

On the Sino-Russian “Zapad/Interaction-2021” Joint Exercise

Shiau-Shyang Liou

Division of National Security Research

1. News Highlights

From August 9-13, 2021, China and Russia conducted the “Zapad/Interaction-2021” exercise at the PLA Army’s Qingtongxia Joint Tactical Training Base in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The two sides participated in the drill with a total of 13,000 troops and about 500 units of various weapons and equipment. The Chinese PLA forces, consisting of ground troops and air force units, were mainly from the Western Theater, while the Russian side, consisting of tactical aviation units, motorized infantry units and special forces stationed in the Zabaykalsky Krai, was from the country’s Eastern Theater. The exercise saw a significant increase in hardware quality as newer equipment accounted for 81.6% of which were deployed. Both sides demonstrated their

direct and indirect firepower covering a wide spectrum of intensity and range for successful saturated attacks. The two countries also claimed that the exercise aimed to expand and strengthen their joint counter-terrorism capability as well as to assert their common determination on maintaining international and regional security.

Based on the idea of terrorist groups using armor, infantry and drones to launch attacks, the goal set for the exercise was to maintain regional security and stability through joint counter-terrorism operations that combine new forms of military force and asymmetric warfare to establish a joint combat capability. The new joint force constituted a three-level command system (Directorate - Joint Command - Participating Forces) implemented in two phases (Joint Planning and Land Attack). The highlight

of the exercise was the commissioning of a dedicated joint command information system that constituted a “one network with four chains” combat infrastructure orchestrating air force, army aviation, artillery, armor and infantry units. With the system, commanders from both sides could analyze the situation and identify targets on the spot, and then launch drones immediately to carry out precise strikes. In the exercise, Chinese and Russian officers practiced more than 20 joint courses such as air defense, barrier breaching and three-dimensional capture operations. After the exercise, both countries agreed that their military collaboration reached a new height.¹

2. Security Implications

2-1. Innovative Sino-Russian collaboration with limited improvement

The Zapad/Interaction-2021 exercise set a number of firsts: the first international exercise organized in China since the outbreak of COVID-19; the first time the Russian army participated in an exercise organized by China using Chinese equipment; and the first time China and Russia used a dedicated command information system for the exercise.

1. Lu Desheng and Zhang Xiaoyu, "Zapad/Interaction-2021" Exercise Officially Begins," *PLA Daily*, August 10, 2021, p. 1; Lu Desheng, Zhang Xiaoyu, and Yang Xiaobo, "Zapad/Interaction-2021 Exercise Highlights—Interview with Li Shuyin, Researcher of Military Science Academy", *PLA Daily*, August 12, 2021, p. 3; Лю Фан, “Синьхуа (Китай): учения «Запад/Взаимодействие — 2021» официально начались,” *ИноСМИ.ru*, 9 августа, 2021, <https://inosmi.ru/military/20210809/250279406.html>; “Цинтунсянская стратегическая операция. Россия и Китай укрепляют геополитический тандем на совместных маневрах,” *Коммерсантъ*, No. 140, 10 августа, 2021, стр. 6. For the actual progress of the exercise, see “Detailed Records of Actions in the Zapad/Interaction-2021 Exercise” by Lu Desheng, Zhang Xiaoyu, and Yang Xiaobo, *PLA Daily*, August 14, 2021, p. 4.

In addition to showing that their combat capabilities are unaffected by the pandemic, China and Russia are systematically increasing their familiarity with each other's equipment. In 2020, Chinese troops participating in the Kavkaz-2020 strategic exercise used Russian equipment for the first time, and the Russians continued the same training pattern in this exercise by using Chinese gears. At this point, the two armies have formally completed the exercise of using each other's combat equipment. But more importantly, the introduction of the bilingual Chinese-Russian command information system is significant, since it will be key to enhancing the joint warfare capabilities of the two armies. The new system has changed the pattern of previous “joint” exercises that involved only independently organized and planned Chinese and Russian forces. The change enables sharing of situational information and unification of operational rules to make the collaboration more efficient. The new system allows participants to build a smoother chain of command,

taking advantage of the information system. The system also allows them to establish internal connections to sub-level operational centers or to the operational group (team) command posts, and, if necessary, to the end terminals of the two armies' individual soldiers for true joint warfare.²

For over a decade, the Sino-Russian military exercises have been conducted under Russian military command codes and the Russian language as a tacit agreement. Today, the introduction of a bilingual command information system and the establishment of a Russian liaison unit in the joint command center not only allow both sides to involve and understand the entire mission, but also enable them to grasp the situation and work out solutions together. This is a large step forward, and it also brings the Chinese PLA out of its previously “passively cooperative” role.

As this exercise is only the first step for China and Russia to take a substantial step towards joint military operations, the

2. Lu Desheng, Zhang Xiaoyu, and Yang Xiaobo, “Zapad/Interaction-2021 Exercise Highlights—Interview with Li Shuyin, Researcher of Military Science Academy,” *PLA Daily*, August 12, 2021, p. 3.

completion of a round of exercise with each other's equipment is still far from seamless interoperability. It will still take considerable time and effort in future exercises for both countries to deepen the collaboration to become truly combat-ready.

2-2 Messages from counter-terrorism exercise

As the Taliban just took over Afghanistan, the Sino-Russian exercise taking place in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region with terrorist groups as the opposing force not only warns the Xinjiang independence activists from cooperating with “outside terrorist powers”, but also signals to the Taliban not to expand the battlefield to other foreign soil. Since the location of choice is quite far from Afghanistan, the tension can be avoided as well.

There have been several joint counter-terrorism exercises held by China and Russia respectively as well as multilateral exercises participated by other Central Asian countries. If terrorism were a real concern, it would be more meaningful to hold such exercises under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a

framework established with counter-terrorism considerations in mind; however, the two countries were organizing exercises seemingly unrelated to the SCO. Although the real strength of their joint combat capability remains unknown, the two countries deliberately publicized the exercises to stress their power against the US, their common adversary. China and Russia keep reiterating that their exercises are not aimed at any country, but it is clear that the US is still the target audience. As China and Russia are both facing the US on both sides of the Eurasian continent, the objective is more than obvious. Despite the fact that the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan with unexpected speed, the real priority of Sino-Russian exercises is mainly in their own interests rather than the advertised counter-terrorism.

3. Trend Observation

3-1. Sino-Russian military cooperation is promising in short term under US pressure

Exercises and arms sales are the two pillars of Sino-Russian military cooperation. The sales have been at a

decade-long standstill due to China's actions such as reverse engineering, intellectual property infringement and theft of trade secrets, but after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, Russia decided to accelerate its “Pivot to the East” policy and relax restrictions on the sale and transfer of advanced weapons and technology to China. The level of military exercises was elevated and selection of the locations for their “Joint Naval Exercises” also became more sensitive. For instance, the “Joint Naval Exercise-2014” took place in the East China Sea, the first stage of “Joint Naval Exercise-2015” in the Mediterranean Sea and the first stage of “Joint Naval Exercise-2017” in the Baltic Sea.

The signing of “Sino-Russian Military Cooperation Roadmap for 2017-2020” in June 2017 set off another wave of Sino-Russian military collaboration, which is believed to be connected to the deterioration of Russian-US relations. Since 2018, China has been invited to participate in Russia's highest-level strategic exercises such as “Vostok-2018”, “Tesntr-2019” and “Caucasus-2020” that highly targeted “other major countries”, in which traditionally only the closest

military partners of Russia were issued invitation. This shocked the outside world and suggested that Sino-Russian military relations are stronger than ever. As China and Russia conducted their first joint strategic air patrol in the Asia-Pacific region in July 2019 and again in December 2020, they were clearly provoking the US and its allies. It's worth watching if such patrols will become routine and held again in 2021. Another important indication is Russia's assistance to China in building an early warning missile system in 2019. Since the system is the most important and sensitive mechanism in terms of strategic nuclear weapons control, this move is tantamount to pushing Sino-Russian military cooperation towards an even tighter alliance.

The changes show that the pressure from the West, especially the US, is the major external force to accelerate the development of Sino-Russian military cooperation. With no light at the end of the tunnel yet in the conflict between the US and China, the Sino-Russian military cooperation is promising in the short term, and early warning missile systems and cyberspace may become the two countries' new proving grounds in the future.

3-2 Conceptional differences between China and Russia are detrimental to future long-term military cooperation

The advancement of Sino-Russian military cooperation is directly proportional to external pressures, and the PLA can benefit from the Russian military's combat experience. However, the imbalance of military power still leads to Russia's domination. This can also be observed from Russian President Vladimir Putin's expedient interpretation on whether China and Russia are allies.

Likewise, the difference in cognition between China and Russia may be a potential variable in the future. Take this exercise, literally called “West/Joint 2021” by the Chinese side, as an example. “Zapad/Interaction-2021” in English and “Запад/Взаимодействие-2021” in Russian both mean “West/Interaction-2021”, in which the meanings of “interaction” and “joint” are quite different. A similar discrepancy in meaning can also be seen in the series of Sino-Russian “Joint Naval Exercises”, where the Russian word “морское взаимодействие” actually means “naval interaction” rather than “naval

joint”. It's possible that the Russians merely see the bilateral exercises as military exchanges and interactions, but China deliberately exaggerated them to make a bigger statement for itself. The discrepancy between their perceptions in this regard is indeed related to historical legacy. Although the Russians call their relationship with China “brotherhood”, they are still proud of themselves as “big brothers” and have not forgotten their assistance to the Chinese in the Soviet era. The author has also learned from interviews with Russians that they believe that the so-called strategic partnership and military exercises are in fact Russia's courteous response to China's needs. With such a mentality, even though China and Russia are united against the US, they may not see each other's geopolitical status as equals.

Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a new type of “major power relationship” between China and the US in 2013 to share and manage global affairs with the US. Although the US has not responded, it has an implication that China considered itself to be on higher international footing than Russia. While Russia has not regained its former status



as a superpower after the Cold War, the country still considers itself to be on par with the US. Therefore, although China and Russia both advocate multipolar international relations, they do not necessarily see each other as equals.

The discrepancy between China and Russia’s interpretation of military exercises is to some extent related to their mutual perceptions, but also to their interpretation of each other’s international positioning. When faced with a common external threat, the two countries may be able to temporarily put aside their differences, but not after the threat has diminished or subsided. For long-term military cooperation between the two sides, this mentality may not be very conducive in the future.