

Russia demonstrates its power in Belarus and on the oceans worldwide

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In mid-January, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (RF)'s extremely intensive training activity, which has been observed for several weeks, was expanded to include new elements. Preparations have begun for a series of extraordinary exercises scheduled for February with the Belarusian army entitled Allied Resolve 2022, as well as for a previously unannounced series of exercises by the Russian Navy on oceans around the world.

The forces of the Eastern Military District (MD), elements of the RF's Aerospace Forces and Airborne Forces, as well as 'almost the entire Armed Forces of Belarus' (in line with the Minsk Declaration), will be involved in the Allied Resolve 2022 exercise. The organisers have not stated the total number of participants, although estimates of the forces involved show that between 60,000 and 80,000 soldiers from Russia and Belarus will participate in the project as a whole. The exercises were kicked off by a so-called unannounced test on 14 January of the combat readiness of troops from the Eastern Military District. On the same day, subunits from the first-line tactical units of the Eastern MD waiting at railway platforms were sent westwards (a distance of 9500 km); it was only on 18 January that reports were published confirming that they were heading to Belarus, where they started arriving a day later. The preparatory phase – that is, the transfer of Russian units to Belarus and the formation of a joint grouping of troops 'in the directions at risk' – is supposed to last until 9 February. The active phase – soldiers from both countries are to train on six training grounds in the Brest and Grodno oblasts – has been scheduled for the period from 10 to 20 February.

On 20 January, Moscow announced a series of training projects aimed at "defending the national interests of the Russian Federation on oceans around the world", involving all the Russian Navy's operational units (four fleets and one flotilla). In total, 140 ships and auxiliary units, as well as over 60 aircraft, 1000 units of heavy weapons & military equipment and around 10,000 soldiers are to take part in the exercises, under the joint command of the Russian Navy's commander-in-chief, Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov. This series of exercises should include the passage by large landing ships (including three units of the Northern Fleet, which were previously supposed to be in the Baltic Sea) through the straits of Denmark to the North Sea, a movement which has been observed since 17 January.

Commentary

- The Allied Resolve 2022 exercises and the series of Russian Navy exercises are linked by their strategic nature. Moreover, they are part of a series of exercises which have been conducted simultaneously and continuously since the beginning of the Russian army's winter training period (1 December 2021), with the participation of units in all operational formations (armies, corps and fleets) throughout Russia. They should be treated as another level of Russian pressure on the West: however, the locations and nature of the exercises prove that their main target is not Ukraine (although sending units from the Far East to the West without naming their destination – for four days – was obviously intended to suggest the expansion of a strike group), but rather NATO countries, and the Western community more broadly, as well as the US's allies in the Asia-Pacific region. The latter is associated with an unprecedented shift of hand-picked units from the Far East to Europe. This move should be read as a demonstration (bearing the hallmarks of a military alliance) of the concordance of Russia and China's interests; it will allow Moscow to use Russia's local military potential in the Far East, so it can informally entrust Beijing (at least partially) with responsibility for Russia's security in the east.
- The Russian-Belarusian Allied Resolve 2022 project is unprecedented in nature. For the first time, strategic exercises (not only on the bilateral, but also the internal Russian dimension) are being conducted in winter. Also for the first time, the main participants on the Russian side are not the forces of the Western MD; nor are they forces from any of the other military districts prepared for operations in the Western direction (the Southern and Northern-Arctic MDs, formed on the basis of the Northern Fleet), or the forces of the Central MD, which were being prepared to act as a second strategic echelon in the aforementioned direction. For the first time, it is forces of the Eastern MD, which constitute the backbone of the Russian contingent for the Allied Resolve 2022 exercise, which will be practicing on training grounds in Europe (and, moreover, outside Russia). The last time Far Eastern units were involved in the European theatre of military operations in combat conditions was in 1941–5. Moreover, for the first time a military district of the Russian army will perform more than one strategic exercise in a calendar year: in late summer this year, the next edition of the Vostok 2022 strategic command post exercises will be held (individual military districts organise undertakings at this level every four years and prepare for them for almost a year, except for the Western Military District, which conducts strategic exercises every two years together with the Belarusian army). On the Belarusian side, the exercises are also a novelty: they are the Belarusian army's first strategic undertaking held during winter, and are being conducted with Russian units with which it has not cooperated before. These will also be the first exercises for the Belarusian Armed Forces in which they will participate in their entirety (the Belarusian army has never undertaken exercises on such a scale before, not even during summer).
- The Allied Resolve 2022 exercises are an extreme example of a demonstration of force, whose effect could only be offset by the transfer to Europe of the entire Eastern and Central MDs' strike potential. Although the groupings dedicated to specific strategic directions are being maintained, the Russian Armed Forces are demonstrating their versatility and readiness to operate in all geographic and weather conditions (in November 2021, a similar demonstration – albeit on a much smaller scale and without

the same geographic momentum – involved the transfer of sub-units dedicated to operations in the Caucasus of the Southern MD's 49th Military Army). In comparison with the above, a secondary role is being played by the Russian army's demonstration that it can organise the strategic transfer of troops between theatres of military operations in a relatively short time; it has carried out such operations many times since 2004, systematically building up its essential potential in the area of rail and air transport.

- Russia and Belarus have not stated how many troops are participating in the exercises, but the information on the forces involved in Allied Resolve 2022 indicates that both countries have completely disregarded the restrictions on confidence-building measures under the Vienna Document (within the framework of the OSCE). Considering that practically the entire Belarusian army (whose total number is 45,000 soldiers) will be directly involved in the active phase (on training areas), up to 15,000 soldiers may be engaged at the same time (the Vienna Document requires prior notification and the admission of external observers if over 13,000 soldiers are involved). It should be remembered that the military training activities (as well as normal combat operations) are only part of the armed forces' activities: it is also necessary to consider those forces which perform other tasks (permanent defence of military facilities, garrison service, etc.), secure the exercising troops (at their places of permanent dislocation, on communication lines and in the immediate back-up facilities), prepare second waves, constitute replacement reserves, etc. Additionally, 30–35,000 soldiers will participate in the exercises on the Russian side; this is the total number of units of the Eastern MD which have so far been disclosed as participating in Allied Resolve 2022. This does not mean, however, that they are being transferred to Belarus in their entirety. At least 10,000 Russian soldiers will be involved at the Belarusian training grounds, which is more than twice the number of soldiers Moscow declared it would send to Belarus as part of the Zapad exercises (the total number of participants in the Zapad exercises on the territories of Russia and Belarus exceeds 100,000, so the Russian contingent delegated to its ally's training grounds actually makes up just a small proportion of all the participants).
- The exercises being undertaken by practically the entire potential of the Russian Navy should be seen as a demonstration whose main addressees are the United States and its allies. The announcements show that practically the entire strike component, including nuclear submarines, will participate in the projects. However, the numbers declared completely ignore the number of marine troops involved in the project: the size of the ship crews, as well as the shore services, should be estimated at no less than 20,000 (apart from the above-mentioned 10,000 soldiers of the Russian fleet's air and coast formations). The geography of the project also indicates that the exercises by the main groups of the RF's Navy (from the Northern and Pacific Ocean Fleets) are scheduled to take place in the north Atlantic and the north Pacific, as well as the Arctic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.
- The transfer of additional troops to Europe from the Asian part of Russia, as well as the highly probable move of a group of landing ships of the Baltic and Northern Fleets to the Black Sea within one or two weeks, should be seen in the context of a potential Russian attack on Ukraine. However, while the latter manoeuvre would represent a real

strengthening of the Black Sea Fleet's potential if a landing operation is being planned (for example, to take rapid control of Odesa), the former gives the operation's potential commander slightly more freedom in the selection of units available for use in the land-air phase. From a strictly military perspective, to achieve the maximum military goal – the destruction of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the capture of nodal points on its territory – the potential of the Western and Southern MD bordering Ukraine is sufficient. From the point of view of full-scale operations, however, what is important is the presence of Russian units in Belarus, regardless of which region of Russia they have been in or will be transferred from. The Brest oblast (the main undertakings of the active phase of the Allied Resolve 2022 exercise will take place on the training grounds there) is a natural base for auxiliary supplies (on the scale of the entire operation) for a strike in the direction of Lutsk & Lviv and onwards towards Transcarpathia, which would cut Ukraine off from support by land from the West. It should be assumed that the joint exercises represent Minsk's consent to the eventual use of Belarus's territory in any potential aggression against Ukraine.