

The Reality of Expanded China-Russia Military Cooperation

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In the face of the threat of US strategic bombers flying close to their respective borders, the Chinese and Russian defense ministers signed a “2021 to 2025 roadmap” on the development of expanded military cooperation between the two countries on November 23, 2021. This is expected to promote deeper cooperation between the two countries in joint patrols and military exercises.¹

Video call between Russian and Chinese defense ministers

The Russian defense ministry announced on the same day that China and Russia agreed to expand military cooperation over the next five years. During the video conference chaired by Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and Russian Defense Minister Sergey

Shoygu, the two military chiefs approved the “2021-2025 Military Cooperation Roadmap” that focuses on strengthening bilateral cooperation in “strategic military exercises and joint patrols.”. The Chinese defense ministry said the roadmap will also cover strategic coordination in joint military activities to safeguard the interests of both countries and regional security. Wei also held a video call with Shoygu, according to the *Xinhua News Agency*.

Chinese H-6K bomber shows 8 pylons in strategic cruise

In a joint Chinese-Russian air force cruise taking place on November 19, 2021, the Chinese side sent two H-6K bombers, the first Chinese bomber with 8 external pylons, flying in formation with

1. “From Foreign Media: China and Russia to Further Expand Military Cooperation in the Next Five Years,” *Xinhua Net*, November 26, 2021. http://www.news.cn/mil/2021-11/26/c_1211462475.htm.

two Tu-95MC bombers from the Russian side. There are currently three variants in the frontline H-6 lineup: 1. the H-6N capable of providing/accepting aerial refueling and carrying ballistic missiles in its bomb bay, 2. the PLA Naval Air Force H-6J, and 3. the PLA Air Force H-6K. The H-6J mainly carries out anti-ship missions with the 400km-range YJ-12 missiles. Since the H-6J needs to enter the enemy's air defense range for desired attacking precision, the PLA has upgraded its avionics system and increased the number of pylons to eight in response to the challenge. The additional pylons can accommodate additional electronic warfare pods that interfere with enemy radar or guidance systems on incoming missiles through electronic interference or suppression. For instance, the inner pylons can be used to carry heavier missiles such as CJ-20 or YJ-12, while the outer pylons carry lighter missiles, electronic warfare pods, or optoelectronic pods for various electromagnetic interference, electromagnetic suppression, information support, anti-radiation as well as air-to-ground/sea missions.²

PLA sent only observers to “Zapad/Interaction-2021” exercise

In August 2021, the Russian Army sent troops to participate in the “Zapad/Interaction-2021” exercise held at the PLA Army's Qingtongxia Joint Tactical Training Base. The Chinese military saw the following features of the Sino-Russian joint military exercise: 1. The defense leaders of China and Russia, Wei Fenghe and Sergey Shoygu, respectively, observed the live exercise together, held talks, and signed cooperation documents; 2. The Russian army was invited to China for the first time to participate in a strategic exercise organized by the Chinese side, with Li Zuocheng, Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission, as the director of the exercise, to transform the PLA's high-level exercises from independent operations to open, collaborative actions; 3. The two armies have joined forces for better coordination by planning, training and working together as a team; 4. The actions of the two armies are planned based on common information and a proprietary strategic command system,

2. “Superpowers Unite/China-Russia Joint Cruise with 8-pylon Bombers,” *Takungpao.com*, November 29, 2021. <http://www.takungpao.com/news/232108/2021/1129/660082.html>.

which allows the two countries to fight together in a more substantial way; 5. The drills showed a new, innovative way of anti-terrorism warfare that consists of saturated firepower assaults, in-depth airborne/paratroop deployments, swarms of drones, and other tactics to lead the combat pattern from air-ground strikes to full-dimensional, holistic breakthrough operations.³

The Russian Western (Zapad)-2021 exercise saw troops from Belarus, Armenia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and Serbia, while the PLA, aiming to deepen Chinese-Russian military cooperation, sent only observers. As the PLA had regularly sent troops to participate in Russia's annual strategic exercises such as Vostok-2018, Tsentr-2019, and Kavkaz-2020, but not in Zapad-2021, its decision is puzzling. According to Moscow's public statements, the Qingtongxia exercise was also changed from Sibur/Cooperation-2021 to

Zapad/Interaction-2021, indicating that their military partnership may not be as close as it appears. Since NATO is wary of Russian invasion into Ukraine, the PLA might have held back from sending troops to participate in the Zapad-2021 exercise to avoid provoking the NATO countries.⁴

Although Beijing and Moscow are expanding their military cooperation, such as joint cruises and military exercises, with the US as their common adversary, the show of power of the two sides is likely to score some points and noise on their political attitude but not have any real military significance.

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3. "Transcript of the August 2021 Ministry of National Defense Regular Press Conference, Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China," August 26, 2021. http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/jzhzt/2021-08/26/content_4893360.htm.
 4. John R. Deni, "What's Russia Doing in Ukraine? Its Latest Military Drills Provide Critical Clues," *Atlantic Council*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/whats-russia-doing-in-ukraine-its-latest-military-drills-provide-critical-clues>.