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Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

Hearing on “China’s Military Diplomacy and Overseas Security Activities,” January 26, 2023

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Thank you for inviting me to contribute to the Commission’s deliberations on “China’s Military Diplomacy and Overseas Security Activities.”

As an independent, nonpartisan think tank, Hudson Institute does not take institutional positions on policy issues, but I welcome the opportunity to share my personal views on this important question.

As requested, I will briefly outline my answers to several questions raised by the Commission and then gladly discuss my responses further on these and other issues.



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1. What trends do you observe in China's joint military exercises with Russia in terms of frequency, location, and participating services? What is driving these trends? Please include any observations from the recent Vostok-2022 and Zapad-2021 exercises in your answer.

Since the mid-2000s, Russia and China have conducted several dozen large-scale bilateral military exercises, including ground and maritime maneuvers as well as many smaller drills and combined tabletop command post exercises.¹ Though the drills began soon after Beijing and Moscow ended their Cold War confrontation, these exercises have become substantially more important during the last decade, essentially becoming a core pillar of their expanding defense partnership.² Despite the COVID pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this military partnership has surged in recent years, with additional defense sales and prominent exercises. China and Russia now conduct more exercises in more locations with more types of weapons systems than ever before.

The Chinese and Russian "Joint Sea" naval exercises have global reach. They have taken place in the Baltic, Mediterranean, and East and South China Seas as well as in the West Pacific Ocean and off the coast of South Africa. Additional locations for naval exercises might encompass the Russian Arctic, South America, or North America. The last few years have seen the Chinese and Russian navies pioneer new types of cooperation such as their joint fleet patrols in the northeast Pacific Ocean and the PLA Navy's participation in Russia's main strategic exercise, Vostok-2022.³

Chinese involvement in the annual Russian strategic drills is a relatively new, but high-profile, element of the Sino-Russian exercise portfolio. These strategic exercises rehearse the maneuvering, integration, and employment of large forces drawn from several Russian military districts and branches. The Chinese military first joined Vostok ("East") 2018, conducted in Russia's Eastern Military District, followed by participation in Tsentr ("Center") 2019 and Kavkaz ("Caucasus") 2020, which occurred in Russia's Southern Military District. The PLA prudently eschewed joining the Zapad ("West") 2021 drills, which would have brought PLA soldiers and weapons into western Russia, intensifying NATO's anxieties about China's growing military reach. Instead, the PRC hosted a special drill with Russia, the Zapad/Interaction-2021 exercise. When it occurred in August 2021 at the Qingtongxia Combined Arms Tactical Training Base in northwest China, Zapad/Interaction-2021 marked the first time any foreign forces had joined a Chinese-led strategic-level exercise on PRC territory. The exercise saw several additional innovations, including Russian use of Chinese-made weapons and the employment of mixed Chinese-Russian teams who planned and operated together.⁴

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Vostok-2022 set additional precedents in terms of the Sino-Russian military interaction. For example, the drills marked the first time all three branches of the PLA joined a single Russian-led military exercise, with scenarios encompassing air, ground, and naval operations. In addition, all the foreign contingents except the Chinese troops used or borrowed Russian-made weapons during the drills. In contrast, the PLA contingent employed only PRC-made armaments during the Vostok-2022. For the first time, moreover, PLA warplanes flew directly from their bases in China into Russian territory rather than first redeploying onto foreign bases. They then rehearsed, while inside Russian airspace, launching anti-radiation missiles at ground targets to suppress enemy air defense operations. Furthermore, though many countries contributed ground forces to Vostok-2022, the naval maneuvers involved only Chinese and Russian warships, along with supporting aviation and coastal units. The context of Vostok-2022 also demonstrates the strength of the Sino-Russian security partnership. China joined a prominent military exercise with Russia despite the international opprobrium Moscow incurred by invading Ukraine.⁵

2. To what extent does China use military cooperation with Russia to develop specific military skills and capabilities or interoperability? What specific skills and capabilities has the PLA prioritized in its engagements with the Russian military in the past, and how has this emphasis changed over time?

These recurring Sino-Russian exercises enable their armed forces to rehearse an expanding set of skills in changing locations and with varying forces and equipment. The purposes of these exercises vary, but include improving operational proficiency by, for example, learning new tactics, techniques, and procedures. Through such drills, the Chinese and Russian ground forces have rehearsed fighting insurgent movements, interdicting guerrillas, liberating hostages, providing close air support, and preparing for airborne and other special forces assaults. The Chinese and Russian naval drills have jointly practiced anti-submarine warfare, maritime air defense, ship-to-sea gunnery, maritime search and rescue, escorting civilian vessels, launching amphibious assaults, liberating ships seized by pirates, and providing underway cargo replenishment.

These Sino-Russian interactions are especially beneficial for the PLA, as the Chinese military has not fought a major war in decades. In contrast, the more experienced Russian armed forces have fought several major combat operations involving the complex integration of multiple combat arms and foreign partners. A PRC military analyst noted, “Russia’s battlefield experience in Syria, Crimea and Chechnya is very valuable to us, in particular on how they have adjusted their military strategy across time.”⁶ Even if the exercises may not realize substantial combat interoperability, they highlight to foreign

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audiences the Sino-Russian capacity to project coordinated military power. The Sino-Russian maneuvers have also allowed the PLA to deploy in novel geographic regions. Meanwhile, the Russian armed forces enjoy opportunities to observe Chinese military forces and equipment, giving them insights into the types of weapons the PLA might want to purchase in the future as well as China's capacity to challenge the U.S. military and its Asian partners.

3. Please describe China's collaboration with Russia on emerging military technologies. What limits do Russia and China respectively place on this type of cooperation? How and why have these limits changed over time, and how do you anticipate them continuing to evolve in the near and the long term?

China has obtained more weapons from Russia than from all other countries combined. Through purchasing Russian arms, the PLA acquired sophisticated technologies that China's defense industry could not manufacture domestically, partly circumventing the West's post-1989 embargo on arms sales to the PRC. The transferred systems have included advanced missiles, military aircraft, warships and submarines, high-performance engines and other critical military technologies. According to various sources, Russian defense-related sales to the PLA ranges from one to three billion dollars annually.

Russia has provided more advanced technologies over time (moving from surplus Soviet-made systems to more recently designed weapons), reflecting their tightening security ties and the rising sophistication of the PRC military-industrial complex. If China can manufacture a defense system domestically, the PRC does not need to buy it from Russia. Moscow must therefore decide every few years whether to meet China's rising demands despite the risks of antagonizing other countries, facilitating PRC reverse engineering, or arming a potential future adversary.

Russian arms sales to China have constituted a diminishing proportion of their overall trade as the value of Sino-Russian non-defense commerce has risen. Yet, the PLA still seeks Russian defense and dual-use technologies that China's improving indigenous military-industrial complex cannot yet manufacture. The rising tensions with the United States in recent years may have made obtaining advanced Russian weapons, such as the S-400 surface-to-air missile system and the Su-35 multi-role fighter, more urgent for the PLA. Their timely acquisition is less risky than waiting several more years for equally advanced PRC-made systems to become available. Meanwhile, Russia gains short-term revenue, lower-cost production runs, rare success in selling Russian high-tech products to the PRC, and perhaps greater influence with China's national security establishment.

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In recent years, the Chinese and Russian governments have sought to research, develop, and, where appropriate, market advanced military technologies together. Joint projects under consideration include an Advanced Heavy Lift helicopter and an advanced non-nuclear-powered attack submarine. Gauging the progress of joint Sino-Russian defense R&D projects is difficult due to decreasing media coverage, but public manifestations of major achievements are hitherto lacking.

Especially in the 1990s, Russia leveraged the exercises with China to showcase weapons Moscow wanted the PLA to purchase. This process has decreased in importance as the PLA, benefiting from the growing capabilities of China's military-industrial complex, has bought a smaller number of Russian weapons systems. In the future, however, the PRC could use Sino-Russian drills to highlight weapons and defense technologies that Russia might want to purchase. China's improving arms industry means that the Russian armed forces might want to acquire more defense and dual-use components from the PRC. These transactions could circumvent Western financial sanctions and involve technologies compatible with Russian weaponry and subsystems. Conversely, the growing potential of PRC defense companies to compete in Russia's traditional arms markets may decrease Russian interest in assisting Chinese acquisition of emerging military technologies.

4. What are the implications for the United States and its allies and partners of the level of military coordination between the PLA and the Russian military? How does the China-Russia bilateral military relationship impact other countries in the region?

Though the exercises and arms sales have become a routine dimension of the Sino-Russian military partnership, they have been unprecedented in relations between Beijing and Moscow. Chinese and Russian leaders routinely deny that their military cooperation is directed against any third party. However, the growing ties between the Chinese and Russian militaries have complicated U.S.-allied military planning, diverted resources from concentrating against other threats, worsened regional security environments, and may make Chinese and Russian policymakers more willing to employ military force or run escalatory risks.

The bilateral Sino-Russian friendship treaty, signed in 2001 and renewed in 2021, lacks a mutual defense clause. Instead, the accord obliges both sides to refrain from aggressive acts toward one another and to consult about mutual threats and international crises. PRC officials have repeatedly stated that they will not join foreign military alliances. Nonetheless, the intense Sino-Russian military coordination affirms the two countries' commitment to a strong defense relationship. The expanding number, scale, and geographic

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scope of their military interactions have reflected, and reinforced, the closer Sino-Russian security alignment against the United States and other countries.

Sino-Russian military cooperation communicates to allies, adversaries, and domestic groups that the Chinese and Russian armed forces could coordinate their military forces in various ways and scenarios. By exercising as partners, China and Russia show the West that they are not as militarily isolated as Western countries desire. Their defense coordination also has an important reassurance function. PRC commentators, in particular, underscore the value of these exercises in promoting mutual trust. Some recent exercises utilized joint Chinese-Russian formations, in which Moscow demonstrated its willingness to subordinate units to PLA command. Such joint command structures are essential to certain multinational operations. Until recently, Russia had only accepted a prominent subordinate command arrangement over a decade ago during its deployment in the U.S.-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia.⁷ While the potential for a near-term Chinese-Russian military conflict is remote, through their exercises, the PRC and Russian national security establishments acquire information regarding each other's tactics, techniques, procedures, and capabilities.

5. What are the biggest remaining knowledge gaps on this topic? Are there areas that policymakers should pay greater attention to?

There is decreasing publicly available information about Russian-Chinese arms sales, R&D projects, and overall military-technology collaboration, presumably due to both countries' efforts to shield the participating firms from Western sanctions and other countermeasures.

Though there is still more detail in the Chinese and Russian media about their joint exercises, this open-source literature leaves uncertain to what extent the skills and capabilities that the Chinese and Russian media say they practice and learn in the exercises are genuine. Some analysts still consider the Sino-Russian exercises insufficiently rigorous to achieve substantial capability and interoperability gains. Immediately before Vostok 2022, the U.K. Ministry of Defence tweeted that the poor performance of the Russian military in Ukraine underscored that, "Such events are heavily scripted, do not encourage initiative, and primarily aim to impress Russian leaders and international audiences."⁸

Furthermore, the extent to which these skills and capabilities, if learned, are diffused to other Chinese and Russian military units that did not participate, remains unclear. The same uncertainty applies to the mechanisms by which this diffusion might occur.

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The United States and its allies, partners, and friends have conducted more multinational drills, over a much longer period, and with more comprehensive and intensive activities. Chinese and Russian national security partners are vigorously striving to decrease this exercise gap. Projections of possible scenarios for how this narrowing might occur, and how long it might take, would be useful.

6. The Commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What are your recommendations for Congressional action related to the topic of your testimony?

Future Sino-Russian exercises could include rehearsing novel missions in new locations with additional partners. For instance, Russia could renew its efforts to convene multilateral exercises involving India, along with China, to encourage greater cooperation among Moscow's two most capable defense partners. The Russian Navy might take advantage of China's access to many foreign ports to seek replenishment and repair services and other global logistic functions.

In the future, Chinese and Russian drills will likely encompass new locations, capabilities, and partners—possibly including the Arctic, hypersonic delivery systems, and novel African, Asian, and Middle East partners—as well as continue such recent innovations as conducting joint naval and strategic aviation patrols and combined arms maritime drills.

Due to its global network of defense partners, the United States enjoys a unique capacity to help other countries consider how Sino-Russian defense ties could adversely affect their security. The United States and its allies can lobby foreign governments and militaries against participating in threatening Sino-Russian drills. Conversely, U.S. experts should consult with foreign defense establishments that work with the Chinese and Russian armed forces in order to garner intelligence about Sino-Russian practices, policies, and capabilities. Decreasing the aforementioned knowledge gaps is critical for assessing the evolving Sino-Russian partnership and its potential malign impact on the United States and other actors.

Beijing and Moscow still eschew a formal defense alliance; there is no pledge or expectation that they would conduct major joint combat operations anytime soon. Yet, that China and Russia are strong military partners despite their lack of a formal mutual defense alliance is a prominent theme of their information campaigns regarding their joint exercises, defense-industrial cooperation, and other military interaction. Retired PLA colonel and military commentator Yue Gang said, "We are not allies but as good as allies with our collective capabilities."⁹ Zhang Xin, an associate professor at Shanghai's East China Normal

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University, observed that recent Sino-Russian exercises and related cooperation mark the evolution of their defense relationship “towards a closed but flexible collaboration between two militaries without entering into a full-scale alliance.”¹⁰

Chinese and Russian use of the phrase, “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination,” connotes a close partnership even without an alliance. Within this framework, Beijing and Moscow intend to “continue exploring new models of international military cooperation, so as to add new dimensions to the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.”¹¹ Regardless of the label, these binational exercises and arms transfers could adversely impact regional instability. Chinese and Russian policymakers might presume that the two countries’ enhanced capabilities and security ties could weaken the credibility of Washington’s defense guarantees to allies.

U.S. and allied military planners will increasingly need to consider potential contingencies involving both the Chinese and Russian militaries, potentially throughout the globe, but especially in Asia. These cases could include Russia’s supporting the PLA in a China-Japan conflict or a PRC invasion of Taiwan. The United States can boost the credibility of its military ties with allies and partners, as well as enhance collective deterrence and defense, by ensuring that U.S.-led multinational exercises incorporate tactics, techniques, and procedures designed to address whatever novel capabilities and skills the Chinese and Russian forces attain through their interaction.

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Notes

¹ Richard Weitz, “Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises: Past Progress and Future Trends,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-chinese-russian-military-exercises-past-progress-and-future-trends>.

² Richard Weitz, *The New China-Russia Alignment: Critical Challenges to U.S. Security* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2022).

³ Richard Weitz, “Eurasian Naval Power on Display: Sino-Russian Naval Exercises under Presidents Xi and Putin,” *Maritime Security* 5:1 (Winter 2022) pp. 1-53.

⁴ Richard Weitz, “Assessing the Sino-Russian ‘West Interaction 2021’ Combined Exercise,” *RINSA Forum: Korea National Defense University* 75 (August 31, 2021) pp. 1-4.

⁵ Richard Weitz, “Sino-Russian Interactions in Vostok-2022,” Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command, September 16, 2022.

⁶ Catherine Wong, “China-Russia military drill makes room for combined force against US,” *South China Morning Post*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3145010/china-russia-military-drill-makes-room-combined-force-against>.

⁷ “NATO and Russia: Partners in Peacekeeping,” NATO Office of Information and Press, no date, <https://www.nato.int/docu/presskit/010219/brocheng.pdf>.

⁸ U.K. Ministry of Defence [DefenceHQ]. “Such events are heavily scripted...” Twitter, September 2, 2022, [Twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1565574315944427521?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1565574315944427521?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).

⁹ Wong, “China-Russia military drill.”

¹⁰ Reid Standish, “China, Russia Showcase Growing Ties With Joint Military Exercises,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 9, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-military-cooperation/31401442.html>.

¹¹ “China-Russia drill signals new era in joint exercises: spokesperson,” Xinhua, August 26, 2021, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-08/26/c_1310150971.htm.