



## Reasoning for the Vostok-2018 Strategic Exercise

**OE Watch Commentary:** Russia conducted the Vostok-2018 strategic exercises 11-17 September 2018 and according to Defense Minister General Sergey Shoygu, approximately 300,000 servicemen (approximately one-third of the Ministry of Defense's uniformed personnel); 36,000 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and other combat vehicles; more than 1,000 helicopters, aircraft, and drones; and ships and auxiliary vessels of the Northern and Pacific Fleets took part in the maneuvers. In addition, approximately 3,000 military personnel from the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and several units from Mongolia also participated.

The accompanying excerpted article from *Svobodnaya Pressa*, lays out some reasoning behind the exercise. The article points out that these annual major exercises shift on a yearly basis from military district to military district, and discusses parallels between Vostok-2018 and Vostok-1981. One commonality, from the author's perspective, is that both exercises were conducted during particularly contentious relations with the West and were intended to deter (through their sheer size), but not provoke (due to them not being near a current hot-spot).

The accompanying excerpted article from *Vzglyad*, lays out varying opinions regarding whether the Vostok-2018 exercise is Syria related. Prominent journalist and military expert Pavel Felgengauer is somewhat cynical of this view, pointing out: "It is difficult to use what was employed in Syria in the large-scale operations, which are being tested at the maneuvers." The article from *Gazeta.ru* is perhaps the most interesting of the articles as it sheds some light on Russian terminology differences. In particular, strategic command-staff exercises [стратегические командно-штабные учения] are considered to be front-level operations occurring at the operational-strategic level of military activity, since they primarily involve just a single military district/joint strategic command, but maneuvers [маневры] are larger (strategic) in nature and involve multiple military districts and fleets in the context of a continental Theater of Military Operations (TVD) [театр военных действий (ТВД)]. Due to the scale of the Vostok-2018 exercise, it would be considered a 'maneuver' by this definition. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bartles)**

*“It is unlikely that 300,000 soldiers and commanders, off-shore ships, and Long Range Aviation will be involved to combat strictly terrorists, even international terrorists.”*



Vostok-2018 Strategic Exercise.

Source: Russian Defense Ministry, <http://мультимедиа.минобороны.рф/multimedia/photo/gallery.htm?id=60539@cmsPhotoGallery>, CC 4.0.

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## Continued: Reasoning for the Vostok-2018 Strategic Exercise

**Source:** Sergey Ishchenko, “Восток-2018: Россия начинает репетицию Третьей мировой (Vostok-2018: Russia Is Beginning Dress Rehearsals for World War III),” *Svobodnaya Pressa*, 8 September 2018. <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/210128/>

*...In a word, what has already begun in Siberia, the Far East, and Arctic and Pacific waters is making an unprecedented impression on the whole world. For there has not been this scale of movement of troops in our country's Armed Forces for almost four decades. Since the time of the Soviet Zapad-1981 exercises...the main narrative of the Zapad-1981 exercises was the start of a big war on the continent. What are we now about to rehearse at Vostok-2018?*

*Both with us and in the West the majority of specialists are certain that today also we are, in actual fact, preparing for exactly the same thing. There was recently, for example, an article on the upcoming exercises in the German business newspaper Handelsblatt. The authors of the publication express the opinion that the North Atlantic alliance will in this way be shown impressive military power. And since the scale of the exercises is comparable to the biggest operations of World War II, they are hereby “embodying Washington's fears.” The fears are absolutely real, what is more, for the participation of the Chinese military in Vostok-2018 graphically demonstrates to the world the indications of the shaping of a new anti-American military alliance, whose aggregate power is appreciably greater than is today at the disposal of the United States.*

*Yes, but why, then, are the exercises being held at Russia's eastern, not western, borders? After all, several thousand Chinese men and officers could easily have been airlifted to somewhere near Bryansk or Voronezh.*

*There are likely two reasons. The first is that strategic command-staff exercises of district scale, at a minimum, have recently been held in Russia annually. But their zones are chosen strictly in turn. The Tsentr-2015 maneuvers were staged in 2015. Exactly a year later, Kavkaz-2016. Another year passed – Zapad-2017. It is thus now the turn of the East.*

*But a simple listing of Russian military activity in the past month is persuasive that we are learning synchronously at exactly this time to fight not only in the Far East, Pacific, and Siberia. Judge for yourself...*

*But the formalization of the date and location of the maneuvers are not the main thing, of course. It is politically far more important for Moscow today to mass these heaps of weapons and host of personnel as far away from the line of contact, which is heating up right before our eyes, with the alliance. In order to avoid additional charges of a provocation. We remember how last year's Zapad-2017 exercises caused real hysteria in Europe and the United States. The calendar approved in the General Staff long since has now simply happily come to hand at just the right moment for us, therefore.*



Vostok-2018 Strategic Exercise.

Source: Russian Defense Ministry, <http://мультимедиа.минобороны.рф/multimedia/photo/gallery.htm?id=60538@cmsPhotoGallery>, CC 4.0.

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## Continued: Reasoning for the Vostok-2018 Strategic Exercise

**Source:** Oleg Moskvina and Mikhail Moshkin, “Крупнейшие маневры на Дальнем Востоке напрямую связаны с Сирией (The Largest Maneuvers in the Far East Are Directly Linked with Syria),” *Vzglyad*, 11 September 2018. <https://vz.ru/politics/2018/9/11/941197.html>

*Vostok-2018's active phase will occur in two stages. “The Main operations will unfold on five combined-arms ranges, four Air Force and PVO ranges, and in the water areas of the Sea of Okhotsk and Bering Sea and Avachinsk and Kronotskiy bays”, General Staff Chief Valeriy Gerasimov warned last week.*

*...The exercises will last four days, until 15 September. Incidentally, the Zapad-1981 large-scale exercises, with which Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu himself compared Vostok-2018, lasted a bit longer – from 4 through 12 September 1981. Military experts recall that the troops were redeployed from Central Russia already long before the official start of the exercises, in other words, preparations had already occurred for no less than one month.*

*“Obviously, it was decided to demonstrate the capabilities of our armed forces to redeploy substantial men and equipment great distances in a short period of time, in other words, to mobilize substantial forces on one of the axes,” Academy of Military Sciences Corresponding Member Aleksandr Bartosh said.*

*He assumes that it was decided to conduct Vostok-2018 with that scope in order to disseminate the experience of the Syrian war to the maximum extent in the Army so that the officers, who had managed to serve as instructors in the Syrian Government Troops, would share their knowledge with the maximum number of officers who have not yet been under fire.*

*“I think that those results, which our military personnel obtained during the course of the Syrian conflict, will be used to the maximum extent in these exercises”, the expert told Vzglyad Newspaper.*

*Bartosh recalled: since the very beginning, our General Staff has been carefully studying the experience, which has accumulated in Syria. So, less than six months after the initiation of the operation, in March 2016, General Staff Chief Valeriy Gerasimov published the article “Based upon Syria’s Experience” in VPK Magazine, where he analyzed the nature of the engagements in the Arab Republic.*

*“Not only instructors were in Syria, all of the military district commanders were there along with their staffs”, Independent Military Expert Pavel Felgengauer told Vzglyad Newspaper. “In this regard, yes, they will share the experience at the maneuvers because all of the army command authorities were there”. However, in his opinion, the theoretical developments come in handy in the Far East only in an abridged form: “It is difficult to use what was employed in Syria in the large-scale operations, which are being tested at the maneuvers”...*

**Source:** Mikhail Khodarenok, “Маневры «Восток-2018»: чего так испугались на Западе (The Vostok-2018 Maneuvers: What Has So Frightened the West),” *Gazeta.Ru*, 3 September 2018. <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2018/09/03/11942911.shtml?updated>

*“The first thing, from which we need to begin, is with terminology and to clarify – are “Vostok-2018” maneuvers [маневры] or strategic command-staff exercises [стратегические командно-штабные учения]? They are called different things in various sources. But maneuvers and exercises – are not at all one and the same thing. Maneuvers – are the highest form of troop operational training”, Konstantin Makiyenko, the Deputy Director of the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, told Gazeta.Ru...*

*The publication’s interlocutor points out that they sometimes call “Vostok-2018” the most large-scale troop maneuvers in the post-Soviet years and practically immediately add: the impending exercise – is one of the main events of 2018 in the RF Armed Forces. In other words, we need to unambiguously put the matter to rest – they are either maneuvers or exercises, Makiyenko thinks.*

*In Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu’s words, “Vostok-2018” – is the largest event since the times of the “Zapad-81” maneuvers for the training of the Armed Forces, which has acquired the status of international exercises, has unprecedented scales, both based upon spatial sweep and based upon the strength of the military command and control agencies, troops, and forces that are involved.*

*In Makiyenko’s words, the first question, which we need to formulate in this case is – precisely what do we intend to refine at these maneuvers. If the men and equipment of two military districts and of two fleets are involved in these events, then, based upon the scale, this is already clearly not the rehearsal of a frontal operation. This is already as a minimum strategic operations in a continental theater of military operations with the involvement of the fleets’ forces on the maritime axes, Makiyenko thinks.*

*“It is unlikely that 300,000 soldiers and commanders, off-shore ships, and Long Range Aviation will be involved to combat strictly terrorists, even international terrorists”, Makiyenko pointed out. In his words, it now remains to clarify – are the operations of the troops (forces) during the course of the maneuvers of an offensive or defensive nature and what kind of military-political situation has been created at the exercises...*

*Gazeta.Ru’s interlocutor thinks that there are all of the grounds to assume that the planned strategic operations in the continental theater of military operations will be purely defensive in nature, in other words, varied defensive operations – from frontal (or operations of operational-strategic combined formations) to corps operations - will be rehearsed during the course of “Vostok-2018”...*

*...in peacetime, one cannot inspect many issues of strategic regroupings, the work of the operational and strategic rear services, the conduct at full scale of the troops’ advance into operational areas and weapons training on all periods, otherwise one would have to paralyze all activity of the country’s economic complex and the daily lives of the population in the exercise conduct areas, however, it is entirely possible with the needed degree of realism to designate the work of the troops and, in so doing, obtain the needed experience, Makiyenko believes.*