

Sino/Russian Relations: The Challenge of Military Contacts as China "Rises"

Written by Dmitri Titoff

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The recent visit of the Chief of the Chinese Army's General Staff Chen Bingde to Russia underscored the two states' willingness to maintain their military contacts despite Russia's fears of the rapidly growing power of its Eastern neighbor. With his Russian host General Makarov Bingde toured a number of military objects, hailing transparency and dramatic progress achieved in the Sino-Russian military over past several years with two parties agreeing to conduct joint naval drills in 2012.[1]

Since 1991 Sino-Russian defense ties have been largely confined to arms sales. Under the guidance of an intergovernmental commission between 1992 and 2007 China acquired \$25 billion worth of aircraft, diesel submarines, destroyers, air defense systems and other Soviet-era weaponry, accounting for roughly 40 percent of Russia's total arms export revenues.[2] The two states achieved significant progress in 1997 when the 'Shanghai Five'—Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—signed a Treaty on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions that restricted conventional forces within a 100 km zone along their shared borders. A Joint Control Group established by the Treaty provided for regular (3 per year) inspections in assigned border areas to monitor the implementation of this provision.[3] The 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship signified full normalization of the Sino-Russian relations, calling on the parties to engage in mutually beneficial military-technical cooperation and to take other measures to improve mutual trust.[4] In 2003 Moscow worked out a new military-technical cooperation program that gave China the access to more advanced defense technologies, such as those related to the operation of nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers and long-distance bombers. By 2002 some 150 Chinese officers also underwent training in Russian military facilities, including the General Staff Academy.[5]

Formal defense ties with Russia aligned with China's general strategic objectives. China needed Russians arms and technical support to upgrade its defense capability (China had no choice because of the EU embargo), while demilitarization along shared frontiers was expected to create an environment beneficial for economic development, wrote one scholar in 2003. Free-trade zones, for instance, were formed in some Chinese cities lying along the Amur River.

The limits to Sino-Russian defense ties have resulted, at least in part, from the presence of China threat views professed within some Russian expert and official circles, especially with regard to China's future expansion into sparsely populated Far East. [6] Even moderate experts fancy various anti-Russian scenarios like a possible future Sino-American combination to divide spheres of influences. [7] The Kremlin was also aware that Chinese designers had been busy copying Russian weapons, which now has the potential to upset Moscow's position in the market for lower-cost weaponry. Since 2006 China has indeed stopped buying many complete Soviet-era weapon systems, forcing Moscow to ponder whether to sell Beijing its more advanced technologies, such as Su-35 aircraft and S-400 air defense system. By now the loss of revenue from arms sales, however, has been partially offset by a dramatic increase in Russian energy exports that made China Russia's biggest trade partner with a \$25.5 billion trade turnover in 2010, surpassing Germany.

Despite those issues the Sino-Russian defense cooperation continued. In 2005 the two states finally demarcated their borders and began conducting regular joint anti-terrorist exercises—aka "peace missions"—including, since

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2007, drills under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Those exercises have several objectives. Firstly, they serve as a confidence building measure whereas China and Russia can observe the state of each other's armies and their chiefs have the opportunity to discuss outstanding security issues on a regular basis. Secondly, the exercises signal that both states are determined to respond to the possibility of an insurgency outbreak or popular rebellion in the region.[8] Both China and Russia face instability at home (i.e. in Chechnya and Xinjiang) and thus have a mutual interest in containing the spread of extremism in the region. In fact, the threats of local conflicts in Central Asia and North Caucasus have so much alarmed Moscow that it initiated a fundamental reform of its military in 2008 that continues to this day. For the first time perhaps this was the topic of discussion between the Russian and Chinese joint chiefs during their recent meeting in Moscow with General Bingde saying that they should mutually promote military building in their states. The Chinese are probably not very worried about Russia's military modernization, due to its orientation at suppressing local conflicts and frequent press reports of its inadequacies, but they may be interested in learning positive aspects from Russian experimentations.

Aside of continuing military exercises and exchanges the next step for China and Russia could be the formation of joint defense enterprises like ones that exist between Russia and India. Either way, it is evident that the two countries want to preserve trust amidst difficult security situations in Eurasia, East Asia and Middle East. But suspicions, especially on the Russian side, will not go away and will pose a challenge to closer defense ties.

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[1] China Daily, August 6, 2011; "Rossijskie i kitajskie voennye provedut peregovory v Moskve," RIAN, August 3, 2011, http://www.ria.ru/defense_safety/20110803/411283761.html.

[2] V.Paramonov, A.Strokov, O.Stolpovskij, " Otnoshenija mezhdru Rossiej i Kitaem: istorija, sovremennost' i budushhee," Easttime.ru, November 11, 2011, <http://www.easttime.ru/analitic/3/8/523.html>.

[3] A Treaty on the Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions, 1997, <http://www.pavlodar.com/zakon/?dok=03436&ogl=all> (in Russian).

[4] A Treaty on Friendship between Russia and China, Kremlin, July 16, 2001, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2001/07/30565.shtml> (in Russian); V.Paramonov, A.Strokov, O.Stolpovskij, " Otnoshenija mezhdru Rossiej i Kitaem: istorija, sovremennost' i budushhee," Easttime.ru, November 11, 2011, <http://www.easttime.ru/analitic/3/8/523.html>.

[5] "Rossija-Kitaj: voenno-tehnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo razvivaetsja," RIAN, November 26, 2002, <http://ria.ru/politics/20021126/270658.html>.

[6] Ming-Yen Tsai, *From Adversaries to Partners? Chinese and Russian Military Cooperation after the Cold War* (Greenwood, Westport, 2003).

[7] Igor Korotchenko, "Kitaja mozhno ne bojat'sja eshhe 10 let ," Rosbalt, June 8, 2011, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2011/06/08/857033.html>.

[8] Richard Weitz, "Assessing Russian-Chinese Military Exercises," September 30, 2009, Small

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Wars Journal, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/300-weitz.pdf>.