



**Outlook for China-Russia Military Cooperation—
Based on an Analysis of China-Russia Joint Exercises**
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Introduction

In September 2016, China and Russia conducted a joint exercise, “Joint Sea-2016” in the South China Sea. This annual (held twice in a year only in 2015) naval drill was launched in 2012, and has mainly been held along the coastal regions of China and Russia with the participation of naval vessels, aircraft, as well as special troops and amphibious troops from both countries. China carries out bilateral military exercises with other countries apart from Russia, and further, also participates in multilateral exercises such as RIMPAC. However, its participation in this particular “Joint Sea” exercise is at its largest scale, both in quantity and quality, since the commencement of the exercise, and is proof of the importance that China places on this exercise. This paper provides an overview of this exercise from China’s perspective, sheds light on the current state of China-Russia military cooperation, and offers an outlook on its future.

Significance of China-Russia Joint Exercises from China's Perspective

In its defense white paper published in May 2015 titled “China’s Military Strategy,” China sets out the following significance and objective for promoting military cooperation with other countries: “Create a security environment favorable to China’s peaceful development” by “developing military-to-military relations that are non-aligned, non-confrontational

and not directed against any third party.” The specific three items that come under this objective are “Developing all-round military-to-military relations,” “Pushing ahead with pragmatic military cooperation,” and “Fulfilling international responsibilities and obligations.” Under the item “Developing all-round military-to-military relations,” Russia is the first partner discussed. More specifically, the document states that “China’s armed forces will further their exchanges and cooperation with the Russian military within the framework of the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia, and foster a comprehensive, diverse and sustainable framework to promote military relations in more fields and at more levels.” In addition, under the item “Fulfilling international responsibilities and obligations,” the implementation of joint exercises and training is listed as one of the concrete means for achieving this goal—“Bilateral and multilateral joint exercises and training, involving various services and arms, will be conducted at multiple levels and in various domains to enhance joint operational capabilities. The Chinese military will work to extend the subjects of such training and exercises from traditional to non-traditional security areas.”

On the other hand, joint exercises implemented between countries, such as the exercises conducted jointly by Japan and our ally, the United States, are generally performed under the framework of regional

security cooperation. They are planned for the purpose of achieving the military or political goals of both parties, serve to improve readiness and interoperability with a country that will become a partner for joint military operations in the future, and provide assurance for the involvement of the ally in the event that a political crisis or conflict arises in the country. At the same time, they help to build close relationships between the leaders of both countries, who are the foundation for response during a crisis.

With respect to its cooperative military relations with Russia, China has openly declared that Russia is neither an ally, nor a “third party” that it views in a confrontational manner. However, based on the general impression that the implementation of joint exercises conveys to a third party other than the countries involved, in addition to the military aspect of improving the readiness and interoperability of both countries, there is also a political aspect—it would not be an exaggeration to say that China anticipates that the exercises would also send a message to external parties that in the event of a crisis between China and a third country, such as the United States, Russia will likely work in cooperation with China to respond to such a crisis.

Implementation Status of the China-Russia Joint Exercise, "Joint Sea"

Next, I will provide an overview of the implementation status of “Joint Sea,” the China-Russia joint exercise that has taken place six times over the past five years, since 2012.

Joint Sea-2012: This was the first Joint Sea exercise, held for a six-day period from April 22 to 27, 2012, on the Yellow Sea off the coast of Qingdao, China. This exercise was implemented based on an agreement concluded between the two countries when People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Chief of General Staff, Chen Bingde, visited Russia in August

2011. The participating forces included 25 warships (18 from China and 7 from Russia), 24 aircraft (including 9 carrier-based helicopters), and special operations squads from both countries. Based on the themes of joint maritime defense operations and defense operations for maritime transportation lines, the exercise involved exercises (training) in traditional security areas, such as anti-aircraft/anti-submarine operations, replenishment at sea, and firing practices with live ammunition. Non-traditional security areas were also covered, including search and rescue, and the escort and recovery of vessels (recovery of commercial vessels hijacked by pirates, etc.).

Joint Sea-2013: This was held for an eight-day period from July 5 to 12, 2013, at Peter the Great Gulf off the coast of Vladivostok, Russia. The participating forces included 19 warships (12 from Russia and 7 from China), 8 aircraft (including 5 carrier-based helicopters), and special operations squads from both countries. This was the largest force China has ever sent on a joint exercise overseas. Based on the theme of joint maritime defense activities, the exercise involved a newly added item of target shooting at sea (anti-ship missile strike guided by Russian aircraft). Apart from the new item, the exercise covered mostly the same items and contents as in the previous year. Of the Chinese warships that participated in this exercise, five entered the Okhotsk Sea via the Soya Strait after the exercise had concluded, the first Chinese warships to do so. Thereafter, the ships passed through the Kuril Islands to enter the Pacific, sailing once around the Japanese Archipelago in the clockwise direction.

Joint Sea-2014: This was held for a seven-day period from May 20 to 26, 2014, in the northern part of the East China Sea off the coast of Zhangjiangkou, China. The participating forces included 16 warships (10 from China, 6 from Russia), 9 aircraft, and

special operations squads from both countries. The opening event of this exercise was attended by President Xi Jinping as well as President Putin of Russia, who was on a visit to China to attend the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). All the participating warships from both countries were in mixed formation, and in addition to items that had been present in previous exercises, beyond visual range (BVR) attack/defense that includes anti-ship missile strikes, as well as voluntary resistance training for surface ships and submarines, were carried out for the first time. In addition, as search and identification of enemy aircraft and submarines and anti-air/anti-submarine strikes are carried out jointly, the means of communication were diversified through the utilization of satellite communications and other methods, and the two countries shared the performance and data of the radars, sonars, and communications equipment fitted on their respective warships and aircraft.

Joint Sea-2015 (I): This was held for an 11-day period from May 11 to 21, 2015 in the Mediterranean, originating at the port of Novorossiysk on the Black Sea, Russia. The participating forces included 9 warships (6 from Russia, 3 from China), 3 carrier-based helicopters, and special operations squads from both countries. The warships from China, which had been on an anti-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia, took part in this exercise after they were relieved by warships on the next mission. This exercise was conducted on seas that were the furthest from China than any other military exercise the country has ever participated in. On the other hand, for the warships from Russia, while only Pacific fleets had participated in the past three exercises, fleets from the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the North Sea were also involved in this exercise.

Joint Sea-2015 (II): This was held for a nine-day

period from August 20 to 28, 2015, at Peter the Great Gulf off the coast of Vladivostok, Russia. It was the second exercise to be implemented in the same year. Participating forces included 24 warships (17 from Russia, 7 from China), 23 aircraft (including 5 fixed-wing aircraft from China, 8 carrier-based helicopters). Furthermore, as landing training was conducted, both sides provided more than 30 amphibious vehicles (10 from Russia, 21 from China) and troops (200 each from China and Russia) for the training. This was the first time that Chinese landing equipment/troops, such as landing ships, as well as fixed-wing aircraft from the air force, were participating in a joint training held overseas. After the conclusion of the exercise, as was the case during the conclusion of the exercise in 2014, five Chinese warships that had been involved in the exercise entered the Okhotsk Sea via the Soya Strait; furthermore, at the beginning of September, they passed by the Aleutian Archipelago of the United States and sailed all the way to the Bering Sea.

Joint Sea-2016: This was held for an eight-day period from September 12 to 19, 2016, on the South China Sea off the coast of Zhanjiang, China. Participating forces included 15 warships (10 from China, 5 from Russia), aircraft (including carrier-based helicopters), and continuing from last year, amphibious equipment and naval troops from both sides were also involved in the exercise. Based on the themes of joint defense for marine transportation lines and joint landing operations, training on sea as well as landing training were carried out. In this exercise, China adopted all the items of the “back to back method” (minimizing control of the exercise and allowing both sides to counter one another based on their own free will) in its exercises with the foreign navy, and both sides also jointly used the command information system (command information platform) dedicated for use in

military exercises. In addition, joint “island-seizing” and securing training was conducted, marking three “firsts” in this exercise. In the basic training conducted before the field training exercise, the crew of warships from both China and Russia carried out various forms of joint training, including competitions such as dealing with water leakages and rope handling techniques, firing by naval (marine corps) troops, rappelling (abseiling from a helicopter), and wall-climbing.

Appraisal of Joint China-Russia Exercises

The first joint military exercise held by the Chinese and Russian navies was Peace Mission 2005, held in August 2005. This exercise saw the participation of many warships and aircraft from both countries as well as about 10,000 troops, and was a large-scale drill that involved landing operations, forcible separation (operations through the separation of forces carried out by airborne and heliborne troops), and live ammunition firing. In this exercise, Russia dispatched not only warships such as landing craft, but also bombers, airborne early warning systems, as well as marine corps and airborne troops. After that, in September 2009, Chinese and Russian warships participating in anti-piracy activities conducted a single joint exercise on the Gulf of Aden, which included ship inspections and replenishment at sea (Peace Shield 2009). However, most of the serious joint military exercises between China and Russia have been conducted on land, and sea exercises were shelved for a period of time until the start of the “Joint Sea” exercises. This was because China wanted to conduct exercises on the sea with a focus on the East China Sea and South China Sea, which Russia disapproved of due to the overly strong political connotations.

Joint Sea-2012, the first serious military exercise at sea to be held in seven years, in comparison with

Peace Mission 2005, comprised of fewer showy training items such as landing operations and airborne operations. In contrast, it focused more on pragmatic exercises such as anti-air and anti-submarine operations by warships, and also included the new addition of non-traditional security areas such as search and rescue, and the escort of vessels. In consecutive “Joint Sea” exercises as well (although landing training was added from 2015), continuous and repetitive training was carried out for operations with a high probability of joint implementation in the near future, such as the escort of vessels, bearing in mind anti-piracy measures and training to improve the necessary capabilities for joint operations in a crisis, such as anti-air and anti-submarine operations.

Until the start of the “Joint Sea” exercises, China had already been conducting various exercises on its own regularly on open waters including the West Pacific Ocean. It held large-scale exercises with three joint fleets on the South China Sea in July 2010, and on the West Pacific Ocean in October 2013. It has also been gradually and steadily building up its capability through training and practical missions, building up a track record of completed missions including participation in anti-piracy activities off the coast of Somalia from January 2009 and escorting commercial vessels. Even so, carrying out the same repetitive training continuously in joint exercises with the Russian navy could be described as a demonstration of the strong ties between the naval forces of both countries, but on the other hand, could also speak of how difficult it is for different countries and their naval forces to work jointly and cohesively together.

Incidentally, in the “Joint Sea” exercises of 2012 and 2013, training such as replenishment at sea and the escort of commercial vessels was carried out jointly between China and Russia, but training of a

relatively high level of difficulty, such as anti-submarine and anti-air activities, was conducted separately by the respective fleets comprising only their own warships. While the level of cooperation was not extremely high, in the Joint Sea-2014 exercise conducted in 2014, a mixed fleet comprising warships from both China and Russia not only carried out anti-submarine and anti-air training, but also exchanged specifications and data on radars, sonars, and communications equipment, and shared search and identification information on enemy submarines and aircraft. These suggest the implementation of a joint exercise with a higher level of difficulty, presenting a marked improvement in the cooperative nature of the exercise as compared to previous exercises.

Until the 2013 exercise, China has been proactive in reporting on the status of exercises and drawing attention to the cooperation between China and Russia. On the other hand, Russia has been described as “restrained” with regard to disseminating external reports. In Joint Sea-2014, however, Russia demonstrated a change in its stance, with President Putin attending the opening ceremony of the exercise. This series of transformations in Joint Sea-2014 is believed to be the consequence of both political and military factors. The former is the need for both China and Russia to draw attention to their friendly relations in the face of Russia’s rapidly declining relations with Europe after its intervention in Ukraine in 2014, and China’s confrontation with Japan and the United States over the East China Sea and South China Sea problems. The latter is China’s desire to take this opportunity to further elevate the cooperative nature of the two countries, under the cover of Russia’s difficulties. Even in subsequent exercises, both China and Russia are perceived to be making efforts to enhance and improve the cooperation and cohesiveness between their naval as

well as air forces, through means such as implementing landing training (Joint Sea 2015 (II)), full introduction of the “resistance” method, and joint operation of the command information platform (Joint Sea 2016), as well as into further enhancing the interoperability between the two countries.

The actions of Chinese warships of entering into the Okhotsk Sea and further, into the Bering Sea after the conclusion of the exercises off the coast of Okhotsk, Russia, in 2013 and 2015 were considered to be intended to restrain Japan and the United States. However, the Okhotsk Sea could be described as an “inland sea” of Russia, and China’s entry into this sea and further, into the Arctic Ocean, could have an impact, however marginal, on fostering a sense of distrust by Russia toward China.

Future Outlook and Points to Note

While no official announcements have been made so far about Joint Sea-2017, it is expected to be hosted by Russia this year, in accordance with the order that has been established to date. On the other hand, the locations and contents of the exercise, as well as the participating fleets corresponding to the contents of the exercise, are not expected to be announced until just before the exercise itself. Nevertheless, it has strongly reflected the military and political intentions of both countries to date, and is the source of much attention. For example, the Mediterranean, the location for the first exercise of 2015, and the South China Sea, the location for the 2016 exercise, both unmistakably reflected the intentions of Russia and China respectively. However, although Chinese warships entered the Black Sea in 2015, they did not go near the Crimea Peninsula. Similarly, while the exercise was held in the South China Sea in 2016, it was actually conducted off the coast of Zhanjiang, far from any disputed areas such as the Spratly Islands. It is clear that both countries

are refraining from becoming involved in the other's affairs.

Incidentally, the 2016 exercise drew more attention than in previous years, partly because it took place soon after the court of arbitration delivered its judgement on the South China Sea problem in July the same year. China has emphasized that the Joint Sea exercise does not target any country in particular and has no impact on the interests of third countries, and has also explained that the exercise has no connection whatsoever with the decision of the court of arbitration. However, it also reported on the progress of the exercises in great detail, including the joint landing training on the islands, and drew attention to the outcome of the exercise. It is clear that China's intention through this exercise, in denial of the judgement delivered by the court of arbitration, is to apply pressure on the respective countries that have asserted their rights over the South China Sea.

The seas where the 2017 exercise may be conducted include Peter the Great Gulf off the coast of Vladivostok and the northern part of the Sea of Japan, the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea if taking the perspective of restraining Europe and the United States, and the West Pacific Ocean south of Okinawa if taking the perspective of restraining Japan and the United States. The tendency to avoid politically and militarily sensitive locations, a stance adopted so far, should remain unchanged. The Arctic Sea, including the Barents Sea, as well as the Okhotsk Sea, are very attractive waters to China, whose goal is to become a blue-water navy, but are options that will not be accepted by Russia.

With regard to the contents of the exercise, the countries are expected to continue training in traditional and non-traditional security areas as they have to date, aim to further improve interoperability between the naval forces of the two countries, and strengthen cooperation between the aircraft of the

respective air forces.

Unlike the sensitive issues surrounding the exercise venue, the contents of the exercise and the improvement and expansion of the participating fleets corresponding to these contents are comparatively easy for both China and Russia to agree on, and are considered to be highly effective military and political messages. From this perspective, some points to note would be: firstly, more in-depth anti-submarine training, and secondly, participation in the exercise by aircraft carriers from both countries. With regard to anti-submarine capabilities, both China and Russia do not have adequate capability in comparison with Japan and the United States. For example, if training could be conducted with the anti-submarine patrol aircraft and submarines of both countries, thereby improving operational capability and armament, this is an area that could offer significant advantages to both countries. With regard to aircraft carriers, as of the end of 2016, the "Liaoning" aircraft carrier from the Chinese navy is based in waters manned by the North Sea Fleet of China, while the "Admiral Kuznetsov" aircraft carrier from Russia is based in the Mediterranean to participate in Syrian air raid operations. If, for example, the 2017 exercise were conducted in the Mediterranean, Russian aircraft carriers could participate in the exercise; if it were conducted in East Asia, then Chinese aircraft carriers would be able to participate in the exercise. It has not been long since either China or Russia commenced (or re-commenced) operation of their aircraft carriers, and there is lingering doubt as to what they can achieve. However, if an exercise could be conducted by the fleets, including the "Admiral Kuznetsov" and "Liaoning," it could serve as an important military as well as political message for both countries.

Conclusion

We have taken an overview of the Joint Sea exercise launched in 2012, and clarified the progress of military cooperation between China and Russia. Apart from this exercise, China and Russia are also strengthening their military cooperation concurrently in multilayered ways, such as the supply of arms from Russia to China, joint weapons development by both countries, and the counter-terrorism exercise “Mission Action” that includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

On the other hand, neither China nor Russia have apparently removed one another from the range of their strategic arms. As of now, it is unclear if they will be able to break down this fundamental feeling of mutual distrust, and build a partnership that is identical in substance to that of an “alliance,” such as a relationship where one will rush to help the other unconditionally during a crisis. China has an overwhelming economic power, and under the current circumstances where it is not even attempting

to disguise its ambitions of expanding the scope of its influence, Russia’s distrust of China is probably stronger than the reverse.

Furthermore, with the change in government administration in the United States at the start of 2017, there is also a possibility that the policies of the new U.S. administration toward China and Russia can dramatically transform the relationship of military cooperation between China and Russia. All eyes will remain fixed on the status of implementation of the “Joint Sea” joint military exercise between China and Russia, which reflects these dynamics.

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profile

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