

China and Russia forge closer military cooperation

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As the US war in Afghanistan and US-sponsored fighting in Pakistan intensify, Russia and China are stepping up military cooperation, with 25 joint manoeuvres announced this year. Previously, China had held a total of just 21 military exercises with foreign countries since 2002.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Defence Ministers meeting held on April 29 confirmed the plans. The meeting issued a political disclaimer, denying the body was becoming a military alliance. All drills, it stated, were focussed on the “war on terror,” not against a third country.

There is little doubt, however, that military ties between China and Russia are aimed at countering the US. Last December, Chinese president Hu Jintao called for closer defence cooperation, saying: “I hope ... to advance the China-Russia strategic partnership and the relationship between the two militaries from a new historical starting point to better and faster development toward the future.”

The SCO was established in 2001 in response to growing US relations with former Soviet republics in energy-rich Central Asia, which both China and Russia regard as vital strategically. The organisation expanded in scope following the US invasion of Afghanistan. In 2005, China and Russia held their first joint military exercises, which in 2007 were enlarged into a SCO-wide event. The SCO includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. India, Pakistan, Mongolia and Iran have observer status.

This year’s war games have already begun. In April, SCO held a joint “anti-terror” exercise in Tajikistan near the border with Afghanistan. The main exercise—“Peace

Mission 2009,” planned for July-August—will resemble a conventional drill operation, involving more than 2,000 Russian and Chinese troops and heavy weapons such as tanks, transport planes, self-propelled artillery and possibly strategic bombers. The three-stage exercise, which is being planned in Russia, will take place in northeastern China, close to the border with Mongolia.

The announcement of closer Russo-Chinese military cooperation came just as Russian relations with NATO deteriorated over Georgia. Tbilisi accused Russia of being behind the mutiny of a Georgian tank battalion in late April, while Moscow condemned NATO’s 27-day military exercise in Georgia that started from May 5.

On April 28, Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie headed a delegation to Russia’s North Caucasus military district to discuss regional security with Russian president Dmitry Medvedev. On April 30, Russia signed five-year defence agreements with Georgia’s two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, allowing Russian forces to guard their borders.

The driving force behind closer Russo-Chinese relations is their mutual concern over US strategic plans to bring the energy-rich Eurasian heartland under its wing. The Obama administration has made friendly gestures toward Russia, China and Iran, but escalated the war in Afghanistan and now Pakistan. Beijing and Moscow regard these moves as even more menacing than the Bush administration’s war in Iraq.

The *Asia Times* commented on May 14: “Think of Afghanistan, then, as an overlooked subplot in the ongoing Liquid [oil and gas] War. After all, an overarching goal of US foreign policy since president Richard Nixon’s era in the early 1970s has been to split

Russia and China. The leadership of the SCO has been focused on this since the US Congress passed the Silk Road Strategy Act five days before beginning the bombing of Serbia in March 1999. That act clearly identified American geostrategic interests from the Black Sea to western China with building a mosaic of American protectorates in Central Asia and militarising the Eurasian energy corridor. Afghanistan, as it happens, sits conveniently at the crossroads of any new Silk Road linking the Caucasus to western China, and four nuclear powers (China, Russia, Pakistan and India) lurk in the vicinity.”

Increasingly, Central Asia has become an arena of rivalry between the major powers. Under pressure from Moscow and Beijing, the SCO called in 2005 for the removal of US bases from Central Asia. Uzbekistan shut down the US air base and earlier this year Kyrgyzstan announced the closure of the Manus base, which had been used by the US military to ferry supplies to Afghanistan. The latter announcement coincided with a Russian offer of \$US2.15 billion in aid.

With the border areas of Pakistan increasingly embroiled in war, the Pentagon has been searching for alternative supply routes into landlocked Afghanistan. Given that Washington has no relations with Iran, the only option is through Central Asia. The US signed agreements this year with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, two SCO states bordering Afghanistan, to allow the transit of limited military cargo.

However, most routes through Central Asia require the tacit approval of Russia, which has looked for significant concessions in return, such as the ending of plans to incorporate Georgia and the Ukraine into NATO. The Pentagon is attempting to develop a new supply route from the Black Sea via Georgia and Azerbaijan to Turkmenistan, bypassing Russia.

Russia is boosting its influence in Central Asia with aid and military cooperation. In February, Moscow established a rapid response force of 3,000 troops as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), comprising the former Soviet republics of Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The plan is to enlarge the force to 10,000.

Not all Central Asian members of SCO are firmly under

Moscow’s influence. Uzbekistan, for instance, refused to take part in the three-day SCO anti-terror exercise on the Tajik-Afghan border in April. Uzbekistan was an important US partner in Central Asia until 2005, when it turned sharply to Moscow, after Western criticisms of its crackdown on political opposition.

Last October, the EU lifted its sanctions on Uzbekistan, which sent security personnel to Germany to discuss the possibility of a transit route to Afghanistan—without consultation with Russia. In November, Uzbekistan withdrew from the Eurasian Economic Community, in opposition to plans by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus to create a custom union.

A major focus of US strategy is gas-producing Turkmenistan. Russia has been looking to Central Asia to provide gas as its own Soviet-era fields reach the end of their life. Moscow cannot, however, afford to pay the high prices promised to Turkmenistan last year. Washington is seeking to persuade the Turkmen leadership to bypass Russia and use alternative pipelines to export directly to Europe. The US is also backing a gas pipeline linking Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India, via Afghanistan.

The US also faces challenges from China, which is in a strong position to exploit Russian and Central Asian energy supplies. In February, Beijing signed oil deals worth \$25 billion with Russia and \$10 billion with Kazakhstan. In Turkmenistan, Beijing is building the world’s longest (7,000 kilometres) and most expensive (\$26 billion) pipeline for transporting gas to southern China. In signing the deal, Beijing insisted that its interests should not be threatened by “third parties”—a clear reference to barring US bases.

Heightened Russo-Chinese military cooperation in response to the US wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan is another indication of the potential for wider conflicts over the key strategic region of Central Asia.



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