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Vostok-2018: Another Sign of Strengthening Russia-China Ties

Not an Alliance, but Defense Cooperation Is Growing

Brian G. Carlson

Russia's recent Vostok-2018 military exercises, in which China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) participated for the first time, were another milestone in the increasingly close defense relationship between the two countries. Only a few years ago, Russia used these and other exercises to prepare its forces for the possibility of war with China. Now, at a time of strain in both countries' relations with the West, China's participation is a sign of the value that both sides attach to their relationship. The two countries are not about to form a military alliance, but their growing defense cooperation is likely to have a significant impact on global politics in the coming years.

Russia held its quadrennial Vostok (East) military exercises September 11—17. The two most notable aspects of Vostok-2018 were its projected size and China's participation. Sergei Shoigu, the Russian defense minister, announced in August that the exercises would feature 300,000 military personnel, 36,000 tanks and armored vehicles, more than 1,000 aircraft, and 80 ships, making these exercises the largest on Russian territory since the Soviet Union's Zapad-81 exercises in 1981. The actual size of the exercises appears to have been considerably smaller, as Shoigu's figures for personnel reflected entire brigades and divisions rather than the particular battalions and regiments that actually participated.

The PLA sent 3,200 military personnel as well as 30 aircraft and 900 tanks and armored vehicles. China and Mongolia, which also participated, became the first countries outside of the former Soviet Union to join the Vostok exercises. Russia and China have been holding joint military exercises for more than a decade — including joint drills under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization since 2005 and joint naval exercises since 2012 — but this was the first time that China had joined a domestic Russian military exercise. Although the PLA contingent was small, its presence signaled both China's desire to learn from Russia's recent military experience and the growing strength of the defense cooperation between the two countries.

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Military Aspects

In a change from previous practice in the Vostok series, the Russian military divided its forces into two groups, which simulated fighting each other rather than an imaginary opponent. The blue "west state," playing the role of NATO, featured the Central Military District and the Northern Fleet. The red "east state" comprised the Eastern Military District and the Pacific Fleet. The red team repulsed the blue team's incursion, then counterattacked and pushed the opposing force deep into blue territory. In the naval component of the exercises, the Pacific Fleet defended itself against amphibious assaults by the Northern Fleet. In the exercises' strategic nuclear component, Tu-95MS bombers flew into a US air defense identification zone near Alaska, prompting US F-22 fighters to scramble and escort them as they retreated.

Meanwhile, Chinese forces joined their Russian counterparts for drilling in the Tsugol combined arms training area, located near the border with Mongolia, where they practiced air-to-ground coordination, airborne assault, and coordinated air-artillery strikes. The Russian and Chinese forces conducted joint firing operations and tested their forces' interoperability.

The Russian military's main purpose in these exercises was to improve its command-and-control capabilities. The exercises posed formidable challenges in this area. For example, the military command had to oversee the movement of forces across long distances to the Eastern Military District as well as joint operations by multiple services. Because the Vostok-2018 exercises were held east of the Ural Mountains, the OSCE's Vienna Document did not apply. This meant that Russia was under no obligation to invite OSCE observers or to report to NATO on the content of the exercises. Despite being conducted in the Russian Far East, Vostok-2018's scenario clearly simulated military conflict with NATO.

This represents a significant change. As recently as 2010, the Vostok exercises appeared to simulate the defense of Russia's eastern regions against a potential invasion by China. On the final day of that year's exercises, Russian forces simulated a tactical nuclear strike against an invading force. In 2013, after the conclusion of Russia-China joint naval exercises in the Sea of Japan, five Chinese warships left the exercises and sailed into the Sea of Okhotsk. Russia responded by calling snap exercises in the Russian Far East. Although these exercises were not part of the Vostok series, they were the largest land and sea exercises in the region, up to that point, since the end of the Cold War. During 2014, as the West imposed sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea, Russia intensified its diplomatic outreach to China. Nevertheless, the Vostok-2014 exercises held that summer were oriented toward the defense of the Russian Far East against an invasion by a state actor — a role that could only be played in the real world by China.

The situation was strikingly different this year. Although the exercises may have served to remind China about Russia's military capabilities, Russia went out of its way to signal that this was not their purpose. Instead, Russia sought to reassure China. At a time of close diplomatic relations, inviting China to participate in such large-scale exercises so close to its border seemed an appropriate courtesy. Russia thereby conveyed a clear message that it does not view China as a military threat to its eastern regions. Beyond reassurance, Russia also enlisted China's participation in order to underscore the message that it was sending to the West by holding large-scale drills simulating conflict with NATO.

China also sought to achieve several military objectives by participating in the exercises. Vostok-2018 was an opportunity for the PLA to participate in drills focusing heavily on the command and control over combined arms operations — a crucial component of any potential military conflict with the United States and its allies in the Asia-Pacific region. The exercises were also an opportunity for the PLA, which has not fought an armed conflict since 1979, to study Russia's military, particularly lessons

from its recent combat experience in Syria. Strategy and tactics that the Russian military has employed in that conflict featured prominently in Vostok-2018.

Political Implications

Through the Vostok-2018 exercises, Russia and China sent a clear signal to the United States and its NATO partners. Their message was that, if the West continues to apply what they consider to be undue pressure, then they will increase their own level of bilateral cooperation — including defense coordination — in response. Although the two countries continue to stress that they have no intention to form a military alliance, some Russian analysts suggest that Vostok-2018 may have been partly an attempt to work out the technical details of an alliance in advance while leaving open the possibility of such an arrangement in the future. Even if it falls short of a formal military alliance, increased military cooperation by Russia and China could have significant implications for global politics.

Vostok-2018 is another in a series of milestones reflecting a strengthened Russia-China relationship, especially since the onset of the Ukraine crisis. After this crisis erupted, Russia and China increased their diplomatic coordination on a range of issues, including North Korea and cyberspace, and struck important deals in the arms and energy spheres. The downturn in US-China relations since the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency has given China additional reasons to strengthen its cooperation with Russia.

The level of defense cooperation between Russia and China is rising steadily. In 2016, the two countries held joint naval exercises in the South China Sea just weeks after the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled against China's expansive claims in that contested body of water. The two countries have also held joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean (2015) and Baltic (2017) seas. In recent years, Russia for the first time agreed to sell its most advanced weapons systems to China, most notably the S-400 air defense system and Su-35 fighter jets. The United States recently imposed sanctions on a Chinese defense company for purchases of Russian weapons, adding to the growing tensions in both countries' relations with the United States.

Russia and China may have intended to use the Vostok-2018 exercises to influence the course of events on the Korean Peninsula. Although their interests on the peninsula are not identical — with China primarily focused on the maintenance of North Korea as a buffer, and Russia more interested in the strategic and economic benefits to be gained from reunification or closer integration between North and South — China and Russia have nevertheless closely coordinated their diplomacy on this issue in recent years. Both countries have sought to limit pressure on the North Korean regime and secure a reduced US military footprint in Northeast Asia in return for steps toward denuclearization by the regime in Pyongyang.

Although no publicly available evidence suggests that the Russian and Chinese militaries have developed joint operational plans, some analysts suggest that the Korean Peninsula and Central Asia are the two regions most likely to be included in any such plans. The Vostok-2018 exercises may have been intended as a display of Russian and Chinese military power in Northeast Asia in anticipation of the possible outbreak of armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula. In advance of an expected second meeting between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Russia and China are continuing their close diplomatic coordination with North Korea.

Growing Russia-China Ties and Implications for the West

Russia and China are not about to construct a formal military alliance, which would entail a mutual security guarantee. Neither country wishes to be drawn into a military conflict with the United States over the

other country's regional ambitions. China declined to support either Russia's recognition of two breakaway regions in Georgia following the war in 2008 or its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Likewise, despite offering some diplomatic support, Russia maintains official neutrality on China's maritime disputes in the South and East China seas.

Growing defense coordination between Russia and China could, nevertheless, have significant implications for NATO. Even in the absence of a formal alliance treaty, the relationship could offer the two countries some of the benefits of an alliance. Although neither Russia nor China is likely to intervene directly in a military conflict involving the other's regional disputes, the ongoing existence of tensions along both countries' peripheries stretches US resources and strategic attention. This situation potentially gives both countries some additional room for maneuver. In a crisis, events in one region could offer opportunities for the other country to seize in its own neighborhood. In addition, Russian arms sales strengthen China's military capabilities, forcing the United States to expend additional resources to maintain its military advantage in the Asia-Pacific region.

These developments will have important implications for European security. Most significantly, they are likely to exert additional pressure on Germany and other European NATO members to increase defense spending. The Trump administration has placed this issue front and center in transatlantic relations, but calls for greater burden-sharing by European allies are likely to come from across the US political spectrum as strategic competition with China intensifies. As Western leaders debate security policies during the coming years, they will need to pay increasing attention not only to Russia and China separately, but to the effects of their increasingly strong bilateral relationship and defense cooperation.

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