



Brothers in arms again? Assessing the Sino-Russian military exercises by Elizabeth Wishnick

For the first time, China and Russia will hold joint military exercises from Aug. 18-25 on the Jiaodong peninsula in the PRC's Shandong province and the Yellow Sea, involving 10,000 troops and an array of modern military technology. Should their neighbors in the Asia-Pacific be alarmed? Yes and no. On the one hand the *Peace Mission 2005* exercises attest to a potential challenge by China and Russia to a U.S.-dominated security order in Asia. Yet the exercises also reveal differences in Sino-Russian political goals that will limit future strategic cooperation.

Ripples from Andijon

Peace Mission 2005, organized within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), reflects growing concern in Moscow and Beijing about the destabilizing political consequences of U.S. military involvement near their borders. Russian and Chinese leaders view the Bush administration's support for the "colored revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan as evidence of a U.S. commitment to regime change in the region and see a double standard in counter-terrorism policy in its condemnation of Uzbekistan's repression of demonstrators in Andijon in May 2005.

At the July 2005 summit in Kazakhstan, SCO representatives called on Washington to specify a deadline for its use of basing facilities in Central Asia. The U.S. role in the evacuation of Uzbek refugees from Andijon, against a background of mounting U.S. criticism of the Uzbek government's human rights abuses, ultimately led President Islam Karymov to end U.S. basing privileges just weeks later. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld then traveled to the region to ensure that the U.S. will retain access to its other base in Kyrgyzstan and overflight rights in Tajikistan, which support US and NATO operations in Afghanistan.

This is not to say that the SCO is likely to turn into a Eurasian NATO. China has been the driving force beyond the grouping, while Russia has been more cautious, casting a wary eye on China's efforts to expand its economic clout in what Moscow has long viewed as its sphere of influence. The Putin government has been quite clear in rejecting any role for the SCO in collective security, preferring to keep this function within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Russia established its own base in Kyrgyzstan in October 2003, which now houses a small CIS rapid deployment force, and set up another in Tajikistan in October 2004.

Location, location

Peace Mission 2005 follows on previous SCO counter-terrorism exercises in Kyrgyzstan in 2002 and in Kazakhstan and China in 2003, but is distinctive in its composition and

unexpected location. *Peace Mission 2005* posits a hypothetical ethnic conflict breaking out in a third country, which appeals to its neighbors and the UN for help. Given China's opposition to participating in most international interventions, this scenario is puzzling enough, but the details of the exercises raise further questions.

Originally Russia proposed holding the exercise in Xinjiang, due to its proximity to the Russian air base in Kyrgyzstan. Instead, the PRC suggested Zhejiang province, across from Taiwan. When the Russian side rejected that location as too provocative, the two countries agreed to hold the exercise in Shandong province.

Russia is contributing a small number of forces, just 1,800 of the 10,000 total, but involving a substantial naval contingent from the Russian Pacific Fleet, including a large *BDK-11* assault ship, the anti-submarine warfare vessel *Marshal Shaposhnikov*, the destroyer *Burny*, and diesel submarines. The naval squadron will join with Chinese forces to simulate a major amphibious landing on a beachhead in the Jiaodong peninsula. Russian bombers (*Tu-95S* Bear strategic bombers and *Tu-22M3* Backfire long-range bombers) will also stage an air landing near Qingdao, including air cover by *SU-27SM* fighters armed with *AS-15* 3,000-km cruise missiles against naval targets.

A brief look at a map of Central Asia indicates that most SCO countries at risk for ethnic conflict (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) are land-locked. Why then the display of Sino-Russian naval power in an SCO exercise?

Strategic partners with strategic differences

While *Peace Mission 2005* may be a joint exercise, China and Russia are pursuing different goals, and there is little chance of future coordinated military interventions in third countries. Russia sees an opportunity to train its pilots, test its equipment, and, most importantly, showcase its technology for China's purchase. For the PRC, the exercise provides an important training function, but is also designed to demonstrate its naval power to Taiwan and other neighbors.

With the development of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the 1990s, Russian officials have consistently expressed their support for a one-China policy. Nevertheless, leaders in Moscow have been equally consistent in their refusal to become involved in any Chinese military confrontation over Taiwan, as their rejection of a location in southern China for the exercises indicates.

Peace Mission 2005 also enables China to send Japan a message regarding Beijing's capability to defend its interests in offshore territorial disputes, but Moscow has quite a different set of concerns there. The Russian government has been successful in recent months in creating a bidding war between China and Japan over first access to Siberian oil.

With President Vladimir Putin scheduled to visit Tokyo in November to discuss the territorial issue as well as energy cooperation, Russia may be seeking to prove that it has another option in the form of the Sino-Russian partnership should talks with Japan not go well.

Finally, Russia has its own long-term concerns about the strategic implications of a rising China. As a lead-up to *Peace Mission 2005*, in late July the Far East military district in Russia held the *Vostok-2005* exercise near the Chinese border, involving 5,000 troops and 14,000 personnel from the Interior Ministry, the Federal Security Service, and the Emergencies Ministry, to prepare for threats from separatist and terrorist groups. While the Russian Federation faces many separatist threats, this is not true of the Far East district. In this part of Russia, security concerns revolve around defense of extended peripheries and demographic imbalances, especially vis-à-vis neighbor and strategic partner China.

A broader Asian security agenda

Since 9/11 it has become harder to compartmentalize Asian security. Today events in Andijon, Uzbekistan have ripple effects in the Yellow Sea, as the current Sino-Russian military exercises attest. Even as they disagree on some aspects of Asian security, China and Russia are increasingly united in their opposition to a U.S. dominated security order. For the U.S. and its allies, this means it is all the more important to devise a broader, more inclusive framework for regional security, that would take into account the growing linkages between Eurasia and East Asia and look beyond military counter-terrorism strategies to address root causes of instability.

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