



Exercise Trident Juncture is a response to Russian aggression

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Forty thousand participants; 130 aircraft; 70 vessels; 30 participating countries: Exercise “Trident Juncture 18” already has been labeled as one of the “most complex exercises” to be executed by NATO in the past 30 years and, in terms of countries participating, is the largest military exercise of 2018. Every aspect of military might will be showcased in the Alliance’s largest exercise since 2002, when it kicks off later this week.

The immediate focus of the exercise will be on the readiness and joint operability of NATO nations. But the broader effects of such a large operation will serve as a key test to the host nation, Norway, and its ability to handle a massive influx of troops and equipment. Above all, the message of Trident Juncture 18 is that the Alliance is unified, capable, and equipped to react multilaterally to future security threats.

The drills are a portent of things to come. Trident Juncture represents the first test of NATO’s so-called “Four Thirties” plan, which was formally announced by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg back in June. “Today, Allies committed, by 2020, to having 30 mechanized battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels, ready to use within 30 days or less,” Stoltenberg told reporters following a defense ministerial of the North Atlantic Council.

The “Four Thirties” plan represents a significant expansion of Alliance capabilities, and NATO is working to accommodate it – including through plans to “upscale the Joint Force Headquarters with a larger contingent of logisticians.” Trident Juncture will be the first concrete test of whether NATO has made any real progress toward the “Four Thirties” objective.

In addition to battling logistics, NATO participants will be battling the elements. The exercise will take place in Norway from late October to early November, which means participants can expect freezing rain and potentially heavy snowfall. The climate will be a change-of-pace for American military forces that have been performing operations in the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan. Trident Juncture thus provides a unique opportunity improve American readiness in a different operational environment.

But the goal of the drills isn’t simply tactical. Although Alliance officials have stopped short of saying so explicitly – when asked if the NATO exercise is practice for war with Russia, Admiral James Foggo III demurred by saying that the exercise’s mission is to prove that NATO “is capable of deterring any adversary” – the geopolitical message of Trident Juncture is clear: NATO is ramping up its ability to respond to Russian aggression.

Such a signal is sorely needed. Since its foundation, NATO’s implicit objective has been to contain and counter Russian expansionism. The Alliance’s deterrent potential, however, has unmistakably eroded over the years. In the last half-decade, the world has witnessed a renewed imperialist impulse in Moscow, manifested in Russia’s ongoing campaign of aggression and subversion against Ukraine, growing Kremlin designs over the Arctic, even simulated Russian military strikes against NATO members.

With Trident Juncture, the bloc is seeking to send a signal that – whatever political disagreements may exist among its members – NATO nations stand ready and able to deter further Russian expansionism. And while there will be a strong American presence at the exercises, perhaps their most salient feature is their multilateral nature, and what it suggests: that confronting and countering Russian adventurism is, by necessity, a collective affair.

How well NATO members perform in Trident Juncture remains to be seen. But one thing is certain: Russian President Vladimir Putin will be watching closely.

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