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Russia's Military Just Carried Out a Massive Test Airstrike in West

Damien Sharkov, Newsweek

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Russia's westernmost forces finished a 5,000-strong drill quite literally with a bang. The drill ended with a massive practice airstrike using four different kinds of warplanes in a joint assault, state news agency Itar-Tass reported Thursday, citing Russia's Western Military District.

The exact number of jets was not given though Su-27, Su-30SM, Su-35 and the MiG-31 units all took part, assisted by Krasukha electronic warfare units. The drill involved jamming enemy detection capabilities, thereby blindsiding the hypothetical designated opponent in the drill. The practice airstrike was a response to a hypothetical attack, the statement by the military district stated. A total of 2,000 units of military kit were involved in the wider exercise in an unspecified location on Russia's northwestern flank, which ended Thursday.

Russia's armed forces in the northwest have pursued a visible reinforcement and uptick in activity in recent years as ties with its Western neighbors have deteriorated. Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 prompted a tide of solidarity from Western powers, particularly in Russia's neighboring Baltics, which were once part of the Soviet Union.

A recent poll found more people in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia fear the likelihood of war than the prospect of extremist attacks of the sort that have struck western capitals. There is strong support among the Baltics for NATO reinforcement measures and the idea of wider western military alliances, such as a European Union army.

Russia's upcoming drill with ally Belarus in the region is currently regarded as a climax in the anxiety Baltic countries have experienced, with increased intercepts of Russian warplanes near their airspace, and Russian naval drills nearby this summer.

Lithuania has accused Russia of "simulating" an attack on NATO with its Zapad drill and has cast doubt over whether the drill will be as transparent as international agreements require. Russia has denied it would attack a NATO ally, though trust between Russia and the West is at a low point and has been further eroded by the Kremlin's inconsistent interpretation of events in Ukraine.