

Russia resumes big military exercises

by Konstantin George

On June 21, Russia began the biggest military exercises since the 1980s, when East-West tension was at a high point. The current exercises, codenamed "Zapad-99" ("West-99"), are the largest since Zapad-85. They combine top-level staff exercises, with 50,000 troops on the ground, coming from five military districts that embrace all of European Russia plus Belarus (the Leningrad, Moscow, Volga-Ural, and North Caucasus Military Districts in Russia, and the territory of Belarus, which was the Belorussian Military District in Soviet times). On land, the exercises are centered in the Leningrad, Moscow, and Belorussian Military Districts. Simultaneously active are Air Force and Air Defense units in European Russia and naval units from the Northern Fleet, the Baltic Fleet, and the Black Sea Fleet.

Involving both Russia and Belarus, Zapad-99 marks the first occasion, since the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, that there have been large, Russian-led international military exercises. Moreover, the exercises have both the name and the combined land, sea, and air elements of the famous Zapad series of exercises instituted in 1981 by the Russian General Staff, then under the direction of the late Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, to rehearse what Ogarkov called "strategic operations in a theater of military actions." The decision to resume the Zapad series reflects an intensity of anger over the humiliation accorded Russia by the eastward expansion of NATO and the Balkan War.

Zapad-99 was publicized June 22 by Gen. Col. Yuri Baluyevsky, First Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, and head of the General Staff's Operations Main Directorate. It was the Operations Staff, under his direction, that executed the dispatch of Russian paratroopers from SFOR in Bosnia into Kosovo, the night of June 11, to seize Pristina Airport.

Announcing Zapad-99, Baluyevsky said: "All forces of five military districts from the Black Sea to Arctic White Sea are involved now in an unprecedented military exercise code named Zapad-99. They are so-called top staff level exercises involving 50,000 troops on the ground." Although Baluyevsky clarified that the exercises were planned in December 1998, he added that "events in Yugoslavia were certainly taken into account in planning the exercise."

Zapad-99 recalls Soviet times in another respect, namely, the presence of top brass to inspect the exercises. On June 22, Defense Minister Marshal Igor Sergeyev attended the mobilization in the Leningrad Military District, which was being placed into "condition-1" readiness. On June 23, he watched

the Moscow Military District Air Force and Air Defense forces launch air strikes against "the aggressor," and the next day he arrived at Kaliningrad on the Baltic coast, where ground and Baltic Sea Fleet units were both active.

Sergeyev's was the second high-level visit within a week, to inspect the Leningrad Military District and the Baltic Fleet. From June 16 to 19, Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Adm. Vladimir Kuroyedov made an inspection tour of the Kronstadt naval facilities, on the famous island near St. Petersburg. This was part of a pre-exercise inspection tour of the Baltic Fleet. Admiral Kuroyedov also presided over the June 18 graduation ceremony of officers at the N.G. Kuznetsov Naval Academy.

Breaking a blockade

There was special attention to the Kaliningrad part of the exercises. The Defense Ministry stated that they would test the ability of Kaliningrad, which is the old German city of Königsberg, to withstand a blockade by sea and land. A Russian General Staff plan for combined use of Russian and Belorussian forces to break such a blockade is being tried out. For the first time in history, Russia and Belarus are "deploying" (on paper, naturally) a regional force to repel an overall "aggression" against Russia and Belarus and, within that, an "aggression" against Kaliningrad. The exercises will conclude June 26, with joint Russian-Belorussian forces having crushed a Western "aggressor" and having restored the territorial integrity of Russia and an allied state.

Other evident goals of the land side of the exercises have direct relevance to the Balkans events, such as the statement of the goal of achieving "condition-1" readiness in the Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts. The two Airborne divisions that are standing by to supply units for Kosovo are based at Pskov, in the Leningrad Military District and Tula, in the Moscow Military District.

Coincident with the start of Zapad-99, Gen. Lt. Nikolai Staskov, Chief of Staff of Russia's Airborne Forces, announced a coming increase in strength for the Airborne Forces. Their personnel level will be raised from 32,000 to 37,600. The size of the increase corresponds roughly to the combined size of Russian paratrooper "peace-keeping" deployments with SFOR in Bosnia and KFOR in Kosovo. Thus, the Airborne Forces will suffer no reduction in their reserve "rapid deployment force" strength and readiness, as a result of deployment to Kosovo. The Airborne Forces underwent deep troop level cuts in 1996-98.

Information released on the naval side of Zapad-99 is sketchy. The Northern Fleet began a large maneuver in the Barents Sea, on June 21. According to Northern Fleet HQ in Severomorsk, more than 20 warships and supply ships took part, among them the Russian Navy's most modern nuclear-powered guided missile cruiser, the *Pyotr Veliky* (*Peter the Great*), and the modern big anti-submarine ship *Admiral Chebanenko*, which only recently joined the fleet. The exercises also involve naval aviation.