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COMMENTARY

Puzzling War Games

 By **RICHARD D. FISHER, JR.**
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At Russia's biannual military air show there is little evident gratitude for the British and American naval rescuers who recently helped save seven trapped Russian submariners off of the Pacific base at Petropavlovsk. Attention instead is focused on the implications of the unprecedented Russia-China military exercise dubbed "Peace Mission 2005," and which formally began last week. Planned for nearly a year, this exercise is a puzzle to observers.


Does it herald the rise of a new China-dominated military grouping, even an alliance, as well as perhaps a much more intimate phase in the Sino-Russian military relationship that started with arms sales in the late 1980s? Or is it an attempt by two powers having fundamentally different national interests nevertheless to pool their strengths in certain areas?

Central Asia would be one such region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 1996, includes Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan as "observers." The SCO's formal secretariat has been in Beijing since 2004, which indicates China's intense interest. A limited form of military cooperation is pursued through the Tashkent-based Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, though bilateral military exercises, mainly with China, started in 2003. The SCO claims to fight "terrorism," "separatism" and "extremism" -- which in the member states are all code words for Muslim resistance to Chinese rule in Xinjiang, and continuing Soviet-style dictatorships in the Central Asian states. But as recent SCO statements, and Peace Mission 2005 itself make clear, the SCO has two other features: hostility toward the U.S., and an interest in Sino-Russian force projection outside the area.

At its July 5 annual meeting, the SCO called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from member states, forces that are actively aiding the ongoing fight against terror in Afghanistan. A concrete result was Uzbekistan's recent eviction order of U.S. troops from one of its bases, a decision taken with Beijing's approval. Why Uzbekistan acted thusly is no secret: Its Soviet-style regime fears that the U.S. will support domestic opposition, as Washington did in Georgia and Ukraine.

Fear of domestic unrest in fact appears to be the glue in this alliance of convenience. Russian Chief of Staff General Yuri Baluyevsky told reporters on August 11 that the exercise shows how "Russia and China provide aid to a third country in solving problems related to . . . illegal armed forces that start anti-state activities" That sounds like intervention in Central Asia to stop Islamists from overthrowing post-Soviet dictatorships. But though Russia demurs, some statements suggest that Beijing wants to use these words to also include joint interventions in such places as Chinese-occupied East Turkistan (Xinjiang) -- or even Taiwan.

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Peace Mission 2005 will also increase China's and Russia's currently almost non-existent ability to mount joint operations, particularly expanding the capabilities of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA). It will be the first time that Chinese and Russian military units have actively cooperated since the Korean War. Peace Mission will also allow the PLA to test its new hardware and even more importantly, its new operating systems and tactics against the military of a peer for the first time since China began its latest military modernization in the early 1990s. Thus, the Russian Pacific Fleet is sending its large anti-ship and anti-aircraft-missile-carrying Slava-class cruiser and three of its Udaloy-class anti-submarine destroyers. These will exercise with PLA Navy submarines, and reportedly, its new Luyang-I class air defense destroyers. Russia's Cold War era combat ships were designed to defend Soviet ballistic missile firing nuclear submarines, nuclear from U.S. nuclear attack submarines and anti-submarine aircraft.

These are exactly the skills the PLA will need to defend its new ballistic missile firing nuclear submarines. Russia will also send two long range subsonic speed Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers and four medium range supersonic Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers. Both formed the backbone of the Soviet Navy's long-range anti-ship forces and are now being actively marketed to the PLA, which needs a modern replacement for its ancient H-6/Tu-16 bombers. Were the PLA to purchase them, it would greatly expand its ability to mass air and sub-launched missile strikes against U.S. Navy carrier groups, and reach Guam and beyond with an air strike.

In addition Russia is sending a company of airborne and amphibious troops, plus their attendant heavy-lift transport aircraft and tank landing ships. For the PLA the development of modern capable airborne and amphibious attack forces has been a high priority. China has already taken islands claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines, and is worried about the Indian presence in the Andaman and Nicobar islands at the entrance to the Straits of Malacca, the key energy transport route. And Taiwan is always in Beijing's sights. In recent years the PLA has introduced a wide range of modern amphibious and airborne-combat systems. In short, for the PLA the chance to exercise with more experienced Russian forces is priceless.

Why Moscow is risking U.S. anger to so help China remains a question, however. Recently declassified records from the Warsaw Pact confirm that it was Mao Zedong's 1958 attack against Taiwanese-occupied Quemoy and Matsu that led to Nikita Khrushchev's decision not to provide nuclear weapons to China -- a decision that went on to create the Sino-Soviet split. So observers are puzzled that in today's Kremlin, Khrushchev's unwillingness to risk confrontation with Washington seems to have been forgotten.

Furthermore it is by no means clear that Russian and Chinese interests mesh -- on the Pacific coast, with respect to Japan, or even in Central Asia. Throughout most of the 1990s both Chinese and Russian spokesmen routinely stated that their increasing military cooperation, mainly arms sales and co-development, was not directed against third parties. Peace Mission 2005 suggests that for some in both capitals, at least, this is no longer the case.

Also, why either Moscow or Beijing should identify the other as a reliable ally is puzzling to say the least. Each risks entrapment in the other's conflicts, in which it may have no interest, while alienating powers whose friendship they need, not only the U.S., but Europe as well.

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