

Joint Russian-Chinese war games: a reaction to aggressive US policies

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China and Russia staged their first-ever joint military exercises over the past week. While the stated aim of “Peace Mission 2005” was to combat “terrorism, separatism and extremism”, there is no doubt that the war games stem from deep concerns in Moscow and Beijing over the aggressive policies of the Bush administration, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia.

China had wanted to hold the war games in Fujian province, directly opposite Taiwan, as a warning to the Taipei government. Beijing, which regards Taiwan as a renegade province, has repeatedly warned that it will respond militarily to any moves towards formal independence. Joint exercises with Russia in Fujian would have sent a sharp message not only to Taipei, but also to Washington, which is committed to defending Taiwan against Chinese attack.

Russia initially proposed that the exercises be held in China’s western province of Xinjiang, close to the Central Asia, where both countries share common concerns about the growing US presence. In the end a compromise was reached. Wary about too openly supporting China over Taiwan, Moscow agreed to hold the exercises on the Shandong peninsula—well to the north of Fujian, but still on the Chinese coast.

As far as Beijing was concerned, the military exercises made the required point. Eight days of joint naval, air and troop manoeuvres culminated in a “live fire” exercise beginning yesterday that rehearsed a naval blockade, an amphibious landing and a forced evacuation. Given that all of the Central Asian republics are landlocked, the most obvious target of this imaginary UN mission was the island of Taiwan.

In all, nearly 10,000 troops were involved—7,000 from China and 1,800 from Russia. Moscow also used the opportunity to put its warships, submarines and aircraft on display, including the sophisticated TU-95 strategic bombers and TU-22 long-range bombers, which it is hoping to sell to the Chinese. Russian military sales to China, worth \$2 billion annually, are a significant component of burgeoning

trade between the two countries.

But the overriding considerations for China and Russia are strategic. During the Cold War, the Stalinist bureaucracies in the two countries were bitter rivals and came to blows in border clashes along with Amur River in 1969. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow and Beijing became increasingly concerned at the intervention of the US into the newly established, resource-rich Central Asian republics.

At Beijing’s initiative, the “Shanghai Five”—Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—was established in 1996 to counter American influence in the region. Uzbekistan joined in June 2001 and the body became known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with a permanent secretariat headquartered in Beijing.

The SCO has become the means for closer China-Russia cooperation, particularly after the US established military bases in Central Asia as part of its intervention into Afghanistan. Moscow and Beijing both regard Central Asia as their backyard and thus a region of vital strategic concern. For China, it is also a significant source of oil and gas to meet the country’s rapidly expanding energy demands.

Early last month the Chinese and Russian presidents met in Moscow and issued a statement entitled “World Order in the 21st Century”. While not mentioning Washington by name, it referred to the danger of “unilateralism”—a codeword for US global domination—and called for a greater role for the UN. The statement declared “mutual support on key issues like Taiwan and Chechnya” and for stability on the Korean peninsula.

Just days later, on July 5, the SCO meeting in Kazakhstan called for the US to set a timetable for the removal of its bases from Central Asia. While supporting the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” in general terms, the grouping pointed out that the “active phase” of the Afghanistan intervention was over and called for the US to set a deadline for ending “the temporary use” of bases.

US officials rejected the suggestion and accused China and Russia of “bullying” the Central Asia republics. For

Washington, Afghanistan was simply a convenient pretext for establishing a military presence in a key strategic area of the globe—what was previously part of the Soviet Union. The US reacted to the SCO statement by promptly bringing its own pressure to bear.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld flew to Kyrgyzstan in late July and extracted assurances from the government that US troops could stay for as long as was needed to stabilise Afghanistan. He also obtained guarantees from Tajikistan that US warplanes would continue to enjoy overflight rights. Uzbekistan, however, has given the Pentagon a deadline of 180 days to pull out from its Karshi-Khanabad air base.

All of the SCO members are concerned about US political intrigues in Central Asia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. So-called “colour” revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan have resulted in regimes that are generally more sympathetic to Washington. Concerned that his regime may be next, Uzbek President Islam Karimov reacted angrily to US criticisms of his crackdown on protesters in May.

Coming in the aftermath of the SCO summit, the joint Russian-Chinese military exercises are aimed at presenting a united front against potential US interference and intervention. Significantly all of the SCO’s Central Asian members were invited to send observers to watch the war games. Moscow and Beijing clearly regard closer military relations as an initial step towards a broader strategic alliance.

At a joint press conference in Vladivostok, Russian Colonel General Yurii Baluyevskii emphasised that China occupied “a key position” in Russian foreign and strategic policy. He stated that the war games were designed to ensure the readiness of both militaries “to counter the challenges we face today in the Asia-Pacific region and in the world as a whole.”

Official US reaction has been low-key. US Admiral Gary Roughead told Associated Press last week: “We are very interested in the exercise, we’re interested in the types of things that they’ll do.” The Pentagon sent two spy planes and two warships to the area to gather information. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack added a note of warning: “We would hope that anything that they [Russia and China] do is not something that would be disruptive to the current atmosphere in the region.”

There is no doubt, however, that Washington views the prospect of a Russia-China alliance as a potential threat. The US already has formal military alliances with Japan and South Korea and substantial US bases in North East Asia. Some 10,000 US personnel are currently engaged in two weeks of joint war games with an unspecified number of South Korean troops aimed at reviewing their ability to

counter North Korea.

In particular, the Bush administration is concerned about the ability of an economically expanding China to challenge US hegemony in Asia. During the 2000 presidential elections, Bush declared that Beijing was a “strategic competitor” not a strategic partner. Since then, however, the White House has toned down its rhetoric, particularly after Beijing supported the so-called global war on terrorism, and helped to pressure North Korea to participate in talks over its nuclear programs.

Sections of the Republican rightwing regard such an approach as unpardonably timid. A recent comment in the extreme right-wing *Weekly Standard* damned this year’s annual Pentagon review of the China’s military as “a mix of happy talk, flabby strategic musings and sobering facts” and accused the Bush administration of “toning down” its initial “more alarming conclusions about China’s strategic intent”. In conclusion, it declared: “[O]ur rosy rhetoric about our ‘constructive’ relationship with Beijing, leave us at a disadvantage as China ratchets up the competition. As a practical matter, this attitude often leaves us a day late and a dollar short when it comes to matching new Chinese initiatives.”

Taken on face value, these remarks are simply absurd. The US dwarfs China economically and militarily and has been systematically forging alliances with and establishing bases in China’s neighbours. What concerns the *Weekly Standard* writers is that the Bush administration is not being forceful enough in ensuring that no country or combination of countries has the capacity to in any way challenge untrammelled US domination in the Asia Pacific region and internationally.

It is, however, precisely the Bush administration’s political intriguing and bullying, and its reckless military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq that is provoking a reaction in Moscow, Beijing and other European and Asian capitals. The joint Chinese-Russian military exercises are one more sign that Washington’s rivals will not passively allow their economic and strategic interests to be trampled upon.



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