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Russia Launches Largest Military Maneuvers of 2015

By Matthew Bodner

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The Russian military launched its largest scheduled military exercise of the year on Monday, known as Center-2015, featuring around 95,000 military personnel, 7,000 pieces of combat hardware, up to 170 aircraft and 20 ships.

The massive exercise, which is set to wrap up on Sunday, is the latest in an escalating tit-for-tat show of force between NATO and Russia, as mutual suspicions and anxieties driven by the Ukraine crisis have convinced both sides of the need to deter the other.

The exercise was described by the Defense Ministry as "the final stage of operations and combat training of Russia's armed forces in 2015" in a statement published on the ministry's website Monday.

Center-2015 features the troops of Russia's Central Military District — one of four regional administrative commands — and personnel from the airborne forces, military air transport forces, Russia's new aerospace forces and several federal ministries, the statement said.

Vessels from the Caspian Sea flotilla are also participating.

In addition, the Center-2015 exercise features units from Russia's allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Moscow-led band of post-Soviet militaries that has at times been pitched as a rough analogue to the Western NATO alliance.

The increasing frequency and size of war games run by Russia and NATO over the past year have raised concerns that the two sides are lumbering toward an unintentional conflict, as the military maneuvers may serve to heighten tensions rather than deter them, according to a study published by the London-based European Leadership Network (ELN), a think tank, in August.

According to the ELN report, NATO this year scheduled some 270 exercises, while Russia announced 4,000 drills of various sizes across all levels of the military.

Russia's largest exercise of 2015 before Monday's launch of Center-2015 saw 80,000 personnel mobilized for maneuvers, while NATO's June Allied Shield Exercises saw a mere 15,000 personnel from 19 nations and three partner states.

The launch of Center-2015 coincided with the announcement of the first ever training maneuvers conducted by the recently formed Arctic brigade, which were formed in December on the base of the Russian Northern fleet, which has traditionally been responsible for Arctic operations.

The Arctic brigade will conduct exercises on Kotelny Island and practice amphibious landings, the head of the Northern Fleet's press service, Vadim Serga, was quoted by the RIA Novosti news agency as saying.

The landings will be conducted by Russian marines off the large landing ships Georgy Pobedonosets and Kondopoga, and will be supported by a handful of vessels from Russia's Northern Fleet and air force assets deployed in the Arctic region.

The Northern Fleet also began exercises on Monday involving four nuclear and diesel submarines and 14 surface warships. These sea drills will run throughout the week and conclude on Sunday, coinciding with the end of the Center-2015 maneuvers further south.

Serga was quoted as saying about the operations: "This is the first large-scale command and staff exercise held by the joint strategic command of the Northern Fleet, with the maximum participation of troops and forces stationed in the polar Kola region."

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