

Vostok – 2003 War Games Preparing to Defend a Nigeria on the Pacific

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From August 18 to 27, 2003, Russia staged the largest military exercises since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Code-named Vostok-2003, the war games were staged in the training zone of the Northern and Pacific Fleets from the Bering Sea to the Sea of Japan, with sideshows in the Caspian and the Black Seas. Judging from the Russian media reports, anywhere between 58 and 61 warships and auxiliary vessels and 69 to 80 warplanes and helicopters, as well as more than 70,000 military and civilian personnel, took part in the drills. And according to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (August 29, 2003), virtually all military districts and fleets across Russia ran exercises and shooting practices timed to Vostok-2003, involving around half a million service personnel.

The officially stated objective of the war games, according to ITAR-TASS, was “training to combat terrorism and bring stabilization to the region and to coordinate their [military and civilian agencies] actions under a state of emergency.” Russian journalists who observed the exercises, however, were left unsatisfied with this broad definition of strategic objectives. Thus, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* wondered: “The exercises were organized on a large scale indeed but who is the enemy? The question is serious, and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov made several attempts to answer it to some degree. Unfortunately, he is always somewhat vague on the subject. All he ever does is imply that we all have a common enemy, terrorism, but there are no specific enemies as such” (August 29, 2003). Alternative explanations of plausible policy objectives behind Vostok-2003 that appeared in the Russian media have themselves, however, been incomplete and inconsistent with the actual conduct of the war games.

Misinterpretation No. 1: Containing Instability on the Korean Peninsula

Writing in the *Moscow Times* (September 3, 2003), Russian military analyst Alexander Golts suggested that the principal—and unstated—objective behind Vostok-2003 was “to prepare for a possible military conflict on the Korean peninsula.” Golts inferred this objective from the fact that Vostok-2003 took place shortly before the six-nation summit to deal with North Korea’s nuclear threat and with Kim Jong Il’s “blackmailing of the entire world community.” The problem with this interpretation is that the Kremlin announced plans to hold Vostok-2003 exercises back in August 2002—long before it was

known whether and when the North Korea six-nation summit would take place. Besides, judging from the accounts of Gen. Pulikovskii—Putin’s envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District, who in 2001 spent two weeks on the train with Kim Jong Il traveling across Russia—the Kremlin explicitly has not seen North Korea’s nuclear program as a threat to Russian security. (If anything, Kim Jong Il—in the eyes of the top Russian officials—comes through in Pulikovskii’s accounts as a reasonable statesman they can do business with, not as a rogue blackmailer). During Vostok-2003, one drill featured 1,000 “North Korean refugees” impersonated by Primorskii krai police cadets, who were given radiation check-ups, food, and clothing upon crossing into Russia. One search-and-rescue drill near Nakhodka featured a South Korean destroyer. These two episodes, however, would hardly justify the transcontinental sweep of the exercises had the security concerns about North Korea truly been Vostok-2003’s principal driver.

Misinterpretation No. 2: Superpower Rematch

Several Russian analysts attributed Vostok-2003 to the resurgence of the Cold War mentality and nostalgia for the lost superpower status in the Kremlin. After all, the Russian defense minister flew to the Far East in a copilot’s seat of a Tu-160 strategic nuclear bomber. Upon arrival in Vladivostok on August 23, 2003, Ivanov was seen on Russia’s main television station saying: “These aircraft have never been on the Pacific coast, and have never carried out missions here. Now they will.” And, in fact, according to Russia’s defense ministry newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda* (reported by WPS Agency, August 29, 2003), the crews of the two Tu-160 bombers and four squadrons of the Tu-22 and Tu-95MS strategic bombers “successfully coped with combat tasks over the Arctic Ocean and the Japanese Sea.” In coordination with the Pacific and Northern Fleets, the bombers “found an enemy warship thousands [of] kilometers from the coast” and “destroyed a naval group of a hypothetical enemy.” In addition, the Russian navy tested what its commander called “a regional monitoring system” to track submarines, surface ships, and aircraft in the entire Russia Pacific region.

However, the display of strategic bombers and destroyers during Vostok-2003 showed that Russia’s air and naval power remains inferior to its main Cold War adversary, the United States. Vostok-2003 also failed to herald the resurgence of a major military buildup to catch up with the United States. To the contrary, following the exercises, the commander of the Russian Navy, Admiral Vladimir Kuroedov, announced that Russia’s strategic priority in the next five to seven years would be “to develop smaller-scale, coastal defense capabilities ahead of strategic blue water capabilities” (*Vremya Novostei*, August 26, 2003). According to Kuroedov, the Kremlin decided not to build aircraft carriers: “The Navy command does not see how an aircraft carrier may be used to defend national interests.” Moreover, Kuroedov also revealed that Russia would no longer build large (25,000- to 50,000-ton) submarines, concentrating instead on multipurpose nuclear subs of up to 12,000 tons and on diesel subs of no more than 1,000 tons.

Misinterpretation No. 3: Fighting Terrorism

Even though Russian government officials and the media frequently referred to Vostok-2003 as an “anti-terrorist” exercise, the design and conduct of the war games largely invalidate this interpretation. To begin with, only a fraction of personnel and capabilities that took part in Vostok-2003 actually participated in specific anti-terrorist drills. Whereas the show of strategic air and naval power was too little to confront the United States globally, it was too much to confront hypothetical terrorists in the region. If, indeed, Vostok-2003 had primarily an anti-terrorist mission, wrote Alexander Golts in the *Moscow Times* (September 3, 2003), then the exercise made as much sense as “hunting with howitzers.”

Symptomatically, a drill near Terekhovka (Primorskii krai) was supposed to showcase civilian-military coordination in counterterrorist operations—one of the avowed strategic goals of Vostok-2003, according to the defense ministry. In this drill, a band of about 15 *spetsnaz* commandos impersonating the “terrorists” set out to blow up a bridge over the Razdol’naya river. After successfully bypassing the interior ministry guards and setting up the explosive devices, the “terrorists”—dressed in bright orange vests—were surrounded by hundreds of army servicemen and were then “cleansed” with massive artillery fire. Judging by the account in the local Russian edition of *Vladivostok Daily*, the drill resembled a sad farce in full view of the defense minister. Having mined the bridge, the “terrorists” failed to leave as one would reasonably expect them to do. Instead, they lingered, as if they had a death wish, until counterterrorist forces surrounded them. But even though they were surrounded and destroyed, the “terrorists” still managed to blow up the bridge. As the *Vladivostok* reporter observed, “even to a dilettante it was clear that the ‘terrorists’ had a chance to blow up that bridge several times over, given how long it took the counterterrorist team to do its job.”

Ultimately, one unscripted episode during the Terekhovka bridge drill highlighted the irrelevance of the anti-terrorist show of force during Vostok-2003. While the top brass watched the action unfolding around the bridge, an unknown serviceman casually strolled toward the command observation post from the opposite direction, across an overgrown field. Undetected by the guards while in plain sight, the “stray” serviceman came within the range of a hand grenade throw of the defense minister and his entourage, at which point one of the observers chanced to spot him. Yet, by the time the armed guards—cursing loudly left and right—came out to intercept the intruder, the latter had vanished into thin air. In short, not only were these drills in Potemkin-like counterterrorism marginal in the big scheme of the war games, they were also staged without the polish and the efficiency one would associate with strategic priorities of a major power such as Russia.

Misinterpretation No. 4: International Security Cooperation

Although Russian officials and commentators emphasized the “international character” of Vostok-2003, only seven international observers (four from China, two from South Korea, and one from Canada) were present. They did not arrive until August 23—after half of the war games and two major counterterrorist drills were already over—and watched only one of the 45 “episodes” of Vostok-2003. Aside from the Japanese

helicopter-carrying destroyer and a Korean destroyer that joined the Russian Navy in a search-and-rescue operation after a hypothetical fire aboard the *Magadan* icebreaker, just one U.S. Coast Guard vessel briefly interacted with Russia's navy in the Bering Sea and one South Korean minesweeper made a port call at a Russian naval base. The scale of international military presence and the type of joint operations hardly allow one to conclude that international coordination was a significant objective of Vostok-2003 exercises.

Vostok - 2003 in the Context of Moscow's State Centralization and Energy Development Strategy

The nature and the conduct of Vostok-2003 begin to make sense once two fundamental issues about the Russian Far East (RFE) are taken into consideration—Moscow's concern about its ability to rule these remote areas and Moscow's interest in cashing in on energy resources in the region. The two are mutually reinforcing. The promise of tapping into the region's oil and gas riches increases the importance of maintaining political control over the area. Strengthening Moscow's grip on Far Eastern politics, at the same time, makes the Kremlin more confident it can secure its hold on the region's natural resources and protect their exports, especially at sea. These perceptions were at the heart of deliberations at the session of Russia's Security Council on RFE in late November 2002, following a year-long brainstorming of the Far Eastern challenges by Russia's top officials. Interviewed by *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (November 27, 2002) in the run-up to that meeting, the deputy secretary of the Security Council, Vladimir Potapov, explained that the RFE "aroused more concern than many others regions" over national security, not only because it is a vast, remote, and sparsely populated region with declining population, long external borders, weak internal communications, and large distances between land and naval bases. Importantly, according to Potapov: "This region is rich in very diverse resources and, consequently, is attractive economically. It has as neighbors countries which are densely populated, which lead quite poor lives, and which evidently need new sources of existence."

According to ITAR-TASS, President Putin similarly framed Russia's challenges in the RFE on a visit to Vladivostok on August 28, 2002—the same day he announced the Vostok-2003 exercises. In turn, the scale and the pattern of force deployment during Vostok-2003 related clearly to this view. Missile attacks from Tu-160s, Tu-22s, and Tu-95MS bombers were shown to be effective precisely against mid-size naval groupings that China, Korea, or Japan may deploy to claim rights over prospective offshore oil and gas deposits. Similarly, the scale of Russian naval and air power engaged in Vostok-2003 demonstrated that Moscow had the capability to protect the tankers exporting oil and gas from Sakhalin to Asia and the United States should piracy akin to that around Indonesia becomes a problem in the RFE.

The orientation of Russia's security strategy toward protection of energy exports was also demonstrated by the nature and location of two major naval maneuvers held outside the Arctic and Pacific region as part of Vostok-2003. The first of these sideshows took place in the central part of the Caspian Sea, near the area where the United States and Azerbaijan had their first joint naval exercises from August 13 to August 20, 2003. The

second sideshow featured the sortie into the Mediterranean of the Black Sea Fleet cruiser *Moskva* and the *Smetlivyi* patrol ship—a demonstration of naval power in the region critical to Russia’s oil shipments from the Black Sea port of Novorossiisk.

Nigeria on the Pacific: Policy Implications for Russia

The investment of significant resources in Vostok-2003 signals that the Kremlin has settled on reviving the erstwhile role of the Far East as Russia’s natural resource base and a military outpost. This strategic calculus assumes that export of oil and gas from Sakhalin and East Siberia will generate dozens of billions of dollars in foreign investment in the coming decade and thus enable Moscow to bankroll large-scale socioeconomic programs and military buildup. This rosy strategy, however, is likely to misfire. As a recent study of development in oil-rich nations by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) strongly suggests (*Economist*, September 13, 2003), authoritarianism, rigged elections, the executive dominance over the judiciary, and constraints on the media—traits increasingly evident in Putin’s Russia—are a recipe for economic stagnation, chronic and widespread poverty, corruption, and unemployment. Russia’s own decline during the “period of stagnation” in the 1970s (bankrolled by oil and gas discoveries in West Siberia and the Arctic) should serve as a warning to the Kremlin.

To this list one needs to add the crony capitalism, corruption, and organized crime that have continued to thrive under Putin—especially in the Far Eastern regions. According to a Vladivostok-based organized crime expert, Vitalii Nomokonov, the annual contract murder rate in Primorskii krai almost doubled after Putin forced then-governor Yevgeny Nazdratenko out of office in February 2001. In the RFE context therefore, the strategy of massive state-run energy development will be a recipe for a Nigeria on the Pacific—except that natural resource rents would be eminently harder to collect given long distances, rough terrain, and permafrost. Moscow would do well to reconsider not only its Far Eastern strategy, but also its entire political philosophy that, judging by Putin’s recent statements, assumes that democracy undermines central authority and national capabilities.

Value Clarification Time: Policy Implications for the United States

Vostok-2003 calls for a major reassessment of Washington’s Russia policy. The allocation of scarce resources toward these war games shows that Russia is not as committed to Washington’s core objectives in the war against terror as Putin claims. While paying for maneuvers of dozens of aircraft and warships and more than 70,000 troops stretched from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, Moscow has remained at best a marginal player in Afghanistan and turned down Washington’s requests to send peacekeeping forces to Iraq in advance of the Putin-Bush summit in late September 2003. In addition, Moscow continued to provide nuclear power technology to Iran, despite growing concern in Washington and elsewhere about Tehran’s capacity to produce atomic weapons. Having staged Potemkin-like counterterrorism drills in the Pacific, Putin has continued to deny that it was on his watch and, to a great extent, as a result of his policies, that indiscriminate killing, torture, and abuse of civilians by the Russian military in Chechnya continue to inspire international terrorists of the most violent kind. An

increasingly authoritarian, centrally-controlled Russia pinning economic development hopes on mega energy projects—a Nigeria on the Arctic and the Pacific—is not going to share fundamental security values with the United States and be a committed partner in Washington's global campaign against sources of support for international terrorism. This is something the White House should consider next time it is planning to make concessions to Putin on issues such as Chechnya, human rights, political pluralism, and the rule of law in Russia.

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