



C H I N A A E R O S P A C E
S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

Russian Participation in PRC Strategic Exercise Emblematic of Improving Military Cooperation

In August 2021, Russian military forces will participate in a People's Republic of China (PRC) strategic military training exercise for the first time, marking a distinct military cooperation milestone for the two countries. During a meeting between PRC Minister of National Defense GEN Wei Fenghe and Russian Minister of Defense GEN Sergei Shoigu, the two parties announced that Russia would attend a “joint exercise” held in the PRC from 9 – 13 August 2021.¹ The event will consist of over 10,000 troops from both sides and will involve joint planning, reconnaissance, early warning, electronic and information attacks, and firepower strikes.²

The PRC's MND Chinese language press conference on 29 July 2021 stated that Russian forces would participate in “JOINT WESTERN 2021” (西部·联合-2021).³ A subsequent PRC MND English language press release calls the event “ZAPAD 2021”, which is Russia's Western Military District strategic military exercise.⁴ However, Russian press sources and banners featured at the welcome ceremony at Yinchuan Airfield call the event “Sibu-Interaction 2021” (Сибу/Взаимодействие-2021). Sibu is almost certainly a transliteration of the Chinese for “WESTERN” (西部/*xibu*). As such, JOINT WESTERN 2021” appears to be a variant of the PLA's “WESTERN” (西部) theater-level exercise as identified in the PRC's 2019 Defense White Paper.⁵ This exercise joint exercise may also be nested under the PLA's larger national strategic exercise that typically occurs over the summer into the early fall.

This is the first time the PRC has invited Russia to participate in a major joint exercise in the PRC despite the PLA having now participated in several iterations of Russian strategic exercises. PLA forces first began participating in Russian ones in 2018, when the PLA sent roughly 3,000 personnel to VOSTOK-2018.⁶ Despite the PLA's subsequent participation in TSENTR-2019 and KAVKAZ-2020 as well as a string of other joint Sino-Russian military exercises, the PLA appeared to be reticent in opening participation in its own hallmark exercises. The PLA's invitation of Russian forces to its summer strategic exercise seems to mark an end to that reticence. This change begs the question of why the PLA is finally willing to open its closely held exercise to Russian participation? In addition to the possibility that such a change is simply emblematic of the natural progression of Sino-Russian military cooperation, there are other potential factors that could be driving this shift.

PLA Confidence

One potential explanation is that the PLA is finally comfortable with its own abilities after years of reform. Given that PLA participation in Russian strategic exercises began amid the PLA's enormous structural reforms, the PLA almost certainly was working through command and control issues during its annual strategic exercise. Five years after the beginning of those reforms, the PLA may finally be confident enough in its own processes and performance to allow foreigners to see how the PLA performs on the training field.

Avoiding ZAPAD

Although the PLA participated the last three Russian strategic exercises, this year, Russia will hold ZAPAD-2021. ZAPAD is held by Russia's Western Military District along NATO's eastern borders.⁷ Given the potential political sensitivities of the PLA participating in such a scenario, the PLA may have opted not to participate in ZAPAD-2021, and instead decided to sustain military-to-military relations by inviting Russian forces to participate in a PRC exercise instead.

Responding to U.S. Military Cooperation in the Region

It is possible that continued Quad and other U.S.-led multilateral activities in the Asia-Pacific has finally pressured the PRC into wanting to demonstrate substantive military cooperation in the region of its own. Although the PRC and Russia have long held military events in the Asia-Pacific, they have frequently been on a rotational basis, irregular, and of limited scale. Repeated U.S. exercises with Japan, Australia, and India as well as an increased NATO presence in the Asia-Pacific in the past few years may be forcing the PRC to respond in kind with a discernable increase in Russian military cooperation in the region.

Regardless of the rationale behind this decision, there are several clear takeaways. First, NATO nations must fully embrace the fact that Sino-Russian military cooperation is increasingly becoming substantive in nature and could have a very real effect on the military balance, even in Europe. Similarly, the U.S. and its partners should discard the notion that China will be fighting alone. Although active Russian participation in a Taiwan or South China Sea conflict still seems to be an absurd notion, Russian-involvement in a PLA strategic exercise suggests that limited cooperation during a conflict may not be out of the question. Finally, this shift reiterates that partnerships matter. Whether or not the PRC's decision to involve Russian forces in its strategic exercise is driven by U.S. military cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, the fact that Russia and China are deepening military cooperation themselves indicates that both the U.S. and China envision improving partnerships as a vital part of strategic competition. The U.S. cannot rest on its laurels in this field and must continue to strengthen its own partnerships- not just in Asia-Pacific, but globally.

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¹China Invites Russia's Defense Minister to Attend Military Exercises in August, TASS Russian News Agency, 28 July 2021, accessed 28 July 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1320353>.

² ibid

³ Transcript of July 2021 Ministry of National Defense Press Conference [2021年7月国防部例行记者会文字实录], Ministry of National Defense Network [国防部网], 29 July 2021, accessed 20 July 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2021-07/29/content_4890559.htm.

⁴ Exercise ZAPAD/INTERACTION-2021 to kick off soon, China Military Online, 2 August 2021, Accessed 2 August 2021, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2021-08/02/content_10070060.htm.

⁵ China's National Defense in a New Era [新时代的中国国防], State Council Information Office [国务院新闻办公室], 24 July 2019, accessed 29 July 2021, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/24/content_5414325.htm.

⁶ PLA to participate in Vostok 2018 Drills, Global Times, 21 August 2018, accessed 28 July 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1116432.shtml>.

⁷ Johnson, David; ZAPAD 2017 and Euro-Atlantic security, NATO Review, 14 December 2017, accessed 28 July 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2017/12/14/zapad-2017-and-euro-atlantic-security/index.html>.