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Assessing Russian-Chinese Military Exercises

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The modern Russian-Chinese relationship has most often been characterized by bloody wars, imperial conquests, and mutual denunciations. It has only been during the last twenty years, when Russian power had been decapitated by the loss of the Soviet empire and China had found itself a rising economic—but still weak—military power that the two countries have managed to reach a harmonious *modus vivendi*. According to various metrics, China now has the world's second or third largest economy, while Russia lags in approximately eighth place and, due to its slower growth rates, is falling further behind. Nevertheless, Russia still has a much more powerful military, especially in the nuclear realm.

This transformed relationship has manifested itself in the sharp decrease in Chinese purchases of Russian weapons. The ongoing improvements in China's indigenous defense industry have decreased Beijing's interest in purchasing Soviet-era weapons from Moscow. The Chinese are now demanding that Russia sell the People's Liberation Army (PLA) its most advanced weapons. The Russian government has thus far declined to do so for fear that the Chinese might copy their technology and use it to design superior weapons that Chinese firms can then sell to potential Russian customers at lower prices.

Another manifestation is that the Russian and Chinese militaries have developed a more professional and balanced bilateral relationship. During the Cold War, the Soviet and Chinese armed forces faced each other across the world's longest border as enemies. They even engaged in a small-scale shooting war in the late 1960s over contested islands lying along a shared river. During the 1990s, the two defense establishments largely ignored each other. The Russian high command was seeking to recover from the collapse of the integrated military structures of the Soviet armed forces and the Moscow-led Warsaw Pact. It was also striving to manage the conflicts that had arisen along Russia's periphery following the messy disintegration of the Soviet Union. Finally, Russian commanders were trying to suppress an unexpectedly vicious and robust insurgency in Chechnya. In China, the military was seeking to come to terms with its June 1989 military crackdown in response to the mass anti-regime protests centered in Tiananmen Square. The brutality of the repression led Western governments to sever defense ties with Beijing and impose arms embargos and other sanctions. In this context, Russian-Chinese defense relations consisted mostly of haggling sessions over how much the Chinese would pay to purchase Russia's excess holdings of Soviet-era weapons.

Now the relationship is becoming better institutionalized and integrated. As befits two large and powerful neighbors, the senior military leaders of Russia and China now meet frequently in various formats. Their direct encounters include annual meetings of their defense ministers and

their armed forces chiefs of staff. Since 1997, they have also organized yearly “strategic consultations” between their deputy chiefs of the general staff.¹ The most recent session occurred on November 24-25, 2008, in Beijing, and included Russian Deputy Chief Alexander Burutin and PLA Deputy Chief Ma Xiaotian. In March 2008, the Chinese defense minister established a direct telephone line with his Russian counterpart, the first such ministerial hotline ever created by China and another country.² In December 2008, the chiefs of the Chinese and Russian general staffs created their own direct link.³

Senior Russian and Chinese defense officials also typically participate in the regular heads of government meetings between Russia and China, which occur about once a year as bilateral summits. They also confer frequently at sessions of multinational gatherings, such as at meetings of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which host regular sessions for defense ministers. Contacts are even more common among mid-level military officers, especially those in charge of border security units and military units in neighboring Chinese and Russian territories. Russian and Chinese military experts also engage in regular direct discussions related to their functional expertise such as communications, engineering, and mapping.⁴ Academic exchanges also constantly occur. More than 1,000 Chinese students have studied at over 20 Russian military academies since 1996.⁵

The two defense communities conduct a number of larger exchanges and engagements. The best known are the major biennial military exercises that they have been holding since 2005, but smaller-scale engagements are constantly occurring. On April 28, 2009, Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov and his Chinese counterpart, Liang Guanglie, announced in Moscow they would hold 25 “joint maneuvers” in 2009 alone, as well as boost other defense cooperation.⁶ Liang had spent the previous days on a fact-finding mission in the North Caucasus with other members of the Chinese delegation. They examined Russian counterterrorist tactics and assessed the security situation in the region.⁷

Several Russian-Chinese engagements had occurred before this April defense meeting. On February 26, 2009, Russian and Chinese border troops rehearsed sealing the frontier between Russia’s Blagoveschensk City and China’s Heihe City.⁸ The two navies also conduct reciprocal port visits and maritime engagements along their Pacific coasts. From October 14-18, 2008, for instance, a Chinese Naval squadron, under the command of PLAN East Fleet Commander Vice

¹ “Joint Military Drill to Boost Peace and Stability,” People’s Daily Online, July 21, 2009, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91345/6705902.htm>.

² Information Office of China’s State Council, *China’s National Defence in 2008* (January 20, 2009), chapter 13, http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2009-01/20/content_17155577_15.htm.

³ Yu Bin, “China-Russia Relations: Embracing a Storm and Each Other?,” *Comparative Connections A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations* (January 2009), http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/0804qchina_russia.pdf.

⁴ “Joint Military Drill to Boost Peace and Stability,” People’s Daily Online, July 21, 2009, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91345/6705902.htm>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Roger McDermott, “Sino-Russian Military Exercises Conceived as a Show of Unity,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 5, 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34949.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Yu Bin, “China-Russia Relations: Between Crisis and Cooperation,” *Comparative Connections: A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations* (April 2009), http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/0901qchina_russia.pdf.

Admiral Xu Hongmen, visited Vladivostock, the location of the headquarters of the Russian Pacific Fleet.⁹ During this period, the PLAN's Tai Chow destroyer and Ma Anshan frigate exercised communications, maneuvers, and rescue operations with the Russian Navy's Admiral Panteleev and Admiral Vinogradov destroyers in the Peter the Great Bay.¹⁰ From April 6-10, 2009, the Admiral Vinogradov destroyer and a tanker conducted the first ever Russian Navy visit at the Chinese port of Zhanjiang. While there, the crew, which was returning to Vladivostock following a three-month tour patrolling the Gulf of Aden against Somali pirates, participated in several cultural and sporting events.¹¹ Two weeks later, the Russian government sent the largest warship, the 11,500-ton Varyag, of the fourteen foreign navies that joined the maritime parade for the April 23, 2009 celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of the PLAN's founding at the held at the northern port city of Qingdao in the Yellow Sea. This Slava-class cruiser, the flagship of the Russian Navy's Pacific Fleet, led the formation of foreign ships on review.¹²

In 2008, Russia also played a prominent role in the international emergency response to the May 12 earthquake that devastated China's southwestern Sichuan Province. In the week following the earthquake, Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry airlifted relief supplies and sent the first foreign rescue and medical teams to Sichuan. When President Medvedev visited China May 23-24 on a previously arranged visit, he ordered hundreds of tons of additional aid. Two Russian Mi-26 helicopters helped move this and other cargo to hard-to-reach areas in Sichuan, whose local transport system had collapsed. The Russian government also arranged for over a thousand Chinese children from stricken region to spend time in Russian summer camps.¹³ Hu and other Chinese government representatives repeatedly thanked the Russian government for conducting the largest foreign relief mission in the history of the Russian armed forces, citing the assistance as a manifestation of the close ties between the two societies.

Major Military Exercises

In addition to humanitarian relief, military exchanges, and numerous small-scale border drills, Russia and China have conducted three major joint exercises during the past four years. The first of these "Peace Mission" exercises, unprecedented in the history of relations between Beijing and Moscow, occurred in August 18-25, 2005. The Chinese and Russian militaries conducted a three-phased operation that began in Vladivostok in the Russian Far East and then moved to China's Shandong Peninsula, where the participants conducted land followed by amphibious maneuvers.¹⁴ While the Chinese supplied most of the troops (8,000 versus 2,000), the Russians provided the most sophisticated equipment, including Russian Tu-160 and Tu-95 strategic

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Mikhail Lukin, "Russian Participation in Combined Training Exercises in 2008," *Moscow Defense Brief* (2009), <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/1-2009/item4/article1/>.

¹¹ "Russian Destroyer Visits Naval Base in South China," RIA Novosti, April 6, 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20090406/120940834.html>.

¹² "Cruiser to Lead Foreign Ships in China Naval Parade," RIA Novosti, April 22, 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20090422/121247162.html>.

¹³ Yu Bin, "China-Russia Relations: Medvedev's Ostpolitik and Sino-Russian Relations," *Comparative Connections: A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relation* (July 2008), http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/0802qchina_russia.pdf.

¹⁴ "Sino-Russian Military Drills Demonstrate Commitment to World Peace," People's Daily Online, August 19, 2005, <http://www.politicalaffairs.net/article/view/1695/1/114/>.

bombers as well as some 140 warships.¹⁵ The maneuvers practiced during Peace Mission 2005 included neutralizing anti-aircraft defenses, enforcing a maritime blockade, and conducting an amphibious assault and other joint maritime operations. One Russian analyst described the exercise as rehearsing “a conventional all-out assault using the Russian and Chinese tactics developed in the 1970s and 80s.”¹⁶

Not even during the 1950s, when China belonged to the Soviet bloc and had a formal mutual defense treaty with Moscow, had the two countries carried out such a large joint exercise. Although their stated purpose was to fight terrorists and restore peace among hypothetical local combatants, the large scale of the air, sea, and ground operations made it appear to Russian as well as foreign observers like a rehearsal for a joint amphibious invasion of Taiwan with tactics designed to deter or defeat American military intervention on the island’s behalf.¹⁷ The U.S. Defense Department also interpreted the exercise as partly an attempt by China to strengthen its power projection capabilities with respect to Taiwan.¹⁸ The Russian government at least did not seem to impart such an impression. Moscow reportedly rejected an earlier Chinese proposal to conduct the exercise in Zhejiang, a Chinese coastal province near Taiwan.¹⁹

Another possible scenario could be a joint Russian-Chinese military occupation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) should the regime in Pyongyang collapse. In such an eventuality, other countries might contemplate moving military forces into North Korea to avert a humanitarian disaster (which could include a massive flight of refugees into neighboring Chinese and Russian territory as well as South Korea) and secure the DPRK’s nuclear explosive devices and other weapons before they could fall into the hands of terrorists, criminals, or other rogue regimes. Beijing and Moscow might want to occupy the territory first rather than allow American forces to move so close to their borders.

Peace Mission 2007, which occurred from August 9-17 of that year, transpired within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Unlike in 2005, the armed forces of all six full SCO members participated on this occasion, with almost 6,500 troops and 80 aircraft engaged in the two phases, including 2,000 troops from Russia and 1,600 from China.²⁰ Peace Mission 2007 began on August 9 in Urumqi, the capital of China’s Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Area, and ended on August 17, with a live-fire exercise at the Russian military training range near Chelyabinsk, in Russia’s Volga-Urals Military District. Unlike Peace Mission 2005, this exercise, which did not involve military ships, was better oriented toward suppressing a major Islamist insurgency (such as occurred in Chechnya) or popular rebellion (such as

¹⁵ Vladimir Mukhin, “Po uyguro-chechenskomu stsensariyu,” *Nezavisimyy gazeta*, July 21, 2009, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2009-07-21/2_uchenia.html.

¹⁶ Roger N. McDermott, *The Rising Dragon: SCO Peace Mission 2007* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, October 2007), <http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Jamestown-McDermottRisingDragon.pdf>.

¹⁷ Mukhin, “Po uyguro-chechenskomu tsensariyu”; and “Russia and China: Joint Military Exercises: Comment and Analysis from Taipei, London, Singapore and Tokyo,” *WorldPress.org*, August 26, 2005, <http://www.worldpress.org/Asia/2138.cfm>.

¹⁸ “U.S. Is Watching Russia-China Drill,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/18/world/asia/18iht-exercise.html?_r=1.

¹⁹ Sergei Blagov, “Russian-Chinese War Game Meant to Boost Bilateral Partnership,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 18, 2005, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=30804](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=30804).

²⁰ Jason Kelly, “Anti-Terrorism with Chinese Characteristics: Peace Mission 2007 in Context,” *China Brief*, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4514.

occurred at Tiananmen Square in 1989 or Andijan in 2005), presumably in one of the landlocked Central Asian countries.

Peace Mission 2009 took place from July 22-27 of this year. It began with a single day of political-military consultations among senior Russian and Chinese defense personnel in Khabarovsk, the largest city in the Russian Far East and the headquarters of the Far East Military Command.²¹ They reportedly discussed “the overall anti-terror situation” and “the terrorism trends in member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” as well as Afghanistan.²² Unlike in 2007, only Russian and Chinese troops participated on this occasion, but, as in 2005, the other SCO members received invitations to send military observers to Peace Mission 2009.²³

The opening ceremony also occurred there, with dozens of senior officials in attendance, including Chen Bingde, the Chief of the General Staff of the Chinese Armed Forces, and Nikolai Makarov, his Russian counterpart.²⁴ The operational phases of the exercise took place in northeast China, at the Taonan training base in China's Shenyang Military Area Command.²⁵ Both parties established a theater-level command headquarters there. They then spent three days jointly planning and organizing for a combined anti-terrorist campaign. The most important exercise segment was a live-fire drill at the base, which occupied ninety minutes on the last day.²⁶ About 1,300 military personnel from each country participated in some phase of the exercise. The Russian air force contributed about 20 military aircraft to the maneuvers in China, including Su-25 and Su-27 combat jets, Il-76 transport planes, Su-24 bombers, and Mi-8 helicopters.²⁷ They considered but declined to deploy strategic bombers, following the practice of 2007 rather than 2005.²⁸ The Chinese military sent about an equal number of combat aircraft, one of which crashed a few days before the exercise began. The Russian ground forces involved included BMP-1 and BTR-70 armored vehicles as well as T-80 tanks.²⁹ A Russian airborne assault unit practiced parachuting from Il-76s.³⁰ The Chinese armed forces contributed artillery,

²¹ “Mission for Peace Targets Terrorists,” CCTV, July 23, 2009, <http://english.cctv.com/20090723/106704.shtml>.

²² Peng Kuang and Li Xiaokun, “Sino-Russian Drill to Begin Despite Crash,” *China Daily*, July 22, 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/22/content_8456192.htm.

²³ Zhang Quanyi, “Aims of Sino-Russian Military Exercises,” UPI, July 23, 2009, http://www.upiasia.com/Security/2009/07/23/aims_of_sino-russian_military_exercises/8829/.

²⁴ Peng Kuang and Li Xiaokun, “Sino-Russian Drill to Begin Despite Crash,” *China Daily*, July 22, 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/22/content_8456192.htm.

²⁵ Taonan tactic training base is one of the PLA's major bases for military exercises. It belongs to the PLA's Shenyang Military Command which borders Russia's Far Eastern region to the north.

²⁶ Liu Anqi, ed., “Day 2 of China-Russia Anti-Terror Drill,” CCTV, July 24, 2009, <http://www.cctv.com/program/newshour/20090724/104689.shtml>.

²⁷ “Russian Troops Go Aboard Train to Take Part in Chinese Exercises,” Itar-Tass, July 8, 2009, <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=14127785&PageNum=23>

²⁸ McDermott, “Sino-Russian Military Exercises.”

²⁹ “Russia and China Hold Peace Mission Drills to Show USA Its Place,” *Pravda*, June 20, 2009, http://english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/20-07-2009/108250-russia_china-0.

³⁰ “Chiefs of the General Staff from both China and Russia Watch Military Drill,” People's Daily Online, July 24, 2009, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6709677.html>; and Russia, China to hold 2nd Joint Training at Peace Mission Exercise,” Itar-Tass, July 19, 2009, <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=14159658&PageNum=0>.

air defense, army aviation, and special forces contingents as well as logistical support to both sides.³¹

Peace Mission 2009 differed from the previous two exercises in the series in certain respects. The operational phase of the drills occurred only on Chinese territory, with the single day of discussions at Khabarovsk looking like a simple attempt to involve Russian territory in some direct capacity. The number of troops participating was much less than in previous years, even if some more sophisticated weaponry is involved this year. For example, both Russian and Chinese forces deployed surface-to-air missiles, a new development in their history of joint operations.³² (How these systems could contribute to fighting terrorists, which do not conduct air attacks unless they can hijack an airplane, was left unclear.)

Several factors might explain the smaller size of Peace Mission 2009. The reason stated by Lieutenant-General Sergei Antonov, the first deputy chief of staff of the Russian ground forces, was that the two armed forces wanted the drills to correspond to their actual experience fighting small groups of mobile terrorists with major military units.³³ Russian analysts interpreted this as applying the lessons learned by Russian forces in the northern Caucasus and the Chinese military in Xinjiang.³⁴ Other reasons for the smaller scale might include operational considerations (the shorter time for preparation and the more genuine focus on counterterrorism), the costs constraints imposed by diminishing revenue due to the global economic recession, the desire not to alarm and the belief of Russian defense leaders of the futility of showcasing weapons for sale to China now that the Chinese have made clear they were interested in purchasing only a few of Russia's most advanced weapons systems, most of which Moscow is not eager to sell.

In any case, both countries conducted much larger national exercises around this time. Russia's "Kavkaz 2009," which ran from June 29 to July 6, involved more than 8,500 military personnel as well as many more tanks, fighters, helicopters, and warships than ever participated in a bilateral exercise with China.³⁵ A month after Peace Mission 2009, China conducted "Stride 2009," a two-month long PLA exercise involving some 50,000 military personnel—including divisions from the Shenyang, Lanzhou, Jinan and Guangzhou regional military commands—at the same base that Peace Mission 2009 occurred. The August-September "Stride-2009" drill represents the largest tactical training exercise ever conducted by the PLA.³⁶

³¹ Zhang Ning, "Chinese Army Battle Group Ready for Russia-China Joint Military Exercise," CCTV, July 20, 2009, <http://www.cctv.com/program/newshour/20090720/104771.shtml>.

³² "'Peace Mission-2009' Improves Anti-Terror Response: Chinese Military Officer," Xinhua, July 24, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/24/content_11765127.htm.

³³ "Vo vremya rossiysko-kitayskix voennykh ucheniy budut otrabotany i deystviya protiv terroristov," Interfax, July 11, 2009, <http://www.interfax.ru/news.asp?id=89731>.

³⁴ Vladimir Mukhin, "Po uyuro-chechenskoy tsenariyu," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, July 21, 2009, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2009-07-21/2_uchenia.html.

³⁵ Roger McDermott, "Russia Quietly Introduces 'New Look' Army," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 14, 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35258&cHash=6bb639c453.

³⁶ China Launches Massive Military Exercise: Report," AFP, Aug 11, 2009, http://www.spacewar.com/reports/China_launches_massive_military_exercise_report_999.html; and Yan Hao, "Stride-2009": PLA 50,000 Troops Kick off Largest Military Exercise," Xinhua, August 12, 2009, <http://www.china-defense-mashup.com/?p=3779>.

Representatives of the Russian and Chinese governments sought to place the exercises with the SCO framework, but the only concrete involvement of that organization was that Moscow and Beijing invited the other four full SCO members—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—to send military observers to the exercise.³⁷ In this respect, the 2009 drill more closely resembled the 2005 exercise, which formally occurred under the rubric of their bilateral friendship treaty, than the multinational 2007 exercise, which involved combat troops from other SCO members. The SCO has already announced plans to hold a multinational exercise next year in southern Kazakhstan.³⁸

Assessment

These joint Russian-Chinese military exercises serve several purposes. One of their original aims was to promote arms sales from Russia to China. Russian officials have used the drills as an opportunity to showcase to the Chinese defense community certain weapons systems that they want to sell to China. The Chinese presumably welcome the chance to examine the capabilities of Russian systems through these exercises. Peace Mission 2005 in particular could be seen in part as an elaborate staging ground for demonstrating Russian military technologies to potential Chinese buyers. At the time, China, along with India, was the leading buyer of Russian weapons. During the exercises, Russia showed off the Tu-95 strategic bombers and Tu-22M long-range bombers that Moscow was then trying to sell to Beijing. Although these strategic bombers are older platforms (the Tu-160 is Russia's most advanced strategic bomber), they can launch long-range cruise missiles against air and ground targets, including U.S. aircraft carriers.³⁹ The sales motive was also evident in the Russian decision to leave the bombers that participated in the exercise, as well as other types of military aircraft, on display in China for several days following the maneuvers. The policy of exploiting the opportunity to highlight a few advanced weapons systems to the Chinese during the exercise may have worked since Beijing placed a large order for one of the participating warplanes, the Il-78 tanker, a few weeks later.⁴⁰ This function appears to have declined in importance in recent exercises since the Chinese armed forces, benefiting from growing indigenous capabilities of the Chinese defense industry, have been buying fewer Russian weapons.

A more enduring goal is to improve the operational and tactical proficiency of both militaries and increase their level of interoperability. Chinese defense representatives have traditionally cited the advantage of using exercises with foreign countries as opportunities to learn new tactics, techniques, and procedures. They can also use the maneuvers to practice coordinating large and varied forces with one of the world's leading military powers. For example, the 2007

³⁷ Zhang Quanyi, "Aims of Sino-Russian Military Exercises," UPI, July 23, 2009, http://www.upiasia.com/Security/2009/07/23/aims_of_sino-russian_military_exercises/8829/.

³⁸ "SCO Military Exercises to be Held in 2010 in Kazakhstan—Russia," RIA Novosti, April 29, 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20090429/150012254.html>.

³⁹ The U.S. Department of Defense also concluded that the Russians might have been exploiting the exercise to show off advanced weapons systems to potential Chinese buyers; see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2006*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2006, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Yu Bin, "China-Russia Relations: The New World Order According to Moscow and Beijing," *Comparative Connections A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, vol. 7, no. 3, (October 2005), p. 148, <http://csis.org/publication/comparative-connections-v7-n3-china-russia-relations-new-world-order-according-moscow-an>.

live-fire drills in Chelyabinsk allowed the Chinese armed forces to practice deploying and supporting a large military force at a considerable distance from mainland China.⁴¹ The Russian armed forces also aim to improve their performance through these exercises. The movement of Russian troops and equipment to northeast China in preparation for Peace Mission 2009 represented the largest foreign deployment by the forces of Russia's Far Eastern Military District since Soviet forces invaded northeastern China to attack the Japanese occupation troops at the end of World War II.⁴²

The Russian and Chinese forces involved in these drills have demonstrated increased proficiency over time, though it is unclear whether this improvement results from the exercises themselves or the strengthening capabilities of both sides' conventional forces in recent years due to other initiatives. The 2005 series saw only a limited degree of operational interoperability. That year's drills did not rehearse integrated operations in the way the U.S. military does with its allies, instead involving mostly parallel Chinese and Russian military maneuvers in the same locations.⁴³ The two subsequent exercise rounds saw greater integration, though it is still dubious if both militaries could conduct a joint battle, with integrated tactical operations, rather than a joint campaign in which they operated independently in parallel sectors (e.g., with Russian troops moving into Kyrgyzstan from the north while Chinese forces enter from the east).

Their ability to organize a rapid joint military response even in a neighboring state is also questionable. The Chinese media cited a Chinese General who boasted that, after deciding to hold Peace Mission 2009, they spent "only six months" getting ready for the drill to better "demonstrate Chinese forces' quick [sic] response capabilities."⁴⁴ The SCO also lacks the integrated command and control mechanism to organize a more rapid collective military intervention, even in one of its member countries. Perhaps for this reason, the Russian government has been trying to develop a rapid response force within the Moscow-controlled Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) that Russia and its allies can employ for urgent scenarios.

Both Peace Mission 2007 and 2009 could enhance the ability of the Russian, Chinese, and perhaps other SCO armed forces to deter—and if necessary suppress—another popular rebellion (which the SCO governments characterize as a large-scale terrorist movement), such as the ones that occurred in Tiananmen Square in spring 1989 and Andijan, Uzbekistan, in May 2005.⁴⁵ At the time, the 2007 drills in Xinjiang led some observers to speculate that exercise aimed "to

⁴¹ Roger N. McDermott, *The Rising Dragon: SCO Peace Mission 2007* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, October 2007), <http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Jamestown-McDermottRisingDragon.pdf>.

⁴² James Pomfret and Dmitry Solovyov, "China, Russia Kick Off War Games," Reuters, July 23, 2009, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/1010/42/379755.htm>.

⁴³ For additional information on the exercise see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2006*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2006, p. 2; Mkhail Lukin, "Peace Mission 2005: A 1970s Template for Sino-Russian 'Peacekeeping'," *Moscow Defense Brief*, no 2 (2005), pp. 15-18; and PINR News Report, "Russia China Security Cooperation," November 27, 2006, www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=588&language_id=1.

⁴⁴ "Joint Military Drill to Boost Peace and Stability," People's Daily Online, July 21, 2009, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91345/6705902.htm>.

⁴⁵ On the similarities and differences between these two events see: Patrick Moore and Daniel Kimmage, "Uzbekistan: Was Andijon Uzbekistan's Tiananmen Square?," RFE/RL, June 09, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1059188.html>.

intimidate the Uighur population in East Turkestan and to warn the democratic forces in Central Asia not to challenge the authoritarian regimes.”⁴⁶ The 2009 maneuvers between the Russian and Chinese militaries occurred against the backdrop of mass unrest in Xinjiang and a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and the Russian-controlled territories of the North Caucasus. Hundreds of people had died the previous month in vicious street fighting between Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang and other parts of China.⁴⁷ The authorities, who used the military to suppress the disorders after the police and other internal security forces lost control of the situation, blamed the ethnic rioting on foreign-backed terrorists seeking to create a separate state of East Turkmenistan. In Afghanistan, the fighting flared up as U.S. Marines flooded into the Taliban’s southern strongholds, leading them to disperse into other parts of Afghanistan as well as neighboring countries. While Chechnya remained relatively quiet, moreover, Russian special forces and police units engaged in several firefights with Islamist extremists in the neighboring Muslim-majority regions of Dagestan and Ingushetia. Finally, during the weeks preceding the exercises, the governments in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan reported that Taliban-linked insurgents were infiltrating their countries from Afghanistan.⁴⁸

Chinese representatives especially emphasized the counterterrorist dimensions of the 2009 exercise. A series of PLA military experts called the drills a “warning” meant to deter terrorists⁴⁹. Major General Wang Haiyun, a former military attaché to Russia, observed that, “To some extent, the July 5 Xinjiang riot pushed forward anti-terrorism cooperation between China and Russia.”⁵⁰ According to General Chen Bingde, Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army, “China and Russia have a very clear objective to jointly eliminate terrorism, separatism and extremism.” Chen added: “We fight for peace.”⁵¹ In describing the tactics involved, Chinese Major General Luo Yuan, a researcher with the PLA's Military Sciences Academy, stressed that, “The major subjects of the exercise are not designed to train positional attack-and-defense or mobile warfare, but to encircle and suppress unprepared terrorists.”⁵² At the opening ceremony, General Makarov also emphasized the counterterrorist purpose of the drills, arguing that the Urumqi riots “show that more and more terrorist, separatist and extremist forces are emerging, and, recently, to that we have to add pirates” that were operating off Somalia and attacking foreign vessels defended by Russian, Chinese, and other international warships. “I believe the joint task of our two armed forces is to fight such illegal forces,” Makarov insisted.⁵³ Despite the lack of a clear counter-terrorist purpose for the surface-to-air

⁴⁶ Alim Seytoff, “SCO Exercise ‘Aimed at Suppressing Uighurs’,” *Asia Times*, August 16, 2007, www.atimes.com/atimes/China/IH16Ad06.html.

⁴⁷ “Russia, China in Military Exercises Amid Fears,” *World Bulletin*, July 22, 2009, http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=45131.

⁴⁸ Fred Weir, “Russia-China War Games Battle Extremists, Separatists,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 22, 2009, <http://features.csmonitor.com/globalnews/2009/07/22/russia-china-war-games-battle-extremists-separatists/>.

⁴⁹ “Researchers: Sino-Russian Joint Military Exercise a Warning to Terrorists,” *Xinhua*, July 22, 2009, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6707055.html>.

⁵⁰ “Joint Military Exercise Targets Spread of Terrorism,” *China Daily*, July 20, 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/20/content_8446817.htm.

⁵¹ “‘Peace Mission-2009’ Improves Anti-Terror Response, Chinese Military Officer,” *People's Daily Online*, July 24, 2009, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6709137.html>.

⁵² “Researchers: Sino-Russian Joint Military Exercise a Warning to Terrorists,” *Xinhua*, July 22, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/22/content_11751370.htm.

⁵³ Li Xiaokun and Peng Kuang, “‘Mission for Peace Targets Terrorists,’” *China Daily*, July 23, 2009-
<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/peacemission2009/index.html>.

missiles, the rest of the order of battle seems well-suited for fighting terrorist groups such as the Taliban and Chechen insurgents.

A second goal is to underscore the high level of defense cooperation between Russia and China. The exercises are not explicitly intended for the classic purpose of collective defense. The bilateral Sino-Russian friendship treaty, signed in July 2001, lacks a mutual defense clause, instead obliging both sides to refrain from aggressive acts toward one another and to consult in the case of mutual threats and international crises. Furthermore, Chinese government representatives have repeatedly stated for years that they will not join foreign military alliances. But the combined maneuvers do affirm the two countries' commitment to defense cooperation as one dimension of their evolving relationship. Major General Wang Haiyun, a former military attaché to Russia, observed that, "Military cooperation is the highest level and most sensitive exchange between two countries and China and Russia's joint military drill has demonstrated the solid bond between the neighbors."⁵⁴ Major General Qian Lihua, director of the Ministry of National Defense's Foreign Affairs Office, specifically described Peace Mission 2009 as contributing to the celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Beijing and Moscow: "This drill is a specific move to consolidate and deepen the two nations' strategic cooperation partnerships, an important practice to implement the consensus reached at the [June 2009] SCO summit and a key program for celebrating the two nations' diplomatic relations."⁵⁵

Collaborating through joint exercises could also be seen as a form of confidence building. Russia and China have adopted a series of arms control measures along their joint border, including advanced notification of large military exercises in the vicinity. The Russia-China border demilitarization talks began in November 1989. They soon split into parallel negotiations: one on reducing military forces along the Russian-Chinese frontier, the other on establishing confidence and security building measures in the border region. The other newly independent former Soviet republics bordering China—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, also participated in demilitarization and confidence-building measures involving China. In July 1994, the Russian and Chinese defense ministers agreed to a set of procedures to avert future incidents, including arrangements to prevent unauthorized ballistic missile launches, prevent the jamming of communications equipment, and warn ships and aircraft that might inadvertently violate national borders. In September of that year, Chinese and Russian authorities pledged not to target strategic nuclear missiles at each other. On April 26, 1996, the governments of China and the four former Soviet republics signed a "Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions," which established a set of military confidence-building measures along their shared borders. At their second meeting, which occurred in Moscow on April 25, 1997, these "Shanghai Five" signed a "Treaty on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions." This accord restricts conventional military deployments and activities within a hundred kilometer-wide demilitarized zone along their shared frontiers. They established a Joint Control Group, which still holds sessions, to monitor implementation of these confidence-building measures.⁵⁶ In April

⁵⁴ "Joint Military Drill to Boost Peace and Stability," People's Daily Online, July 21, 2009, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91345/6705902.htm>.

⁵⁵ "Joint Military Drill to Boost Peace and Stability," People's Daily Online, July 21, 2009, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91345/6705902.htm>.

⁵⁶ Bin, "Embracing a Storm."

1998, China and Russia established a direct presidential hot line—China’s first with another government.

Some of these agreements are largely symbolic in that they are not accompanied by any verification or enforcement procedures. For example, either country can rapidly retarget its strategic missiles. Leaders can choose to use the hot line, or not pick up the receiver. Yet, most of the accords are self-enforcing. China and the former Soviet republics were eager to demilitarize following the end of the Cold War. The Russian-Chinese exercises, whether they occur bilaterally or occur within the multilateral SCO framework, help supplement these formal accords by providing additional information regarding the tactics, techniques, and procedures practiced by the other military as well as its capabilities and intentions.

In this regard, the two militaries are presumably also interested in learning more about the evolving capabilities of a potential future adversary. Alexander Khramchikhin, the Director of Russia’s Institute for Political and Military Analysis, argues that the joint military operations provide an occasion for both militaries to check each other: China intends to study Russia’s strong and weak points during the drills in case Russia becomes its adversary in the future.”⁵⁷ He warns that, “China is our potential enemy, and these exercises are mostly playing into China’s hands.”⁵⁸ Unlike during the Cold War, China and Russia no longer fear engaging in a shooting war. The two countries have largely accepted their common border, which at almost 2,700 miles (consisting of a small segment in China’s northwest and a much larger frontier along China’s northeast) is longest border between two neighboring countries in the world. Yet, Russians worry about the long-term implications of China’s exploding population for Russia’s demographically and economically stagnant eastern regions. Another possible unspoken purpose is to use the exercises as an opportunity to show their capabilities to external audiences, including each other. Demonstrating military prowess is a time-honored tactic for reassuring friends and deterring adversaries. Through such operations, the Russian armed forces can counter doubts that they have not yet fully recovered from their post-Soviet meltdown, while the Chinese can show off their growing sophistication of their own military.

One target audience might be the Central Asian governments that a constantly being wooed by Washington. Through their exercises, which typically involve observers if not combat troops from Central Asian states, Russia and China underscore their ability to defend Central Asian governments threatened by foreign militaries or, more probably, internal rebellion and terrorists. By reassuring the Central Asian governments that they can depend on Russia and China to protect them, the drills also weaken Western influence in the region by helping persuade their SCO allies that they need not rely on NATO and the United States for their defense.⁵⁹ Russia in particular has benefited from highlighting its commitment to combating threats to regional stability to justify its military presence in the region. Unlike the United States and other NATO countries, Russia has not experienced problems retaining its air base in Kyrgyzstan or elsewhere in Central Asia. At the time of the Peace Mission 2009, the Russian government was seeking a

⁵⁷ Sergey Balmasov, “Russia and China Hold Peace Mission Drills to Show USA Its Place,” *Pravda*, June 20, 2009, http://english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/20-07-2009/108250-russia_china-0.

⁵⁸ Weir, “Russia-China War Games.”

⁵⁹ Roger N. McDermott, *The Rising Dragon: SCO Peace Mission 2007* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, October, 2007), p. 3, <http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Jamestown-McDermottRisingDragon.pdf>

second military base in southern Kyrgyzstan. Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the country's president, said that he might approve a new Russian military base so that Russia could help train the region's militaries to combat the growing threat of narco-terrorism.⁶⁰

In terms of political signaling to third parties, moreover, the maneuvers affirm to the United States and other extra-regional countries that Russia and China consider Central Asia as lying within their overlapping zones of security responsibility. The chief of Russia's general staff, General Nikolai Makarov, said at the opening ceremony that the exercises "must show the international community that Russia and China have the necessary resources to ensure stability and security in the region."⁶¹

Thus far, the American defense community has reacted with appropriate watchful calm to the Russian-Chinese defense engagements. The two countries have shown no capacity or inclination to conduct joint military operations against the United States or its allies in the region, and have avoided the 2005 mistake of giving the impression of even considering such a possibility. Even in the SCO context, Russia and China lack the interoperability or integrated command, control, and support mechanisms required to conduct an effective combined military campaign. If they ever were to fight a war on the same side, they would most likely do so in parallel, carving out their own area of operations. If anything, these exercises are less threatening to U.S. regional security interests than the Russia-China arms trade relationship, which at times seems as if it could allow Beijing to contemplate using its Russian-supplied capabilities for pursuing military options against Taiwan or in other Asia Pacific scenarios. The U.S. government should continue to monitor the Russian-Chinese defense exchanges while continuing its own robust exercise and exchange series with the far larger number of international partners available to the United States. Unlike Moscow or Moscow, Washington has many genuine military allies.

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⁶⁰ Weir, "Russia-China War Games."

⁶¹ "Russia, China Kick off Military Exercises," AFP, July 22, 2009, <http://www.france24.com/en/20090722-russia-china-kick-off-military-exercises>.

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