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Russia and Belarus Begin Zapad-2025 Military Exercises

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Belarusian Defense Ministry

Russia and Belarus began joint military exercises on Friday, the first Zapad drills to be held since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Zapad-2025 drills, which run through Sept. 16, are meant to test the ability of the two countries to repel an enemy attack, retake lost territory and secure the borders of what they call their Union State, according to the Russian and Belarusian Defense Ministries.

Russia said the exercises will play out in two phases, with the first focused on defense and coordination and the second on regaining ground and defeating enemy forces. The drills are being staged at ranges in Belarus and Russia, as well as in the Baltic and Barents Seas.

Belarus has described the exercises as defensive and limited to its eastern regions. Officials in Minsk said in January that 13,000 troops would take part, but later reduced the figure to about half that number, marking a sharp drop from the 200,000 involved in Zapad-2021.

Moscow said it invited observers from defense and economic blocs led by Russia and China.

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The exercises come as tensions rise along NATO's eastern flank, with Poland accusing Russia this week of deliberately launching drones into its airspace. In response to that air incursion, Poland and NATO scrambled fighter jets to shoot down the drones, the first time the Western military bloc has fired on Russian targets since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov told reporters on Thursday that the Zapad-2025 drills had been planned in advance and were not directed at "any third country."

"This is about continuing military cooperation and practicing coordination between two strategic allies. We will continue along this course, which is by no means a secret to anyone," Peskov said.

The exercises also take place amid Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Minsk has said the drills will feature Russia's new experimental nuclear-capable missile, known as Oreshnik, and nuclear strike training.

A video published by Russia's Defense Ministry marking the start of Zapad-2025 showed military forces in action across different settings, including armored vehicles traversing woodland roads, attack helicopters and bombers taking to the skies, as well as warships and a submarine at sea.

Poland closed its border with Belarus on Thursday ahead of the exercises, which Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk described as "very aggressive." Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have all imposed airspace restrictions near the Russian and Belarusian borders.

Poland, Latvia and Lithuania held their own military drills in August and earlier this month, which analysts said were timed to overlap with Zapad-2025. Around 30,000 Polish and allied troops took part in Poland's exercises, called Iron Defender 2025.

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