

The Russian-Chinese naval exercise in the Baltic Sea

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On July 24-27 Russia and China for the first time ever conducted their annual naval exercises in the Baltic Sea. It involved three Chinese ships (a guided missile destroyer, a guided missile frigate and an auxiliary ship) and two Russian vessels (class 20380 guided missile corvettes). After the exercise the Chinese ships will most likely sail to Saint Petersburg to take part in the celebrations of the Russian navy holiday on 30 July.

Russia and China have held annual naval exercises since 2012. The exercises have been held predominantly in Eastern Asian seas so far. The exercises in the Yellow Sea (2012), the Sea of Japan (2013), the East China Sea (2014) and the South China Sea (2016) were held mainly in response to exercises of the US fleet and its allies in the region. In 2014 and 2015, Chinese and Russian ships were engaged in joint exercises in the Mediterranean Sea, thus signalling that the two countries took a similar approach to the Syrian crisis.

Commentary

- Exercises in the Baltic Sea above all serve as a political demonstration suggesting the enhancement of political and military co-operation between Russia and China. Russia has pursued a policy of building a 'strategic partnership' with China over the past two decades – intensifying political relations, enhancing economic, military and military-technical co-operation. Questioning the post-Cold-War, US-led international order has been the main foundation of the strategic partnership of Moscow and Beijing over this period.
- The fact that China and Russia held joint exercises in the Baltic Sea, which over the past few years has been an area of tension and incidents between the armed forces of Russia and Western countries – above all the USA – is a sign of Beijing's political support for Moscow. It is also a kind of reciprocal gesture for the support which Russia has offered China in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia over the past few years. Russia's participation in the joint exercises with the Chinese fleet in the East China Sea basin was an indirect way of Moscow expressing its support for Beijing in its territorial disputes with South-Eastern Asian countries. The joint passage of the two countries' ships through the waters around the Japanese Senkaku Islands, contested by China, had a similar character. Russia also supports the Chinese concept of Asian security architecture based on collective security principles (i.e. without the US participating). Russia, moreover, shares China's objections to US attempts to increase pressure on North Korea.

- By staging a joint exercise with Russia in the Baltic Sea, China wished to demonstrate the oceanic character of its navy and the global scale of its interests. At the same time, Beijing has shown that its desire to have good political and economic relations with EU countries in the Baltic region will not prevent it from increasing the intensity and the scope of its strategic/geopolitical co-operation with Russia. Beijing also seems to be counting on more decisive support from Moscow in its territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas.