of Russian four-dimensional combat forces on its territory. If that really happens Belarus may be confronted with a dark perspective. The odds that Putin wants to strengthen his grip on Belarus in order to force Lukashenko back under Moscow's wings, is certainly not imaginary. Preparations for this were part of the troop build-up for the ZAPAD 2017 exercise. If that conclusion becomes a reality, Putin can steer the political process in adjacent states by juggling with the gas supply and by frustrating air traffic to and from Vilnius.

Past and present developments in the Ukraine-Russian and Russian/Belarus-Baltic border regions reflected in the assumed scenario of ZAPAD 2017 underline that the centre of gravity of Moscow's Pac-man game still lies in the eastern part of the Ukraine concentrated on a linkage of the Donbas and Crimea. Despite Putin's peace proposal, Donbas and Crimea offer better conditions and presumably more success for a multi-dimensional operation of a combined land and air force capability than the Baltic region. Troop displacements, types of units and combat force build up locations may provide a proper indication for that observation.

ZAPAD 2017 scenario, a further build-up of Russian combat forces in Belarus, subsequent developments in the Balkans in general and between Serbia and Kosovo in particular, may force Mons and Brussels to review the status of NATO forces in the Baltic States and Poland in terms of volume, type, composition and readiness. It may even force the NATO Council to change the temporary status of the troops involved into a permanent one.

Albeit Politicians and media have taken a breather, they have to be warned. The invasions in Georgia (and subsequently the annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Ukraine (Crimea and Donbas) were preceded by similar large-scale exercises as ZAPAD 2017. ZAPAD was certainly not focused on militants crossing the Russian border from one of the Baltic States, it was concentrated on increasing the pressure on Lukashenko; controlling the air corridors to and from Vilnius to achieve political targets in a way Moscow is to exploiting the gas delivery to adjacent states and It had been focused on blocking the arrival of NATO reinforcements on the ground, at Sea as well as by air; on closing Suwalki Gap, conquering the Polish Baltic Sea Coast and increasing the space margins of Kaliningrad.

Is the above text a result of “doom thinking”? Not at all, it is the result of observations of developments and events in the last couple of months.

Footnotes

1. To bring in sync developments and effects of Moscow’s externally oriented hybrid efforts directed against adjacent states not being part of the Russian Federation and internally destabilizing effects of extremist movements and Russian political entities.
2. Determining the effects of time coinciding similar events, that may strengthen and/or weaken each other.
3. For the effective deployment of military capability, it is relevant to determine whether the closure rate (time between the assignment and effective intervention in the mission area) is within the available time and, if this is not the case, to determine the consequences for the European and NATO stability.
4. ASEAN: Association of South East Asian Nations. A regional intergovernmental organization of ten countries associated with this organization: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.
5. Optically, the Donbas is primarily eligible for this. It cannot be ruled out that Novorossiia creation is also taken if a land corridor between Belarus and East Prussia may have been included in the plan to close the land connection between NATO member states Poland and Lithuania.
6. A vignette is an in depth restricted area with similar geographic and climatic conditions as the region where the real assignment will be performed, and exercise goals can be achieved under similar time-space factors. Within the vignette, the exercise can be divided into several small-scale exercises to achieve the desired effectiveness or the operational levels to be practiced.
7. Aka Littoral operation centered around and on a Sea Base.
8. Landing ships capable of transporting and landing a combat force of two squadrons – (including) 10 Main Battle tanks, 340 man staff, or 12 x BTR, 300 man and 500 tonnes of freight.
9. Writer uses the original name; East Prussia, for the part of the East Prussia illegally annexed by the USSR in 1945.
10. An exercise (week) is usually started or terminated with such an operation and is in that setting more a demonstration of strength and ability than an operation under simulated fighting conditions.
11. Integration of war fighting functions at sea, projecting multi-dimensional power ashore, and sustaining enhanced capabilities both at the sea base itself and among those forces conducting military operations ashore. The enhanced networked sea base will integrate disparate assets into one coherent force, enabled by FORCE net, while significantly increasing the ability to project, support and sustain forces throughout the battle space”.
12. a multilayered protection for forces and facilities against a full spectrum of threats, from ballistic missiles to germ warfare ranging from theater operations to the individual soldier giving them greater freedom of action in all phases of combat. A combination of Information Assurance and Force

Protection measures used throughout a system's life cycle to ensure mission capability.

13. Virtual dimension.

14. Russian mobile anti-ship coastal defense system. Ranging radius up to 300 km.

15. The "32ste Gotland Bataljon".

16. Already in 2014, an assessment of the Danish Defense Defense Service (DDIS), which demonstrated that the Russians had prepared a simulated attack on this island for a second time.

17. In troop volume, fire strength, time-space factors, depth of the offensive.

18. Despite the official announcement from the Kremlin that "all Russian units have withdrawn, Ukraine's Commander in Chief, General Viktor Mushenko, made a public statement that he has information that a number of Russian units were still on the Belarus territory.