

China and Russia hold joint naval exercises in North East Asia

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China and Russia are conducting a major joint naval exercise in the Yellow Sea from April 22 to 27. The drills are a response by the two countries to their growing concerns about the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot" to Asia that includes a military build-up and the strengthening of US alliances throughout the region.

Seven Russian vessels led by its Pacific Fleet flagship, the Varyag, a guided missile cruiser, arrived at Qingdao—a Chinese naval base on the Shandong Peninsula. They were joined by 16 Chinese surface ships and two submarines. Thirteen warplanes, nine helicopters and special force units also took part in the live fire drills.

Russia and China have held joint military exercises in recent years, within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and in the name of combatting terrorism. The main object of the latest war games, however, is the joint defence of sea lanes, involving maritime air defence, as well as anti-submarine tactics and electronic countermeasures.

Although Russian and Chinese officials claimed the exercises were planned last year and did not target at any third party, the "imaginary enemies" could only be the US and its allies. A key focus of the American military build-up is to ensure US domination of key shipping routes through South East Asia.

The location and timing of the naval drills was highly sensitive. As Russian warships crossed through the Tsushima Strait between Japan and Korea last weekend, the Japanese media speculated that this was a message to Tokyo. The strait was the site of the key

naval battle in 1905 Russo-Japanese war for dominance in Korea and Manchuria.

This week's drills were held close to where several US-South Korean naval exercises were staged following the alleged sinking of a South Korean frigate by North Korea in 2010. The US-South Korean naval exercise last November was only 170 kilometres away from the Shandong Peninsula.

The Russo-Chinese exercises coincided with US-Philippine joint war games near the South China Sea, which also involved Australia, Japan and South Korea. That exercise took place amid a continuing standoff between Chinese and Philippine ships near the disputed Scarborough Shoal. The US has encouraged the Philippines and other countries to take a more aggressive stance in territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

As well as raising concerns in the Chinese regime, the strengthening of the US military presence and ties in Asia has also caused unease in Moscow, which in recent years has expanded its military exercises in Russia's far eastern regions.

The Obama administration exploited North Korea's failed rocket launch this month to renew calls for a joint missile shield with Japan, South Korea and Australia. The plan poses a threat not only to China's nuclear missile arsenal but also to Russia's road- and rail-launch missiles in the Far East, as well as its Pacific-based nuclear submarines.

By stationing radar and interceptor missiles in South Korea and Japan, the US can significantly shorten the

detection time of any Chinese and Russian missile launch and enhance its ability to shoot down the missiles. While promoted as a defensive measure, the missile shield would enable the US to launch a devastating first strike on China or Russia, then neutralise any surviving missiles.

China's and Russia's shared anxieties about the threat of US militarism have led to a strengthening of their strategic partnership over the past decade. The SCO was formed in 2001, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to counter growing American influence in Central Asia, especially after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

In 2005, Russia and China held their first major joint military exercise, "Peace Mission 2005," in the Yellow Sea. Then, under the pretext of the "war on terror," the SCO countries staged four joint military exercises. Far from being anti-insurgency exercises to suppress "terrorists" in the region, these drills were more in line with practicing for a large-scale land conflict in energy-rich Central Asia.

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Sections of the Chinese ruling elite have become convinced in recent years that China should form a military alliance with Russia. During a recent National Security Policy Committee forum on the impact of the "US pivot to the East," several of China's top analysts argued for a shift in strategic policy.

Qian Wenrong of the Institute of World Issues declared: "We must change the no-alliance policy, without openly announcing it. We must consider the issue of forming alliances. Otherwise, in the future wars, in both political and military confrontations, we by ourselves will not have the slightest chance of overcoming the global network of alliances that the US has constructed."

At the same time, the state-run press in China has generally played down any prospect of a formal alliance with Russia. Both countries fear that an alliance would antagonise the US and its allies, on which they depend economically. Russia is a major

exporter of energy to Europe, while China remains a cheap labour platform for major Western corporations.

Moreover, China and Russia remain suspicious of each other. Moscow is worried about Beijing's growing presence in former Soviet Central Asia, where it is tapping the region's vast energy reserves. By assimilating Russian technology, China has boosted its military strength, provoking concerns in Moscow over a potential conflict with an "overcrowded" China seeking to dominate the resource-rich and underpopulated Russian Far East.

The Chinese regime is concerned that Russia has been supplying sophisticated military hardware, including nuclear submarines, tanks and an aircraft carrier, to its regional rival, India, in an attempt to counter-balance Chinese influence in Asia. Russia is also selling submarine and strike aircraft to Vietnam, which in turn has invited India and Russia to jointly explore energy reserves in disputed areas of the South China Sea.

The very fact that China and Russia are considering closer military ties, despite these antagonisms, underscores the dangerous tensions being produced by the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot" to Asia.



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