

## Partnership on the high seas: China and Russia's joint naval manoeuvres

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# SWP Comment

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## Partnership on the High Seas

China and Russia's Joint Naval Manoeuvres

*Michael Paul*

On the occasion of the 70th founding anniversary of China's national navy, a big naval parade with more than 30 Chinese ships sailed off the coast of Qingdao. A few days later, on 29 April 2019, the "Joint Sea 2019" Russian-Chinese bilateral naval exercise began. In numbers, China's navy now has the world's biggest fleet – also thanks to decades of Russian naval armament. From Beijing's point of view, however, the Chinese armed forces have a serious shortcoming: a lack of operational experience. Here, too, Moscow fills some gaps. Since the first joint manoeuvre in 2005, cooperation has increased at many levels. Sino-Russian sea manoeuvres now also serve as a menacing signal of support for China's claims in the South China Sea or in the Sino-Japanese disputes in the East China Sea. Moscow and Beijing use the joint naval exercises to set geopolitical signals. Despite all historic mistrust, Sino-Russian cooperation seems to rest on a relatively stable foundation of partnership. But maritime cooperation and coordinated partnership must not lead to an alliance.

Joint exercises benefit China in various ways. The country primarily wants to secure its long sea routes because the export-orientation of China's economy makes it increasingly dependent on and vulnerable to maritime security. China is also the world's largest importer of crude oil. Its navy is therefore supposed to secure trade and energy supplies. It has a lot of catching up to do when it comes to operating in seas beyond its own coastal region. China has been involved in anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa since 2008, but apart from that, the navy has little experience with operations outside Asia. Maritime cooperation with Russia helps China implement its maritime strategy, enhance mari-

time security, and develop capabilities for "offshore operations".

Chinese and Russian armed forces have now carried out more than 25 bilateral, increasingly complex joint exercises in which naval, land, and air assets were combined. Bilateral exercises at sea began in 2012, signalling similar geopolitical ambitions and promoting the implementation of maritime strategies. In addition, bilateral military exercises enable a process of learning and the exchange of operational and strategic concepts. They can both demonstrate military readiness and enhance operational experience, thus improving operational flexibility and readiness for future deployments. Geographically, the



## Chinese-Russian naval exercises since 2012

| Year | Date              | Host – Operational Area                  | Scope  |
|------|-------------------|--|--|
| 2012 | 22 – 27 April     | China – Yellow Sea                       | <i>China</i> : 18 warships (incl. 2 submarines), 13 aircraft, 5 helicopters<br><i>Russia</i> : 7 warships (incl. 3 suppliers), 4 helicopters                         |
| 2013 | 5 – 12 July       | Russia – Sea of Japan                    | <i>China</i> : 9 warships (incl. 2 submarines, 1 supplier), 3 helicopters<br><i>Russia</i> : 13 warships (incl. submarine), 3 aircraft, 2 helicopters                |
| 2014 | 20 – 26 May       | China – East China Sea                   | <i>China</i> : 8 warships (incl. 2 submarines), 7 aircraft, 4 helicopters<br><i>Russia</i> : 6 warships, 2 aircraft  |
| 2015 | 11 – 21 May       | Russia – Mediterranean Sea               | <i>China</i> : 2 frigates and 1 supply vessel<br><i>Russia</i> : 2 warships  |
|      | 20 – 28 August    | Russia – Sea of Japan                    | <i>China</i> : 7 warships, 5 aircraft, 6 helicopters, 21 amphibious vehicles<br><i>Russia</i> : 18 warships (incl. 2 submarines), 3 aircraft, 9 amphibious vehicles  |
| 2016 | 12 – 20 September | China – South China Sea                  | <i>China</i> : 12 warships (incl. 2 submarines), 11 aircraft, 8 helicopters<br><i>Russia</i> : 5 warships (incl. 2 suppliers), 2 helicopters and amphibious vehicles |
| 2017 | 21 – 28 July      | Russia – Baltic Sea                      | Altogether 13 warships with helicopters (Ka-27) and bombers (Su-24)  |
|      | 18 – 25 September | Russia – Sea of Japan and Sea of Okhotsk | A total of 13 warships (incl. 2 submarines), 4 on-board helicopters, and 4 submarine combat aircraft (ASWs)  |
| 2018 | 11 – 17 September | Russia                                   | Large manoeuvre “Vostok 2018” with tactical naval exercises  |
| 2019 | 29 April – 4 May  | China – Yellow Sea and East China Sea    | <i>China</i> : 7 warships (incl. submarine)<br><i>Russia</i> : 5 warships (incl. submarine)  |

exercises have covered different sea areas, with each country acting as host in different waters.

Three of the exercises took place in the Chinese home region: in the Yellow Sea (2012), in the East China Sea (2014), and in the South China Sea (2016). Four exercises were carried out in Russian operational areas: in the Mediterranean Sea (2015), in the Baltic Sea (2017), and in the Sea of Okhotsk (2017). Several Sino-Russian manoeuvres have also been held in an area where both have strategic interests, namely

the Sea of Japan (2013, 2015, 2017). On 29 April, “Joint Sea 2019” started on China’s Yellow Sea coast as the latest iteration of the annual naval exercise.

### Manoeuvres in the Chinese Home Region

The joint exercises began in April 2012 in the Yellow Sea, a marginal sea of the Pacific Ocean largely surrounded by China and the Korean Peninsula. The Bohai Gulf belongs

to the Yellow Sea and forms the sea-side access to Beijing, in the south of the East China Sea. The United States regularly deploys ships in these waters and conducted annual exercises with South Korea for decades until President Donald Trump suspended them in 2018. These manoeuvres, repeatedly criticised by China, were one of the reasons for the start of Sino-Russian exercises in 2012. With 25 warships, China and Russia demonstrated their strength in geostrategic competition with the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, also against the background of the enduring North Korea conflict.

Led by the flagship of the Russian Pacific Fleet, a convoy entered the East China Sea on 18 May 2014. The ships moored in the Wusung naval port near Shanghai. This marked the beginning of another joint fleet manoeuvre. The presence of presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping underlined the importance of the exercises. Beijing had previously declared its support for Russia's stance in the Ukraine crisis; Moscow had assured its support for contentious Chinese claims. The latter refer to the Japan-controlled Senkaku Islands, which China claims as the Diaoyu Islands. The Chinese navy's operations in the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have increased since Japan violated the status quo – from a Chinese point of view – and placed the islands under its own administration. In 2012, seven Chinese warships had passed the Miyako Strait. China thus indicated to Japan that its navy would extend its forces to the Pacific to “defensively protect” foreign trade and oil routes, as Chinese admiral Yin Zhuo explained. The “Air Defence Identification Zone”, proclaimed by China in 2013, was another sign that Beijing wanted to take control of the East China Sea. In April 2014, the largest amphibious manoeuvre to date between the United States and South Korea took place on Korea's south-east coast. The Sino-Russian manoeuvres in May 2014 demonstrated the ability and willingness of both naval powers to maintain a strong stance in East Asian waters. Joint exercises on the high seas were

conducted with mixed formations of ships and included missile and artillery strikes against sea targets from various distances and defence against submarine attacks.

In the South China Sea joint sea manoeuvres focussing on amphibious operations were conducted in 2016. China claims nearly 90 per cent of the South China Sea, including the Paracel Islands (occupied by China since 1974, claimed by Vietnam) and the Spratly Islands (some occupied by China, but disputed with Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and disputed with Brunei and Indonesia as regards territorial waters). The naval manoeuvres in September 2016 took place two months after The Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration rejected China's claims. From the court's point of view, the “historical” rights declared by China did not justify territorial claims, and none of the features in the Spratlys qualify them as “islands”, according to maritime law. In addition, the court had criticised the creation of artificial islands. President Putin declared before the start of the exercise that Russia supported China's position in not recognising the ruling from The Hague. The establishment and militarisation of artificial outposts by China had aroused international protest. Russia strengthened China's back with its willingness to engage in joint military manoeuvres in the area. The “demonstration of unity” had a special quality, as it included amphibious operations, that is, it was intended to deter neighbouring states with similar claims. China sent the largest contingent, including state-of-the-art warships (052C and 052B destroyers and three 054A frigates). Russia sent two of its largest but oldest destroyers from its Pacific Fleet. Both communicated for the first time via a common command information system.

### **Manoeuvres in the Russian Home Region**

After all the exercises had taken place in the Pacific, China signalled its support for Russia by sending its ships in the Mediter-

anean and visiting the Russian Black Sea coast in May 2015, although Crimea itself had not been visited. Its annexation had triggered international protest and sanctions and isolated Russia. By announcing that they would be holding joint exercises in the South China Sea in 2016, Beijing and Moscow linked the two highly controversial processes in the spirit of mutual support.

Russia returned to the Mediterranean in 2015 as a maritime power. This included not only the reactivation of the traditional base in Sevastopol on the south-western tip of Crimea, but also of the Russian naval base in the Syrian port of Tartu. This is the only naval base for Russian warships in the Mediterranean and the only military base of the Russian Federation in “distant foreign countries”. Russia mainly sent ships of the Black Sea Fleet into the exercise, which traditionally operates in the Mediterranean Sea from Sevastopol, as the Imperial Russian Navy used to.

China, for its part, demonstrated blue-sea capabilities and emerging interests of its own in the Mediterranean. In the Belt and Road Initiative – China’s multidimensional foreign and economic policy instrument – the Greek port of Piraeus has geopolitical significance as an important part of the maritime Silk Road. In 2016, the state-owned Chinese shipping company COSCO took over 51 per cent of the port company and intends to acquire a further 16 per cent of the shares in 2021. Piraeus is intended to serve as the logistical bridgehead for China’s activities in Europe.

In July 2017, China came surprisingly close to one of the most turbulent fault lines in the East-West relationship. For the first time, a Chinese ship convoy – accompanied by 18 Russian ships of the Baltic Fleet – carried out manoeuvres in the Baltic Sea. The warships met in the waters off the enclave of Kaliningrad. Afterwards, the Chinese ships continued their voyage to St. Petersburg. Some observers spoke of it as being a signal from Beijing, which wanted to be perceived as a great naval power, and also as a gesture of support for Russia, which was isolated from the West. Others

saw it as Beijing’s response to the presence of British and French ships in its own maritime backyard, the South China Sea.

In the second half of 2017, the sea manoeuvres continued in the Sea of Japan. They were then extended to the north, into the Sea of Okhotsk, which lies between the Kuril Islands and the Kamchatka Peninsula in the North Pacific. From the Russian point of view, such manoeuvres support the legal claim to the Sea of Okhotsk, which Moscow closed in 2014 for foreign shipping and fishing following a decision by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. Some argued that this could strengthen Chinese efforts in the South China Sea to pursue its own interpretation of the Law of the Sea for that area.

A similar common interest was shown in the exercises in the Sea of Japan, which lies between the Japanese archipelago, the Russian island of Sakhalin, and the Korean Peninsula. Geostrategically, this sea space is as important for China as it is for Russia, which has in Vladivostok its home port for the Russian Pacific Fleet. This can be seen from the fact that three exercises took place in the area between 2013 and 2017. With their manoeuvres in the Sea of Japan, Russia and China were sending a clear message to Japan, especially after the exercise in 2013, when five Chinese ships first crossed the Soya Strait between Hokkaido in northern Japan and the Russian island of Sakhalin. The 2015 exercises included amphibious operations, which was also an unmistakable signal to Tokyo in the context of the island disputes with Beijing and Moscow. Such complex operations also demonstrate the high level of maritime cooperation.

### **China’s and Russia’s Maritime Capability Profiles: Unequal Partners**

While China is eager to establish a sphere of influence in what it calls the San Hai, or “Three Seas” – the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea – the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) navy is de-

veloping capabilities for offshore operation, that is, the high seas. The concurrent objectives are securing maritime interests (the protection of sea lines of communication, the realisation of territorial claims in the maritime periphery, and finally naval supremacy in the Western Pacific) and the security of the communist regime. General Liu Huaqing, as Commander of the Navy (1982 – 1987), used the national interest in maritime resources as an argument for building a modern navy. The national goal of recovering “lost territories” in the South China Sea also served at that time to justify the transition in doctrine from coastal defence to “active defence”. The development of the maritime strategy was further advanced by experiences in the 1990s, when the Beijing leadership had to recognise the weaknesses of its armed forces, especially during the crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1995/96.

In just over two decades, the PLA navy has mustered one of the mightiest navies in the world. In numbers, China now has the world’s biggest fleet. It is also growing faster than any other major navy. The number of ships or the total tonnage is useful for assessing the capabilities of a fleet in relation to its tasks. However, it is not sufficient to compare its capabilities with those of another navy, such as that of the United States. Today, the Chinese navy has more than 300 warships, whereas the number of US ships in recent years has been between 270 and 290. Now China wants to enable its naval forces more quickly for far-seas operations and build more destroyers, frigates, and submarines. By 2030, it is estimated that the PLA navy will consist of up to 550 naval assets: 450 surface ships and 99 submarines. More and more, the Chinese navy will become equal to the US navy, both quantitatively and even qualitatively, if armament, training, and maritime exercises are continued as before. But only years after the end of the modernisation process in 2035 will the capabilities of China’s navy on the high seas and in the highly complex operation of aircraft carrier groups come close to those of the US navy.

After a quite successful military reform, Russia has efficient, battle-tested armed forces, but it has declined as a maritime power. Moscow therefore declares the return of its navy to the ranks of the leading naval powers as a national goal. To this end, the Arctic and the Atlantic are to form operational focal points. The annexation of Crimea, and thus the regaining of the seaport Sevastopol, also improved the ability to be present in the Mediterranean. According to the new naval doctrine of July 2017, naval forces are to be created that can also operate in distant areas of the world’s oceans. They are intended to prevent the dominance of the US navy and other naval powers and to secure second place in the world (“by combat characteristics”) for their own navy. In quantitative terms, however, the Russian navy is already in third place. While China has two aircraft carriers and a third is under construction, the only Russian carrier, “Admiral Kuznetsov”, was called the “most marauded warship in the world”. Only a quarter of the Russian fleet of more than 200 ships – mainly made up of Soviet-era surface ships – are fit for blue-water operations. Only in the construction and operation of submarines does Russia remain a peer leader – and thus in a position to put the US navy and NATO’s anti-submarine capabilities under pressure.

### **From the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination” to the Alliance?**

Moscow and Beijing came together in the early 1990s under similarly difficult conditions. The violent suppression of the uprising on Tiananmen Square in June 1989 had massively damaged China’s reputation in the world. The European Union and the United States imposed an arms embargo, which is still in force today. Russia suffered from the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In this phase of weakness, both wanted to counter the growing influence of the United States. This effort to restore a balance of

power (“balancing”) is a central explanation for the emergence of alliances, according to classical alliance theory.

After the first reciprocal state visits in 1992 and 1994, a “Strategic Coordination Partnership” was declared in April 1996. This was followed by a “Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Creation of a New International Order” in 1997 and a “Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation” in 2001, in which consultations were agreed in the event that either side saw its security interests being threatened. The last border disputes were settled in 2004. In January 2017, in China’s White Paper on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation Policy, Russia was described as a “priority in diplomacy”. In December 2017, the Chinese Ambassador to Russia, Li Hui, declared that the “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” between China and Russia had a special position in diplomacy with major powers. And Russian President Putin explained in April 2019: “Our military and military-technical cooperation points to the high level of trust. Russia and China hold regular joint exercises and share our accumulated experience in military development.”

Contrary to the official characterisation of China and Russia as equal partners, China’s dominant role in economic relations, which will presumably continue to develop to Russia’s disadvantage in the coming decades, is becoming clear. Moreover, China is not as dependent on Russian energy supplies as Russia is on China as a buyer and investor in the energy sector. However, there is (still) one decisive exception to the rule of Chinese superiority, namely Russia’s experience as a military power. Russia continues to have an operational and technological lead in important areas of naval warfare, such as submarine operations, the use of long-range bombers at sea, and mine warfare. Whereas manoeuvres in the past were often limited to anti-terrorist exercises, they now include combined air defence, missile and artillery operations, anti-submarine warfare, and amphibious operations. In 2017, a Chinese lifeboat docked

with a Russian submarine for the first time. And the interaction is still growing, as can be seen from the fact that Chinese airborne reconnaissance now regularly transmit data to Russian ships. Only in the nuclear domain does Russia remain on par with the United States and superior to China. But here, too, Beijing is likely to expect support from Moscow in the construction of strategic submarines, among other things.

Pragmatic cooperation is beneficial for both because it avoids the uneasy compromise between obligation and sovereignty. Therefore, a formal alliance is unnecessary — an alliance with a guarantee of military assistance in times of conflict can even negatively affect relations with other countries and harm one’s own political interests. In the event of a crisis or conflict, the alliance partner would limit the range of political options, while the appearance of a Sino-Russian military alliance could have a threatening — and even escalating — effect. Moreover, they are unequal partners with different goals. The dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation virtually prohibits voluntary self-restriction, as would be required by an alliance. Russia’s role as a great power, on the other hand, benefits from the partnership because it underscores that Russia is not just a regional power. In the long term, only Beijing is able to contain its common rival, the United States, and the transatlantic alliance. This is an advantage for Moscow, which is why it has “fed the dragon”. In this respect, the Kremlin is *nolens volens* striving less for balancing than for leaning towards a state with higher power potential (“bandwagoning”). An alliance would make it even clearer that both are not equal partners.

## Perspectives

With its ongoing naval modernisation programme, Beijing has long since overtaken Moscow, both in claiming a leading role as a great maritime power and in its implementation. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has failed to restore its blue-

water fleet. Instead, the navy usually navigates in the brown-water areas of the Atlantic's and Pacific's marginal seas, securing its interests in the "near abroad". China, on the other hand, will expand its global naval capabilities. Two aircraft carriers, additional type 055 guided weapon destroyers, and smaller warships are to be completed in the next years. Russia has a combination of small warships such as frigates and corvettes as well as submarines equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles. These are suitable for threatening land targets up to 2,000 kilometres away, as was the case in the Syrian conflict. Moscow therefore has respectable naval capabilities to safeguard its national security interests, and its modernisation projects will enhance blue-water capabilities, even though it will not be able to project global maritime power like China in the future.

Russia uses the joint exercises as an alternative means of projecting power, whereas China uses them to advance and implement its own naval strategy. China's rise as a naval power is to be seen as part of an extraordinary transformation. In modern history, it is the only example of a land power becoming a hybrid land and sea power. The fact that a land power develops sea power touches the established sea power's most sensitive nerve. But so far, China has consistently adhered to this highly complex, quite expensive, and risky geostrategy.

In addition to military-technical cooperation and military-to-military dialogue, military exercises have established themselves as an important element in further developing the partnership. In August 2005, almost 10,000 Chinese and Russian soldiers from the air force and navy took part in the first major joint manoeuvre, the "peace mission". In view of the smouldering Taiwan crisis, this first joint manoeuvre already had considerable political significance. Over time, the manoeuvres became more diverse and complex. However, it remains uncertain whether some exercises for air defence and submarine combat were carefully orchestrated so as to guarantee the safety

of crews and ships or rather to not expose themselves to the partner navy. Maybe only deficiencies should be concealed.

Nevertheless, the Russian navy is a valuable model for China. The shortage of surface vessels is compensated by distributing cruise missiles across the fleet, including submarines, thereby significantly increasing combat strength. The continued proliferation of offensive missile capabilities among ships and submarines remains perhaps the most significant new development of Russia's naval capabilities, also in terms of an effective anti-access/area denial strategy (A2/AD). Complementary to this, the Chinese navy is the world leader in the maritime deployment of ballistic missiles.

Politically sensitive areas not only proved to be no obstacle to joint exercises, but seem to be part of the planning because they gave them higher symbolic value. The 2014 manoeuvres took place in the East China Sea at a time when the Sino-Japanese island disputes threatened to escalate. During the exercises in the Black Sea in 2015, Europe was still shocked by Russia's annexation of Crimea. The 2016 manoeuvres were held in the South China Sea, where the militarisation of newly erected Chinese outposts was just beginning.

Are Russia and China on the way to a military alliance, or are they simply using a mutually beneficial partnership? In fact, neither the functionality of military cooperation nor its potential should be underestimated. Attention should focus not only on China and Russia as individual countries, but also on the impact of their evolving military partnership. In the end, the respective self-interest does not necessarily make Moscow and Beijing allies. Even without formal alliance relations, they enjoy advantages that otherwise only close allies do, as illustrated by the Vostok exercises in 2018. These include a learning process on both sides as well as a certain degree of interoperability that – as in NATO – is only viable so long as it is maintained and practised.

Russia seems more concerned with maintaining strategic nuclear capabilities as well as ground and air forces for operations in the “near abroad” than rebuilding its fleets. China, as a rising maritime power with extensive economic interests around the globe, is building a blue-water navy with carrier groups and expeditionary capabilities. A “degree of mutual complementarity between the two militaries” does not automatically mean military engagement in the event of conflict. But the combination of Russian combat experience and advanced strategic weapons with Chinese sea power makes a quite impressive force.

It is up to Beijing to enhance strategic stability by creating transparency in its naval strategy and future fleet armament. Beyond maritime arms control, not only Brussels and Washington, but also Moscow and Beijing must be interested in confidence- and security-building measures to avoid crisis instability, even if their chances of success currently can be regarded as quite low.

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