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# ‘Iron Diplomacy’: With NATO On Edge, Russia and Belarus Launch Major Military Drills

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Russian Armed Forces taking part in the Zapad-2025 joint military drills in an undisclosed location.
**Handout / Russian Defense Ministry / AFP**

Even before they officially started Friday, Russia and Belarus’ joint Zapad-2025 military drills had already sent a rash of unease through frontline NATO states.

Polish authorities closed the border with Belarus earlier this week “for national security reasons,” while Lithuania’s national security mechanisms were put on high alert and the government deployed additional troops to the border.

And then there was the incursion of Russian drones into Polish airspace that triggered NATO’s first direct military engagement with Russia since Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022.

During this year’s Zapad (“West”) drills, which are expected to feature fewer troops than

2021, troops will practice the decision-making around using nuclear weapons and Russian nuclear-capable Oreshnik ballistic missiles.

But despite the heightened drama and the flashes of new technology, experts told The Moscow Times that the drills do not signify an imminent threat.

Instead, Russian and Belarusian forces will simulate how NATO would respond in an area — the Belarus, Poland and Lithuania border region — considered the potential site of a future confrontation.

"I would analyze this from the foreign policy perspective, because Russia is certainly laser focused on Ukraine now and it doesn't have the size and scale of capabilities needed to attack Europe," said Kirill Shamiev, an expert on the Russian military at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

European states, on the other hand, believe they have good reason to fret. The last time the Zapad drills were held, in 2021, with Russia and Belarus claiming to have mobilized 200,000 troops, they coincided with a military buildup later used to launch the war in Ukraine.

That fact has pushed NATO countries bordering Belarus to launch their own military exercises, with Poland and Lithuania mobilizing upwards of 40,000 and 17,000 troops along the border, respectively.

In the Baltic Sea, Germany is leading a simulation of rapid NATO force deployment to Lithuania known as Quadriga.

"I think each country is preparing in its own way," said Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda this week. "We really take this period of heightened threat seriously, which is related to both the active phase of the Zapad exercises and the period leading up to it."

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Moscow has denied that Zapad-2025 should be interpreted as an act of aggression.

"They are routine drills, not aimed against anyone else," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said ahead of the exercises. "It's about a continuation of defense cooperation and efforts to improve interaction between two strategic allies."

But Russia and Belarus' NATO neighbors expect that the two will use the drills to try to probe their defenses.

A spokesperson for the Polish Defense Ministry told The Moscow Times that the country is anticipating "cyberattacks, GPS jamming or small-scale military incidents that could test NATO's response."

"The upcoming Zapad-2025 exercise, conducted by Russia and hosted by Belarus in the context of the ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, is illustrative of further aggressive behavior and deepening cooperation between the two countries," the spokesperson said.

A spokesperson for the Lithuanian Armed Forces did not respond to a request for comment.

During the drills, lasting from Sept. 12-16 in the Grodno, Minsk and Vitebsk regions, Russian and Belarusian troops will reportedly simulate repelling NATO attacks in two stages. Belarusian officials originally said that 13,000 troops would take part in the exercises, but later reduced their predictions to half of that number.

In the first, soldiers will practice staving off air attacks and digging into defensive positions, according to Belarusian Chief of the General Staff Pavel Muraveiko. The second, appearing to simulate a counterattack, "will involve a complex of events to destroy the enemy's groupings and cleanse the territory."

Throughout the exercises, Muraveiko added, soldiers will test the viability of new technologies to aid in combat, including electronic warfare devices, drones and weapons systems that make use of artificial intelligence.

Among the weapons likely to be tested is the Oreshnik, Russia's hypersonic intermediate-range ballistic missile that it unveiled last year.

Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the stationing of Oreshnik missiles, which are difficult to shoot down and reportedly capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, in Belarus late last year.

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Shamiev, the Russian military expert, said that showcasing these technologies demonstrates what he calls "iron diplomacy": "showing off the latest defense capabilities and how they aspire to fight, considering the security environment."

To that end, he predicted, Russia's testing of new drone technologies — a staple of its war in Ukraine — will be particularly telling for how it perceives a potential combat operation in this region.

Moscow is preparing to launch a new military force dedicated to unmanned warfare systems by the end of the year, and NATO countries like Poland are investing heavily in anti-drone defenses along their borders.

The drills come at an awkward time for Belarus as it pursues warmer relations with the U.S. and Europe. Officials in Minsk earlier this year decided to move the exercises deeper into Belarusian territory away from the Western border, apparently to reduce the risk of raising tensions with Europe.

But NATO countries remain convinced that if Russia were to attack, it would do so by funneling forces and combat systems into Belarus and the Kaliningrad exclave, attempting to overwhelm defenses.

As if to confirm their fears, Poles were startled this week to learn that their military had shot down Russian drones crossing over the Belarusian border into Polish airspace overnight, with

some crashing into residential buildings.

The episode pushed Warsaw to invoke NATO's Article 4, kicking off emergency talks on security threats from Russia and driving up tensions just as Zapad-2025 was getting underway. Moscow denied that it intentionally targeted Poland.

"This situation brings us the closest we have been to open conflict since World War II," Prime Minister Donald Tusk said.

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