

Russian Drills Show War Preparedness

by William Jones

Russian military forces on July 13-20 held the largest military drills since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Staged in Russia's Far East, on Sakhalin Island, and in and over the Pacific Ocean, the exercises were the fourth in a series of a snap military practices, aimed at testing the reaction capabilities of the Russian defense forces on a large scale, since Gen. Sergei Shoygu was installed as Defense Minister last November, and began to redress the damage done by his predecessor Anatoli Serdyukov, an accountant and tax specialist.

It was clear that maneuvers of this size would attract a great deal of attention, especially coming on the heels of major Russian-Chinese joint naval maneuvers, held in mid-July in the Peter the Great Gulf. Clearly the "Asia pivot" of the Obama Administration, combined with the growing militant rhetoric of the Japanese government, has heightened an awareness in both Moscow and Beijing, that military confrontation in the region could become very serious, very fast, and the Russian leadership is particularly aware of the vulnerability of the Russian Far East. Through growing military and naval collaboration with China, as well as flexing its own military might in the Far East, Russia is preparing to protect its sovereign interests there from whatever threat might emerge.

According to the Russian military newspaper *Red Star*, the Far East exercises also tested new C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance), established as a part of Shoygu's transformation of the Armed Forces. The maneuvers involved five separate armies and all branches of the Armed Forces, with a total of 160,000 troops, more than 5,000 tanks and armored vehicles, 70 ships from Russia's Pacific Fleet, and 130 war planes, including the TU-95 "Bear" strategic bombers based in the Amur region. "The main goal of the drills is to check the readiness of units to carry out their missions, and to assess the quality of their training and technical preparedness," the De-

fense Ministry said in a statement on July 13.

Military commanders in the Far East and Trans-Baikal regions where the maneuvers were held learned of the drills' details only after they had begun, through a secret communication from the defense minister. President Vladimir Putin, as commander-in-chief, issued the order on July 13 from Prokhorovka, where he was visiting on the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Prokhorovka (July 13-17, 1943)—one of the biggest tank battles of all time (1,000 tanks), and a crucial event in the Soviet counteroffensive to the German Operation Citadel against the Kursk Salient, known overall as the Battle of Kursk.

Drawing from the Central Military District, as well as forces permanently based in the Far East, the drills took some units more than 3,000 kilometers from their usual area of deployment. Seven hundred flat wagons and 50 railway cars made the transfer. The drills were also intended to test the capabilities of the defense forces when operating in unfamiliar terrain. The ground troops were given two days to reach their destinations, pitch their camps, mask their positions, and organize defensive strategies. Departing from the usual practice of pre-designing the scenarios for military maneuvers in excruciating detail, Channel 1 Russia TV reported, officers were instructed to move into designated areas, conduct reconnaissance, and determine what needed to be done next.

The transfer was secured by air power, with Sukhoi Su-27 fighters covering the crossings to Sakhalin Island and protecting the ships of the Pacific Fleet, which were also deployed in the exercise. The Pacific Fleet was divided into six task forces, which carried out anti-submarine and search and rescue exercises in the Sea of Okhotsk. Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valeriy Gerasimov traveled out to the 68th Army Corps, headquartered in Sakhalin, to oversee the exercise.

A Test of Readiness, New Technologies

The maneuvers were also a critical test for C4ISR operations. Putin observed the maneuvers in the Far East, first from a command post on Sakhalin Island and then in the Trans-Baikal region from the headquarters at Ugol, near Chita. The command posts were receiving real-time information from the maneuvers through the deployment of drones, and involved coordination of military forces from 17 different military test ranges. A similar test of the new communications systems had been conducted earlier this year



Russian Presidential Press and Information Office

Russia's Far East military maneuvers July 13-20, were the largest since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Shown: the Tsugol test ground, July 17, 2013.

during snap naval maneuvers in the Mediterranean, involving units from both the Black Sea and Northern Fleets.

In his concluding remarks toward the end the maneuvers, the Russian President underlined the role played by the military transport authorities in moving troops and equipment, both by air and by rail. The air transport services transported more than 10,000 troops, 482 military and technical units, and more than 930 tons of equipment, utilizing 28 military transport planes based in Orenburg, Taganrog, Pskov, and Tver, and flying over 50 missions. Naval ships covered a total of 1,500 kilometers; 142 tons of provisions for the troops were transported, including 24 tons of hot food.

Defense Minister Shoygu has brought military support operations back under the uniformed services. Under Serdyukov, support functions, such as the kitchens, had been outsourced to civilian companies. This might be suitable for a peacetime army, but not for one prepared for war.

Units involved in the maneuvers also practiced drills under conditions of radiological, biological, and chemical warfare. The final stages of the maneuvers

involved naval artillery practices on Russian territory in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan, as well as amphibious landings. During the maneuvers, Russian aircraft encountered both Japanese and South Korean planes flying nearby, but the maneuvers were conducted solely on Russian territory or in international waters.

Situating the maneuvers over such a great expanse of Russia's Far East sent the important message that Russia is capable of defending *all* of its territory.

Putin also took the opportunity to underscore, not for the first time, his urgent desire for Russia's Far East development plans to move ahead. He held a session with Sakhalin and overall Far East officials, to dress them down for the slow pace of implementing even those plans approved in the federal budget. The fact that the Russian military has shown itself capable of conducting maneuvers over such a broad sweep of this still sparsely populated eastern region defines a fundamental commitment to maintaining it as an integral part of the nation. But Putin made clear to officials, both in Sakhalin and in the Trans-Baikal region, that he thinks these regions need much more intensive economic development.