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Sino-Russian joint military exercises in focus: New strategic confluences in the Asia-Pacific

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This paper examines the current state of Sino-Russian strategic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region through the lens of joint military exercises. Over the last two decades, China and Russia have conducted an increasing number of joint military exercises around the globe, both multilaterally and bilaterally. In 2012 the two countries launched their first joint naval exercise in the Yellow Sea, codenamed “Joint Sea-2012”. Since then, China and Russia have continued to develop their “Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation” and conducted a series of strategic air and naval patrols in the Asia-Pacific. Additionally, they have shown more willingness to take political risks, by increasing their military presence in sensitive sea lanes in the East China Sea, the Sea of Japan, and the Western Pacific. Drawing on existing academic literature on political and coercive signaling, this paper highlights the diplomatic-military dimension, as well as the significance of Sino-Russian exercises. By outlining emerging trends in the planning of bilateral exercises between China and Russia over the past decade, this paper shows how China is gradually shaping this cooperation to its advantage. Finally, this paper offers a reflection on the strategic risks and potential for escalation against the backdrop of territorial disputes and China’s military ambitions in the region.

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Primary author: GAPANY, Jerome (Military Academy (MILAC) at ETH Zurich)

Presenter: GAPANY, Jerome (Military Academy (MILAC) at ETH Zurich)

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