

# Comparative Connections

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## China-Russia Relations: Summer Heat and Sino-Russian Strategizing

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The Sino-Russian strategic partnership was in overdrive during the summer months despite the unbearable, record-setting heat in China and Russia. While the Snowden asylum issue dragged on, “Operation Tomahawk” against Syria appeared to be in countdown mode by late August. In between, the Russian and Chinese militaries conducted two large exercises, which were described as “not targeted against any third party,” a term often used by the US and its allies to describe their exercises. Welcome to the age of speaking softly with or without a big stick.

### Edward Snowden: To Russia, via China (Hong Kong)

In May and June, the Beijing-Moscow strategic relationship were tested, and unexpectedly boosted, when US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden managed to travel to Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. Snowden had leaked to the press details of several US and UK mass surveillance programs (PRISM, XKeyscore, NSA call database, Boundless Informant, etc.) targeting countries including China, Russia, and even EU countries. Snowden eventually flew to Moscow on June 23, after his asylum request was turned down by Iceland and 26 other countries.

The US effort to extradite Snowden from Hong Kong failed and revoking his passport on June 23 may have expedited his departure. On the day Snowden’s passport was revoked, the Hong Kong government let him board a Russian commercial flight to Moscow, claiming that the US extradition request failed to provide the necessary information as required by Hong Kong law (Snowden’s middle name was misspelled).

Whoever was responsible for Snowden’s travel arrangements from Hong Kong to Moscow remains a mystery. Washington, however, believes that it would have been impossible without cooperation between Russia and China. Indeed, Snowden reportedly spent several days living at the Russian Consulate in Hong Kong before flying to Moscow’s Sheremetyevo International Airport. The *New York Times* went so far as to toy with the idea of a “new anti-America axis.” In his public remarks, US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns said that the US was “very disappointed with how the authorities in Beijing and Hong Kong handled the Snowden case.” For this, Chinese officials insisted that the SAR government handled the Snowden case “in accordance with law, and its approach is beyond reproach. Others should respect this.”

There were at least three reasons for Beijing to “outsource” the Snowden affair to the SAR government and later to Russia. One was to maintain the positive momentum of the Obama-Xi informal summit in Sunnylands, California on June 7-8. Just two days before the summit, the

British daily, *The Guardian*, leaked the story regarding the vast US surveillance operations around the world. There is no question that this lessened US pressure on China for its alleged hacking of US computer networks. For Beijing, the importance of the overall US-China relationship outweighs the technical benefit from the revealed information. Second, the potential cost for Beijing's more active role in the Snowden affair could be very high, given the fact that Washington simply has more strategic leverage against some of China's vital interests ranging from Taiwan, territorial disputes with China's neighbors, to Tibet and Xinjiang, and the huge amount of US Treasury bills Beijing possesses. Last, if not least, the consensus among political groups of all ideologies in Hong Kong opposed extraditing Snowden to the US – something rarely seen in this increasingly politicized city. A poll of Hong Kong residents conducted by the *South China Morning Post* showed that 50 percent of the respondents believed the Snowden should not be returned to the US; 33 percent saw Snowden as a hero, while only 12.8 percent said the former NSA contractor was a traitor.

“The Chinese didn't exactly invite Snowden to come to Hong Kong,” remarked Claudia Mo, a high-profile pro-democracy and anti-Beijing lawmaker. “It was the US, not Hong Kong, that decided to operate a global electronic spying operation, which even some Americans now believe is out of control” and “[I]t was the US, not Hong Kong, that decided directly or via outsourcing to use the services of a young man who turned out to be disloyal,” echoed pro-Beijing Executive Council member Bernard Chan in the *South China Morning Post*. China's best strategy regarding Snowden was to take a hands-off posture.

Russia seemed rather reluctant in taking the Snowden “hot potato.” Once in Russia, Snowden was confined to the “international area” of the Moscow Sheremetyevo transit zone without formally being admitted into Russian territory. Eight days later, Snowden actually withdrew his asylum plea to Russia after President Vladimir Putin suggested on July 1 that asylum would be offered only if he stops leaking information and harming the interests of the US. This condition was reiterated later by Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov. In the first 10 days of Snowden's “camping” inside the Moscow airport, Putin seemed impatient, twice saying that Snowden should choose a destination and leave. Russian media noticed that Putin remained “highly unenthusiastic” about Snowden's presence in Russia. Snowden resubmitted his asylum request on July 12 after promising Russian officials that he would “definitely” stop his “political activity against the US.” Putin then made it clear that Russia would not extradite Snowden to the US. Putin defended the decision by saying that the US had effectively trapped Snowden on Russian territory. Describing Snowden's asylum in Russia as “an unwanted Christmas present,” Putin insisted that “[T]hey [US] themselves scared all other countries; no one wants to take him, and in this way they themselves in fact blocked him on our territory,” reported *The New York Times* on July 15.

In retrospect, President Putin's apparent indifference to, if not resentment of, to Snowden's asylum plea and his anti-American political activity may well be genuine, given the stakes in US-Russia relations and their impact on the forthcoming G20 in St. Petersburg and Sochi Winter Olympics. Yet, considering Putin's deep geostrategic sense, it is hard to take Russia's “innocence” at face value. Indeed, a rule of the game between nations is as complex AND simple as the “fence painting” strategy humorously and heuristically penned in Mark Twain's masterpiece, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) : if one is really interested in obtaining

something from others, it is better to show indifference first. Snowden will remain a strategic asset for Russia for years to come, no matter how much Russia expresses its indifference. In his mind, however, Putin may understand the importance of not overplaying the Snowden card by unnecessarily aggravating the world's sole superpower.

It was unclear if Putin's Russia was appeasing, comforting, or mocking the US – or doing all three at once. Beijing, however, seemed thrilled and amused at Russia's handling of the difficult, outsourced issue. Declaring that Russia was the winner in the Snowden affair, an article in China's *Global Times* described Russia's handling of the Snowden case, suddenly and unexpectedly pressed upon Russia, as highly skillful, extremely graceful and sophisticated [外交技巧的高超、精致和老道]. Specifically, the article saw the Russian balancing between three highly delicate issues: (1) respect for the integrity of the case itself, right or wrong; (2) respect for both Russian domestic law and international legality; and (3) the need to avoid harming relations with the US. These measures, among others, were described by the *Global Times* commentator as “almost flawless” [几乎无可挑剔], allowing Putin to turn this troublesome issue into a bargaining chip with the US – a burden into an opportunity for strengthening Russian national interests. The article attributed this outcome to two reasons: Russian/Soviet rich experience in handling similar cases during 40 years of the Cold War and Russia's tradition of pursuing an active, balanced, flexible, and pragmatic diplomacy as a Eurasian continental power for more than 200 years. For all of this, the writer said that Russia is China's strategic partner and deserves China's respect, and that China had a lot more to learn from Russia.

In contrast to China's positive assessment of Russia's role in the Snowden affair, views from Russia were more complicated. Lilia Shevtsova, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Moscow, believed that Putin came out ahead in Snowden affair. This nonetheless compared with “many losers” including Snowden himself, liberal democracies, and even Russian society because Putin, who was the “only victor of this ordeal,” “now has grounds to dismiss US criticism of his authoritarian rule.” Fedor Lukyanov, chairman of the Presidium of the Foreign and Defense Policy Council, believed that “only China has managed thus far to slip out with minimal losses,” while Russia “is having to accept a conflict with the United States.” Still, Lukyanov claimed that “Moscow has neither the intention nor the desire to use Snowden as a weapon against America.” The long-term outlook, however, is not optimistic because Snowden desires “publicity in order to exclude the possibility of arrangements as to his future without his participation.” Meanwhile, the common interest between Moscow and Washington is to forget this “as quickly as possible,” or to work out a deal “without undue publicity what is to be done to extract this thorn in the side of relations.” For Lukyanov and other Russian officials, “[T]he problems are only just beginning.”

A potential, though seemingly unlikely, winner from the affair is the former Russian intelligence officer, Anna Chapman, who was arrested in 2010 in the US for spying for Russian Federation's External Intelligence Agency. Chapman went “from under-cover to cover-girl without missing a beat,” according to the *Moscow Times* on July 15. Before Russia offered temporary asylum to Snowden, the flame-haired Russian beauty proposed marriage to the 30-year old American.

## **Chinese military: to Russia, for war games**

Edward Snowden was not alone in traveling from China to Russia during the hot days of the 2013 summer. Twice within a month, PLA ground, air, and naval forces went to Russian waters/territories for two large-scale exercises by the two militaries: *Joint Sea 2013* (Morskoye Vzaimodeystviye, or 海上联合) naval exercise was held July 5-12 in Peter the Great Gulf off the Sea of Japan and *Peace Mission 2013* (Mirnaya Missiya, or 和平使命) anti-terrorism maneuvers were held at the Chebarkul training site in Russia from July 27-Aug. 15.

For the naval exercise, the two sides dispatched some of their best and most powerful naval platforms. Seven People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy ships traveled some 1,300 km from Qingdao to Vladivostok to participate. This was by far China's single biggest deployment of naval forces in any joint exercise outside China. For this annual drill, the two navies deployed 18 surface ships, a Russian submarine, eight airplanes (three from China), and two Special Forces units. The declared goals of the exercise were: 1) deepening bilateral strategic partnership relations; 2) increasing the ability to cope with common threats from the sea; 3) enhancing the ability of joint operations; and 4) optimizing interoperability.

There were 11 training subjects for the week-long naval exercise included fleet protection in anchorage, air defense, escort operations, anti-submarine warfare, surface strike, hostage rescue, search and rescue, replenishment at sea, live-fire training for surface and air targets, and firing depth charges. It ended with a fleet parade. During the drill, the warships of the two navies turned on their fire control and their illumination and missile guidance radars. They also used their sonar, photoelectric communication, and electronic equipment in the anti-submarine and air-defense drills. For those tactical subjects, particularly the top-secret components of the joint anti-submarine drill, Chinese commentators claimed the two militaries developed higher-level strategic and mutual trust than previous Sino-Russian joint naval exercises, which had demonstrated "only mild mutual trust," according to Beijing-based military expert Liu Jianping.

Beyond the enhanced mutual trust, the two navies seemed to have different assessments of the exercise. "The most difficult stage was the preparation stage, when the headquarters were making preparations, when forces were making preparations..." remarked Igor Smolyak, commander of the Russian naval task force. PLAN Deputy Commander Ding Yiping considered joint firing the most difficult part of the drill. It was interesting to note that the working language for the two navies was English, though Russian and Chinese were also used in communication. During the drills, liaison officers and interpreters (Russian-Chinese) were also dispatched to each other's ships to facilitate communication. The PLAN even required its sailors to be able to speak at least 25 simple Russian sentences and to sing at least two Russian songs.

The two sides claimed that the weeklong drill was a routine naval exercise and not intended to target any third party. Indeed, this series of naval exercises was initiated by Gen. Chen Bingde, then chief of the PLA General Staff, during his August 2011 visit to Moscow. In April and May of 2012, the two navies held *Joint Sea 2012*, which was planned and simulated in Vladivostok and then drilled in the Yellow Sea near China's Shandong Peninsula.

The 2013 iteration came at a time when tensions were rising over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute between China and Japan. Some Chinese commentators speculated the choice of exercise location, which was close to northern Japan, may have been intended to have some deterrent effect for Japan. “The location of the exercise was obviously decided after serious and careful consultations between the two sides,” remarked Gen. Yin Zhuo, director of PLAN’s Commission of Information Experts. “It also shows more consensus between Russia and China regarding military affairs,” added Yin. Liu Jianping, the expert on military affairs in Beijing, said that the “anchorage drills” meant to practice defense operations against sudden air-sea joint assaults, a tactic repeatedly employed in the past by Japanese forces.

To drive home the not-so-hidden “Japan factor,” the exercise ended with five of the seven Chinese warships (two missile destroyers, two frigates, and a supply ship) passing through the Soya (La Perouse) Strait off northern Japan, which, according to a Beijing source, was “a breakthrough for Chinese warships to pass through the narrow strait and enter into the exterior lines of the Pacific Ocean and the Arctic Ocean.” Hong Yuan of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Institute of World Politics said, “It would help China break through the encirclement by Japan and the United States in the region, and it would also help deepen the strategic cooperation between the two navies of China and Russia.” Later in a press interview, Rear Adm. Yin Zhuo pointed out that *Joint Sea 2013* was the PLAN’s first exercise in the Sea of Japan. It was a great training opportunity for the PLAN and an important step toward understanding the Pacific Ocean to sail through the La Perouse Strait and the Sea of Okhotsk to familiarize itself with the area and enter the Pacific Ocean to carry out open-sea training.

The Japan implication of the China-Russian naval exercise was certainly picked up by both Japan and the US. As the drills entered its operational stage on July 8, the Japanese and US air forces also kicked off their joint exercise involving 16 fighter aircraft in the waters and airspace of Hokkaido, which was less than 800 km from the waters where *Joint Sea 2013* was held. China considered the US-Japan joint air drill to be an immediate response to the exercise.

Despite the obvious improvement in mutual trust and interoperability demonstrated in the *Joint Sea 2013* exercise, the PLAN still considers its overall capability to lag far behind the US and Japan. Prior to the PLAN launching its largest-ever surface force for a foreign exercise 1,300 km away, three large Japanese naval ships (landing ship *JS Shimokita*, destroyer *JS Atago*, and helicopter destroyer *JS Hyuga*) journeyed 9,000 km to San Diego, California to participate in the multilateral exercise *Dawn Blitz*. The Chinese believe that the level of interoperability in US exercises with its allies is usually much higher than during exercises between China and other foreign militaries. Aside from technical constraints, the relatively low-level of interoperability between Russian and Chinese militaries was the outcome of at least two non-military factors. One is the defensive nature of the Sino-Russian drill vs. the offensive nature of the US-Japan exercise, which focused on amphibious landing. In contrast, *Joint Sea 2013* was largely focused on surface escort techniques. This aspect of the Sino-Russian exercise was driven by their declared policies as being non-alliance, non-confrontational, and not targeting any third country, which are important components of the so-called “new type of large power relationship.” Meanwhile, the US has maintained its robust military alliance relations with many of its allies for decades, hence their higher level of interoperability.

### ***Peace Mission 2013: less for more?***

Preparation for *Peace Mission 2013* was in high gear even before the end of *Joint Sea 2013*. Between July 27 and Aug. 15, 1,500 Russian and Chinese servicemen from Russia's Central Military District (CMD) and China's Shenyang Military Area Command (MAC) participated in the drill in Russia's Chebarkul training site in Russia's Chelyabinsk Region. A joint command consisting of 60 officers was established, along with a joint air group of 20 bombers and helicopters from the two air forces, as well as more than 200 pieces of military hardware and vehicles. Unlike previous *Peace Mission* exercises, which were commanded directly by the general headquarters of the two militaries, the 2013 exercise was prepared and executed by military regions: Russian CMD and China's Shenyang MAC. This decentralization was seen by both sides as a sign of more institutionalized military relationship.

The 20-day joint anti-terrorism drills had three phases: troop deployment, battle planning, and simulated combat. Most of the drill time was devoted to map maneuvering, war-room simulation, and field practice/training (joint reconnaissance, joint block and control of target areas, joint strike, and joint support for campaign equipment). The final stage of the exercise on Aug. 15 involved a 45-minute "campaign" operation: aerial reconnaissance with drones, fixed-wing aircraft and scout units; psychological warfare (dropping leaflets and loudspeakers in English and Arabic languages) to weaken the "militants'" fighting will and winning over "civilians"; heavy-artillery bombardment; bombers (Russian *Sukhoi 24MRs* and Chinese *JH-7A Flying Leopards*) providing air support; low-flying helicopter gunships (two Chinese *Z-9* and two Russian *Mi-24s*) picking out remaining pockets of resistance; commandos assaulting a three-story building taken by a group of "heavily armed terrorists"; heavy-armor units of the two militaries (Russian *T-72* and Chinese *T-96* main battle tanks, Chinese *T-83* 152mm self-propelled howitzers and *T-86 WZ501* APCs) chasing, encircling, and annihilating the fleeing "terrorists."

*Peace Mission 2013* was the sixth round of joint exercises within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) framework. They have been either in bilateral (only Russian and Chinese troops) or multilateral (together with other SCO states) formats. What separated this year's exercise from its predecessors, however, was the long period of "practice" days. For almost three weeks, the two militaries practiced and fine-tuned their interoperability skills and operational details. Russian and Chinese units were all "grouped" with their counterparts into so-called "combat groups" during the practice and final drills. The drill entered its final rehearsal stage on Aug. 12 when 900 Chinese and Russian troops went through the entire drill.

Despite the usual "anti-terrorist" label (heavily-armed terrorists have taken over a populated location with the goal of setting up a separate "state"), *Peace Mission 2013* was defined as a simulated "campaign" (战役), with a virtual force of 25,000 troops involved. In other words, Russian and Chinese commanders conducted their operations with more of their regular forces (infantries with heavy artillery, armor, air defense and logistics, plus aerial support). The PLA infantry units were transported by rail over 5,000 km to Russia's southern Ural region, while its bombers and helicopters flew to their destination in Russia with several refueling stopovers in Russia. With the exception of bombers from the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), all Chinese units were from the 39<sup>th</sup> Group Army stationed in Liaoning Province.

The virtual force and the types of weaponry involved in *Peace Mission 2013* provoked some questions from both foreign sources and from China and Russia. A Chinese reporter used the term “using a knife for butchering cattle to kill a chicken” [杀鸡用牛刀] in his question to Maj. Gen. Pan Liangshi, Chinese commander of the Sino-Russian joint campaign command post and commander of the 39<sup>th</sup> Group Army. Pan responded saying that it was imperative to use regular forces for such actions because terrorist groups are “extremely cruel and sinister” and may gain various types of weapons, including heavy weapons. Anti-terror action therefore must be “rapid and decisive, and cannot be a protracted battle.” If the battle lasted long and becomes indecisive, Pan believed that “people will suffer exponentially growing danger from terror.” In addition, the activities of the terrorist organizations “are international in nature, so anti-terror operations cannot use only one service, but require joint strikes in all domains.” For this, Pan cited the Chechen War as a case in point. Elsewhere, Pan also cited Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia as a case for the Chinese military to learn from Russia’s experience. The PLA obviously pays close attention to Russia’s combat experience in both regular and counter-insurgency operations against Chechnya’s separatist movement that have cost Russia dearly.

*Peace Mission 2013* also included a lot of socializing. Aside from the usual sports contests between the two militaries (basketball, volleyball, tug of war, etc., this time in “mixed” teams), there seemed to be a complete transparency of life and activities of the two militaries. There were frequent visits to each other’s quarters, logistic depots, emergency facilities, and armor maintenance and repairing shops out of both curiosity and a desire for mutual learning. Russian Defense Ministry’s *Zvezda TV*, for example, showed a Chinese field kitchen including a chef demonstrating cooking with martial arts moves, and PLA choir singing “Midnight in Moscow,” the only Russian song that every Chinese could hum. Russian officers and men also visited a Chinese “cultural pavilion” displaying and demonstrating Chinese arts and crafts, calligraphy, painting, Peking opera, martial arts, tea ceremony, etc. One “mandatory” item for the Chinese units, which puzzled the Russians most, was the daily two-hour nap for all Chinese servicemen after lunch. “Even a general won’t be able to order his men around during these napping hours,” mused a Russian reporter.

On Aug. 11, some PLAAF officers and men traveled to the World War II Victory Square in central Chelyabinsk to celebrate the 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Russian Federation Air Force. Group leader Jin Lingui presented flowers to the eternal flame towering in the Victory Square. “[T]he officers and men of China and Russia always bear in mind the friendship forged by blood and sincerity, which is an important source of strength for the development of the relations between the two militaries,” Lin was quoted as saying.

### **Russia’s snap drill: largest in post-Soviet times**

The timing, frequency and execution of the two exercises between Russian and Chinese militaries certainly drew attention from outside and within the two nations. Official media of both countries saw the exercises as a stabilizing influence in addition to strengthening the relationship. There was, however, a wide range of views. Moscow’s Politkom.ru, an independent online journal known to be somewhat critical of the official view, interpreted on Aug. 19 the seemingly closer military relations between Moscow and Beijing as being a function of Russia’s more problematic relationship with the West, particularly with the US. Moscow was seen as

essentially “taking a time-out” when “problems are more prevalent in Russian-American relations than their isolated points of cooperation in different regions of the world.” Russian-Chinese military ties, therefore, were considered lacking internal logic but destined to fluctuate according to external stimuli.

Interestingly enough, a survey by China’s *Phoenix TV* in late July also showed that more than two-third of the respondents (70.76 percent) considered the US, Japan, and other countries with territorial disputes with China as targets of the *Peace Mission 2013* exercise. Only 27 percent saw international terrorism and separatist movements in Xinjiang and Chechnya as the target. Considering that *Peace Mission 2013* was conducted deep inside the Eurasian landmass, one wonders how Chinese respondents would view *Joint Sea 2013*, given its location was just a few hundreds of kilometers from the Japanese mainland.

Russian critics of closer military relationship with China “have not lost their relevance,” though they had “become noticeably more subdued,” stated a Politkom.ru article. Alarmists in Russia even cited the fatalistic view of the so-called “Zyuganov’s formula” for Russia’s plight in the world stage (1 percent of world’s GDP + 30 percent of world’s resources = zero ability to compete). Perhaps more than anything else, Russia’s week-long “surprise check” of its Eastern Military District on July 12-20 drove home the uncertain and tepid nature of the bilateral relationship. The largest exercise in the post-Soviet history (160,000 servicemen, 5,000 tanks and armored fighting vehicles, 130 aircraft and 70 naval vessels), this “no-notice inspection” started on the last day of the *Joint Sea 2013* naval exercise and ended a few days before the start of *Peace Mission 2013*. Russian media reported that China was informed about the surprise check only hours in advance, leaving the impression that China was perhaps the real target of this massive military readiness drill along thousands of kilometers of the border with China.

There are elements of truth in Russia’s alarmist view of closer military relations with China. Careful reading of the issue, however, provides a fuller picture of the evolving military relationship. According to *Interfax* on July 1, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu revealed that he and his Chinese counterpart Gen. Chang Wanquan met on June 26 on the sidelines of a meeting of SCO defense ministers in Bishkek, where they “frankly discussed the holding of surprise inspections of combat preparedness of our armed forces.” Shoigu recalled that “I gave a rather detailed account of the goals and tasks of these inspections.” On July 13, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoliy Antonov described “a special procedure” to give China “additional information” about the inspection. However, it looks like other Russian neighbors were informed about the no-notice inspection only hours before it started and through normal channels, such as Russian military attaches in neighboring countries.

According to a 1996 agreement with China titled “Shanghai Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Border Region,” Russia is obligated to notify China prior (in certain instances, 30 days) to the start of exercises within the 100-km zone of the Russian-Chinese border. As such, Russia was not obliged to make any written notifications to inform China of the surprise inspection, but Russia did notify Beijing that “an extensive measure” would be taking place in the region of the Eastern Military District,” explained Sergey Koshelev, chief of the Main Directorate for International Military Cooperation.



For China, Russia’s no-notice inspection was perhaps an irritant, particularly considering its timing (between two bilateral exercises with China). Throughout the hot summer, however, Moscow and Beijing seemed full of guarded optimism regarding the military relationship. In addition to staging two large exercises, military sales – “military-technological cooperation” in Russia’s terminology – of several advanced weapon systems (*Su-35s*, *Lada* submarines, *SS-400* air defense systems, etc.) were said to be moving ahead. After years of stagnation, the current round of negotiations for weapons sales to China appears promising. These positive signs in military-technology cooperation were even picked up by President Putin when he met visiting Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi on Aug. 16. “We are working together successfully, including in the sphere of military-technical cooperation and the military. That is indicated by the exercises taking place between our armed units,” Putin said in a meeting with Yang, who was in Moscow for the 9<sup>th</sup> round of China-Russia strategic security consultations.

Finally, the two 2013 exercises marked a more institutionalized trajectory for joint exercises, particularly since 2012 when Russia and China engaged in both land and naval exercises in the same year (See Table 1 below). Previously, the two militaries either embedded their exercises within the SCO framework, or skipped drills for the year (2006 and 2008).

**Table 1: China-Russia Joint Military Exercises, 2003-2013**

Code-Names	SCO	Russ-Ch	Time	Location	Force Size
Coalition-2003	*		Aug 6-12	Kazakhstan & Xinjiang	1,300
Peace Mission-2005		* n	Aug 18-25	Vladivostok & Shandong	10,000
Peace Mission-2007	*		Aug 9-17	Chelyabinsk, Russia	4,000
Peace Mission 2009		*	Jul 22-26	Khabarovsk & Taonan	1,300
Peace Shield 2009		n	Sept 8	Gulf of Aden	6 warships
Peace Mission 2010	*		Sept 9-25	Kazakhstan	5,000
Joint Sea 2012		n	Apr 22-27	Qingdao, China	25 warships
Peace Mission 2012	*		Jun 8-14	Tajikstan	2,000
Joint Sea 2013		n	Jul 5-12	Peter the Great Gulf, Russia	19 warships
Peace Mission 2013		*	Jul 27-Aug15	Chebarkul, Russia	1,500

\* = Infantry with aerial support  
n = naval

### From summer “steam” to the “Syria storm”

By the end of August, cooler air from Siberia arrived in Beijing and the Chinese capital entered its best and shortest season, autumn. As the last train carrying Chinese armor and personnel cleared Russian territory on Aug. 25, civil war in Syria appeared to be on the verge of significantly escalating when President Obama “outsourced” his presidential authority to bomb Syria for its alleged use of chemical weapons to the US Congress for approval.

Most Russian pundits anticipated US strikes against Syria with or without UN authorization. Few, if any, Russian analysts believe that Russia would intervene militarily in Syria, given the huge disparity in comprehensive power between Russia and the West. China’s posture regarding Syria is somewhat more restrained than that of Moscow. Inside Syria, however, most of the 2,000 Chinese nationals have been evacuated.

“Nobody is able to rein back the US’ war against Syria,” said an editorial in China’s *Global Times* on Aug. 28. US air raids against Syria, however, may well be the least legitimate one in the post-Cold War era. “Still, China and Russia would not directly confront the West, though their anti-war posture would be harder this time,” continued the editorial. The paper suggested that China offer moral support for Syria, while Russia and Iran provide direct military assistance.

While both sides were posturing, the toll in Syria was 100,000 dead and 2 million refugees by late August. With or without chemical weapons, Syria is being destroyed, perhaps beyond repair. Western intervention, no matter how limited, would turn an already combustible mix into an explosive mess. Such a prospect even alarmed Pope Francis, as well as other Christian leaders in the Middle East and around Europe, who are warning of a possible global conflict should the US and other Western powers launch an attack on Syria.

Indeed, after the hottest summer in a century for many parts of the world including Russia and China, the world is heading toward the centennial commemoration of the outbreak of World War I. After the first salvo of the guns in the fatal month of August 1914, major powers in Europe declared war on one another in a matter of 10 days. The rest is history. What happens in Syria in the next few months will test the wisdom and will of the world’s leaders, including those in Russia and China.

## **Chronology of China-Russia Relations**

### **May – August 2013**

**May 8, 2013:** Russian President’s Special Envoy for the Middle East and Deputy Foreign Minister, M.L. Bogdanov, meets Chinese Ambassador Li Hui in Moscow. Bogdanov briefs Li about the Russian-US agreements on the settlement in Syria reached during the visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry to Moscow on May 7. They coordinate their efforts “in the interests of the fastest settlement of the Syrian conflict has been confirmed.”

**May 10-15, 2013:** Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, visits China as part of bilateral religious exchanges. He meets President Xi Jinping and says Russian and Chinese people cherish national independence and sovereignty, as well as value unity, diligence, and justice. Xi praises the Russian Orthodox Church’s consistent support for the development of China-Russian relations and for China’s stance on issues involving its core interests.

**May 26-28, 2013:** Chairman of Russian State Duma Sergei Naryshkin visits Beijing to participate in the sixth session of the Russian-Chinese Inter-Parliamentary Commission at the invitation of Zhang Dejiang, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress. He meets President Xi Jinping on May 27.

**June 11-20, 2013:** Chinese and Russian special forces conduct a 10-day joint training exercise in Beijing named *Cooperation 2013*. The exercise involves 46 Chinese and 29 Russians training in shooting, forced entry, hostage rescue, and terrorist camp raids. The last time the two sides conducted a joint anti-terrorism drill was *Cooperation 2007*, in Russia.

**June 15, 2013:** President Xi Jinping and Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin discuss bilateral ties and the situation on the Korean Peninsula in a telephone conversation.

**June 19-22, 2013:** Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli attends the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum, an annual gathering of world political and business elites. Zhang is received by President Putin. He also meets First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov and Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich, who co-chairs the China-Russia energy cooperation committee. A \$270 billion contract is signed for up to 46 million tons of oil annually to China for 25 years.

**June 23, 2013:** Edward Snowden, former contract employee of the US National Security Agency, leaves Hong Kong on a flight bound for Russia.

**June 25-27, 2013:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) border service heads meet in Yekaterinburg to discuss plans of joint operations on the Russian-Chinese and Kyrgyz-Chinese stretches of the state borders for 2013. They also discuss the Western coalition's planned withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014.

**June 26, 2013:** The SCO Defense Ministers Meeting is held in Bishkek. Ministers agree to strengthen cooperation in crushing separatism, extremism, and drug-trafficking based on their share of responsibilities. China's Defense Minister Chang Wanquan holds separate talks with Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu on the sidelines.

**July 1, 2013:** Col. Gen. Fang Fenghui, PLA chief of General Staff, visits Russia and meets General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.

**July 5-11, 2013:** Russian and Chinese navies conducted *Joint Sea 2013* exercise in the Peter the Great Gulf of the Sea of Japan.

**July 13, 2013:** SCO annual Foreign Ministers Meeting is held at Cholpon-At in northeastern Kyrgyzstan. Among the documents signed is the action plan for 2013-2017 to implement a long-term cooperation agreement among the SCO member countries. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets separately with Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

**July 12-20, 2013:** Russia's Eastern Military District stages a week-long, non-notice combat readiness "inspection." It is the largest in post-Soviet history.

**July 27-Aug. 15, 2013:** Russia and China conduct *Peace Mission 2013* joint anti-terror exercise at the Chebarkul training ground in Russia's Chelyabinsk region. More than 1,500 Russian and Chinese servicemen participate.

**Aug. 11, 2013:** Kyrgyz and Chinese border guards hold a joint antiterrorism exercise code-named *Joint Border Activities 2013* on the Kyrgyz-Chinese border. Representatives from SCO member states (Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) the SCO regional antiterrorist structure and observers (India and Iran) observe the exercise from headquarters in Urumqi.

**Aug. 14-16, 2013:** Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi and Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev lead 9<sup>th</sup> round of China-Russia strategic security consultations in Moscow.

**Aug. 26, 2013:** Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang discuss by phone anti-flood measures for the Amur/Heilongjiang River. Li voices hope that Russia would exploit the advantage of its upstream reservoir to cut the flood peak and scale down the floods and offers help with Russia's disaster relief efforts to keep the flood damage to a minimum level.

**Aug. 28-29, 2013:** Twice in two days, Russian and Chinese representatives walk out of the UN Security Council emergency sessions on Syria.