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Russian-Chinese military exercises and their wider perspective: Power play in Central Asia

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Key Points

* The Russian-Chinese manoeuvres of August 2005 had little to do with the formally pronounced objective of warfare against terrorism, but simply practised conventional warfare.

* Their most likely real main objective was that China and Russia thus made it clear to the (Western) world that they consider themselves to be in control of the Asian-Pacific region and that others are denied interfering in their sphere of influence.

* Although Russian-Chinese relations are intensifying, the alleged formation of a joint military command in Russia's Far East could prove that in due course fear of China could trigger Russia to draw back from China and to strengthen ties with the west.

* Carrying out exercises in different theatres simultaneously and using weapons systems at large distances could prove that the Russian Armed Forces have left their state of decay.

* Supported by China's rising power and with regional actors such as India and Iran as observers, much more than the CIS the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) will represent to Russia a vital instrument to achieve geopolitical objectives.

* In due course, however, the divergent objectives of member states and observers of the SCO could become a hindrance for its endeavours.

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From 18 to 25 August 2005 for the first time in 40 years Russian and Chinese armed forces carried out joint exercises, comprising 10,000 military personnel, navy vessels and aircraft. What is the meaning of these exercises, considering Russia's military power, and is this Sino-Russian military liaison likely to expand? Could this be considered as a structural shift of power attempting to repel Washington's influence in Central Asia and adjacent areas?

Russian-Chinese manoeuvres

Starting point

According to Russia's minister of defence, Sergei Ivanov, the decision to conduct bilateral exercises had been made in Beijing in December 2004. China took the lead in proposing the size, participating type of forces and content of the manoeuvres. In the process of drafting the exercise plan the number of Russian troops decreased whereas the number of Chinese troops increased. Allegedly, China also took care of most of the costs of the manoeuvres.[1]

Objectives

The Chinese Chief of the General Staff and his Russian counterpart have more than once stated that the manoeuvres were in line with United Nations (UN) principles and were not aimed against third countries.[2] The formal objectives of the exercises were to strengthen the capability for joint operations and the exchange of experience; to establish methods of organizing cooperation in the fight against international terrorism, separatism and extremism; as well as to enhance mutual combat readiness against newly developing threats.[3] Another aim of these exercises, not suggested by official sources, but in Russian and Western independent reports, would have been arms export. Demonstrating to China the capabilities of Russian military equipment might encourage China to buy it. This assumption was strengthened by the fact that right after the end of the exercises, China announced that it was interested in acquiring 30 Il-76 transport aircraft.[4]

Scenario and timetable

The scenario for the exercise can be portrayed as follows. The Shandong Peninsula was presented as a fictitious state which, as a result of ethnic differences, had to cope with serious unrest, including violent clashes. After a relevant UN mandate

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was received Russian and Chinese forces started a peace support operation to separate the conflicting parties and to restore law and order. The coastal area, occupied by terrorists, would be blocked by warships, and subsequently invaded by amphibious troops. Following this, an area in which terrorists were hiding would be isolated by the peace supporting forces, including the use of fighter planes and long range bombers.

The *first phase* of the exercises, from 18 to 19 August, took place in Vladivostok on Russian soil and consisted of military-political consultations of both parties. The second and third (final) phases of the exercises were performed on Chinese territory, at the Shandong Peninsula and the adjacent Yellow Sea. The *second phase*, from 20 to 23 August, comprised the formation of a joint grouping of forces and practising its command & control and coordination aspects of the joint use of forces. During the *third phase*, from 24 to 25 August, the scene was set for conducting a maritime blockade, an amphibious assault, an airborne landing and combat operations aimed at occupying and sustaining specified objects.[5]

Number and type of troops and equipment

Overall some 70 naval ships and submarines participated in the exercises, as well 10,000 military personnel. Russia contributed to the manoeuvres with 1,800 military personnel: its naval forces with ten ships of its Pacific Fleet, including a company of 100 naval infantry personnel; the air forces with more than twenty Russian aircraft of which two were Tu-95MS BEAR strategic bombers, four Tu-22M3 BACKFIRE long range bombers, Su-24M2 FENCER bombers, Su-27SM FLANKER fighters, ten Il-76 CANDID transport aircraft, one A-50 MAINSTAY air warning command and control aircraft, one Il-78 MIDAS air-refuelling plane, as well as a reinforced air assault company of 100 men, including some twelve BMD and BTRD vehicles of the airborne forces. China participated in the exercise with more than 8,000 military personnel: engineer, anti-aircraft artillery and communications units, airborne, special forces and tank battalions, mechanised infantry and artillery regiments, as well as aircraft and some 60 naval ships and submarines.[6]

Military-operational aspects

The Shandong Peninsula was selected as area of operations for a number of reasons. First, because a large exercise area is located in this peninsula. Secondly, nearly all the Services of the Chinese Armed Forces are represented in this area. And thirdly, this peninsula possesses favourable transport infrastructure for the concentration and manoeuvre of troops and equipment.[7]

Area of the exercises (*Source*: Radio Netherlands)

Before the formal start of the exercises Russian and Chinese airborne troops had already trained together. According to a Russian television report, in this airborne training a difference of standards of both parties was noticeable. In contrast with their Chinese counterparts, the Russian airborne troops were able to jump at lower altitude and with weapons. Clearly, the Chinese were eager to learn from the Russian airborne troops.[8] Military-operational cooperation between Chinese and Russian worked out quite well. Whereas exercises with NATO forces are often characterised by complications because of differences in weapon systems, in this case, due to the fact that China uses a lot of Russian made arms, this problem was absent. The biggest problem to be encountered was the language barrier.[9]

Defence minister Sergei Ivanov allotted a special role to the use of strategic aviation in the exercise. According to Ivanov, long range strategic bombers provide Russia with the capability of striking terrorists – also in the form of preventive attacks – in any part of the world. For that reason, Ivanov stated, the presence of strategic weapons was justified in a peace restoring scenario, as were warships and fighter aircraft. In the exercises Russia would deploy BEAR strategic bombers and BACKFIRE long range bombers. The BEARS were to launch non-nuclear cruise missiles.[10]

Concerns of other states

The US, allegedly, made an official request to China to send military observers, which Beijing turned down. According to Russian unofficial sources Washington replied to this refusal by sending strategic submarines to the area of operations, in order to observe the exercises in a different way. The size of the manoeuvres and the training of an invasion was also cause for concern for Japan, South Korea and above all Taiwan; even though China and Russia insisted that the exercises were not directed against any other country.[11]

Intensification of Sino-Russian relations

During the exercises minister Ivanov stated that Russia has an open mind on joint Russian-Chinese peacekeeping operations in the Asia-Pacific region, on the condition that such operations are based upon resolutions by the UN Security Council. Ivanov also mentioned that Russia and China – although plans had not yet been drafted – might conduct joint military exercises on a regular basis.[12] Ivanov's

statements are in line with the current comprehensive improvement of bilateral relations between China and Russia, a development which can be described as remarkable. For instance, the long standing border disputes between both states were recently settled in agreements. Furthermore, Russia, in addition to its arms export, will supply China with oil and gas. Moreover, as explained below in detail, both countries have found in each other a strategic partnership aimed at countering the (Western/US) 'monopoly in world affairs', as was made clear in a joint statement by the Chinese and Russian Presidents, in July.[13]

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

These exercises should not only be considered from a Sino-Russian bilateral point of view, but also as an activity of the SCO, as was frequently stated by Sergei Ivanov and other officials. Not only the Russian and Chinese ministers of defence observed the manoeuvres, but also representatives of the SCO. On 23 August Ivanov and his Chinese counterpart, Cao Gangchuan, as well as the defence ministers of the other SCO members (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and military attachés of the SCO observers – Iran, Pakistan, India and Mongolia – arrived at the scene of the exercises.[14]

Formed in 1996 as the 'Shanghai Five' – comprising Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – in 2001, together with admitting Uzbekistan, the SCO was formalised as an international organisation. Until 2005 the SCO mainly dealt with regional security – in particular against the three 'evils' of terrorism, separatism and extremism – as well as with economic cooperation. However, at its latest Summit in July 2005, in Astana, Kazakhstan, the SCO proclaimed a radical change of course. Over the last few years the governments of the Central Asian member states - faced with the Western backed regime changes in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as with Western criticism of the Uzbek government's beating down of the unrest in Andijan – increasingly saw their existence threatened, which forced them to choose an alliance with Russia and China and diminishing the (economically favourable) relationship with the West. At the summit this led to a final statement of the SCO members, in which (US) unipolar and dominating policies as well as foreign military deployment in Central Asia were condemned and the withdrawal of the (Western) military troops was encouraged.[15] This Declaration of the Heads of Member States has revealed a watershed in the SCO's range of policy from regional anti-terrorist activities to claiming an important position in the international arena in external security policy.

Besides the SCO's change of course, there was another significant development at this summit. In addition to Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan and India joined the SCO as observers. By admitting these three states as observers, the SCO now encompasses nearly half of the world's population.[16] Furthermore, in addition to Russia and China, India and Pakistan bring together four nuclear powers, whereas Iran possibly has the ambition to become one. Comprising a considerable territory in and around Central Asia, a large part of the world population and nuclear arms, the SCO has a formidable political and military potential which certainly will make an impact on the West.

Assessment

Exercises

Apart from the exercises with China, Russian forces also conducted other manoeuvres during this period. The Northern Fleet carried out exercises in the

region of Murmansk, in which among other elements, a ballistic missile from a nuclear submarine as well as a new long range cruise missile from a Tu-160 BLACKJACK bomber were launched. At the same time Russian forces were also involved in manoeuvres in Kazakhstan and in the Caspian Sea.[17] Clearly, after years of absence Russia is capable again of simultaneously employing its forces in different theatres.

According to official statements the Russian-Sino exercise scenario presented terrorism, separatism and extremism as developments against which armed forces would be employed. As has been officially declared, 'ingredients' such as the use of strategic long range bombers; neutralisation of anti-aircraft defence, command posts and airbases; gaining of air superiority; enforcing of a maritime blockade and control of maritime territory were exercise objectives.[18] However, terrorist movements do not posses conventional land, sea or air forces, nor do they deploy their military power in a symmetric way. Therefore, these exercise objectives had little to do with warfare against terrorism, but were actually nothing other than practice in conventional warfare, employing all Services except for nuclear forces. The most likely real main objective of the manoeuvres was that in this way China and Russia made clear to the (Western) world that they consider themselves to be in control of the Asian-Pacific region and that others are denied interfering in their sphere of influence.

From a military-operational point of view Russians as well as Chinese have gained from the experience of these bilateral exercises. The Chinese armed forces are – as a consequence of China's increasing political and economical power – in a stage of growth, in size as well as in ambition. Therefore, for instance practising command and control procedures but also purely operational aspects, such as carrying out an airborne assault, will strengthen the capabilities of the Chinese forces. If Russia considers that China might turn into a threat in the long run, then these exercises have also been worthwhile for the Russian General Staff, by providing insight into how the Chinese armed forces operate and what their current capabilities are.

It is doubtful that arms export to China was one of the (hidden agenda) aims of the bilateral military exercises. China has been the best buyer of Russian military equipment for a number of years and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. Currently, some 45% of Russia's arms exports go to China. Since 2000, Russia has delivered weapon systems to China – including fighter aircraft, submarines and destroyers – amounting to an average of $ 2 billion annually. Since China did not have to be convinced by Russian military equipment, perhaps the demonstration was meant to impress some of the SCO observers. India, for instance, takes 35% of Russia's arms exports and Iran is considered to be an interesting growth market for Russian arms.[19] However, demonstrating the full range of capabilities of weapon systems is better done under 'factory' conditions than in exercises.

The remarks of Russian defence minister Ivanov on the use of strategic bombers and/or the concept of preventive attacks on terrorists abroad are not new, but in line with policy statements since 2002. Regarding Russia's quarrel with Georgia on terrorist bases in the latter's Pankisi Valley, ministers, generals, and other Russian officials have repeatedly accompanied their expressions of concern on this development by warning that if Georgia did not neutralize these rebels, then Russia reserved to itself the right to prevent attacks on Russian territory, by pre-emptive Russian military action into this valley. For example, Russia's then Chief of the General Staff, Anatoly Kvashnin, claimed that Russia, given the new American doctrine of pre-emptive use of force, was entitled to do the same.[20] Official

statements on the possibility of preventive attacks against terrorists abroad have also been used in reference to internal anti-terrorist policy, after the 'Nord-Ost' hostage takings of October 2002 in Moscow and Beslan in September 2004. In these announcements officials maintained that war had been declared against Russia and that, if necessary, (preventive) attacks by Russian forces against terrorists abroad would be carried out.[21]

The SCO as instrument of Russia's security policy

For Russia's foreign and security policy the SCO is a rapidly rising organisation. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in none of the current security policy documents of Russia: the National Security Concept, the Military Doctrine and the Foreign Policy Concept – all formally approved by President Putin in 2000 – the SCO, at the time called 'Shanghai Five', was dealt with. It was only mentioned in the Foreign Policy Concept as one of the cooperating organisations in Asia. In 'The priority tasks of the development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation', a security policy document published in October 2003, the SCO for the first time was brought up in detail. In this 'Defence White Paper' the SCO was described as an important organisation for regional stability in Central Asia and the Far East, especially in countering military threats.

For Russia the SCO apparently acts as a means to bring together different policy objectives. This can be illustrated by the example of Russia's relationship with India. In May 2003 India and Russia held their first joint naval exercises for ten years.[22] In October 2005 Russia and India plan to conduct joint 'anti-terrorist' manoeuvres in India, called 'IndRo-2005'. In these exercises, which are intended to become an annual event, army, navy and air forces – including Russian strategic bombers and airborne troops – will participate.[23] According to official statements, in the Russian-Indian exercises – as in the Sino-Russian exercises of August – Russian strategic aircraft, bombers and fighters will practise mid-air refuelling and demonstrate that the Russian air force is capable of conducting combat missions in difficult climate and visibility conditions and at long range.[24] Taking into consideration that India is responsible for one third of Russia's arms exports in combination with the growing bilateral ties in conducting military exercises, it was not a surprise that Russia brought forward India to obtain the status of observer in the SCO. Probably the same applies to Iran's observer status. Just as China and India, Iran also has a special (economic) relationship with Russia. All three states are important actors in Russia's arms export. In addition, China and India are gaining a closer relationship with Russia in the field of joint, bilateral military exercises. Therefore, the fact that India and Iran have recently joined China in its cooperation with Russia within the SCO proves that the SCO serves as a platform for Russia's security policy.

It is evident that the SCO is winning power, in particular since its summit of July 2005. It is likely that this development will further continue in the coming years. Russia will use this organisation, for instance to reduce Western (US) influence in Central Asia which increased in the aftermath of '9/11'. In such a way, supported by China's rising power status, much more than the CIS or its Collective Security Treaty Organisation – consisting mainly of states dependent on Russia's security umbrella – the SCO will represent to Russia a vital instrument to achieve geopolitical objectives.

Outlook

Analysing the recent political and military developments described above, the following conclusions on future perspectives can cautiously be made.

Russian military power

Often after the dissolution of the USSR when the performance of Russia's Armed Forces was discussed, only negative reports were heard, such as in the field of hazing of conscripts, bad social-economic conditions for military personnel, the defeats in Chechnya and obsolete equipment. However, the Sino-Russian exercises were conducted simultaneously with other manoeuvres. Carrying out exercises in different regions at the same time and using weapons systems at large distances – thus demonstrating management of complex processes and high tech systems - could prove that the Russian Armed Forces have left their state of decay. This could be the result of the increase of Russia's military budget over the last five years by 10% annually.[25]

Russian-Sino relationship

In the coming years Russia is likely to strengthen its ties with China. Not only in the field of security but also in areas such as military cooperation, energy, (arms) trade and foreign policy, these states are seeking a closer relationship. Nonetheless, this could very well turn out to be for the short term. Russia has a long border with China, some 4,300 kilometres, and possesses energy sources which China desperately needs. Russia is well aware that China's growing economic and military importance could develop into a threat. An indication of Russia's concern is possibly that at present in the Far East – after the first one was set up in Russia's primary area of insecurity, the North Caucasus – Russia allegedly is creating a second joint military grouping of defence forces and internal and security troops.[26] Since – in contrast with the area of Chechnya and Dagestan – in Russia's Far East there is no threat of Islamic extremism, the formation of a joint military command could only be related to a potential threat from China. In due course this so far hidden fear of China could cause Russia to draw back and to seek an intensification of political and economic ties with the West, even if its backing against China would mean that Russia has to accept Western influence in its backyard of the former Soviet Union.

Cooperation within the SCO

If developments like these continue the West will no longer have the liberty of acting 'without limits' in Central Asia. The expansion of Western influence in this region after '9/11' has come to a halt. The SCO will aim to accomplish a withdrawal of the West from this area. In the meantime the SCO – uniting important regional powers and a rising world power, China – will develop into an organisation which the West has to take into consideration in its international endeavours, in particular in regions such as Central Asia, the Far East and the Pacific. However, in establishing the future position of the SCO, it is important to note that cooperation among its members and observers is essentially based upon a negative strategic objective: to counter US/Western influence. To a large extent common, positive targets are absent. For example, China is seeking markets and energy sources, Russia is eager to regain its leadership status within the CIS as well as that of a superpower in the international arena, and the Central Asian regimes consider the SCO as its guarantee for their survival. Moreover, India and Pakistan are probably showing the West that they follow their own independent course and Iran's objective might be found in anti-Americanism. This mixture of possibly divergent objectives – for

instance Iran's support of extreme Islamists which are a threat to the Central Asian states – demonstrates that they do not have much in common. Hence, it is not inconceivable that eventually deviating objectives of SCO member states and observers will cause a split in this organisation, which would paralyze its activities.

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