

Defending the East: Russian Military Exercises and the China Question, 2008-Present

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Abstract

First in 2010 and then later in 2014, Russia conducted its largest military exercises in history. As the setting for these maneuvers, respectively labeled as Vostok 2010 and 2014, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation chose the Far Eastern Federal District along the border with China. For the Russian military, these maneuvers tested both the success of the military reform program initiated in 2008 and sent a message of warning to other powers in the region about Russia's capacity to defend its territorial integrity. Due to their proximity to their shared border and the large number of asserts involved, only China could have served as the intended audience for these exercises. The purposes of Vostok 2010 and 2014 reveal further challenges to the Sino-Russian relationship in that Russia still views China as a potential military rival despite their recent extensive international collaboration. By using Vostok 2010 and 2014 as a means of analysis, this paper argues that Russia's exercises indicate great concerns within the Russian government about China's increasing economic and military strength and how these factors have changed the dynamic between the two countries. As demonstrated by the Vostok maneuvers, moreover, China has significantly influenced Russia's efforts to modernize its military. The implication of this project is that behind the collaborative façade of the Sino-Russian relationship, there lies significant caution and distrust. Russia, however, must still maintain good relations with China due to their own diplomatic and systemic economic problems. These conditions have further compounded Russian feelings of inferiority, for which their renewed military strength cannot account.

Introduction

Beginning on September 19, 2014, the Russian Federation held its largest military exercise in history. Lasting six days, Vostok 2014 featured the participation of 100,000 personnel, supported by 1500 tanks, 120 aircraft, and 5000 pieces of other assorted hardware (artillery, transports, and supply vehicles).¹ As part of this exercise, the Russian military conducted defensive maneuvers against a hypothetical, conventional foe in the Far Eastern Federal District near the border with China and on the Sakhalin Island.² Preceding this activity, President Vladimir Putin ordered a series of snap inspections of the armed forces and among different government agencies in preparation for the components of the exercise focused on strategic mobility and interdepartmental cooperation.³ Vostok 2014—as well as the previous Vostok 2010 exercise—tested the recent series of reforms implemented in the Russian military since 2008. Addressing the composition, organization, and doctrines of the armed forces, these initiatives served to modernize the Russian military. Simultaneously, the Russian government intended Vostok 2010 and 2014 to demonstrate the new capabilities of the Russian military to international observers. The choice to hold such extensive exercises in the Far East rather than in Western Russia,

¹ Roger McDermott, "Vostok 2014 and Russia's Hypothetical Enemies (Part One)," *The Jamestown Foundation*, <https://jamestown.org/program/vostok-2014-and-russias-hypothetical-enemies-part-one/> (accessed April 10, 2017).

² Ibid.

³ Roger McDermott, "Putin Orders Largest Snap Inspection Exercise of the Year," *Jamestown Foundation*, <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-orders-largest-snap-inspection-exercise-of-the-year/> (accessed April 10, 2017).

furthermore, indicated a shift in future concerns among Russian strategic thinkers.

Importantly, the size and nature of Vostok 2010 and 2014 immediately disqualified the United States and its regional allies as the target of Russia's assertive message. The United States, for example, lacks assets in the region comparable to those deployed by Russia in either Vostok 2010 or 2014. More significantly, the United States and its Asian partners do not possess a clear, perceived motive that would suggest an interest in attacking Russian territory. If Russia did want to address a threat from the United States, moreover, it would have contributed more resources to its exercises in Western Russia, not those in East Asia. In this sense, the location of Vostok 2010 and 2014 proved extremely significant. Vostok 2010 and 2014 mainly focused on conventional land warfare and tested the Russian military's logistical capabilities, not its ability to respond to a naval challenge. In this regard, only China remained as a potential target because of their substantial forces in East Asia. China has also shown increasing interest in Siberia and the Far East Region as a result of its demand for natural resources. Vostok 2010 and 2014, therefore, appeared to prepare Russia for a potential conflict with its southern neighbor.

Throughout the weeks preceding and during the war games, however, the Russian Ministry of Defense refrained from identifying a specific opponent when describing the purpose either Vostok 2010 or 2014. Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu in 2014 declared that Vostok 2014 occurred "without the script developed in advance," while a statement by the Ministry of Defense claimed "the purpose of the activities is to check the readiness of units to perform assigned tasks, and the ability of troops to act in crisis situations posing a direct threat to the military security of the country."⁴ By not addressing the target audience for the exercises, Russia avoided antagonizing China. By not addressing China directly, Russian officials revealed their understanding of their country's precarious geopolitical situation: although Russia desires to assert its renewed strength, it does not want to destabilize its partnership with China.

As Vostok 2010 and 2014 demonstrate, not only has the Sino-Russian partnership begun to deteriorate but Russian strategic planners are already anticipating a future potential conflict along their shared border with China. In order to understand these new considerations, this paper argues that Russia's exercises indicate concerns within the Russian government and military that China does represent a potential challenge to Russian interests in the future, especially as a result of the changing power dynamic between the two powers. Vostok 2010 and 2014, moreover, illustrate China's influence on the ongoing Russian military reform program initiated in 2008. This paper will further contribute to our understanding of the obstacles afflicting the Sino-Russian relationship, as well as to the reasons why China and Russia have failed to move past them. This situation suggests both the divergent nature of Chinese and Russian interests, as well as a developing underlying rivalry between both states. Russia and China, however, have also maintained their friendly relations, especially in regards to regional cooperation. As discussed later, these recent collaborations have only served to exacerbate Russia's unease.

⁴ Ibid.

Such mixed concerns reflect the changing dynamic of the Sino-Russian relationship in the last sixteen years. Beginning in 2001, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China first began to develop a new regional partnership through the successful resolution of their historic border disagreements and increased cooperation. Although not explicitly aligned against the United States, China and Russia have collaborated to oppose American unipolar hegemony and Western liberalism, especially after the color revolutions in the mid-2000s. In international organizations like the United Nations, China and Russia often counter American or European initiatives that might threaten either of their interests; of the last seven Security Council Resolutions addressing the Syrian Civil War, for example, China and Russia have jointly vetoed six of them.⁵ Simultaneously, China has proven willing to provide Russia with new opportunities for expansion and growth. This situation became increasingly apparent after 2014 when the United States and European Union imposed economic sanctions on Russia for its role in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

With few alternatives because of their diplomatic isolation and falling oil prices, Russia had little choice but to turn to China for assistance. In 2014, Russia and China concluded the largest energy deal in history, which stipulated that the former supply the latter with 38 billion cubic meters of gas annually for 30 years in exchange for \$400 billion.⁶ Russia also decided in 2015 to rescind its previous ban on selling China advanced weapons systems as a means of raising revenue; in 2015 and 2016, China purchased the S-400 SAM system and the Su-35 fighter from Russia.⁷ Putin's attendance of the Belt and Road forum in Beijing in May 2017 further indicated Russia's increased amenability to China's Belt and Road Initiative despite earlier concerns about its compatibility with the Eurasian Economic Union.⁸

Much of the evidence used to suggest the growing strength of the Sino-Russian relationship in recent years also reflects Russia's increasing geopolitical isolation. Because of its aggressive actions against Ukraine—which resulted in the imposition of sanctions and expulsion from Western organizations like the G8—Russia has become reliant on China. The arms agreements in 2015 and 2016 illustrate the nature of this situation as throughout the 2000s, Russia refrained from selling China advanced weaponry for fear that the Chinese would reverse engineer them.⁹ Even the 2014 energy deal was met with criticism. Not only did Russia agree to sell the gas at significantly below the market price, the Chinese also gained more direct access Siberia.¹⁰ Russia's recent agreements with China from 2014-2016, therefore, did not originate from a

⁵ "Russia and China Veto UN Resolution on Syria Sanctions," *Al Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/russia-china-veto-resolution-syria-sanctions-170228170547908.html>, (accessed April 13).

⁶ James Paton and Aibing Guo, "Russia, China Add to \$400 Billion Gas Deal with Accord," *Bloomberg*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-11-10/russia-china-add-to-400-billion-gas-deal-with-accord> (accessed April 13, 2017).

⁷ Richard Weitz, *Parsing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, 2015), 24.

⁸ "Belt and Road International Forum," *Kremlin*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54491>, (accessed May, 14 2017).

⁹ Simon Saradzhyan, "Global Insider: Russia-China Military Ties Growing Despite Friction," *Harvard Kennedy School*, <http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/global-insider-russia-china-military-ties-growing-despite-friction> (accessed April 11, 2017).

¹⁰ Paton and Guo, "Russia, China Add to \$400 Billion Gas Deal with Accord."

position of equality but of inferiority as Russia's lack of international alternatives and weakening economy forced them to turn towards China. Even though they still maintain their partnership, China's expanding economic and martial strength have relegated Russia to the junior role in the Sino-Russian partnership.

Sino-Russian Relations

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Russian concerns about the expansion of Chinese influence and military power proved largely absent. Instead, Putin adopted a policy of rapprochement with China almost immediately upon becoming President of the Russian Federation. His efforts in the first half of the 2000s produced important results such as the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, which outlined a new framework for Sino-Russian relations based on economic and international cooperation. As part of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, China also gained greater access to then-superior Russian military technology.¹¹ Putin followed this diplomatic success in 2004 by negotiating the Complementary Agreement on the Eastern Section of the China-Russia Boundary, wherein Russia returned several Amur River islands to China.¹² Throughout much of this period, Russia also served as one of the few sources of foreign arms for China. In 2000, the value of these sales peaked at \$4 billion before declining to a yearly average of \$1-1.5 billion until 2009.¹³ Bilaterally, China and Russia also collaborated in international organizations such as the United Nations to oppose American initiatives. In this regard, both China and Russia have sponsored groups that challenge American unipolar hegemony like the BRIC summits and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

This cooperation has also extended to important regional bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which provide China and Russia greater opportunities to develop their military and geopolitical relationship. Originally founded in 2001 as a means of promoting political, economic, and military cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization includes China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan as its principal members. The SCO has served as a check on the expanding influence of the United States in the region by providing Russia and China greater access to the Central Asian republics. As discussed by Bobo Lo, rather than becoming a source of competition between Russia and China, Central Asia actually enabled them to develop a closer relationship.¹⁴ This development became evident by the frequency of Sino-Russian joint and multilateral exercises in the region.

From 2005 onwards, China and Russia would engage in both bilateral and multilateral exercises almost yearly (see Table 1). As their stated purpose, the Peace Missions and bilateral exercises

¹¹ Christina Yeung and Nebojsa Bjelakovi, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: Views from Beijing and Moscow," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 23, no. 2 (2010): 243-281, 247.

¹² "Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t309361.shtml (accessed April 12, 2017).

¹³ Yueng and Bjelakovi, "Views from Beijing and Moscow," 258.

¹⁴ Bobo Lo, "Ten things Everyone Should Know About the Sino-Russian Relationship," *Center for European Reform*, http://cer-live.thomas-paterson.co.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/pb_china_bl_dec08-775.pdf (accessed April 15, 2017)

conducted by Russia and China served to strengthen the military cooperation of both states, especially in regards to operations against fundamentalists and separatists.¹⁵ Indirectly, as these maneuvers served to assert Sino-Russian influence in the region against other competitors. Principally, as Jin Canrong asserted, “the main target is the United States.”¹⁶ Simultaneously, however, these maneuvers provided both powers with the opportunity to observe each other. As described by Alexander Khramchikhin, the Director of Russia’s Institute for Political and Military analysis, “China intends to study Russia’s strong and weak points during the drills in case Russia becomes its adversary in the future.”¹⁷ Between 2005 and 2010 this proved the case as those Russian forces participating in the Peace Missions always featured the best equipment and capabilities in comparison to the other participants. At Peace Mission 2007, for example, Russia supplied all of the participants except for China with their ammunition and weaponry.¹⁸ This dynamic changed at Peace Mission 2010, however, when both Western and Russian observers noted significant improvements in China’s military capabilities.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ariel Cohen and John J. Tkacik, “Sino-Russian Military Maneuvers: A Threat to US Interests in Eurasia,” *Backgrounder*, no. 1883 (2005): 1-5, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Weitz, *Parsing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises*, 44.

¹⁸ Marcel de Haas, “The ‘Peace Mission 2007’ Exercises: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Advances,” *Defense Academy of the United Kingdom* 7, no. 28: 2-21, 6.

¹⁹ Weitz, *Parsing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises*, 14-15.

Table 1. Russian National, Joint, and Multilateral SCO Exercises, 2005-2014.²⁰

Name	Date	National, Joint, or Multilateral SCO	Location	Number of Russian Participants	Number of Chinese Participants
Peace Mission 2005	August 18-25, 2005	Joint	Shandong Peninsula (NE China)	2,000	8,000
Peace Mission 2007	August 9-17, 2007	Multilateral SCO	Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Area and the Volga-Urals District	2,000	1,700*
Peace Mission 2009	July 22-27, 2008	Joint	NE China	1,300	1,300
Vostok 2010	June 28-July 9, 2010	National	Far Eastern Federal District	20,000	-
Peace Mission 2010	September 9-25, 2010	Multilateral SCO	Kazakhstan	1,000	1,000
Peace Mission 2012	June 8-14, 2012	Multilateral SCO	Tajikistan	350	350
Peace Mission 2013	July 27-August 15, 2013	Joint	Chelyabinsk Region, Russia	900	600
Peace Mission 2014	August 24-29, 2014	Multilateral SCO	Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region	1,000	5,000
Vostok 2014	September 19-25, 2014	National	Far Eastern Federal District	100,000	-

*Although China participated in Peace Mission 2007, its contingent principally engaged in solo operations.

²⁰ Weitz, *Parsing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises*, 5-35.

In preparation for Peace Mission 2010, the Chinese military successfully transported a large number of its participating soldiers 5000 km from their bases in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region to Kazakhstan. The Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force also demonstrated similar improvement by completing several unnecessary mid-air refueling.²¹ Later, at Peace Mission 2014, the Chinese contingent used more advanced weaponry than the Russians.²² As Richard Weitz argued, this situation represented a role reversal as Russia had previously used the SCO exercises as an exhibit for its own military technology.²³ By effectively usurping Russia's traditional position in these exercises, China challenged Russia's influence in the region, especially among the Central Asian republics.

Already in 2009, official Russian state news services were reporting concerns about China's growing military strength. Although Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov avoided mentioning China as a strategic threat to Russia during a 2009 press conference on military reforms, a follow-up article in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the Defense Ministry's newspaper, argued Makarov's presentations "shows that it is, after all, NATO and China that are the most dangerous of our geopolitical rivals."²⁴ In September 2009, Chief of the Ground Forces Staff Sergei Skokov also indirectly addressed the threat posed by China when he discussed potential conflicts in Eastern Russia. He described how "if we talk about the east, then it could be a multi-million-man army with a traditional approach to conducting combat operations."²⁵ According to Khramchikhin, this statement was the first in which "a high-ranking national commander has de facto acknowledged officially that the People's Republic of China is our potential enemy."²⁶ Even before the military conducted its first Vostok exercise in September 2010, Lieutenant-General Vladimir Chirkin, Commander of the Siberian Military District went so far as to move two brigades closer to the border with China. He explained that "despite friendly relations with China, our army command understands that friendship is possible only with strong countries, which can quiet a friend down with a conventional or nuclear club."²⁷ Such a statement illustrated new considerations within the Russian military regarding China. At the same time, though, the Russian government made sure not to antagonize its partner.

Like Makarov in 2009, the Russian state attempted to avoid mentioning China as a potential future adversary. In the Military Doctrines of the Russian Federation, which describe the officially adopted policies of the armed forces, especially in regards to its role and future direction, China is conspicuously absent when these documents discuss potential adversaries. Rather, the 2010 and 2014 Military Doctrines of the Russian Federation still identified NATO and the United States as the most direct threats to Russia, not China.²⁸ Indeed, as illustrated in Table 1, Russia and China still continued to conduct bilateral and multilateral military exercises.

²¹ Ibid, 14.

²² Ibid, 30.

²³ Ibid, 33.

²⁴ Simon Saradzhyan, "The Role of China in Russia's Military Thinking," *Harvard Kennedy School*, <http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/role-china-russias-military-thinking> (accessed April 15, 2017).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Roger McDermott, "Reflections on Vostok 2010: Selling an Image," *The Jamestown Foundation*, <https://jamestown.org/program/reflections-on-vostok-2010-selling-an-image/> (accessed April 12, 2017).

²⁸ *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2010; The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 2014.*

Despite their continued collaboration, Russia's pivot towards Asia occurred out of a sense of weakness not as means of exploiting new opportunities. As Fiona Hill and Bobo Lo argued, this decision effectively acknowledged the "rise of China at [the] expense of [the] US" in the region and also demonstrated Russia's "anxiety about the vulnerability of its eastern flank and desire to project influence."²⁹ Importantly, Russia only began negotiating new major trade deals with China after the West imposed economic sanctions on them for their aggressive actions against Ukraine in 2014. As such, it appears more likely that Russia shifted its focus to Asia in 2010 in order to reassert its influence in the region against China. As part of this process, Russia's ongoing military reform program since 2008 became tailored to catching up with Chinese advances and sending a message about the Russian armed forces' renewed capabilities.

Russian Military Reforms

When Russia first initiated their broad program of reform in 2008, it did so not as a response to China but as a result of the poor performance of its military in the then recent Russo-Georgian War. Although Russian forces defeated their opponent in a matter of days, the conflict revealed significant deficiencies. In regards to equipment, according to Rod Thornton, not only were between 60-75% of Russian tanks obsolete, many did not have access to GLONASS, the Russian GPS. Russian soldiers also went into combat without proper body protection and helmets.³⁰ Simultaneously, some officers at times could not maintain contact with the formations under their command; Lieutenant-General Anatoliy Khrulev, for example, was forced to use a satellite phone at one point in order to ascertain the location of his units. Other field officers had difficulty coordinating with the air force due to the pre-war delineation of duties. Due to this situation, the Commander of the North Caucasus Military District did not have direct access to the air assets in the region under the control of Colonel-General Aleksandr Zelin throughout the conflict.³¹ Russia, moreover, lost several planes to Georgian anti-aircraft weaponry because of the absence of intelligence about Georgian capabilities before the invasion began.

The otherwise avoidable casualties that resulted from these conditions led to both domestic and international criticism regarding the Russian military's performance. Makarov's assertion following the Georgian War effectively acknowledged the significant mistakes made throughout the war on the part of the Russians. Following the cessation of hostilities, Makarov declared that "we had serious drawbacks in the conflict and learned a number of lessons" and that we will deal with them as soon as possible."³² Indeed, by October 2008, the Russian Ministry of Defense and General Staff announced a series of initiatives that essentially served as the first stage of Russia's military reform program. At first, these attempted to address all of the problems affecting the Russian armed forces but later became tailored to addressing specific issues such as doctrine and organization. Following the 2010 SCO Peace Initiative exercises, however, in which China demonstrated its own new military capabilities, Russian authorities redirected the emphasis of the reforms. Based on China's performance, these reforms became focused more on improving

²⁹ Fiona Hill and Bobo Lo, "Putin's Pivot: Why Russia is Looking East," *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2013-07-31/putins-pivot> (accessed April 13, 2017).

³⁰ Rod Thornton, *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 19.

³¹ *Ibid*, 18.

³² *Ibid*, 20.

interdepartmental cooperation, preparation, and transportation. This new direction in the Russian reform program served as Russia's direct response to China's increasing military advancements.

When first announced by then President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin in 2008, the reform plan included measures that principally addressed the modernization of the Russian military and the rationalization of its organization. As part of these initiatives, the Ministry of Defense hoped to increase the share of modern weaponry in the Russian armed forces to 70% by 2020.³³ The 2010 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation reflected this aim when it declared the necessity for the Russian government to “comprehensively equip (reequip) with up-to-date models of armaments and military and specialized equipment” the different branches of the military.³⁴ Anatoly Serdyukov, the Defense Minister at the time, also announced his intention of reducing the size of the officer corps as a means of addressing the imbalance in the ratio of officers to enlisted soldiers (*kontraktniki*) and conscripts.³⁵ Importantly, the Georgian conflict also caused the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff to immediately transform the army's divisions into brigades in October 2008.

Relying on mobilized conscripts, reformers criticized the retention of divisions due to their lack of operational independence and the slow speed at which they organized themselves. Critics of the division also contended that because Russia faced smaller wars along its borders rather than a conventional conflict with NATO, the Russian military required a force at permanent readiness. Serdyukov argued, for example, that “the brigade structure is more flexible, mobile, and modern.”³⁶ The supporters of this reform also claimed that the brigades would enable Russia to forego the logistical issues that hampered their invasion of Georgia in 2008 as the brigades would be “capable of going into battle within 1 or 2 hours.”³⁷ The transition to brigades, however, did lead to debate within military circles.

Because brigades rely on enlisted soldiers to provide them with their status of permanent readiness, the abandonment of divisions challenged Russia's historic utilization of mobilization as its organizational doctrine. The 2010 Military Doctrine confirmed the transformation away from a complete reliance on conscription and mobilization when it outlined a policy involving “a rational correlation of permanent-readiness large formations and troop units to large formations and troop units intended for the mobilizational deployment.”³⁸ Since 2010, conscription has remained an ongoing subject of debate in Russian society. In the Duma, for example, United Russia MP Aleksei Zhuravlev argued for extending the term of service for conscripts as “one year...in the army is not enough in order to prepare qualified specialists.”³⁹ A 2014 VTSIOM

³³ Bettina Renz, “Russian Military Capabilities after 20 Years of Reform,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 66, no. 3 (2014): 61-84, 65.

³⁴ *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, 2010.

³⁵ Bettin Renz and Rod Thornton, “Russian Military Modernization: Cause, Course, and Consequences,” *Problems of Post-Communist* 59, no. 1 (2012): 44-54, 46.

³⁶ Thornton, *Military Modernization*, 23.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 24.

³⁸ *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, 2010.

³⁹ Nadja Douglas, “Civil-Military relations in Russia: Conscript vs. Contract Army, or How Ideas Prevail Against Functional Demands,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 4 (2014): 511-532, 525.

(Russian Public Opinion Center) survey also reported Russian society's broad support for conscription as 80% of participants agreed that every Russian man should serve in the armed forces.⁴⁰ Military officials proved no different than their civilian counterparts. Deputy Chief of the General Staff Colonel-General Vasily Smirnov contended that the Russian people needed mobilization in order to be "taught to respect their constitutional duty to defend the country."⁴¹ Interestingly, Smirnov, along with several other high-ranking officers, also used China as an example for retaining divisions.

Not only has China's military retained the division structure, its military of 2.8 million significantly dwarfs the 1 million soldiers Russia has available.⁴² Such an unfavorable balance of force compounded fears among Russian military officials about their ability to defend the eastern flank of their country. Smirnov and Chief of the Ground Forces Staff Sergei Sokov both warned that brigades lacked the concentration of personnel and firepower that made divisions so effective in large environments like Eastern Russia. Sokov referred to this issue in a September 2009 statement when he described how a potential conflict in Eastern Russia would feature an opponent utilizing "a multi-million-man army with a traditional approach to conducting combat operations."⁴³ Russia's demographic situation in Eastern Russia, as well as its limited infrastructure further exacerbated the Chinese threat to the region. With a population of around 27 million people largely located in urban centers near the Chinese border, Russian strategic planners believed that their military would not have enough time to organize an effective response to a potential Chinese offensive into Siberia and the Far Eastern Federal District.⁴⁴ This issue proved true whether Russia adopted brigades or returned to divisions as the former would lack the capacity to defend against such an overwhelming force, while mobilization would prove too slow.

China's performance in the Peace Missions after 2010 appeared to confirm Russian anxieties about the vulnerability of Eastern Russia. In response to the perceived threat posed by China, the Russian government shifted the purpose of its reform program. Rather than address issues regarding personnel or composition, strategic planners instead focused on rectifying logistical problems and improving the transportation capabilities of the Russian military. Russia in effect adopted these reforms as means of countering the advances made by the PLA. With few diplomatic or economic alternatives with which to challenge China, these reforms have become one of the few ways for Russia to effectively reassert itself in the region against Chinese influence. Their successful implementation, as demonstrated by the Vostok 2010 and 2014 exercises, have enabled Russia to send a clear message to its partner about their new capabilities.

Vostok 2010 and 2014

When Russia conducted Vostok 2010 and 2014, it indirectly acknowledged its weaker position vis-à-vis China. Defensive in nature, Vostok 2010 and 2014 concerned themselves more with testing the success of the military reform program initiated after 2008 and the ability of the

⁴⁰ Ibid, 526.

⁴¹ Thornton, *Military Modernization*, 6.

⁴² Saradzhyan, "The Role of China."

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Russian to protect the territorial integrity of the Russian Far East. Through both exercises, Russia demonstrated its renewed military strength, as well as its ability to resist invasion. The success of Vostok 2010 and 2014 enabled Russia to send an effective message to the other powers in the region that Russia was capable of defending its interests. Specifically, these exercises served as a response to China's own challenges to Russia's military strength.

Russia initiated Vostok 2010 several months before the beginning of Peace Mission 2010. Lasting from June 29-July 8, one commentator described Vostok 2010 as featuring “around 20,000 servicemen, over 5,000 pieces of military equipment, more than 40 ships, and 75 aircraft and helicopters.”⁴⁵ Although not stated directly by the Russian government, Vostok 2010 served as a challenge to China's growing influence in the region and as means of silencing domestic critics of the military reforms. To reinforce these messages, Vostok 2010 was the largest military exercise in Russian history up to that point and featured maneuvers to demonstrate the improvements in military technology, strategic coordination, and logistical capabilities. The Russian air force, for example, performed its first mid-air refueling, while Russian formations also had access to new unmanned aerial vehicles.⁴⁶ The soldiers themselves were provided with new body and helmets.⁴⁷ Importantly, Vostok 2010 tested the new reforms implemented in response to the growing perceived threat of China. These included coordinating the efforts of civilian departments with the military, as well as the new brigade force structure. In order to reinforce the message of Vostok 2010 to international observers, specifically China, the Russian government invited Chinese Lieutenant-General Hou Shusen, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army to view the exercises.⁴⁸

Throughout Vostok 2010, the Russian government and military never identified a particular target or opponent. To that end, Makorov described Vostok 2010 as “not directed against any concrete nation or military-political bloc.”⁴⁹ Rather, the exercises served to test the capability of the armed forces to ensure the “security and defense of the state's national interests along its Far Eastern borders from a hypothetical enemy.” Although the Russian state officially characterized Vostok 2010 as a mock anti-terror exercise, it is apparent that the military leadership of the Russian armed forces initiated Vostok 2010 with specific state actors in mind.⁵⁰ By involving more men than the ostensibly anti-terror SCO exercises and due to the demonstration of new technology and strategic capabilities, Russia clearly intended to exhibit its renewed military capabilities to China, as well as the region as a whole. Russia, furthermore, used Vostok 2010 to assert its willingness to defend its territorial integrity at any cost. On the last day of the exercises, the Russian armed forces simulated a decapitation tactic against an enemy headquarters using Tochka-U tactical missiles; such missiles are capable of carrying nuclear warheads.⁵¹ Russia would send a similar message through the Vostok 2014 exercise.

⁴⁵ McDermott, “Reflections on Vostok 2010.”

⁴⁶ Jacob W. Kipp, “Vostok 2010 and the Very Curious Hypothetical Opponent,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, <https://jamestown.org/program/vostok-2010-and-the-very-curious-hypothetical-opponent/> (accessed April 13, 2017).

⁴⁷ McDermott, “Reflections on Vostok 2010.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Kipp, “Vostok 2010 and the Very Curious Hypothetical Opponent.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ McDermott, “Reflections on Vostok 2010.”

Vostok 2014 carried more significance than Vostok 2010 in several ways. Conducted several months after the imposition of Western sanctions, Russia needed to use Vostok 2014 as a means of reasserting its strength and influence to international audiences. For Russia, China's performance at the previous Peace Missions since 2010 served as reminders of the continuing evolution of their military. The unequal gas deal signed between Russia and China in May 2014, moreover, provided further impetus for Russia to demonstrate that it was not the junior member of the Sino-Russian partnership. The new apparent reliance on China indicated by the energy agreement only exacerbated concerns amongst Russian civil and military officials that China would attempt to take advantage of Russia's weak position in order to gain greater access to the resources in the Far Eastern Federal District and Siberia. Recognizing these conditions, Russia used Vostok 2014 to warn its neighbor about its increasing military potential.

As part of Vostok 2014, Russia mobilized over 100,000 soldiers, as well as numerous civilian agencies—mainly those concerned with logistics—participated in the maneuvers. These included the Ministries of Communications, Transports, the Federal Press and Mass Communications Agency, the Federal Telecommunications Agency, and the Federal Air Transport Agency.⁵² In many ways, Vostok 2014 proved an even greater success than its predecessor four years earlier. The Russian military succeeded in transporting some formations over 6000 km in order to participate in the exercises.⁵³ The units involved in Vostok 2014, moreover, demonstrated improved tactical capabilities, as well as strategic coordination between the different branches of the military.⁵⁴ Interestingly, Vostok 2014 did not focus on defeating the hypothetical enemy but on delaying them. This suggests that the Russian military leadership understands that in the event of an attack, China would likely be stronger than the immediate defenses available to Russia in the region. As such, a potential conflict would require the forces involved to slow the advance of the enemy until either reinforcements arrive or the government could find a diplomatic solution. If this is the case, Vostok 2014 did succeed in serving as a warning to Russia's enemies in the region that it was prepared for an invasion.

Like Vostok 2010, the military refrained from explicitly identifying a target for the 2014 exercises. One Defense Ministry statement, for example, vaguely described Vostok 2014 as ensuring the “readiness of units to perform assigned tasks, and the ability of troops to act in crisis situations posing a threat to the military security of the country, including anti-terrorist.”⁵⁵ As in 2010, however, the number of soldiers involved in the maneuvers suggested a state actor as the principal opponent. The participation of numerous civilian agencies and the focus on the Russian military's ability to transport formations long distances from Western Russia also points to this. Furthermore, the equipment used during Vostok 2014 included heavy strategic bombers and tactical missiles launched from air and sea. The appearance of such assets is more consistent with defending the territorial integrity of the Russian Far East against a conventional opponent than a terrorist threat. As such, Russian Vostok 2014 served to send a message of defiance to China and

⁵² McDermott, “Putin Orders Largest Snap Inspection.”

⁵³ Roger McDermott, “Vostok 2014 and Russia's Hypothetical Enemies (Part Two),” *The Jamestown Foundation*, <https://jamestown.org/program/vostok-2014-and-russias-hypothetical-enemies-part-two/#.VCsdZRYjyRM%20-%20external-link-new-window> (accessed April 12, 2017).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ McDermott, “Putin Orders Largest Snap Inspection.”

allay fears about the military's ability to defend the nation from attack. By successfully testing command and control capabilities, inter-agency coordination, and strategic mobility, the Russian military demonstrated its new capabilities as well as the success of the reform program initiated in 2008.

The Future of the Sino-Russian Relationship

Although direct conflict between China and Russia remains unlikely, Russian strategic planners and government officials already appear to be planning for such a contingency. In this regard, Vostok 2010 and 2014 indirectly addressed Russia's inferior position vis-à-vis China by focusing on defensive maneuvers, as well as the capacity of their armed forces to quickly respond to an incursion by a foreign threat such as China. By testing the ability of the Russian military to delay an enemy invasion long enough for other solutions to be found, the Russian government tacitly acknowledged the possibility that it could not challenge Chinese military strength through conventional means. The use of missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads in decapitation strikes against hypothetical enemy headquarters only reinforced this conclusion by demonstrating the extent to which Russia would go to halt invading formations.

While Russia did conduct Vostok 2010 and 2014 from a position of weakness, these exercises did illustrate Russia's success in implementing military reforms. In both exercises, Russia proved able to marshal its logistical resources and organize the transportation of large numbers of soldiers to the Far Eastern Region in a short period of time. Simultaneously, the Russian General Staff and officer corps gained important experience in utilizing the new operational network-centric command and control doctrines at Vostok. The Russian military's ability to quickly adapt to these reforms also disarmed domestic critics originally opposed these initiatives and sent a potent message to regional foreign powers in Asia about Russia's new capacity to defend its remote Far Eastern Region against a conventional threat. Despite economic obstacles, moreover, the Russian military continues to develop new technologies that effectively facilitate modernization; although former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov's procurement proposal now appears outlandish given Russia's economic situation, the Russian military's budget has continued to increase by various amounts over the past seven years.

Nevertheless, some issues, especially those regarding the Russian demographics and economy, continue to hamper the implementation of reforms. In terms of the former, Russia's ability to maintain a million man army remains in question due to the near stagnant nature of their country's population growth. This situation has compounded problems related to both enlistment and mobilization as the population of eighteen year-olds is set to decrease to 630,000 by the end 2017. An estimate from 2014, moreover, warned that only 40-45% of conscripts are fit for service.⁵⁶ The decision by the Russian government to reduce the term conscription to only a year has further compounded this issue by doubling the annual number of conscripts need by the military to 600,000. Simultaneously, Russia's economy lacks sophistication and capacity to fully modernize and professionalize the Russian military. Western analysts attribute this problem to the failure of the government to invest properly in research and development projects for the armed forces, as well as endemic corruption; the Russian Military Procurator's Office in 2014

⁵⁶ James A. Marshall, "Russia's Struggle for Military Reform: A Breakdown in Conversion Capabilities," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 4 (2014): 189-209, 195.

announced that as much as 20% of the military's budget is embezzled.⁵⁷ Such systemic problems threaten Russia's ability to further pursue significant military reforms. Moreover, while Vostok 2010 and 2014 served to demonstrate Russia's renewed martial strength, they failed to effectively change the balance of power in the Sino-Russian relationship.

While Russia now possesses a more capable military, it has failed to reverse its diplomatic isolation or the general decline of its economic. Because of this situation, Russia remains the junior member in the Sino-Russian partnership for the foreseeable future. Russia's interactions with China in the last several years demonstrate its recognition of this new power dynamic in their relationship. As discussed earlier, Russia continues to collaborate with China in regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The Kremlin has also accepted China's Belt and Road Initiatives despite concerns that this project would upset Russian economic interests in Central Asia. That said, Russia has little choice but to support One Belt, One Road as a result of their diplomatic isolation by the West and continued economic difficulties. Russia was also one of the founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank even though it was headquartered in and nominally led by China. While these organizations have allowed China to challenge Russia's historic influence in the region, they nevertheless do provide Russia with a means of tracking Chinese economic and military developments. Importantly, however, Russia has proven unable to prevent China from using these settings to increase its own influence in the region.

Conclusion

Although these actions seem to confirm Russia's acceptance of this position, the sustainability of this situation remains in question. As demonstrated in this paper, fractures are already beginning to appear in the Sino-Russian partnership. As China's economic and military power continue to expand, Russia's threat perception may also increase and lead them to engage in even larger military exercises in Asia in the future. As such, it remains likely that Russia will continue to pursue reforms aimed at improving the capabilities of their armed forces and begin shifting their attention away from NATO and Western Russia in order to address their growing concerns in the East. In this regard, Vostok 2018 may feature even greater number of soldiers and weaponry than either the 2010 or 2014 exercises. Whether these war games will succeed in sending a direct, defiant message to China remains to be seen.

⁵⁷ James A. Marshall, "Russia's Struggle for Military Reform," 192.

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