



Airborne Operations in the Tsentr-2019 Exercise

OE Watch Commentary: The first accompanying passage from *Krasnaya Zvezda* discusses Russian Airborne operations in support of the Tsentr-2019 Strategic Command and Staff Exercise (SKShU). Tsentr-2019 involved military elements from Russia, India, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Despite the exercise purportedly being ‘antiterrorist’ in nature, it is clear from the forces and equipment involved that the opposing force in the exercise was a state actor, or more likely, group of state actors. As with Russia’s other major exercises, the Russian Airborne (VDV) is featured prominently. Of particular interest in Tsentr-2019 was Russia’s execution of a regimental-level air drop of 2,000 paratroopers and over 200 pieces equipment on unfamiliar landing zones, in less than 20 minutes by 71 Il-76MD transport aircraft. Although the article describes the regiment as an “operational-level assault force,” in Soviet/Russian doctrinal terms, a regiment is a tactical echelon, and in context, this phrase suggests that the regiment is the spearhead of an operational-level assault (meaning that the regiment will almost certainly be relieved by more heavily armed follow-on forces).



Tactical exercises of the airborne brigade in the Volgograd region.

Source: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, <https://мультимедиа.минобороны.рф/multimedia/photo/gallery.htm?id=69535@cmsPhotoGallery>, CC BY 4.0

This airdrop was reportedly the first regimental-level drop conducted in the post-Soviet era. The airdrop of the 217th parachute-infantry regiment of the 98th Airborne Division (Ivanovo) was not without incident. As the passage from *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* reports, two Airborne Fighting Vehicles (BMDs) [Боевая Машина Десанта (БМД)] were destroyed during a botched airdrop when their parachutes failed to deploy properly.

Another significant VDV operation of Tsentr-2019 was the 31st Air Assault Brigade (Ulyanovsk) conducting an air assault involving 128 helicopters, 1,500 paratroopers, and some equipment, including towed howitzers. Despite the destruction of two vehicles during inherently risky airborne operations, these airborne and air assault operations are impressive, even though they required a significant proportion of the Russian Aerospace Forces’ Military Transport Aviation (MTA) and Army Aviation (AA) assets to execute. (Also see: “Center 2019: More than a Military Exercise,” *OE Watch*, October 2019) **End OE Watch Commentary (Bartles)**

“The drop of an airborne regiment in full strength with organic weapons and military equipment as an operational-level assault force has been accomplished for the first time in the history of the Russian Armed Forces as part of Exercise Tsentr-2019.”



Continued: Airborne Operations in the Tsentr-2019 Exercise

Source: Aleksandr Pinchuk, “Масштабно, эффективно, слаженно (On a Large Scale, Effectively, and in Unison),” *Krasnaya Zvezda Online*, 23 September 2019. <http://redstar.ru/masshtabno-effektivno-slazhenno>

On a Large Scale, Effectively, and in Unison

Strategic Command and Staff Exercise (SKShU) Tsentr-2019 has ended...The experience of local wars and armed conflicts (above all in Syria) as well as new forms of employment and methods of operation of troops and forces that had been tried out in the course of combat training activities were made the basis for execution of combat training missions during the SKShU...

A feature of SKShU Tsentr-2019 was the establishment of a coalition antiterrorist grouping of troops consisting of formations and military units of the armed forces of India, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Russia...units of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan performed missions jointly on a separate axis...According to the SKShU scenario, the “South” -- an army grouping of troops and attack force elements of international terrorist organizations -- had wedged into “North” territory to a depth of up to 150 kilometers. The aggressor had lost offensive capabilities as a result of combat operations and was attempting to take favorable lines for committing reserves to the engagement. In repelling “South’s” aggression, the “North” activated a coalition antiterrorist grouping of troops (forces) on the Orenburg axis for preventing the spread of international terrorism...

Personnel, arms, and military equipment are being landed on the left flank. By decision of the commander of the antiterrorist coalition grouping of troops (forces), Airborne Troops formations are being employed in the form of an air assault operation with the objective of assisting the grouping of troops on the Central Asiatic Strategic Axis in a crushing defeat of the “enemy” and capture of important areas (lines). The 98th Guards Airborne Division is being employed as an operational-level assault force and the 31st Separate Air Assault Brigade is conducting air assault operations. That form of employing Airborne Troops (VDV) formations permits significantly increasing the gamut of missions accomplished in the enemy rear...Simultaneously with the Russian servicemen, a CPLA airborne company consisting of 12 airborne fighting vehicles and 96 persons is being landed on the right flank from four Il-76MD aircraft and a Y-9 aircraft...

The drop of an airborne regiment in full strength with organic weapons and military equipment as an operational-level assault force has been accomplished for the first time in the history of the Russian Armed Forces as part of Exercise Tsentr-2019...Preparation of the operational-level assault force had been organized and conducted in an assault airlift staging area more than 1,500 kilometers from the area of upcoming combat operations at airfields in Ivanov, Ryazan, Ulyanovsk, and Saratovsk oblasts.

The drop of more than 2,000 airborne troopers and over 200 pieces of military equipment on previously unfamiliar landing zones had been carried out in less than 20 minutes by 71 Il-76MD aircraft of a Military Transport Aviation composite regiment at a speed of 360 kilometers per hour...The airborne troopers landed in the rear of the simulated enemy, performed missions of seizing a field strip, and supported high rates of advance by the main body of the troop grouping.

Work on an experiment to activate VDV formations of a “new type” had continued during Exercise Tsentr-2019. As part of this experiment, a Spetsnaz team of the armed forces of Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan together with Russian airborne troopers of the 31st Separate Air Assault Brigade rehearsed combat training missions in a tactical assault landing in 128 army aviation helicopters on Donguz Range.

A total of around 1,500 airborne troopers of the Ulyanovsk Air Assault Formation took part in the tactical landing. Mi-8 helicopters were used for the first time to airlift personnel and deliver D-30 howitzers on the helicopter sling arrangement as part of the experiment in the airmobile reserve landing phase. Using that method of delivery considerably increased maneuverability of the artillery subunits.

A total of around 5,000 personnel and more than a thousand pieces of military equipment of two Airborne Troops formations -- 98th Airborne Division and 31st Separate Air Assault Brigade -- were in action in SKShU Tsentr-2019.

Source: “На учениях “Центр-2019” при десантировании разбились две БМД (During ‘Tsentr-2019’ Exercise Two BMDs Were Destroyed While Landing),” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, 22 September 2019. <https://rg.ru/2019/09/22/reg-pfo/na-ucheniiah-centr-2019-pri-desantirovanii-razbilis-dva-bmd.html>

During ‘Tsentr-2019’ Exercise Two BMDs Were Destroyed While Landing

In the Orenburg Oblast, at the Tsentr--2019 exercises, the parachute systems of two airborne combat vehicles (BMDs) failed while being deployed from a Il-76 aircraft. As a result of the incident, the BMDs were severely damaged.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the incident happened on September 20.

The fighting vehicles, as reported by TASS, landed without personnel and, and therefore, there were no casualties. The circumstances and causes of the incident are being determined by the Airborne Forces Commission together with industry representatives...