

Overrated Significance of the Sino-Russia “Joint-Sea 2013” Exercise? by Dr. Chang Ching

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The Sino-Russian “Joint-Sea 2013” naval exercise was conducted by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and the Russian Pacific Fleet in the Sea of Japan from July 5-12. Concerns about “the Bear and the Panda dancing together” in neighboring waters may be overrated now, but in the long term, these expanding series of exercises do warrant greater regional attention – and concern.

This series of naval exercises was initiated by General Chen Bingde, the chief of the PLA General Staff, during his visit in Moscow in August 2011. The first exercise, “Joint-Sea 2012,” was held from April to May in 2012 and entailed planning and a war game in Vladivostok, followed by sea drills in the Yellow Sea near Shandong Peninsula.

This year’s exercise, which included seven PLAN ships and 16 Russian warships, was touted by the PRC as the “single biggest deployment of military force in any joint foreign exercise.” The PLAN ships traveled roughly 680 nautical miles, from Qingdao to Vladivostok, to link up with the Russian task force. The at-sea portion of the exercise reportedly lasted three days.

Training scenarios included fleet protection in anchorage, air defense, anti-submarine warfare, escort operations, replenishment at sea, search and rescue, surface strike, concluded by live-fire training and fleet parade at sea. Similar to the US-led RIMPAC exercises, social functions and sport competitions were held on the “sidelines” to enhance camaraderie among these two maritime forces.

Operationally, the outcome of the exercise is not of great concern. While coordination between these two naval forces is maturing and the PLAN has improved its ability to begin training upon arrival in a relatively distant area with minimal preparation time, it is unlikely that interoperability was significantly enhanced. The size of the force involved, duration, and scope of the exercise did not significantly expand from Joint Sea 2012. Thus, given the small force involved, the short duration of the exercise, and the limited time key functions were exercised, it does not appear these first two exercises have significantly enhanced either country’s warfighting capability.

Most analysts agree that the political targets of Joint Sea 2013 were Japan and the US, a point the PRC firmly drove home when the PLAN traversed Japan’s waterways after the exercise. While this deliberate intrusion clearly had propaganda value in the PRC, some suggest it was designed to frighten the Japanese during Japan’s Diet election campaign. Again, such concerns must be placed in context.

Given the size and capability of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, the PLAN task force was hardly perceived as a threat. The PLAN cannot, as of yet, match Japan’s capabilities. If this action was intended to influence Japan’s political leaders or voters, it failed: the maritime exercise never became a campaign issue.

The Joint Sea exercises, by themselves, are not particularly worrisome. Cumulatively, however, the increasing Sino-Russian exercise regime may prove troublesome. Despite the lack of a military alliance and the apparent absence of any joint doctrine, there are many joint PRC-Russian exercises that facilitate the capabilities of these armed forces.

These exercises are conducted mainly within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). A series of joint military exercises named “Peace Mission,” have been held among SCO members over the past decade. Other countries join, but the main participants are always China and Russia. Shortly after Joint Sea 2013, these two countries conducted drills in Russia’s Ural Mountains.

So the “Sea-Joint” series is not really a breakthrough in the Sino-Russian military-to-military relationship. It is only one element of an increasing Sino-Russian joint exercise program, routinely conducted by land and sea forces, supported by corresponding air components.

Care is required in assessing this expanding military relationship. Although PLAN Deputy Commander, Admiral Ding Yiping, claims that Sino-Russian naval exercises are now “institutionalized,” Russia and the PRC have a long history of “on again, off again” cooperation.

Russia has provided extraordinary support for the PRC’s military modernization, and has attempted to address historical frictions while vastly expanding its trade with the PRC. But the Russians still greatly fear and distrust the ambition and policies of the rising giant next door. They know they are weak by comparison.

It may take very little for a PRC “reset” with Russia to rapidly shift to a “reject.” To drive home Russia’s ability to “reject” if needed, as the PLAN task force sailed back to the PRC, Russia launched a military exercise along the PRC border. These war games reportedly entailed 160,000 troops, 1,000 tanks, 130 aircraft, and 70 ships. Media reports suggest Russia notified the PRC of the drill only hours in advance.

Similarly, the PRC has reportedly conducted large-scale maneuvers in recent years. These drills involved advancing PLA forces distances of nearly 2,000 miles – distances only possible against Russia and Kazakhstan.

Such mutual wariness may likely undermine true Sino-Russian operational cooperation in the near term, but the

perception of “the Panda and the Bear dancing together” could have significant psychological impact on the Asia-Pacific Region. Fueling a sense of intimidation in the region is a PRC news media report that senior Russian and PRC officers are now considering more diversified exercises in other parts of the Pacific “to safeguard their strategic interests.”

At a minimum, international organizations such as ASEAN, countries in the region, and the US should call for transparency by the PRC and Russia regarding future joint exercises. On a multilateral basis, the affected countries should demand clarity, compromise, and assurances of peaceful intent in face of such increasing PRC-Russian naval exercises taking place ever closer to their home shores and sea lanes.

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