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# Eurasian Naval Power on Display: Sino-Russian Naval Exercises under Presidents Xi and Putin

Richard Weitz, Hudson Institute

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## ◀ Abstract ▶

One manifestation of the contemporary era of renewed great power competition has been the deepening relationship between China and Russia. Their strengthening military ties, notwithstanding their lack of a formal defense alliance, have been especially striking. Since China and Russia deploy two of the world's most powerful navies, their growing maritime cooperation has been one of the most significant international security developments of recent years. The Sino-Russian naval exercises, involving varying platforms and locations, have built on years of high-level personnel exchanges, large Russian weapons sales to China, the

Sino-Russia Treaty of Friendship, and other forms of cooperation. Though the joint Sino-Russian naval drills began soon after Beijing and Moscow ended their Cold War confrontation, these exercises have become much more important during the last decade, essentially becoming a core pillar of their expanding defense partnership. China and Russia now conduct more naval exercises in more places and with more types of weapons systems than ever before. In the future, Chinese and Russian maritime drills will likely encompass new locations, capabilities, and partners—including possibly the Arctic, hypersonic delivery systems, and novel African, Asian, and Middle East partners—as well as continue such recent innovations as conducting joint naval patrols and combined arms maritime drills.

China and Russia pursue several objectives through their bilateral naval cooperation. The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation lacks a mutual defense clause, but does provide for consultations about common threats. The naval exercises, which rehearse non-traditional along with traditional missions (e.g., counter-piracy and humanitarian relief as well as with high-end warfighting), provide a means to enhance their response to such mutual challenges through coordinated military activities. Though the exercises may not realize substantial interoperability gains regarding combat capabilities, the drills do highlight to foreign audiences the Sino-Russian capacity to project coordinated naval power globally. This messaging is important given the reliance of China and Russia on the world's oceans for trade and the two countries' maritime territorial disputes with other countries. The exercises can also improve their national military capabilities as well as help them learn more about the tactics, techniques, and procedures of each other. The rising Chinese Navy especially benefits from working with the Russian armed forces, which have more experience conducting maritime missions, particularly in combat operations involving multiple combat arms, than the People's Liberation Army (PLA). On the negative side, these exercises, by enhancing their combat capabilities, may make Chinese and Russian policymakers more willing to employ military force or run escalatory risks in confrontations with other states.

All these impacts are amplified in Northeast Asia, where the Chinese and Russian navies conduct most of their joint exercises. Northeast Asia has become an area of intensifying maritime confrontations involving China and Russia against the United States and Japan, with South Korea situated uneasily between them. The growing ties between the Chinese and Russian navies have complicated South Korean-U.S. military planning, diverted resources from concentrating against North Korea, and worsened the regional security environment. Naval planners in the United States, South Korea, and Japan will increasingly need to consider scenarios involving both the Chinese and Russian navies. For example, South Korean and U.S. policymakers need to prepare for situations in which coordinated Chinese and Russian military aggression overtakes the Pentagon, obligating the South Korean Navy to rapidly backfill for any U.S.-allied security gaps that arise on the Korean Peninsula. Potentially reinforcing Chinese and Russian naval support to North Korea in a maritime confrontation with South Korea and its allies would present another serious challenge. Building on the commitment of Japan and South Korea to strengthen security ties, future exercises involving Japan, South Korea, and the United States should expand to consider these potential contingencies.

**Key Word** : Sino-Russian Naval Exercises, Chinese Navy, Russian Navy, Naval Cooperation

## I . Introduction

This monograph reviews the evolution of joint Chinese-Russian naval exercises, evaluates their goals and impact, forecasts their trajectory, and assesses their policy implications. Though the exercises have become a routine dimension of the Sino-Russian military partnership, they have been unprecedented in the history of relations between Beijing and Moscow. It has only been in the last decade that China and Russia have concurrently had powerful navies. Furthermore, the importance of these Sino-Russian naval drills is evident in how much attention they have attracted, within the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Russian Federation, and other countries. Senior PRC and Russian officials, including Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, have attended the drills. The PRC and Russian governments have regularly maintained that their exercises are not targeted against any country. However, even PRC and Russian analysts have acknowledged that the Sino-Russian exercises challenge the interests of the United States and its allies. The growing activities of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Russia's Federation Navy (RFN) in disputed bodies of water, such as the South and East China Seas, and other regions of tension, like the Baltic Sea, invariably raises concerns. These naval drills have practiced a widening range of tactics, with changing venues and forces. The expanding number, scale, and geographic scope of these maneuvers have reflected, and reinforced, the closer Sino-Russian security alignment against the United States and other countries that has evolved in the Indo-Pacific and other regions.

The Chinese-Russian drills reflect how both fleets have become more capable and active on international waters in recent years. Though the Soviet Union assisted in the development of the Chinese Navy in the 1950s, the Sino-Soviet split that arose during the 1960s ruptured these ties. The Soviet Union's "Red Banner" Pacific Fleet treated the PLAN as much as a potential adversary as the U.S. Pacific Fleet. The end of the Cold War ended their overt designation of the other's navies as

adversarial. The Chinese and Russian fleets resumed reciprocal port visits and officer exchanges. More importantly, Russia began selling enormous quantities of now surplus Soviet-era naval equipment, including warships and missiles, to the PLAN. These ties provided a critical foundation for the subsequent commencement of their joint naval drills, which began sporadically in the early 1990s but only blossomed in the last decade to become a pillar of the Sino-Russian military partnership. Though additional countries sometimes participate in smaller drills, only the PLAN and the RFN have engaged in their most important series of naval exercises, termed “Joint Sea” in Chinese and “Naval Interaction” or “Maritime Cooperation” in Russian.<sup>1)</sup> The Chinese and Russian naval exercises have taken place in the Baltic, Mediterranean, and East and South China seas; more recently, they have occurred in the West Pacific Ocean and off the coast of South Africa. These drills typically involve multiple phases—consisting of table-top preparations, live-fire drills, and formal ceremonies. They rehearse traditional combat tasks against potential foreign navy adversaries (hunting submarines, defending ships from air attacks, assaulting islands) and so-called “non-traditional” tasks addressing non-state and natural challenges (evacuating civilians, countering pirates, etc.). The last year has seen the Chinese and Russian navies pioneer new types of cooperative activities, notably their joint fleet patrols in the northeast Pacific Ocean and the PLAN’s recent participation in Russia’s main strategic exercise, Vostok-2022. Given the strong ties between Beijing and Moscow and their institutionalized military cooperation, the PLAN and RFN look to remain each other’s most significant foreign exercise partners for years to come.

## II. Joint Sea 2012

China and Russia have conducted several joint ground force drills since 2005. They also held naval maneuvers during one of their land-centered

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1) 輕碎惟à 海藏溢鴨梢軫猥 in Russian and 海上聯合 in Chinese.

exercises, Peace Mission 2015, which occurred in August of that year in the Russian Far East and in China's Shandong Peninsula. Though Peace Mission 2005 involved primarily air-and-ground drills, with a total of some 10,000 Chinese and Russian soldiers, more than one hundred warships and hundreds of marines participated in the associated off-shore activities. The naval maneuvers practiced in Peace Mission 2005 included neutralizing anti-aircraft defenses, enforcing a maritime blockade, and conducting an amphibious assault.<sup>2)</sup> But the exercise did not immediately lead to further PLAN-RFN cooperation. For example, though the two fleets subsequently conducted concurrent anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, their rotating tasks forces did not coordinate more with each other than they did with the other international patrols there. It was not until 2012 that the PLAN and RFN conducted their first major naval drill dissociated from any larger ground force exercise. Since then, China and Russia have been holding regular joint naval exercises, the so-called Joint Sea drills, which have occurred in various locations in the world's oceans.

Described in the Chinese media as “path-breaking,” Joint Sea 2012 ran from April 22-27.<sup>3)</sup> This exercise occurred in the Yellow Sea, near China's coastal city of Qingdao in Shandong Province, where the PLAN Northern Fleet was based. The two governments denied the exercise was directed against any other country or related to various regional tensions. PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Liu Weimi dismissed suggestions that the maneuvers were a response to recent U.S.-South Korean drills or any other foreign military activities, asserting that, “As a big country in the Asia-Pacific region, China has a great responsibility to use this drill to contribute to regional stability and peace. We hope the various parties will view this drill objectively and not link it with other events.”<sup>4)</sup> Defence

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2) Roger N. McDermott, *The Rising Dragon: SCO Peace Mission 2007* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, October 2007), <https://jamestown.org/report/the-rising-dragon-sco-peace-mission-2007>; and “Second Phase of ‘Peace Mission 2005’ Starts,” Xinhua, August 20, 2005, [www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Aug/139175.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Aug/139175.htm).

3) “China-Russia joint naval exercise held in waters near Qingdao,” *PLA Daily*, April 27, 2012, [en.people.cn/90786/7801796.html](http://en.people.cn/90786/7801796.html).

Ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng said that, “China and Russia holding joint military exercises is normal,” adding that, “The exercises are not considering a third party as an enemy.”<sup>5)</sup>

Joint Sea 2012 saw more than two dozen surface vessels and submarines, accompanied by planes, helicopters, and special forces, participate in six days of maneuvers. The PLAN sent 4,000 service personnel, 16 surface vessels (five missile destroyers, five missile frigates, four missile boats, a support vessel, and hospital ship), two submarines, and 13 fixed-wing aircraft along with five shipboard helicopters).<sup>6)</sup> The PLAN Type 052 Luh-class multi-role destroyer Harbin (a domestically-produced, second-generation ship that was the Northern Fleet’s flagship) acted as the command vessel for the exercise.<sup>7)</sup> The Chinese fleet also included four more, five missile frigates four missile boats, two submarines, a hospital ship, and a resupply vessel.<sup>8)</sup> Meanwhile, the RVN Pacific Fleet supplied four combat ships and three supply vessels from its Pacific Fleet: The Slava-class cruiser Varyag, the flagship of the Russian Pacific Fleet, participated in the exercise. In 2009, the Varyag had led the formation of foreign ships on review at the celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of the PLAN’s founding.<sup>9)</sup> Three Udaloy-class anti-submarine destroyers (the Admiral Vinogradov, Marshal Shaposhnikov and Admiral Tributs) came from the RVN Northern Fleet. The RVN also sent the tugboat MB-37, the fleet tanker Pechenga, and the supply ship SB-22.<sup>10)</sup>

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4) Zhao Shengnan, “Exercises ‘intended to ensure peace,’” *China Daily*, April 24, 2012, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-04/24/content\\_15120545.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-04/24/content_15120545.htm).

5) “China, Russia end naval exercises,” Agence France-Presse, April 27, 2012, <http://www.abs-cbnn.ews.com/global-filipino/world/04/27/12/china-russia-end-naval-exercises>.

6) Zhao Shengnan, “Russia-China joint naval drill starts,” *China Daily*, April 22, 2012, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-04/22/content\\_15108571.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-04/22/content_15108571.htm).

7) Denis Bolotsky, “Russia, China To Trade Naval Know-How In Drills,” RT, April 23, 2012, <http://rt.com/news/russia-china-drills-warships-679/>.

8) Dean Cheng, “Sino-Russian Naval Exercises: Shape of Things to Come?,” *The Daily Signal*, April 25, 2012, <http://blog.heritage.org/2012/04/25/sino-russian-naval-exercises-shape-of-things-to-come/>.

9) “Cruiser to Lead Foreign Ships in China Naval Parade,” RIA Novosti, April 22, 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20090422/121247162.html>.

10) “China, Russia End First Naval Exercises: State Media,” Agence France Presse, April 27, 2012, <http://www.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/World/Story/A1Story20120427-342570.html>; and “Russia, China Complete Naval Drills,” RIA Novosti, April 26, 2012, <https://sputniknews.com>

While the PLAN provided more ships than the RFN, some of the Russian vessels were more advanced.

During the drills, the ships conducted reciprocal ship visits in port, a joint fleet review, and both live-fire and weapons-free drills, including maritime search and rescue, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) tactics, counter-piracy and simulating escorting merchant ships and freeing them from hijackers.<sup>11)</sup> The Russian ships arrived at Qingdao on April 21 and the exercises themselves began the next day. Starting on April 25, the active phase of the exercises began, with sailors engaging in tactical drills with small arms and RPGs aimed at defending their ships. Following these “live-fire” drills, a fleet review was held later that day, marking the end of the active phase of the exercise.<sup>12)</sup> The exercises officially ended on April 27 with a closing ceremony. During the drills, the PLAN and RFN vessels practiced joint command, control, and communications functions.<sup>13)</sup>

### III. Joint Sea 2013

From July 5-12, 2013, the PLAN and RFN staged naval maneuvers in Russia’s Peter the Great Bay, in the Sea of Japan, near Vladivostok. The PRC described the maneuvers as the PLAN’s “single biggest deployment of military force in a China-foreign joint exercise.”<sup>14)</sup> The PLA Navy contributed two guided-missile frigates, four destroyers, and one support vessel.<sup>15)</sup> Meanwhile, Russia sent eleven surface ships along with a submarine and three warplane

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/20120426/173069251.html.

11) Yan Meeng, “2012 China-Russia joint naval exercise,” *People’s Daily Online*, no date, <http://en.people.cn/102775/204981/index.html>; and “Yellow Sea: China, Russia Begin First Joint Naval Drills,” *Xinhua*, April 22, 2012, <https://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2012/04/22/yellow-sea-china-russia-begin-first-joint-naval-drills/>.

12) “Fleet Review Held at Russia-China Joint Naval Exercise,” *China Military Online*, April 27, 2012, <http://en.people.cn/102774/7801225.html>.

13) Shengnan, “Russia-China joint naval drill starts.”

14) “China and Russia conduct joint naval drill,” *BBC*, July 5, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-23159442>.

15) J. Michael Cole, “China, Russia to Hold Largest-Ever Naval Drills,” *The Diplomat*, July 2, 2013, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/07/china-russia-to-hold-largest-ever-naval-drills/>.



s.<sup>16)</sup> China and Russia dispatched a total of 4,000 military personnel, including special force units from both countries. The scale of the July 2013 maritime maneuvers—in total 18 surface ships, three fixed-wing warplanes, five ship-launched helicopters, one submarine, and special forces—exceeded that of Joint Sea 2012.<sup>17)</sup> Whereas seven RFN warships and support craft participated in the previous year's exercises, a dozen RFN Pacific Fleet vessels joined Joint Sea 2013. Though the PLAN sent fewer ships in 2013 than it had the previous ships, the seven ships from the PLAN North Sea and South Sea fleets were some of the Chinese Navy's most sophisticated vessels, including a guided-missile destroyer with Aegis-type tracking radar and anti-submarine missile frigates.<sup>18)</sup>

During the eight-day exercise, the sailors rehearsed joint air defense, civilian ship escorting, counter-piracy, maritime search and rescue, live translation and interpretation, at-sea replenishment, surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare, and fleet air defense.<sup>19)</sup> PLAN Deputy Commander Ding Yiping stated that the drills were not directed against any country, but archly added that “those who feel uneasy have a guilty conscience.”<sup>20)</sup> But RFN Deputy Chief of Staff Leonid Sukhanov overtly stated that the exercise showed how “the two navies can withstand any invasion and cope with any challenge.”<sup>21)</sup>

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16) “China and Russia conduct joint naval drill.”

17) “China, Russia hold largest-ever joint naval drills,” Associated Press, July 5, 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/07/05/china-russia-hold-largest-ever-joint-naval-drills/2491025/>.

18) “China-Russia ‘Joint Sea-2013’ joint naval drill,” *People’s Daily Online*, July 2013, <http://en.people.cn/90786/207733/index.html>.

19) “China, Russia Hold Largest-Ever Joint Naval Drills”: Jane Perez, “China and Russia, in a Display of Unity, Hold Naval Exercises,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/11/world/asia/china-and-russia-in-a-display-of-unity-hold-naval-exercises.html>; Tom Phillips and Julian Ryall, “China and Russia Send Joint Force of 19 Warships to Sea of Japan in Largest Ever Naval Exercise,” *The Telegraph*, July 5, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10162193/China-and-Russia-send-joint-force-of-19-warships-to-Sea-of-Japan-in-largest-ever-naval-exercise.html>; and Zhao Shengnan, “China, Russia consider increasing naval drills,” *China Daily*, July 12, 2013, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2013-07/12/content\\_16765666.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2013-07/12/content_16765666.htm).

20) Sarah Wang, “The Chinese-Russian Naval Exercise 2013,” NATO Association of Canada, August 22, 2013, <https://natoassociation.ca/the-chinese-russian-naval-exercise-2013/>.

21) *Ibid.*

## IV. Joint Sea 2014

From May 20 to 26, 2014, the PLAN and RFN conducted a bilateral maritime exercise in the northern section of the East China Sea, off Shanghai port near the east of Yangtze River estuary. Before sailing to that staging ground, the PLAN and RFN vessels engaged in joint maneuvers at Usun in Shanghai. On May 19, sailors and officers toured each other's ships in the port.<sup>22)</sup> This exercise coincided with a state visit by President Putin to China, which lasted May 20-21. Hosting Putin at this time was controversial since Moscow had seized Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula two months earlier, triggering many Western sanctions. Xi and Putin attended the exercise's official opening. Xi said that the maneuvers "display the new level of strategic mutual trust and coordination between the two countries."<sup>23)</sup> In his remarks, Putin urged more Sino-Russian defense cooperation "to tackle various threats and challenges to safeguard regional and world peace and stability."<sup>24)</sup>

More than a dozen warships participated in Joint Sea 2014, with an equal number from both countries, along with two submarines (both Chinese); nine fixed-wing aircraft (seven Chinese, two Russian); six ship-borne helicopters (two PLAN and four RFN); and one marine special operations unit from each country. Yet, the overall Russian contingent was smaller than that provided by China and played more of a support role. The RFN provided only three of the eight surface combatants and none of the submarines, but did supply two of the three support ships. Furthermore, only two of the fixed-wing aircraft were Russian. The PLAN's larger contribution may have reflected that the exercises took place off China's coast. The drills practices such skills astracking potentially hostile aircraft and submarines, joint air defense, escorting

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22) "China, Russia begin joint naval drills in Shanghai," *Global Times*, May 21, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/861439.shtml>; and "Russian battleships in Shanghai for joint naval drills," RT, May 19, 2014, <http://rt.com/news/159912-russia-china-naval-drills>.

23) "China, Russia begin joint naval drills," Xinhua, May 20, 2014, [www.china.org.cn/world/2014-05/20/content\\_32444891.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-05/20/content_32444891.htm).

24) *Ibid.*

vessels, conducting maritime search-and-rescue missions, recapturing a seized ship, and intercepting missiles.<sup>25)</sup> For the simulated ship-to-ship combat, the PLAN and RFN contingents divided into two teams, as in previous years, but also for the first time formed mixed groups, with each force having both Chinese and Russian vessels and personnel, under joint command.<sup>26)</sup>

## V. Joint Sea 2015

The year 2015 saw China and Russia, for the first time, split their annual Joint Sea drill into two phases; these occurred in different months and places. Phase I took place from May 11-21 in the Mediterranean Sea, which was also a novel location for the joint drills. All previous Sino-Russian exercises has been conducted in Asia, whether in the Pacific Ocean or on land. Joint Sea 2015 Phase II transpired off Russia's Pacific coast, from August 20-28. In conjunction, Parts I and II lasted longer than any other previous Sino-Russian military exercise. Other innovations that occurred with Joint Sea 2015 included the first deployment of PLA Air Force warplanes in a foreign exercise, the first PLAN drills with Russia in such close proximity to Japan, and the first Chinese-Russian simulated joint landing on an island. Du Jingchen, deputy PLAN Commander and director of the exercises, confirmed that both countries made concerted efforts to explore new formats for these drills.<sup>27)</sup>

Nine ships participated in Joint Sea 2015 Phase I—three from China and six from Russia. The PLAN sent two relatively new Type 54A Jiangkai II frigates,

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25) "Russian-Chinese military exercises Joint Sea 2014 end in China," *The Voice of Russia*, May 26, 2014, <https://defenceforumindia.com/threads/russian-chinese-military-exercises-joint-sea-2014-end-in-china.61014>.

26) Minnie Chan, "China, Russia start joint naval exercise," *South China Morning Post*, May 20, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1516768/china-russia-start-joint-naval-exercise>.

27) "China, Russia end joint military exercises," PRC Ministry of National Defense, May 22, 2015, [http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international\\_exchanges/2015/05/22/content\\_281475112482910.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international_exchanges/2015/05/22/content_281475112482910.htm).

the Linyi and the Weifang, along with the Wei Shanhu replenishment ship. Both frigates had served on anti-piracy missions off the nearby Horn of Africa and one frigate had escorted a ship conveying Syria's chemical weapons to their elimination site the previous year. The flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, the guided-missile cruiser Moskva (famously sunk during the 2022 Ukraine War), provided the exercise headquarters. Russia also sent the Burevestnik-class frigate Ladny, the Bora-class guided missile corvette Samum, the Ropucha-class landing ship Alexander Shabalin along with an older ship of the same class, the Alexander Otrakovsky, and a MB-31 tugboat. Shortly before the drills commenced, the three PLAN vessels arrived in the Russian port of Novorossiysk to join the Russians' May 9<sup>th</sup> celebrations of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, marking when German forces surrendered to Moscow and the other allied governments. President Xi attended the massive Red Square military parade on May 9th. Afterwards, the Chinese and Russian flotillas assembled and together sailed to the exercise staging area in the Aegean Sea. The subsequent maneuvers comprised four stages—planning, assembling forces, an active segment from May 17-21, and a departure stage. During the active stage, the navies practiced safe navigation, at-sea underway replenishment, escorting civilian vessels, and live-fire drills. The crews also rehearsed chemical, biological, and radiological protection along with ASW and air defense.<sup>28)</sup>

Between August 20 and August 28, Joint Sea 2015 Phase II took place in the Peter the Great Gulf, on the coast of Cape Klerka, and in the Sea of Japan off the coast of Primorsky Krai, near Vladivostok and some 400 kilometers from Japanese territory. The PLAN contributed more ships than during Phase I, providing seven surface warships, including two guided missile destroyers (the Shenyang and Taizhou; two guided-missile frigates (the Linyi and Hengyang); two dock-landing ships (the

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28) *Ibid.*, and Franz-Stefan Gady, China and Russia conclude Mediterranean Drill, *The Diplomat*, May 22, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/china-and-russia-conclude-naval-drill-in-mediterranean/>; "Russian, Chinese Navies Hold Anti-Submarine Training During Joint Drills," *Sputnik*, May 18, 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/world/20150518/1022284002.html>; and "Not aimed at third country': Russia & China start joint drills at Mediterranean," *RT*, May 17, 2015, <http://rt.com/news/259437-russia-china-navy-drills/>.

Changbaishan and Yunwushan); and one supply ship (the Taihu). The warships came from three PLAN fleets—the North China Sea fleet, East China Sea Fleet, and the South China Sea Fleet. The PLA also sent several fighter planes, along with several hundred marine personnel and more than twenty amphibious vehicles. Meanwhile, Russia contributed 16 surface ships, 12 aircraft, nine amphibious vehicles, two submarines, and 200 marines. The active phase of the exercise, which occurred from August 24 to August 27, saw live fire drills that simulated joint air, sea, and submarine defenses, anti-sabotage activities, and a joint amphibious assault by marines from both countries employing helicopters and landing craft (such as the PLA ZBD-05 infantry vehicles), simulating the evacuation of civilians threatened by terrorists. Not only did the high-profile August 25 mock beach assault represent the first Sino-Russian amphibious drill, but the maneuvers also demonstrated both navies' capacity to transport substantial personnel and equipment into a simulated combat zone.<sup>29)</sup>

## VI. Joint Sea 2016

A total of 18 ships, 21 aircraft, over 250 helicopter-borne marines, and 15 units of military equipment were involved in the Joint Sea 2016.<sup>30)</sup> The PLAN sent the Zhengzhou Type 052C destroyer as its lead ship, along with the Guangzhou Type 052B destroyer, the Kunlunshan Type 071 Landing Platform Dock, three Type 054A multirole frigates, a pair of supply ships,

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29) Sam LaGrone, "China, Russia Land 400 Marines in First Joint Pacific Amphibious Exercise," USNI News, August 26, 2015, <https://news.usni.org/2015/08/26/china-russia-land-400-marines-in-first-joint-pacific-amphibious-exercise>. "What Do Russia-China Joint Naval Drills Really Mean?," Sputnik, August 22, 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/military/20150822/1026058354/china-russia-navy-alliance-exercises.html>; "Russia, China Hold 'Unprecedented' Joint Naval Drills," Sputnik News, August 20, 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/world/20150820/1025981512/russia-china-hold-naval-drills.html> "Navy completes joint beach drill," *China Daily*, August 26, 2015, [www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/cn\\_eu/2015-08/26/content\\_21706536.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/cn_eu/2015-08/26/content_21706536.htm).

30) "Joint Sea-2016: Russia-China naval drills," Russia Behind the Headlines, September 22, 2016, [https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/pictures/2016/09/22/joint-sea-2016-russia-china-naval-drills\\_632057](https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/pictures/2016/09/22/joint-sea-2016-russia-china-naval-drills_632057).

two diesel-powered submarines, 11 aircraft, eight helicopters, a company of 160 marines, ZDB-05 amphibious tanks, ZDB-2000 amphibious fighting vehicles, and other pieces of military equipment. The RFN contributed its 7,500-ton Udoloy-class Admiral Tributs destroyer, the Udoloy-class Admiral Vinogradov destroyer, a 4,000-ton Ropucha-class landing ship capable of deploying up to 24 armored assault vehicles, along with two supply ships, Alatau tug, the Pechenga tanker, about 90 marines, and a couple of helicopters.<sup>31)</sup> The exercise began at the port of Zhanjiang, in southern Guangdong province and the base of the Nanhai (South China Sea) Fleet, on September 12. The drills then simulated amphibious landings, maritime search and rescue, interdicting and boarding ships at sea, combined air and island defenses, and a submarine hunt. According to PLAN spokesperson Liang Yang, the exercise features “the highest ever level of standardization, combat and digitalization in recent China-Russia drills.”<sup>32)</sup> For example, the two navies employed an advanced command and communication system.<sup>33)</sup> The beach landings and ASW drills represented the most innovative aspect of the maneuvers. Joint Sea 2016 formally ended on September 19.

These exercises proved controversial in simulating “joint-island seizing missions” in the South China Sea.<sup>34)</sup> Before the exercise, China had been constructing artificial islands in that body of water. Additionally, the Permanent Court of Arbitration had just ruled against Beijing in a case brought by the Philippines over China’s restricting access to the fishing grounds near the Scarborough Shoal, situated some 200 kilometers west of the Philippines’ Luzon Island. The PRC Ministry of National Defense insisted that the drills were “not directed against any third party” but

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31) Jeffrey Lin and P.W. Singer, “The Chinese-Russian South China Sea Naval Exercises: What Happened And Why Did It Matter?,” *Popular Science*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.popsoci.com/chinese-russian-south-china-sea-naval-exercises-what-happened-and-why-did-it-matter/>.

32) Sam LaGrone, “China, Russia Kick Off Joint South China Sea Naval Exercise: Includes ‘Island Seizing’ Drill,” *USNI News*, September 12, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/09/12/china-russia-start-joint-south-china-sea-naval-exercise-includes-island-seizing-drill#more-21558>.

33) An Baijie, “China-Russia naval drill ends with island-seizing mission,” *China Daily*, September 19, 2016, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-09/19/content\\_26824297.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-09/19/content_26824297.htm).

34) Ankit Panda, “Chinese, Russian Navies to Hold 8 Days of Naval Exercises in the South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, September 12, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/chinese-russian-navies-to-hold-8-days-of-naval-exercises-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

“aimed at consolidating the comprehensive partnership of strategic collaboration between China and Russia, deepening pragmatic and friendly cooperation between the two militaries and enhancing the two navies’ capability to jointly dealing with maritime security threats.”<sup>35)</sup> Yet, some Chinese analysts, such as Professor Yu Sui acknowledged that the exercise “at least to a certain extent a response to the so-called arbitration concerning the South China Sea.” He accused the United States of “poking its fingers everywhere while Japan plays the fox assuming the tiger’s power.” He insisted that this “two-man comic show” will definitely not scare the Chinese people, who are contemptuous of the performance.<sup>36)</sup> The Sino-Russian maneuvers did occur in waters internationally recognized as belonging to China, near its southern coastal city of Guangdong. Nonetheless, the implication of the joint exercise was that Moscow supported Beijing’s expansive territorial claims in a broader area, even though the PRC’s claims in the South China Sea overlap with those of Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Moscow had traditionally remained noncommittal regarding China’s territorial claims, but Joint Sea 2016 illustrated how Russia’s had been shifting toward Beijing’s position in the past decade.

## VII. Joint Sea 2017

Joint Sea 2017 also occurred in novel locations, in this case in the Baltic and Okhotsk Seas. The exercises in the Baltic Sea marked the first time that PLAN warships appeared in this sensitive region in northeast Europe, where the RFN faces off with several NATO navies. This drill also was the first Joint Sea exercise that included a submarine rescue drill, along with anti-submarine warfare tasks.<sup>37)</sup> The Chinese ships and

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35) Yu Sui, “Thoughts on China-Russia Joint Military Exercise in South China Sea,” *China-US Focus*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/thoughts-on-china-russia-joint-military-exercise-in-south-china-sea>.

36) *Ibid.*

37) “Chinese naval fleet departs for joint drill in Russia,” Xinhua, September 13, 2017, <http://news>.

aircrafts that were a part of Joint Sea 2017 included missile destroyers, missile frigates, supply ships, submarine rescue ships, rescue vehicles, shipborne helicopters, and marines. The RFN brought an anti-submarine ship, a frigate, a rescue ship, a deep submersible rescue vehicle, two shipborne helicopters, and marines. Furthermore, parts of the Joint Sea 2017 exercise involved two Il-38 planes, two Tu-142M3 planes, a Ka-27PS and a Ka-27 helicopter duo, as well as a Z-9C and a Z-9D shipborne helicopter.<sup>38)</sup> Upon the drills' completion, the PLAN ships docked at St. Petersburg to join the annual Russian Navy Day celebrations there.

Following a welcoming ceremony on the Korabelnaya Embankment, the shore-based activities took place in Vladivostok from September 18-21. Afterwards, the drills' at-sea activities transpired in the Sea of Japan and Sea of Okhotsk.<sup>39)</sup> These involved eleven surface ships, two submarines, two deep submergence rescue vehicles, four anti-submarine aircraft, and four shipborne helicopters.<sup>40)</sup> The shore-based activities consisted of tactical briefings, grenade launchings, overcoming obstacles, and marksmanship competition. For the at-sea activities, the ships formed two mixed Sino-Russian tactical groups. One group was commanded by a PLAN Shijazhuang destroyer, whereas the other group was commanded by a RFN Udaloy-class destroyer.<sup>41)</sup> The first group comprised a PLA naval guided-missile destroyer, a RFN anti-submarine warfare ship, and a RFN naval rescue ship, while the second group consisted of a PLA guided-missile frigate, a PLA frigate, a PLA comprehensive supply ship,

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xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/13/c\_136606786.htm.

38) Ankit Panda, "Chinese, Russian Navies Hold Exercises in Sea of Japan, Okhotsk Sea," *The Diplomat*, September 21, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/chinese-russian-navies-hold-exercise-s-in-sea-of-japan-okhotsk-sea/>; and Huang Panyue, "Second stage of Russian-Chinese naval exercise to involve 11 ships, 2 submarines," *Tasnim*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/09/17/1522092/second-stage-of-russian-chinese-naval-exercise-to-involve-11-ships-2-submarines>.

39) "Russian-Chinese naval drills 'Joint Sea 2017' completed in Valdivostok," *TASS*, September 25, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/967324>.

40) Panyue, "Second stage of Russian-Chinese naval exercise."

41) Panda, "Chinese, Russian Navies Hold Exercises."



and a RFN cruiser. These rehearsed offensive and defensive combat operations such as joint air and anti-submarine defense, ship-to-sea gunnery, maritime search and rescue, liberating vessels seized by pirates, and underway cargo replenishment.<sup>42)</sup> During the drills, a PLA submarine rescue ship partnered with a RFN rescue ship to rehearse aiding a simulated distressed submarine situated on the ocean floor some 50 meters below the surface.<sup>43)</sup> Joint Sea 2017 ended with a closing ceremony in Vladivostok.

## VIII. Joint Sea 2019

Earlier in the following year, both the Chinese and Russian government had discussed plans for a Joint Sea 2018 exercise in the fall, to occur off the Qingdao port in east China's Shandong Province. They held several rounds of consultations to discuss the resources, size, and timeline for the announced exercise.<sup>44)</sup> Nonetheless, the drills did not occur, perhaps due to the decision to have the PLA participate, for the first time, in the most important annual national Russian military strategic exercise, which took place in Russia's Eastern ("Vostok") Military District near China from September 11-15. Some 3,200 PLA ground troops, along with 900 pieces of military equipment and several dozen helicopters and warplanes, joined Vostok 2018, along with a much smaller contingent of Mongolian soldiers. Though this represented the largest PLA contingent sent to a foreign military exercise, the PLAN did not participate, since Vostok 2018 was primarily a land and air drill.<sup>45)</sup>

China and Russia resumed their regular Joint Sea drills the following

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42) "China, Russia complete phase one joint naval drills in Baltic Sea," Xinhua, July 28, 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/28/c\\_136478591.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/28/c_136478591.htm).

43) "Na ucheniyax 'Morskoye vzaimodeystviy' voennye otrabotali spasenie terpyashchey bedstviy podpodki," TASS, September 23, 2017, <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4586519>.

44) "Russia, China to hold joint naval drills in Yellow Sea," TASS, April 26, 2018, <https://tass.com/defense/1001880>.

45) "Sino-Russian drill set to guard regional peace," *China Daily*, August 31, 2018, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0831/c90000-9495872.html>.

year. From April 29 to May 4, the PLAN and the RFN conducted Joint Sea 2019 in the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan, off China's Qingdao port.<sup>46)</sup> The initial ceremony was held in the port of Qingdao, immediately after the naval parade there, which consisted of 30 ships sailing off the coast to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PLAN.<sup>47)</sup> Qui Yanpeng, deputy commander of the PLAN, oversaw the Chinese contingent of Joint Sea 2019. Moscow sent Russian Navy deputy commander-in-chief Alexander Vitko to direct the Russian ships.<sup>48)</sup> The first few days of the exercise, which ran from April 29 to May 1, comprised shore-based planning intended mainly to establish methods of communication and coordination. The subsequent maritime drills, which lasted until May 4, was overseen by a joint command headquarters based in Qingdao, led by captains from both navies.<sup>49)</sup> During the drills, the warships fired at moving air and sea targets. They also conducted anti-air, anti-submarine, and a joint submarine rescue drill.<sup>50)</sup>

Twelve vessels in total, consisting of five warships from China and seven from Russia, joined Joint Sea 2019.<sup>51)</sup> The PLAN sent the Hongzehu, a Type 926 submarine rescue and support ship.<sup>52)</sup> In addition to that vessel, China sent two advanced guided missile destroyers, the Harbin and Changchun. Two PLAN guided missile frigates, the Wuhu and the

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46) "China and Russia Begin Joint Naval Interaction Exercises," Navy Recognition, April 30, 2019, <http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2019/april/7034-china-and-russia-begin-joint-naval-interaction-exercises.html>.

47) Guo Yuandan and Liu Xuanzun. "China and Russia May Conduct Joint Naval Exercises in Late April," *Global Times*, March 28, 2019, <http://www.ecns.cn/news/military/2019-03-29/detail-iffzwnmy4088796.shtml>.

48) Li Jiayao. "Russian Vessels Arrive in Qingdao for Joint Exercise with Chinese Navy." Xinhua, April 30, 2019. [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-04/30/content\\_9492655.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-04/30/content_9492655.htm).

49) Bertil Lintner and Chiang Mai, "Eyes on America, China-Russia flex naval muscles," *Asia Times*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/04/article/eye-on-america-china-russia-flex-naval-muscles/>.

50) Yuandan and Xuanzun. "China and Russia."

51) *Ibid.*

52) "Chinese Navy Conducts Naval Exercise to Perform Submarine Rescue Missions," Navy Recognition, May 25, 2021, <https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2021/may/10196-chinese-navy-conducts-naval-exercise-to-perform-submarine-rescue-missions.html>.

Handan, also participated in the drills.<sup>53)</sup> The RFN Pacific Fleet contingent consisted of two Udaloy-class destroyers, which are large, guided-missile ASW ships in service since the 1980s. These ships were accompanied by the search and rescue vessel Igor Belousov, the cruiser Varyag, the tanker Irkut, the Ropucha-class landing ship Oslyabya, and the corvette Sovershenny. (Western sources sometimes term modern Russian corvettes as frigates since they have enhanced capabilities normally found on Western frigates rather than corvettes.) Altogether China and Russia sent four helicopters and seven aircrafts to the exercise, especially the live-fire anti-air drills.<sup>54)</sup>

## IX. Naval Operation Mosi 2019

From November 25 to December 1, 2019, China, Russia, and South Africa conducted trilateral naval drills off the southern coast of South Africa in False Bay, a small body of water situated off Cape Town and between the Cape Peninsula and the Hottentots Holland Mountains.<sup>55)</sup> This drill, termed “Naval Operation Mosi” (Mosi means smoke in the South African language of Sesotho), represented the first Sino-Russian maritime exercise that incorporated a third country’s navy. The PLAN sent the Weifang frigate. South Africa provided two vessels: their main Valour-class frigate, SAS Amatola, and a smaller replenishment ship, the SAS Drakenberg.<sup>56)</sup> The Russian flotilla was led by

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53) Yao Jianing. “Changes in Vessels of China’s Five Maritime Parades,” China Military Online, April 13, 2018. [http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2018-04/13/content\\_8003875.htm](http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2018-04/13/content_8003875.htm).

54) Franz-Stefan Gady. “China, Russia Kick Off Bilateral Naval Exercise ‘Joint Sea’,” *The Diplomat*, April 29, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/china-russia-kick-off-bilateral-naval-exercise-joint-sea/>; and Huang Panyue. “Russia ‘Joint Sea-2019’ Exercise Makes Two ‘First Times’,” China Military Online, May 5, 2019, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/05/content\\_9495927.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/05/content_9495927.htm).

55) “S. African Navy Hosts Russia, China for Maritime Exercise,” Xinhua, November 26, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/26/c\\_138582909.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/26/c_138582909.htm).

56) “Joint Naval Military Exercise Code-Named Mosi in South Africa,” Navy Recognition, November 30, 2019, <http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2019/november/7732-joint-naval-military-exercise-code-named-mosi-in-south-africa.html>; and “SA Navy Commits Two Platforms for Joint Exercise with China and Russia,” DefenceWeb, November 20, 2019, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/sa-navy-commits-two-platforms-for-joint>

Slava-class missile cruiser Marshal Ustinov. The other Russian vessels comprised the Kaliningradneft class medium seagoing tanker Vyaz'ma, and the rescue tug SB-406. The lead Russian ship arrived in Cape Town on November 24, but the operations stage of the drill did not commence until November 28. The first few days following the arrival of the warships consisted of planning for the maritime exercises, along with some military social and cultural activities.<sup>57)</sup> Starting on November 28, the ships practiced surface gunnery, multinational maneuvering, helicopter cross-deck landings, rescuing hijacked ships, and establishing disaster control measures.<sup>58)</sup> The PLAN flotilla was led by Rear Admiral Liu Zongcheng, the South African Fleet was commanded by Rear Admiral Bubele Mhlana, while Rear Admiral Vladimir Zemskov oversaw the Russian contingent.<sup>59)</sup>

The stated goals of Naval Operation Mosi 2019 were to protect maritime navigation and security as well as to enhance each navy's preparedness and capabilities.<sup>60)</sup> These waters lie athwart international maritime trade routes for Asia, Europe, and Africa; the southern part of Africa is where the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans merge.<sup>61)</sup> China's Belt and Road Initiative has expanded trade and economic relations between the PRC and South Africa; this exercise deepened their military cooperation as well. Russian military expert Captain Vasily Dandykin even termed the exercise a BRICS military drill. At the 11<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit earlier that month, President Putin had expressed a desire to see the BRICS bloc—consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—expand its economic and political cooperation into the military sphere.<sup>62)</sup>

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-exercise-with-china-and-russia/.

57) "S. African Navy Hosts Russia, China."

58) "Joint Naval Military Exercise Code-Named Mosi"; and Elizabeth Shim, "Chinese, Russian, South African Navies Conduct 1st Maritime Drills," United Press International, November 27, 2019. [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2019/11/27/Chinese-Russian-South-African-navies-conduct-1st-maritime-drills/2201574873439/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2019/11/27/Chinese-Russian-South-African-navies-conduct-1st-maritime-drills/2201574873439/).

59) Ankit Panda. "Chinese, Russian, South African Navies Conduct Trilateral Naval Exercises," *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/chinese-russian-south-african-navies-conduct-trilateral-naval-exercises/>.

60) *Ibid.*; and Shim. "Chinese, Russian, South African Navies."

61) "Joint Drills of China, Russia, South Africa Aimed to Ensure Stability," TASS, November 28, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1093747>.

## X. Operation Marine Security Belt, 2019

From December 27 to 29, 2019, China, Russia, and Iran conducted joint naval maneuvers in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. Entitled “Operation Marine Security Belt,” this four-day exercise began in Chabahar in southeastern Iran and continued in the Indian Ocean.<sup>63)</sup> Situated between the outlet of the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz leading to the Arabian Sea, one fifth of the world’s oil passes through the Strait, which connects to the Gulf of Oman.<sup>64)</sup> The stated purposes of these drills were sharing experiences with naval operations along with practicing coordinated action against terrorists and pirates.<sup>65)</sup> Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani commanded the Iranian flotilla, Vice Admiral Alexander Fedotenkov the Russian warships, and Vice Admiral Tian Zhong oversaw the PLAN flotilla. In their public messaging, the Chinese and Russian governments played down the significance of the drills, while the Iranian Foreign Ministry elevated their strategic profile. Rear Admiral Khanzadi asserted that, “Today, the era of American free action in the region is over, and they (US forces) must leave the region gradually.”<sup>66)</sup> Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani added that the trilateral exercise would show Western powers, particularly the United States, which had just withdrawn from the 2015 nuclear deal and reimposed comprehensive sanctions on Tehran, that Iran could not be isolated.<sup>67)</sup> In contrast, Chinese and Russian representatives, perhaps wary of antagonized Saudi

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62) Peter Fabricius. “South Africa’s Military Drills with Russia and China Raise Eyebrows,” Institute for Security Studies Africa, November 29, 2019, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201912040287.html>.

63) “‘Marine Security Belt’ Drill in the Eyes of World Media.” *Tehran Times*, December 29, 2019, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/443510/Marine-Security-Belt-drill-in-the-eyes-of-world-media>.

64) Verity Ratcliffe, Julian Lee, and Javier Blas, “Why the Strait of Hormuz Is a Global Oil Flashpoint,” Bloomberg, January 10, 2021 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-10/why-the-strait-of-hormuz-is-a-global-oil-flashpoint-quicktake>.

65) Syed Fazl-e Haider, “The Strategic Implications of Chinese-Iranian-Russian Naval Drills in the Indian Ocean,” *China Brief*, volume 20, no. 1, January 17, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-strategic-implications-of-chinese-iranian-russian-naval-drills-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

66) “Iran Navy Chief: US Must Leave Region,” Tasnim, December 29, 2019, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2019/12/29/2169879/iran-navy-chief-us-must-leave-region>.

67) “‘Marine Security Belt’ Drill.”

Arabia, Israel, and other anti-Iranian governments in the Middle East, framed the drills as routine maritime maneuvers designed to practice benign naval skills. They also disclaimed any anti-Western intentions behind the maneuvers.<sup>68)</sup> For instance, PLA spokesperson Wu Qian said that the drill was a “normal military exchange” and was “not necessarily connected with the regional situation.”<sup>69)</sup>

As suggested by the Chinese and Russian rhetoric, the drills involved low-intensity tasks such as combating pirates, extinguishing fires, and rehearsing rescue missions.<sup>70)</sup> The Chinese and Russian ships involved were accordingly not especially important. Though the PLAN only sent one ship to the event, its Type-052D Luyang III-class guided missile destroyer Xining, was the most prominent vessel in the exercises.<sup>71)</sup> The only more advanced destroyer class in the PLAN were the Type-055 vessels. The RFN sent the Yaroslav Mudry, a Neustrashimy-class frigate, as their lead unit, along with the Elnya tanker and the Viktor Konetsky tugboat.<sup>72)</sup> The Iranian Navy provided the FF-72 frigate, the Alborz, which was a prominent combatant during the tanker wars with Iraq in the 1980s.<sup>73)</sup> The other Iranian Navy vessels participating in the drills were the frigate Sahand, the corvette Bayandor, and the hovercraft Tondar.<sup>74)</sup> The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy also sent Coast

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68) “China, Russia, Iran to Hold Joint Naval Exercise.” Xinhua, December 26, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/26/c\\_138659848.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/26/c_138659848.htm).

69) “China, Russia, Iran begin joint naval drills,” Deutsche Welle, December 27, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/china-russia-iran-begin-joint-naval-drills/a-51807634>.

70) “Commandos Rescue Ships from Assaults, Fire during ‘Marine Security Belt’ Drill,” Mehr News Agency, December 29, 2019, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/153840/Commandos-rescue-ships-from-assaults-fire-during-Marine-Security>; and “Russia, China, Iran Start Joint Naval Drills in Indian Ocean,” Reuters, December 27, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/27/russia-china-iran-start-joint-naval-drills-in-indian-ocean-a68766>.

71) Haider, “Strategic Implications of Chinese-Iranian-Russian Naval Drills.”

72) “Russia sends three ships to joint drills with China and Iran,” TASS, December 26, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1104123>.

73) “3<sup>rd</sup> day of trilateral joint naval drill between Iran, Russia, China terminates,” Mehr News Agency, December 29, 2019, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/153845/3rd-day-of-trilateral-joint-naval-drill-between-Iran-Russia>.

74) “Iran: Most Advanced Homemade Destroyer, Sahand, Joins Persian Gulf Fleet,” Associated Press, December 1, 2018, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2018/12/01/iran-most-advanced-homemade-destroyer-sahand-joins-persian-gulf-fleet/>.

Guard vessel Shahid Naserinejad and catamaran Shahid Nazeri.<sup>75)</sup>

## XI. Joint Sea 2021

Between October 14–17, 2021, China and Russia conducted Joint Sea 2021 in the Peter the Great Gulf and adjoining areas of the Sea of Japan. The PRC forces participating in the exercise consisted of ships from the Eastern, Southern, and Northern Theater Commands, as well as fixed-wing aircraft attached to PLAN naval aviation. The vessels included the Type 055 destroyer Nanchang, Type 052D destroyer Kuming, Type 054 frigates Binzhou and Liuzhou, a Fuchi-class replenishment ship Dongpinghu, a diesel submarine, and a rescue vessel.<sup>76)</sup> The PLA used these exercises to practice deploying its novel naval hardware, including the Nanchang and new control, control, and communications technologies.<sup>77)</sup> The drills saw indigenous Chinese fixed-wing ASW aircraft, the PLA Air Force's J-20 stealth plane, and the 10,000-ton-PLA command ship Nanchang participate, for the first time, in an exercise with a foreign navy.<sup>78)</sup> The Russian forces participating in the exercise consisted of ships and naval aviation from the Pacific Fleet and aircraft from the Eastern Military District. The RFN contributed mine-sweepers, submarines, frigates, and helicopters. The ships included Udaloy-class destroyers Admiral Tributs and Admiral Panteleyev, Project 20380

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75) Haider, "Strategic Implications."

76) Guo Yuandan and Liu Xuanzun, "China, Russia hold joint naval drill in Sea of Japan, display 'higher level of trust, capability'," *Global Times*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236294.shtml>; "Russia, China Wrap up Drills off Japan, Pledge More Joint Exercises," US NI News, October 25, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/10/25/russia-china-wrap-up-drills-off-japan-pledge-more-joint-exercises>; and "Russia, China kick off joint naval maneuvers in Sea of Japan," TASS, October 14, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1349479>.

77) Ben Noon and Chris Bassler, "Schrodinger's Military?: Challenges for China's Military Modernization Ambitions," *War on the Rocks*, October 14, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/schrodingers-military-challenges-for-the-chinas-military-modernization-ambitions/>.

78) "China, Russia launch joint naval drills in Russian Far East," Associated Press, October 14, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-china-beijing-foreign-policy-8a267ec78ff261e0bed8a97c5672a663>; and Mark Episkopos, "Russia and China Are Holding Naval Exercises in Japan's Back Yard," *The National Interest*, October 16, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia-and-china-are-holding-naval-exercises-japan%E2%80%99s-back-yard-195110>.

Steregushchiy-class corvettes Gromkiy and Hero of the Russian Federation Aldar Tsydenzhapov, two unidentified coastal minesweepers; the Project 877 Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine Ust-Bolsheretsk; an unidentified missile boat; and an unidentified tugboat, and the Marshal Nedelin-class tracking ship Marshal Krylov.<sup>79)</sup> Several Sukhoi Su-30SM Flanker multirole fighters participated in an anti-aircraft component of the exercises. This exercise was meant to replicate actual combat conditions to a greater degree than previous drills. The participating ships practiced joint maneuvering and communications, destroying floating mines with artillery fire, targeting simulated moving surface ships, defending against hostile aircraft, and tracking submarines.<sup>80)</sup>

Following the formal conclusion of Joint Sea 2021, the PLAN and RFN for the first time conducted a long-range combined naval patrol, from October 17-23. Due to Tokyo's Cold War-era decision to limit its territorial claims in the 12-mile-Tsugaru Strait between Honshu and Hokkaido to three miles—decided to allow U.S. ships carrying nuclear weapons to traverse the Strait without violating Japan's formal policy of banning nuclear weapons from its territory—the PLAN and RFN ships in the joint patrol remained in international waters throughout this transit.<sup>81)</sup> The Chinese and Russian ships eventually travelled 1,700 nautical miles and nearly circled Japan's main island. The Japanese government viewed the unprecedented Sino-Russian naval patrol with concern and monitored the ships' passage with minesweepers and P-3C maritime surveillance aircraft. Upon conclusion, the two flotillas traveled near Japan's southern coast through the Osumi Strait into the East China Sea, where they parted to their respective national ports.<sup>82)</sup> According to

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79) Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Russia, China Wrap Up Drills Off Japan, Pledge More Joint Exercises," *USNI News*, October 25, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/10/25/russia-china-wrap-up-drills-off-japan-pledge-more-joint-exercises>; and "Russia, China Kick off Joint Naval Maneuvers."

80) Yuandan and Xuanzun, "China, Russia Hold Joint Naval Drill.": and "Russia, China kick off joint naval maneuvers."

81) Julian Ryall, "China and Russia send message to Japan and US with first-of-its-kind transit by warships," *South China Morning Post*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-russia-navies-sailing-tsugaru-strait-message-to-japan-us-2021-10>.

82) Brad Lendon, "Analysis: Why Russian and Chinese Warships Teaming up to Circle Japan Is a Big



the Russian Ministry of Defense, the combined patrol aimed “to demonstrate the state flags of Russia and China, maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and also protect facilities of both countries’ maritime economic activity.”<sup>83)</sup> According to the PRC media, PLAN commanders commented that, “The joint exercise and joint cruise have further developed the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era, and effectively improved both sides’ capabilities of joint operations, which was conducive to jointly maintaining international and regional strategic stability.”<sup>84)</sup>

## XII. Vostok–2022

Though the PLA had sent ground forces to Vostok 2018, Tsentr 2019, and Kavkaz 2020, the two armies organized a special joint strategic exercise in August 2021 on Chinese territory, at the Qingtongxia Combined Arms Tactical Training Base in northwest China in the Gobi Desert, rather than having PLA send forces into European Russia for Zapad/Interaction-2021 (which would have amplified NATO concerns about China’s growing military reach). More than 10,000 troops from the armored, airborne, army aviation, artillery, and specials forces participated in it, along with some 200 armored vehicles, almost 100 artillery pieces, and more than 100 fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, but the drill had no naval component.<sup>85)</sup>

While many countries contributed ground forces to Vostok-2022, which ran from September 1-7, the naval drills that occurred within its framework involved only Chinese and Russian warships, along with

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Deal,” CNN, October 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/25/asia/china-russia-naval-flotilla-circles-japan-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

83) “Russian, Chinese warships conduct first ever joint patrol in western Pacific,” TASS, October 23, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1353271>.

84) “China-Russia Joint Sea 2021 military exercise concludes,” China Military Online, October 23, 2021, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-10/23/content\\_4897383.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-10/23/content_4897383.htm).

85) Richard Weitz, “Assessing the Sino-Russian ‘West Interaction 2021’ Combined Exercise,” *RINSA Forum: Korea National Defense University*, vol 75 (August 31, 2021), pp. 1-4.

supporting aviation and coastal forces. Vostok-2022 saw all three branches of the PLA, for the first time, join a single Russian-led military exercise. Vostok-2022 also marked the first occasion when China joined a prominent military exercise with Russia when the latter was engaged in a major war, further testifying to their still strong security partnership. The PRC Ministry of National Defense asserted that China's participation in Vostok 2022 intended to advance "friendly cooperation among the armed forces of all countries, as well as to increasing the level of strategic interaction by all parties and strengthen the ability to respond to various security threats."<sup>86)</sup>

The PLAN North Sea Fleet sent the Type 055 cruiser Nanchang, the Type 054A guided missile frigate Yancheng, and the Type 903A supply ship Dongpinghu. All three PLAN ships had already worked with the RFN, either through participating in Joint Sea 2021 or escorting the Russian vessels that escorted the ship conveying chemical weapons out of Syria for disposal in Europe in 2014.<sup>87)</sup> The RFN Pacific Fleet contributed the Project 1155 Udaloy-class destroyer Marshal Shaposhnikov, the Project 20385 Gremyashchiy-class multi-role corvette Gremyashchiy, and the Steregushchiy-class frigate Hero of the Russian Federation Aldar Tsydenzhapov. The Pacific Fleet's Oslabya, Peresvet, and Nikolay Vilkov landing ships also simulated coastal operations. The Russian Navy aviation units active in Vostok-2022 included the Kamov Ka-27 ASW helicopters and Ilyushin Il-38 "Dolphin" maritime patrol-and-ASW aircraft. The ten warships and additional support vessels that participated in Vostok-2022 rehearsed defense of sea lanes, securing marine economic activity, and supporting ground troops in littoral zones. They also tracked warships, practiced mine sweeping, and simulated defending ships against air, amphibious, and other types of attack.<sup>88)</sup> For instance,

86) "China's army to take part in Vostok-2022 exercise in Russia, says Beijing," TASS, August 17, 2022, <https://tass.com/defense/1494763>.

87) Guo Yuandan, "China and Russia may carry out joint naval patrol following Vostok-2022," *Global Times*, September 5, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202209/1274618.shtml>.

88) "Russia, China initiate drills on aircraft carrier at Vostok-2022," Al Mayadeen English, September 9, 2022, <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/russia-china-initiate-drills-on-aircraft-carrier-at-vostok-2>; "Russian and Chinese naval branches practice during Vostok 2022 exercise," Navy Recognition, September 7, 2022, <https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2022/september/12167-russian-and-chinese-naval-branches-pra>

their vessels “detected and tracked two groups of air targets” and then employed defensive measures such as “operation electronic countermeasures” along with active and passive measures, including using artillery for both air defense and destroying hysterical sea mines.<sup>89)</sup> Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin said that some of the scenarios posited combating an aircraft carrier and other naval strike groups.<sup>90)</sup> The ships conducted a joint hunt for a submarine in the central part of the Sea of Japan. PLA and Russian helicopters also practiced hovering over and landing on the decks of each other’s vessels.<sup>91)</sup> After Vostok-2022, the Chinese and Russian navies conducted their second joint naval patrol.

### XIII. Objectives and Results

That China and Russia have sustained their naval exercises for over a decade underscores the value Beijing and Moscow see in them. These Sino-Russian maneuvers advance several goals of paramount importance to both governments—enhancing mutual ties, deterring threats, intimidating rivals, and augmenting their national and joint military capabilities. The exercises, like all Sino-Russian security cooperation, are not explicitly justified as pursuing collective defense. The bilateral Sino-Russian friendship treaty, signed in 2001 and renewed in 2021, lacks a mutual defense clause. Instead, the accord obliges both sides to refrain from aggressive acts toward one another and to consult about mutual threats and international crises. PRC officials have repeatedly stated that they will not

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ctice-during-vostok-2022-exercise.html; and Evgeny Korenev, “Vostok-2022: Rossiya i yee soyuzniki ukrepyayut poyas bezopasnosti,” *Eurasia Expert*, September 7, 2022, <https://eurasia.expert/vostok-2022-rossiya-i-soyuzniki-ukrepyayut-poyas-bezopasnosti/>.

89) Korenev, “Vostok-2022”; and “Russian and Chinese naval branches practice during Vostok 2022 exercise.”

90) Kristina Tsytsura, “Rossiya i Kitay otrabotali na ucheniyax ‘Vostok-2022’ razgrom avianosnyx grupp.” *Vzglyad*, September 9, 2022, <https://vz.ru/news/2022/9/9/1176765.html>.

91) Minnie Chan, “China, Russia destroy ‘hostile submarine’ in Sea of Japan joint drill,” *South China Morning Post*, September 6, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3191572/china-russia-destroy-hostile-submarine-sea-japan-joint-drill>.

join foreign military alliances. Nonetheless, the naval drills affirm the two countries' commitment to military ties as a core dimension of their evolving security relationship. As PRC Vice Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping put it, their military cooperation is crucial for a “comprehensive strategic partnership” between Beijing and Moscow.<sup>92)</sup> Referencing Joint Sea 2015, PLA Senior Colonel Yang Yujun likewise said that the “purpose of the exercise is to consolidate and develop the China-Russia all-round strategic coordination partnership, to deepen the pragmatic and friendly cooperation between the Chinese and Russian militaries, and to enhance the organization and command capabilities.”<sup>93)</sup>

These exercises also enable both countries to demonstrate that they are global naval powers and can pool their resources to achieve diverse maritime objectives. In terms of geography, the Sino-Russian naval exercises have occurred in a greater variety of locations than the ground or strategic aviation drills, ranging from the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas to China's and Russia's Pacific coasts. In terms of operational and tactical proficiency, these recurring Sino-Russian maneuvers enable their navies to rehearse an expanding set of skills in changing locations and with varying forces and equipment. In those years when the Chinese and Russian navies conduct Joint Sea drills in two separate parts of the world, the second phase of these exercises typically take place in the Indo-Pacific region, whereas the first phase has occurred in more diverse bodies of water, allowing the militaries to practice more missions in more locations. The two fleets have jointly practiced traditional and non-traditional tasks including coordinating offensive and defensive combat operations such as joint anti-submarine warfare, combined air defense, ship-to-sea gunnery, maritime search and rescue, escorting civilian vessels, launching amphibious assaults, liberating vessels seized by pirates, and providing underway cargo replenishment. In 2016, Russian

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92) “Major Russia-China Joint Naval Drills End in Primorye,” Sputnik, August 28, 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/military/20150828/1026286054.html>.

93) Ankit Panda, “China and Russia to Hold Military Exercise in the Sea of Japan,” *The Diplomat*, July 31, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/china-and-russia-to-hold-military-exercise-in-the-sea-of-japan/>.

Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said that the “high level of practical cooperation” seen in “such exercises help improve combat skills and credibility of the Russian and Chinese armed forces.”<sup>94)</sup> Though the PLAN has decreased its use of Soviet- and Russian-origin weaponry, the regular drills help sustain potential interoperability despite the Chinese military’s increasing use of indigenously developed technology. The PRC and Russian leaderships perceive each other’s military power as useful for preventing the United States from focusing exclusively against one of their countries. PRC and other sources claim there has been greater “combat realism” in the more recent drills. Nonetheless, some analysts still consider the Sino-Russian exercises as insufficiently rigorous to achieve the capability and interoperability gains that accrue from NATO and U.S.-ROK exercises.<sup>95)</sup> Immediately before Vostok 2022, the UK Ministry of Defence tweeted that the poor performance of the Russian military in Ukraine underscored that, “Such events are heavily scripted, do not encourage initiative, and primarily aim to impress Russian leaders and international audiences.”<sup>96)</sup>

In any case, participation in these drills enables China and Russia to signal reciprocal support for purposes of diplomacy and deterrence. Demonstrating military prowess is a time-honored tactic for reassuring friends and deterring adversaries. PRC authors in particular underscore the value of these exercises for promoting, or at least confirming, a high level of mutual trust among the participants.<sup>97)</sup> Though the potential for a direct PLAN-RFN naval clash is remote given their lack of direct maritime disputes and overall good Sino-Russian political relations, PRC and Russian national security establishments will acquire important

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94) “Expanding military ties with China priority for Russia — defense ministry,” TASS, June 3, 2016, <http://tass.ru/en/politics/880015>.

95) Alec Blivas, “Sino-Russian Military Exercises Signal a Growing Alliance,” *Proceedings*, vol. 147 (June 2021), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/june/sino-russian-military-exercises-signal-growing-alliance>.

96) UK Ministry of Defence, September 2, 2022, [twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1565574315944427521?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1565574315944427521?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).

97) “China, Russia Begin Joint Naval Drills,” China Radio International, May 20, 2014, <http://english.cri.cn/6909/2014/05/20/2941s827578.htm>.

information regarding the tactics, techniques, and procedures practiced by the other military as well as its capabilities and intentions. Though Beijing and Moscow routinely deny that their military cooperation is against any third party, the drills communicate to allies, adversaries, and domestic groups that the Chinese and Russian armed forces could coordinate their military forces in ways that would be detrimental to the interests of the United States and its allies. In July 2015, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu bluntly acknowledged the two countries' shared "concern over U.S. attempts to strengthen its military and political clout in the [Asia-Pacific Region]."<sup>98)</sup>

In terms of political signaling to third parties, the maneuvers affirm to the United States and other extra-regional countries that Beijing and Moscow consider certain bodies of water as lying within their overlapping zones of security responsibility. A PRC official affirmed that the Sino-Russian naval drills "demonstrate their confidence to maintain peace and stability in the region and world."<sup>99)</sup> Russia's Deputy Defense Minister similarly affirmed that Vostok 2022 "made a significant contribution to ensuring military security in the East Asian region."<sup>100)</sup> In covering Vostok 2022, The Global Times highlighted that the Sino-Russian drills addressed the "potential threat from the direction of the Pacific Ocean."<sup>101)</sup> PRC military analyst Song Zhongping said the exercises sought to communicate "the message that Beijing and Moscow would work together to maintain security in the region."<sup>102)</sup> The joint naval exercises during

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98) Sam LaGrone, "China, Russia Planning 20-Ship Naval Exercise in the Sea of Japan in August," USNI News, July 17, 2015, <http://news.usni.org/2015/07/17/china-russia-planning-20-ship-naval-exercise-in-the-sea-of-japan-in-august>.

99) "Joint navy drill to boost China-Russia military ties: senior Chinese officer," *People's Daily Online*, April 18, 2012, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90786/7790327.html>.

100) "General Fomin: Vse tseli I zadachi ucheniya vpolneny v polnom ob'eme," *Argumenty Nedeli*, September 9, 2022, <https://argumenti.ru/army/2022/09/788723>.

101) "China to join Vostok-2022 Russia with other countries; closer China-Russia ties 'crucial to defend global stability to counter US hegemony'," *Global Times*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1273352.shtml>.

102) Liu Zhen, "Signs of China-Russia military trust in Vostok 2022 war games, observers say," *South China Morning Post*, September 10, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3192074/signs-china-russia-military-trust-vostok-2022-war-games>.

the past decade have occurred amidst growing tensions in the western Pacific over territorial disputes. China has competing maritime territorial claims with several of its neighbors. With Japan, the dispute center on islands in the East China Sea located within the two countries' overlapping exclusive economic zones, known as the Diaoyus in China and the Senkakus in Japan. Meanwhile, Moscow's territorial dispute with Tokyo over the Kurile Islands/Northern Territories has become newly acute in recent years. Sino-Russian naval drills have transpired in places where one country seeks to highlight cooperation with the other's military. For example, the 2014 naval drills took place near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the 2016 maneuvers in the South China Sea came shortly after the Permanent Court of Arbitration had rejected the PRC's claims over most of that maritime area, while the 2017 Baltic exercises brought attention to their military ties in this sensitive body of water.

The Sino-Russian exercises also advance the distinct national naval goals of Russia and China. Through such operations, the Russian armed forces can counter doubts that they have not yet fully recovered from their post-Soviet meltdown, while the Chinese can show off the growing sophistication of their military. The most recent Russian naval doctrine highlights the necessity of deterring and defending Russian interests against Western navies.<sup>103)</sup> Putin has invested considerable time, money, and political capital on restoring Russia's naval capabilities and global military profile. Participating in joint exercises with the PLAN demonstrates the value of these investments to domestic audiences and Russia's renewed maritime power to foreign observers. Russian experts maintained that Vostok-2022 demonstrated their country's ability to deploy large groups in the Asia-Pacific region and interact with friendly regional militaries there.<sup>104)</sup> Retired Colonel Viktor Litovkin insisted that

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103) V. Putin, "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii: Ob utverzhdenii Morskoy doktriny Rossiyskoy Federatsii," Kremlin, July 31, 2022, [static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/xBBH7DL0RicfdtdWP0l32UekiLMTAycW.pdf](https://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/xBBH7DL0RicfdtdWP0l32UekiLMTAycW.pdf).

104) Alexey Zakvasin and Elizaveta Komarova, "'Kompleksnoe ukreplenie oboronosposobnosti': ka kiye takticheskie priyemy otrabivalis' na manyovrax 'Vostok-2022,'" RT, <https://russian.rt.com>.

the drills showed how Russia, unlike the United States (which Litovkin noted has offered only indirect assistance, but not U.S. combat forces, to Ukraine), could undertake major strategic operations in two theaters of war at once.<sup>105)</sup> The Sino-Russian military interactions also enable Russian analysts to assess the capabilities and tactics, techniques, and procedures of the growing PLAN and other branches of the PLA. Russian writers further note how the participation of China and other countries in Russian military exercises shows that Russia is not isolated despite Western efforts to marginalize it.<sup>106)</sup>

Conversely, the Sino-Russian exercises have been particularly useful for the PLAN. China is constructing its first world-class navy in centuries. During the past three decades, the PLAN has continuously grown its budgets and equipment. But the Chinese armed forces have not fought a major war since the 1950-53 Korean conflict, excluding a brief cross-border intervention into northern Vietnam in 1979 along with limited border skirmishes with India and the Soviet Union. The PLAN has until recently lacked the network of foreign bases that has enabled the Russian Navy to support ships on lengthy international patrols. Even today, only the RFN has engaged in combat operations. During the Russian military campaigns in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, the RFN has provided long-range fires and other support to Russian and partner ground forces. The Sino-Russian drills have allowed the PLAN to gain insights from (and intelligence about) Russia's more experienced navy as well as deploy in novel simulated environments and geographic regions. PLA analysts have been closely examining Russia's military campaigns, including interviewing participants in conflicts, for insights.<sup>107)</sup> One area

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com/russia/article/1045929-rossiya-vostok-2022-ucheniya-armiya-kitai.

105) "Ucheniya 'Vostok-2022' pokazali glavnoe primushchestvo Rossii and Ssha," *Moscow Komsomolsets*, September 6, 2022, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2022/09/06/ucheniya-vostok2022-pokazali-glavnoe-preimushchestvo-rossii-nad-ssha.html>.

106) *Ibid.*

107) Vasily Kashin, "Russian-Chinese Security Cooperation and Military-to-Military Relations," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, ISPI, December 21, 2018, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/russian-chinese-security-cooperation-and-military-military-relations-21828>.



or particular value for the PLAN has been learning from the RFN's superior experience with anti-submarine warfare.<sup>108)</sup>

The Sino-Russian analysts have accordingly assisted the PLAN to transition from a brown-water to a blue-water force (from "off-shore water defense" to "open-seas protection."<sup>109)</sup>). For instance, the 2015 maneuvers in the Mediterranean and the Joint Sea 2017 drills in the Baltic Sea helped the PLAN rehearse missions regarding European regions, where PRC warships had rarely traveled. Joining the Vostok 2018 and 2022 strategic command exercises allowed the PLAN to learn from the Russian experience in integrating combined arms—naval elements with air and land forces sustained through expeditionary logistics. Achieving a global navy is important given China's worldwide economic interests and investments, dependence on maritime commerce, and the increasing foreign presence of PRC entities. The PLAN has already had to conduct several noncombatant evacuation operations of Chinese citizens, in Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015.<sup>110)</sup> The PRC must prudently plan to conduct more noncombatant evacuations from other distant locations. Closer to home, Beijing sees the expanding PLAN presence in the Asia-Pacific, including through its joint drills with the RFN, as advancing China's territorial claims. For example, Joint Sea 2016 implied that Moscow shared Beijing's view that the PLAN's expanding activities in the South China Sea was legitimate despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling that the PRC's vast territorial claims in the region were legally unsubstantiated.

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108) Blivas, "Sino-Russian Military Exercises Signal a Growing Alliance."

109) "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, June 6, 2017, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL33153.html>.

110) Magnus Nordenman, "Why the Chinese Navy is in the Mediterranean," USNI News, May 14, 2015, <http://news.usni.org/2015/05/14/why-the-chinese-navy-is-in-the-mediterranean>.

## XIV. Future Possibilities

Future Sino-Russian naval exercises could include rehearsing novel missions in new locations with additional partners. For instance, Russia could renew its efforts to convene multilateral exercises involving India, along with China, to encourage greater cooperation among Moscow's two most capable defense partners. The future could also see more multi-service exercises that involve naval support of ground force coastal operations and, conversely, army and air force support for simulated at-sea battles. Additionally, the PLAN and RFN will likely continue their post-exercise joint patrols around sensitive areas, especially Japan. Though these combined cruises do not emphasize developing novel joint military capabilities, they do display solidarity and draw attention in Japan and other audiences. China and Russia might rehearse additional missions such as joint noncombatant evacuation operations, joint submarine patrols, or joint interdiction of sea lines of communication or undersea cables. Additional locations for naval exercises might encompass the Russian Arctic, South America, or North America off the Continental United States. They might also employ the two countries' novel hypersonic missiles, cyber weapons, or other new capabilities. The Russian Navy might take advantage of China's access to many foreign ports to seek replenishment and repair services and other global logistic functions. Additionally, ROK and U.S. planners must plan for opportunistic aggression by China, Russia, or other countries in cases when Beijing or Moscow could exploit conflicts between the other and Washington to advance their security interests while the United States and its allies are preoccupied elsewhere. For example, if the Ukraine conflict escalates, China or North Korea might exploit the occasion to test the U.S. will and capacity to defend its Asian allies. Similarly, if the United States, South Korea, and Japan were engaged in a conflict with North Korea, the Russian government might take the opportunity to become more adventurous in the Baltics.

Still, major differences between the Chinese and Russian navies will

likely persist. The PRC and Russia still do not have a formal defense alliance and there is no pledge or expectation that they would conduct joint combat operations anytime soon. China will likely still depend more on its naval forces than does Russia to assert its territorial claims. Moscow has used its navy to back Russian territorial claims only in the Black Sea; Russia's main tool of territorial expansion has been its ground forces. In contrast, excluding the essential role of PLA ground forces in the Sino-Indian territorial dispute, Beijing's main instrument of territorial expansion has been its Navy, whose patrols now routinely encompass the vast areas of the East and South China Seas Beijing claims as PRC territory. Furthermore, Russia's naval power in the Asia-Pacific region is constrained by geography. The Russian Federation distributes its navy across the many bodies of water surrounding its land frontier, which lie adjacent to its Arctic, Baltic, Black Sea, Caspian, and Pacific shores. In peacetime, the RFN Pacific Fleet only has access to about a quarter of Russia's total naval power.<sup>111)</sup> When Russia needs more warships in Asia, as in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, Russia must redeploy ships from its other fleets. Japan's destruction of the Russian Fleet in the Battle of Tsushima shows this is a perilous process.

Additionally, the diverging trajectories of the Chinese and Russian navies, which partly reflects the different development paths of both countries, could complicate future Sino-Russian naval collaboration. The PLAN is constructing an ever-greater number of large capital ships, including aircraft carriers, to support a global naval presence and prepare for potential air-and-sea battles around Taiwan or Japan. The PRC has been constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea and establishing its first foreign military bases and dual-capable coastal logistic centers. In contrast, the RFN, lacking the PRC's shipbuilding capacity or, since 2014, access to Ukraine's shipyards, has had to concentrate on acquiring smaller ships designed to defend Russia's coasts

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111) Mark Adomanis, "Joint China-Russia Exercise More Political Than Military," USNI News, July 8, 2013, <https://news.usni.org/2013/07/08/joint-china-russia-exercise-more-political-than-military>.

and support primarily land wars with long-range fires. Russia's newlybuilt warships have been frigates and corvettes, equipped with an array of anti-air, anti-ship, and land-attack missiles, but not optimized for maintaining a long-term Russian presence throughout the world's oceans. Russia's poor performance in the 2022 Ukraine War has further deepened doubts about the effectiveness of its naval capacity in the face of a sustained conflict armed with modern weapons. The only capability in which Russia will likely remain ahead of China in coming years will be in submarine and ASW domains. Moscow has made sustaining an effective strategic submarine fleet a priority since the Cold War, including in its Pacific Fleet, while the PLA favors land-based missiles for conveying its nuclear warheads. These growing disparities in Sino-Russian capabilities could limit the military benefits the parties will realize through future bilateral exercises, though the diplomatic advantages these drills generate for both states would persist.

## XV. Implications

As noted, Chinese and Russian representatives regularly insist that their defense collaboration is not directed against third parties. At the time of the July 2017 Baltic maneuvers, Putin stated that the Sino-Russian exercises were “not directed against any third countries” and that “our militaries are simply polishing their skills.”<sup>112)</sup> Before the Vostok 2022 drills, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Fomin likewise maintained that the exercise was not “directed against any specific countries or military alliances and is purely defensive.”<sup>113)</sup> Claiming their exercises are routine activities allows Beijing and Moscow to play-down the significance of the drills while knowingly making their potential

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112) Yulia Gornostaeva, “Putin: sotrudnichestvo RF iKNR ne napravleno protiv tret'ikh stran,” *Izvestia*, July 27, 2017, <https://iz.ru/625025/2017-07-27/putin-sotrudnichestvo-rf-i-knr-ne-napravleno-protiv-tretikh-stran>.

113) “Russia to launch major military drills with China and others,” Aljazeera, August 29, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/29/russia-to-launch-military-drills-with-china>.

adversaries nervous.

Notwithstanding these Sino-Russian professions of benign intent, U.S. Navy leaders identify the Chinese and Russian fleets as their most formidable potential adversaries.<sup>114)</sup> Though more reticent, South Korean and Japanese national security managers are also concerned by Chinese and Russian naval activities in northeast Asia. In their May 2022 joint statement, ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol and U.S. President Joseph R. Biden declared their joint opposition to “all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order including freedom of navigation and overflight and other lawful use of the seas, including in the South China Sea and beyond.”<sup>115)</sup> The Sino-Russian exercises in the Yellow Sea, which have been a constant target of Chinese criticism, have also implicitly rivaled the South Korean-U.S. drills in that body of water. Though President Donald Trump suspended these exercises in 2018, their resumption could heighten joint Sino-Russian activities there. The Sino-Russian missile defense drills have similarly signaled their joint opposition to the ROK-U.S. missile defense partnership. The United States and its allies, partners, and friends have conducted more multinational naval drills, for many more years, and with more comprehensive and intensive activities. But Chinese and Russian national security partners are making a coordinated effort to decrease this gap.

The Sino-Russian drills have helped amplify the growth in capabilities of the PLAN resulting from Russia’s arms transfers to China. Purchases of Russian military systems and technology were an important driver of PLAN modernization in the 1990s and early 2000s. The transfers included

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114) See for example “Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense Holds Posture Hearing with Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday, and Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. David Berger on the Fiscal Year 2023 Navy and Marine Corps Budget Request, May 26, 2022.” U.S. Navy, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Testimony/display-testimony/Article/3046510/senate-appropriations-subcommittee-on-defense-holds-hearing-on-the-fiscal-year/>.

115) “United States-Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement,” White House, May 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement/>.

turnkey Russian major warships, air defense missiles, and other systems that have improved the PLAN's defensive and offensive capabilities against foreign navies. In the past, Russia used the exercises to showcase weapons Moscow wanted the PLA to purchase. This process has decreased in importance as the PLA, benefiting from the growing capabilities of China's military-industrial complex, has bought a smaller number of Russian weapons systems. In the future, however, the PRC could use these drills to display warships and other weapons the Russian Navy might want to acquire. Their joint exercises provide valuable opportunities to profile military technologies to potential buyers. Unfortunately, these arms sales and joint exercises could adversely impact regional instability. PRC and Russian policymakers might presume that the two countries' enhanced capabilities and security ties could weaken the credibility of Washington's defense guarantees to U.S. friends and allies. U.S. allies' faith in U.S. security guarantees might decline while the risk of accidents or inadvertent encounters between Chinese and Russian forces and other militaries might increase. The United States can boost the capacity and credibility of its naval ties with allies and partners by ensuring that U.S.-led international naval exercises incorporate tactics, techniques, and procedures designed to address whatever novel capabilities and skills the Chinese and Russian navies attain through their cooperation.

In this regard, Sino-Russian naval cooperation can enhance Moscow's and Beijing's leverage with other countries, such as Japan. Until recently, Beijing and Moscow remained detached from each other's territorial disputes. China and Japan contest control over several islands situated between them; these are known as the Diaoyu islands in Chinese and the Senkaku islands in Japanese. Moscow and Tokyo have competing claims concerning the four islands north of Japan, which the Japanese term their Northern Territories and the Russians, who currently administer them, call the Southern Kurils. Neither Beijing nor Moscow wanted to see the other parties resolve their disagreements with Tokyo since that development could decrease their own leverage with Japan. When PLAN

warships conducted their first known passage of the Soya Strait between Hokkaido in northern Japan and Russia's Sakhalin Island immediately following Joint Sea 2013, RFN vessels did not join them. In recent years, however, Chinese and Russian officials have downplayed Sino-Russian differences regarding Japan. The PLAN and RFN, following their naval drills in both 2021 and 2022, sent a joint patrol sailing around Japan—unlike in 2013, Beijing and Moscow had lost any inhibitions about what looked like a combined show of force designed to intimidate Tokyo. They have each, sometimes jointly, denounced Japan's missile defense cooperation with the United States and criticized other Japanese security policies. Some differences exist between Russia and China regarding Japan. Moscow finds the status quo regarding the Kuriles acceptable since Russia possesses the disputed islands, whereas Beijing's outlook is fundamentally revisionist, aiming to take control of islands currently administered by Tokyo. In this regard, Japan stands as a revisionist actor regarding Russia, wanting to recover its Northern Territories, but as a status quo state regarding China, seeking to ward off Beijing's claims to the East China Sea. But by having their combined naval fleets and strategic air patrols undertake military exercises near Japan, and even more recently conduct combined naval patrols in which a Sino-Russian joint task force has circumvented Japanese islands, they now have further harmonized their defense policies regarding Japan. In August 2022, the Japanese government issued a formal demarche objecting to the Sino-Russian Vostok 2022 naval drills around the Kuril Islands.<sup>116)</sup>

The growing Sino-Russian naval partnership has complicated ROK-U.S. military planning, diverted U.S. and Japanese resources from concentrating more against North Korea, and aggravated regional security by stimulating regional arms races. South Korea and the United States are striving to counter the growing North Korean threat, but the strengthening Chinese-Russian security alignment complicates their response. Further, the

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116) Jimmy Quinn, "China and Russia to Conduct Naval Drills near Disputed Islands over Japanese," *National Review*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/china-and-russia-to-conduct-naval-drills-near-disputed-islands-over-japanese-protests/>.

Sino-Russian relationship prompts Seoul and Washington to avoid actions that would drive Beijing and Moscow closer together in defense of Pyongyang. China's and Russia's vigorous opposition to the deployment of advanced U.S. missile defenses in South Korea has illuminated their perception of increased ROK-U.S. military ties as a potential threat. This shared opposition has brought both nations closer together in de facto support of North Korea, to the detriment of regional security. Furthermore, ROK and U.S. naval planners must consider scenarios in which the U.S. Pacific Fleet will have to focus on concurrent Chinese and Russian naval aggression, requiring the South Korean Navy to rapidly backfill any security gaps regarding North Korea.

The governments of the United States, South Korea, and their partners should regularly consult about the Sino-Russian exercises. They should also devote sufficient resources to monitoring and forecasting Sino-Russian naval interactions and other defense cooperation to avoid unanticipated developments such as the recent Sino-Russian strategic aviation and combined naval patrols near the Korean Peninsula and Japan. In 2019, the PLA Air Force and the Russian Aerospace Force conducted a surprise joint strategic aviation patrol over waters encompassing the Air Defense Identification Zones of South Korea and Japan along with the air space around the Dokdo islands (known in Japan as Takeshima). In 2021, they conducted their first joint naval patrol, with a combined task force that traversed Japan's Tsugaru Strait following Joint Sea-2021. China and Russia have since undertaken additional patrols. Though anticipating foreign military intentions is difficult, U.S., ROK, and allied policymakers need to think in advance how to respond to even unlikely scenarios, such as the Russian Navy's supporting the PLAN in a China-Japan conflict or a PRC invasion of Taiwan. The most taxing scenario would be Chinese and Russian naval support for the DPRK in a major conflict with the ROK-U.S. alliance, whose war plans envision an enormous, rapid, and generally unimpeded flow of forces and material from the United States across the Pacific into East Asia.

Due to its global network of defense partners, Washington has a unique



capacity to encourage Asian as well as European countries to consider how Sino-Russian naval ties could adversely affect their national security. The United States, along with South Korea, Japan, and other allies, can similarly lobby other countries against participating in threatening Sino-Russian drills, while perhaps exploring opportunities for undertaking non-threatening exercises with the PLAN and RFN, such as cooperating on humanitarian disaster relief. In any case, the United States and its allies should consult with those navies that do work with the Chinese and Russian navies to garner intelligence about Sino-Russian maritime practices, policies, and capabilities. They also should continue robust exercise programs and other security cooperation since the United States, South Korea, and their allies and partners will need an enhanced capacity to manage the more complex Indo-Pacific security environment.

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〈국문초록〉

**유라시아 지역의 해군 전력 과시:  
시진핑 주석과 푸틴 대통령 체제 하에 펼쳐지는 중러 해상합동훈련**

Richard Weitz

허드슨연구소 (Hudson Institute)

중러 관계 강화는 강대국 경쟁이 재개되고 있음을 보여주는 한 가지 징후라고 볼 수 있다. 공식적인 방위동맹을 체결하지 않았음에도 불구하고 양국의 군사관계가 강화되고 있다는 사실을 눈여겨 볼 필요가 있다. 특히, 중국과 러시아가 세계 최강의 해군력을 보유하고 있다는 점에 비추어 본다면, 양국간 해양안보협력 강화는 최근 수년 간 나타난 국제안보 전개상황 중 가장 중요한 양상으로 꼽을 수 있다. 여러 플랫폼과 장소에서 펼쳐진 중러 해상합동훈련은 고위급 인사교류와 중국의 대규모 러시아 무기 구매, 중러 우호조약 체결 및 다양한 협력형태로 수년간 지속되었다. 양국간 해상합동훈련은 냉전기의 대치국면이 종식된 직후 시작되었으나, 그 중요성은 최근 십년의 기간 동안 더욱 부각되고 있다고 볼 수 있다. 해상합동훈련이 양국 국방동맹의 핵심으로 부상하고 있기 때문이다. 양국은 그 어느 때보다도 다양한 장소에서 다양한 무기체계를 활용해 해상훈련에 임하고 있다. 앞으로 양국의 합동군사훈련은 북극, 초음속 운반수단, 아프리카, 아시아, 중동의 신규 파트너를 비롯해 새로운 위치와 전력을 동원해 펼쳐질 가능성이 크다. 또한, 경비함정 및 제병 연합부대를 동원한 해상합동 훈련을 수행하는 등 최근에 보여준 획기적인 전개를 지속할 것으로 보인다.

중국과 러시아는 양자간 해군협력을 토대로 일련의 목표를 추구하고 있다. 중화인민공화국과 러시아 연방 사이에 체결된 선린우호협력조약 (Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation)은 공동방어 조항을 포함하고 있지는 않지만, 공동의 위협에 대해 상호 논의하도록 언급하고 있다. 전통적/비전통적 군사작전 (예: 대해적 작전, 인도적 구호 및 최고수준의 전투수행)을 모의하는 해상훈련은 합동군사활동을 통해 공동의 도전 과제에 대한 양국의 대응력을 강화하는 수단이 된다. 이러한 합동훈련이 전투력 측면에서 높은 수준의 상호운용성을 구현하지 못하더라도, 이를 통해 중러 양국이 단합된 해군력을 동원할 수 있는 역량을 갖추고 있다는 사실을 국제사회에 알릴 수 있다. 양국의 해상무역 의존도나 영해를 둘러싼 국가간 갈등을 감안하면 이는 중요한 메시지라고 할 수 있다. 한편으로는 해상합동훈련을 통해 자국의 전투력을 향상시키고, 동시에 서로의 전략, 전술, 전투기술 및 절차에 대한 이해를 강화할 수 있다. 점차 부상하고 있는 중국 해군은 특히 러시

이군으로 부터 많은 혜택을 얻을 수 있다. 러시아군은 복수의 제병협동작전을 중심으로 중국인민해방군 (People's Liberation Army, PLA) 보다 훨씬 많은 해상임무수행 경험을 보유하고 있기 때문이다. 그러나 한편으로는 전투력 강화를 통해 양국 정치지도자들이 군사력을 동원하거나 다른 국가와 대치할 경우, 긴장을 더 고조시키는 방향을 선택할 가능성이 더욱 커졌다는 부정적인 측면이 지적된다.

이러한 모든 영향은 양국 해군이 대부분의 해상합동훈련을 수행하는 동북아시아 지역에 더욱 큰 파급력을 미친다. 동북아시아 지역은 중국과 러시아가 미국 및 일본과 벌이는 그리고 불편한 상태로 한국을 사이에 둔 해상에서의 대치상황이 펼쳐지는 격전지가 되고 있다. 중러 해군 협력 강화가 공고해지면서 한미 군사계획이 더욱 복잡해지고, 북한에 집중되어야 할 자원이 전환되어 결국 지역 안보환경을 악화시키는 결과로 이어지고 있다. 한미일 해군 실무자의 입장에서는 중러 해군이 모두 포함된 시나리오를 수립해야 할 필요성이 더욱 커지고 있다. 가령, 한미 정책 결정가들은 중러 군사력의 공동 무력대응에 대비하기 위해 미 국방부가 과도한 지출을 하게 만들고, 한반도에서 한미안보 부재가 발생하지 않도록 대한민국 해군을 신속하게 보충해야 하는 상황이 발생하게 되었다. 북한이 한국 및 동맹국과 해상에서 대치할 경우 이를 중러 해군이 지원할 수 있다는 가능성은 또다른 심각한 도전을 제기한다. 이 같은 긴급사태 발생 가능성을 고려해 안보결속을 강화하겠다는 한일 간의 약속을 토대로, 한미일 3국 공동군사훈련을 더욱 확대할 필요가 있다.

**주제어 :** 중러 해상합동훈련, 중국해군, 러시아해군, 해군협력