

### Russia is preparing for Zapad 2017

#### Growing tension in the Baltic region

Russia and the United States concede that in the last period their relations are at the lowest point since the end of Cold War. The alleged influence of Moscow in the American elections, Russian role in the Ukrainian crisis, the renewed military activism on the border with Poland and the Baltic countries and the numerous incursions into the airspace in northeastern Europe, are fueling a climate of distrust and suspect for the redefinition of Moscow's strategic position along its border with NATO's partners.

In response to renewed sanctions imposed by Washington against Russia in late July – denying the helpful attitude showed by President Donald Trump towards Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in Hamburg and weakening his image and credibility – Moscow's Duma decided the expulsion, by the end of September, of 755 US diplomats, in response of the Russian staff expulsion (455 units) decided by President Barack Obama at the end of December 2016, following the release of an intelligence report on Russia's role in the campaign for the US presidential elections. In addition, since August 1<sup>st</sup> the use of some buildings, which had been available for the US embassy, have been no longer allowed.

Compounding the terms of the renewed East-West confrontation contributes to the approaching Zapad 2017 exercises (in Russian, *zapad* means West), that Russia will held from September 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>, with the participation of 100,000 men and 4,000 heavy tanks along its western border. The maneuvers, which were already carried out periodically during the Soviet era, were featured for the first time in 1999 and then in 2009 and 2013. Even before August 2017, 1000 air defense troops and logistic support teams were concentrated in Belarus. For the whole duration of the exercises, it is expected the strengthening of NATO's presence in the Baltic region, with 600 American paratroopers located in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and the postponement of the alternation of the command of the US led battalion based in Poland.

The heart of the exercises is entrusted to motorized elite departments, dissolved after the post-Soviet era and until then used in particularly serious or delicate operations (for example: to fight the Germans on the Eastern Front during in World war II, to invade Czechoslovakia and repress Prague Spring in 1968). At the end of the Cold War, those departments were withdrawn from the base in Smolensk (on the border with Belarus) and later established again by President Putin. Zapad 2017 will also benefit from the commitment of 300 pieces of artillery and dozens of tactical Iskander launchers, which consist of a force greater than the sum of those currently deployed by NATO in the Baltic States, Poland and Germany. Officially, the Russian ministry of Defense has announced an exercise with 13,000 men. On the eve of the exercises, the issue of international observers allowed to monitor Zapad remains open, since the Russian authorities have not yet decided about it.

The maneuvers have been anticipated from exercises carried out by the Russian Navy in late July in the waters off the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, with landings on the beach covered by fighter jets and helicopters; a part of the exercise was carried out on shore, at Khmelevka, with the participation of 2,000 troops, more than 200 ships and 100 military vehicles. Chinese manpower has also been added to the maneuvers, with the latest generation launchers.

#### Anti-terrorism exercises between Belarus and China

Part of the Zapad 2017 exercises were based in Belarus, where the placement of advanced command of the motorized elite units has been planned in the western part of the country, as well

as exercises in a training base near Brest (on the border with Poland) and in Grodno (near Poland and Lithuania). Belarus is, however, expanding the horizons, looking for new partnerships beyond the traditional one with Russia.

From July 11<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>, Belarus and China carried out common anti-terrorist exercises, whose scenario was the capture of hostages in a city occupied by terrorists and the operations for their release. Previously, other joint exercises between the two countries took place in 2015, 2013 and 2011, as well as SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) training sessions open to the Belarusian forces as well. Beyond the operational context, the intensity of bilateral relations is particularly concerned with the military-industrial environment (in the framework of a cooperation agreement concluded in September 2016, which led to the production of the Palanez multi-rocket system) and the economic field, given the prospects of economic growth that Belarus sees in the Chinese infrastructure development project One Road One Belt, whose terminal is in Eastern Europe.

Although Lukashenko's more open foreign policy has not compromised strategic relations with Moscow, interested in maintaining a westward outpost beyond Kaliningrad, bilateral relations are undergoing the consequences of approaching the West on other issues. In early 2017, Belarus decided to liberalize visas for 80 countries, including the United States and European Union members, creating alarm in Russia, due to the common border transits. Consequently, since February 1<sup>st</sup> Moscow has established a safety zone at border posts, while since May Russian airports moved flights to Belarus from national flights area to the international one. Such measures revealed a reduction of the closest interstate connections established between Russia and Belarus with the State Union signed in 1996, and consolidated with the Eurasian Economic Union (operational since January 2014, together with Kazakhstan and, later, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan). Sporadic checks at land border posts on international bus or trains entering Russia, however, started in December 2016. The Minsk authorities proposed to Moscow to negotiate for a revision of the visa regime, so that a traveler can move from one country to another with a single visa, which would re-establish international transit in Belarus. The path, however, appears long and unclear.

### **Analysis, assessments and forecasts**

Russian neighbors and NATO's commanders believe that Zapad 2017 is not an exercise like any other, but an event organized to demonstrate to the West the strengthening of Russian offensive capabilities, expressing a power of men and means far superior to the availability of its neighbors and the support options offered by their allies.

The loss of Ukraine and Belarus as buffer states along the Russian western border, determined by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has projected Moscow strategic vision to a pre-1990 setting, increasing the mass and sophistication of military forces and expressing a clear message on its current operational capability. Therefore, strategic relations with Belarus are a priority interest to be preserved, despite Minsk's ambitions to be accredited with new Western or Asian partners. To this end, Moscow must necessarily offer a satisfactory compensation and compete with the financial support offered by Brussels in exchange for openings in the political and human rights fields or the prospects for development offered by China. In fact, beyond the ability to establish new relationships beyond the traditional partnership with Russia, the special bond between Minsk and Beijing marks the capitalization of Belarus' strategic commercial hub position, close to the European Union seaports.

Regarding east-west relations, which are shaping like during the Cold War, the confrontation appears determined by the Moscow leadership and the American Congress confrontation, rather than by Trump's presidency, whose swinging positions are subordinated to an independent parliamentary vote, which is often in contradiction with the White House.

## Events

● **New Russian naval strategy.** On July 20<sup>th</sup>, President Vladimir Putin signed an Executive Order for the approval of the *Basic Principles of the Naval State Policy for the period until 2030*. The document, which amends the text of the 2015 Russian Naval Strategy, offers new details about the country's vision of its maritime projection and the role of naval power determined to defend national interests everywhere in the world.

To this end, the Russian *Naval State Policy* does not allow intimidation by foreign governments, first of all the United States and their allies, reiterating also the centrality of the Arctic region for its own interests (disputed with other four contiguous countries, all US allies) and defines the role of containment played globally by the Russian Navy, despite an increasingly unstable and uncontrolled international security environment. The *Basic Principles of the Naval State Policy* were signed on the same day of the 320<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Naval Fleet.

● **Russia will stay in Syria for the next 49 years.** On July 28<sup>th</sup>, President Vladimir Putin signed a law allowing the Russian Air Force to remain in Syria for 49 years, in the implementation of a military assistance protocol to the agreement signed in January 2017 with the Damascus government. Since September 2015, Russia has used the Khmeimim air base (in the governorate of Latakia), from where it conducts operations against the anti-government forces of Syria, while offering also military advice. Despite having withdrawn part of the forces stationed in Syria in March 2016, Moscow is still maintaining a significant presence in the port of Tartus. The Basic Principles of the Naval State Policy also provide an ideal backdrop to the Russian presence in Syria, as it clarifies that the Russian Federation must have a strong fleet in all operating theaters, whether near or far in the oceans, as well as naval aviation and coast forces equipped with advanced weapons and support systems.

● **Seven arrests for terrorism in St. Petersburg.** On July 28<sup>th</sup>, seven people from Central Asia have been arrested in St. Petersburg, on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks at railway stations and public places. The news was released by the FSB (Federal'naja Služba Bezopasnosti), the Security Service of the Russian Federation. Following the suicide attack in St. Petersburg subway on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, led by a young Kyrgyz man supported by a network of migrants, the attention of the authorities towards Central Asia has increased.

● **War Games in the Caspian Sea.** From 1<sup>st</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> August, the War Games 2017 took place in the Caspian Sea, attended by the navies of Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran and Azerbaijan. The fifth coastal state, Turkmenistan, did not participate.

● **Explosion at an ammunition depot in Abkhazia.** On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, an explosion destroyed an ammunition depot located close to Primorskoye, a small town next to the Black Sea in Abkhazia, a separatist region of Georgia, injuring 60 people, including 35 Russian tourists.

● **Russia closes the Kerch Strait.** On August 7<sup>th</sup>, the Russian Federation's Minister of Transport formalized the plan for closing the Kerch Strait. The measures, unilaterally taken, would have the technical reason to allow the installation of the pillars of the bridge that will connect the Russian mainland to the occupied peninsula of Crimea. Mostly, the closing of the strait isolates southeastern Ukraine coasts and overlooking the Sea of Azov, leading to the temporary prohibition of the ports, particularly Mariupol and Berdyansk, strategic for steel exports to the West. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, from 0600 to 1800, the first interruption of maritime traffic occurred; only the transit of ships with Russian flag has been allowed. The bridge across the Kerch Strait, along more than 19 km, is expected to be completed by December 2018, while in the following year the rail link between Russia and Crimea

will be fulfilled. Until the Crimean occupation, sailing from the Azov Sea to the Black Sea across the Kerch Strait was managed by an agreement signed on December 24<sup>th</sup> 2003 between Russia and Ukraine. It defines the Azov Sea as an internal sea, where all the commercial and non-commercial boats with Russian and Ukrainian flags can freely navigate.

● **Abkhazia: Putin commemorates the start of the 2008 war with Georgia.** On August 8<sup>th</sup>, the Russian president paid a visit to Abkhazia, a breakaway region of Georgia that declared its independence in 1990 and since then is economically, politically and militarily supported by Moscow. Along with the separatist regions of South Ossetia (Georgia) and Transnistria (Moldova), Abkhazia is a de facto state derived from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The date of August 8<sup>th</sup> coincided with the ninth anniversary of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, because of which Abkhazia and South Ossetia were recognized by Russia as an independent state, excluding any possibility of contact with Tblisi. President Putin has announced the possibility of simplifying customs procedures and border controls with Abkhazia, in order to facilitate travel and trade. Georgian President, Giorgi Margvelashvili, during the commemorations for the fallen of 2008 (228 civilians and 184 military), deplored the posture of Russia, reiterating his support for the European Union and the Euro- Atlantic alliance. From July 30<sup>th</sup> to August 12<sup>th</sup> the Nobel Partner exercises were held in Georgia - at the Vaziani training center and the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC) military base in Norio – with the participation of 1,600 American soldiers, 800 Georgians, plus other smaller contingents from Armenia, Germany, Slovenia, Turkey, Ukraine and United Kingdom. As a United States' strategic partner, Georgia has started the admission process to NATO.