

China-Russia Naval Exercises: Signs of a Credible Alignment?

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On 20 August 2015, China and Russia concluded '[Joint Sea II](#)' in the Sea of Japan. This was their second combined naval exercise following '[Joint Sea I](#)', which was conducted in May 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea. The closely timed drills and the choice of geographic locations draw attention to the thrust areas in China-Russia military cooperation and their common objectives to challenge the geopolitical status quo. Whereas China maintains a hard position on island disputes and maritime sovereignty issues in the East and South China Seas against other East Asian states, Russia's relations with the US and Europe have been tense ever since its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the continued backing of pro-Russia rebels in the Ukrainian civil strife. Amidst these circumstances, the China-Russia naval exercises warrant an examination of the interests and intentions of the two states in the international system.

Push for Naval Resurgence

China places much emphasis on building a comprehensive blue water naval capability, which is evident in its new acquisitions, naval exercises, and out-of-area operations. Similarly, Russia too seeks to revive its navy which has been a significantly less potent force since the demise of the Soviet Union. Russia's new 'Maritime Doctrine – 2015' has

[identified key functions and regions](#) where Moscow's naval presence must be actively maintained in the near future.

Modernization of these navies also brings the accompanying imperative of testing new capacities and capabilities in theatres of critical interest. The Mediterranean Sea is the primary maritime zone for the Russian Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol since it aims to access the Atlantic Ocean. It also gives an opportunity to the PLA Navy to train and test its sea endurance far from the Chinese shores.

On the other hand, its Pacific Fleet gives Russia the natural advantage of expanding the geography of a military conflict originating in Europe. For the PLA Navy, the Western Pacific constitutes the area for exercising its [far seas defence](#) which would let it contest the US Navy's preponderance in the Pacific Ocean. Thus, the geographic logic of Joint Sea I and II seems to appeal to the strategic interests of both the navies.

Strategic Signaling

Analysts of international relations have long considered the China-Russia axis to be an implicit reality. Despite the Sino-Soviet split during the 1950s, the two states have come to symbolize the totalitarian challenge to Western democracies and constitute the non-liberal poles within a liberal international order. In this context, there is the tendency to view the hostile behaviour of both states as endorsed and encouraged by each other. China and Russia have indeed made this evident on multiple occasions on key forums such as the United Nations Security Council.

To this effect, the intended signals of their combined naval exercises would also be perceived in the same vein. While Joint Sea I was Russia's counter to NATO raising its military preparedness levels in Eastern Europe, Joint Sea II was projected by the two sides as an exercise to bolster their position in the regional balance of power and deter

the US from 'destabilizing' the Asia-Pacific. Obviously, China and Russia understand the signals sent by their joint military manoeuvres and reinforce these speculations by injecting the same in their [rhetoric](#), which precedes such exercises.

In Need of Repairs

China-Russia relations have not been without their ups and downs. Hence, there is the need to assess whether these exercises can and will create the impact desired by the two states, and as suspected by observers in both Europe and Asia. The most critical determinant in China-Russia military cooperation is the absence of alliances. Both states lack powerful allies and their respective military industries are afloat mainly on account of huge yearly arms sales to other states. They cannot but engage with each other for as long as they expect and must prepare for a major war which would either involve the US or its allies.

However, the constraints on this partnership of convenience are manifold. Primarily, in terms of capacity, the two navies do not match up to the opposition and this is likely to remain so unless the US suffers rapid and interminable decline in the coming decades. Both forces face crucial disadvantages in terms of maritime geography as well. The Russian naval fleets remain fragmented by vast continental/oceanic distances whereas the PLA Navy is still far from possessing an assured capability to breach the 'island-chains' in case of armed conflict in the Western Pacific. Furthermore, the complexity of these combined exercises remains at a basic tactical level in comparison with exercises such as the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) which involves manoeuvres of far greater complexity.

This brings to fore the low level of mutual trust between China and Russia. It may be noted that military-to-military cooperation between Beijing and Moscow has not risen to the level of sharing advanced technologies. Further, leaders of the two states continue to pursue deeper engagements with each other's competitors despite known

insecurities. Hence, one can question whether China and Russia can really prepare to challenge any element of the existing order in their respective regions of interest. It is pertinent here that the likelihood of any military threat to either China or Russia to also threaten the other would be quite low. Thus, China and Russia would have to forge a stronger alignment to unify against threats which are beyond either state's military-strategic frontiers.

In sum, the China-Russia naval exercises only send weak signals, albeit, of a suspected strong front which could be a future menace for the opposition. In order to achieve maximum effectiveness in at least this area, both the frequency and complexity of these exercises might grow in the future to reflect their increased threat perception and deteriorating security environments. The bigger challenge for the two states would be to reiterate this commitment at the politico-diplomatic level.

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