

Some Military Dreams Never Come True

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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Most adults don't believe in miracles, but they happen all the time. The most recent occurred last week. I don't mean the surprise release of opposition leader Alexei Navalny pending his appeal. I am referring to President Vladimir Putin's announcement last week of a surprise inspection of the combat readiness of the Eastern Military District. Three other districts were already subjected to unannounced inspections this year, so it was not unusual to learn that yet another had been chosen. The surprise came in the number of troops involved: 160,000, almost a quarter of Russia's entire armed forces. Until recently, military maneuvers conducted by China in 2009, which involved 50,000 troops, had been considered the largest ever held in Asia in the past 20 years.

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The logic of conducting maneuvers on such a gigantic scale is understandable. They were not held, as some analysts believe, to demonstrate Russia's might to China or to intimidate Japan. Putin wants to know what would happen in the event of a sudden military conflict. Putin has good reason to be concerned about this. For example, at the start of the second Chechen war, Russia's 1.5 million-man army was unable to form a functioning force of 60,000 men and reserves had to be called up to make it work. Then there was the war with Georgia in 2008, when much of the military hardware never even reached the battlefield.

Of course, it would have been much more convenient to hold such maneuvers in the European part of the country. But in that case, Russia would have had to invite foreign observers, in accordance with international agreements the country signed, and Putin wanted to avoid a situation where Russian troops would embarrass themselves and the country in the eyes of fastidious foreigners.

But even the decision to carry out such large-scale exercises presented an almost impossible assignment for the army brass. The Eastern Military District includes 14 army brigades located thousands of kilometers apart. Just deploying them to the zone of the exercises presented a formidable task, given the poor transportation available in Siberia and the Far East. It was equally challenging to move large units in their entirety. Every single soldier had to be on hand for the maneuvers, although almost half of them only joined their units about one month ago. What's more, the entire army is about 20 percent understaffed, and the troops had to bring into play weapons that had been in storage. If 160,000 troops were actually mobilized, chaos would have been the certain result.

But a miracle happened. According to official government statements, everything went like clockwork. Yet nothing was mentioned about the chemical weapons protection brigades that got held up for 10 hours because civil airfields had insufficient fuel for the military transport aircraft deploying to the maneuvers. Some of the troops were promptly transferred by train ferries and transport aircraft to Sakhalin where the first stage of the exercises was held. After the simulated attack by enemy forces was successfully repulsed, the units and formations of three entire field armies were efficiently redeployed to the new test grounds in the Zabaikalsky region.

Putin made no secret of his pleasure. "The objectives have been achieved, and the exercises have been more than satisfactory so far," he told reporters, adding that Russians should be proud of the army. If that's true, Putin should immediately reinstate former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, whose military reforms made the effectiveness of these exercises possible. It turns out that Serdyukov's idea to eliminate skeleton units and formations and to

create units of permanent battle readiness has worked. Reservists are no longer needed for rapid troop deployments; their call-up capability for these exercises was only a formality anyway. It would seem that the Russian army has achieved unprecedented mobility: Units can now deploy over thousands of kilometers in just 24 hours.

This would have been a truly outstanding achievement if not for one very obvious fact: 160,000 troops did not participate in the exercises. Official Defense Ministry statements refer to only a dozen or so brigades, meaning that a maximum of only 40,000 troops were involved.

And even the official reports about the maneuvers were contradictory. The first message from the Defense Ministry stated that about 1,000 tanks, armored personnel carriers and infantry combat vehicles would be involved, along with 130 aircraft and 70 ships. Afterward, military officials obviously caught their own error. Those numbers meant that only one tank or armored vehicle was allotted for every 160 soldiers, which is nowhere near the proper figure for a modern army.

The next statement cited the impossible figure of 5,000 pieces of military hardware. According to open sources of information, the Eastern Military District contains about 600 tanks and a similar number of armored personnel and combat vehicles — a combined total of a little more than 1,000 units. The only way that the reported number of 5,000 could have been obtained is if the remaining 4,000 tanks, armored vehicles and self-propelled howitzers had been deployed in just two or three days' time from Central Russia, which is impossible any way you look at it.

I suspect that out of a desire to impress Putin, the top brass lumped all the units of both the Eastern and Central Military Districts into one wildly inflated figure, and that most of those units never deployed anywhere or took part in any maneuvers.

Unfortunately, this charade may have serious consequences. For example, the country's leaders might think that inexperienced conscripts can successfully load tanks onto railroad cars on their very first attempt. They could also gratify themselves with the illusion that a conscript can become a skilled specialist on military equipment in just 12 months, or believe that Russia really can deploy 160,000 troops in a single day to repel a serious threat to national security. Believing in miracles is OK when you are 5 years old, but it is not the best policy when you are running the armed forces.

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