

Zapad-2025: Russian and Belarusian Strategic Military Exercise

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Russia and Belarus have announced plans to conduct the strategic exercise Zapad-2025 from September 12 to 16, 2025. According to Russian Defense Minister [Andrey Belousov](#), Zapad-2025 is the “key event” for the Russian and Belarusian militaries in 2025. Consisting of a series of exercises on training ranges in Belarus and Russia, Zapad-2025 is planned as the annual strategic command staff exercise of the [Union State](#) forces (the Union State is a supranational organization consisting of Russia and Belarus). Russia has reduced the size and scope of its military exercises since 2022, likely due to the demands of its war in Ukraine.

Views on the exercises are mixed. Some observers assert that the resumption of strategic exercises [does not indicate](#) an [immediate threat](#), while others caution they could be an [indication](#) of Russia’s efforts to [reconstitute](#) its military from losses sustained in Ukraine and prepare for a [possible future conflict](#) with NATO. Members of the 119th Congress may evaluate Zapad-2025 and other Russian military exercises for their [potential implications](#) for U.S. and European security, and in conducting oversight over aspects of executive branch policies toward Russia and Belarus.

Zapad-2025

Prior to its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia routinely conducted two types of military exercises: annual strategic command staff exercises and combat readiness inspections. Command staff exercises are used to test the [Russian military’s ability](#) to conduct large-scale operations, refine operational concepts, deploy new technology and equipment, and assess mobilization and readiness levels. Prior to 2022, the location of the exercises rotated among each of Russia’s [then-four Military Districts](#).

Zapad-2025 is the first strategic command staff exercise since 2021 to be held in the [Moscow Military District](#) (the district bordering Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland). According to Russian and Belarusian officials, the Zapad-2025 [exercises](#) will [focus](#) on [defensive scenarios](#), including “repelling strikes by an enemy’s aerial attack weapons, conducting a defensive battle,” and “fighting outlawed armed formations [and] enemy subversive and reconnaissance groups.” Russian and Belarusian authorities assert they have, as part of an effort to [reduce tensions](#) in the region, [decreased](#) the number of troops (reportedly from

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13,000 to around 7,000-8,000 personnel), moved the exercises [from](#) western to central Belarus, and [invited](#) signatories to the [Vienna Document](#) (an international confidence-building mechanism) to observe.

While Zapad-2025 is not as large as previous exercises (more than 200,000 Russian and Belarusian troops [reportedly](#) participated in Zapad-2021), the resumption of strategic-level exercises could indicate a returned focus on potential conflict scenarios between Russia and NATO. A stated focus of the exercise is practicing the integration of the Belarusian military, which in the [event of war](#) would become part of a [Regional Grouping of Forces](#) under Russian military command. Additionally, prior to and in coordination with Zapad-2025, the Russia-led [Collective Security Treaty Organization](#) (CSTO) is hosting its [main combat training](#) event for 2025 in Belarus. These exercises involve the CSTO's [Rapid Reaction Forces](#) (high-readiness forces designated by CSTO member states) and [focus](#) on the "deployment of a regional group of troops."

In addition to refining operational concepts and capabilities, Russia uses military exercises to [conduct](#) political-military [signaling](#). Belarusian military officials have [stated](#) that Zapad-2025 will include a rehearsal of joint Russian-Belarusian planning to employ nuclear weapons. Such joint planning would follow November 2024 revisions to Russia's nuclear declaratory policy which, among other changes, explicitly referenced a conventional "aggression" against Belarus that "poses a critical threat to [its] sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity" as a potential scenario in which the Russian President could authorize the employment of nuclear weapons. A 2025 Defense Intelligence Agency [report](#) indicated that Russia is "expanding its nuclear posture to Belarus [...]." Belarusian officials also have [stated](#) that Zapad-2025 will feature the new dual-capable Oreshnik intermediate-range ballistic missile (capable of being armed with conventional or nuclear warheads). Russian President Vladimir Putin stated in 2024 that Russia would deploy the Oreshnik to Belarus.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Interests

Some U.S. officials and Members of Congress have expressed concern regarding the long-term threat Russia poses to NATO and allied countries in the region. During April 2025 congressional [testimony](#), General Christopher Cavoli, then-Commander of U.S. European Command, stated, "Despite extensive battlefield losses in Ukraine, the Russian military is reconstituting and growing at a faster rate than most analysts had anticipated."

Given such concerns regarding Russian military reconstitution, Congress may conduct further oversight of executive branch policy related to deterring Russian aggression. In response to reports of the Trump Administration considering [reductions](#) in U.S. forces in Europe, some Members of Congress have introduced legislation in the 119th Congress (S. 2296, §1225, and H.R. 3838, §1304) to limit the ability of the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) to downsize forces in Europe absent certifications and analysis to Congress of the implications of any potential reductions on U.S. and allied security in the region.

Russian military exercises may also offer insights into how the Russian military is developing plans and operational concepts, testing command-and-control capabilities, and incorporating lessons learned from its war in Ukraine. Joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises may also showcase how Russia and Belarus could integrate their forces in a conflict against NATO and could offer insights into their plans for employing Russian military capabilities on Belarusian territory, potentially including nonstrategic nuclear weapons. Congress could require or request that DOD and/or the intelligence community submit reports on Russian military and security developments and/or form a working group to assess Russian military exercises and capabilities. For example, Section 302 of S. 2592 calls on the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Secretary of Defense, to establish a "Ukraine Lessons Learned Task Force" to identify, assess, and distill battlefield lessons from Russia's war in Ukraine. Such efforts could inform Congress of potential Russian intentions and plans against U.S. or allied interests.

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