

#### Literature

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## Analysis

### The Role of China in Russia’s Military Thinking

By Simon Saradzhyan, Cambridge, MA.

#### Abstract

The continuing rise of China requires the Russian military to prepare a plan that allows it to counter Beijing’s potential supremacy. However, military preparations alone will not suffice. Russia needs to reverse the negative socio-economic and demographic trends in the Far East and Siberia before they create conditions facilitating an armed conflict.

#### The East-2010 War-Game: Who Are Russia’s Potential Foes?

In June 2010 the Russian armed forces will stage an operational-strategic exercise dubbed Vostok-2010 (East-2010) that will become “the main combat-training event” of 2010, according to a recent Defense Ministry press release. Thousands of soldiers from the Army (including the Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Protection Forces) Navy, Air Force, Airborne Troops and other elements of the Russian armed forces will participate in the joint exercise staged by the Far Eastern and Siberian Military Districts. While these two eastern districts and the fleet will play the lead role in the game, Vostok-2010 will also involve forces and assets from other military districts and all of Russia’s four fleets, including submarines, according to senior commanders. Russia’s long-range aviation and the Ministry of Interior Affairs’ Interior Troops will also participate in the war game.

The importance given to Vostok-2010 marks a significant change from the recent past. More often than not, it is the Zapad (West) exercise, which simulates a Russian war with NATO, that concludes the Russian armed forces’ combat training season. That was the case

last year when tens of thousands of troops participated in Zapad-2009, which featured large-scale operations in western Russia and Belarus, including beach landings and a simulated nuclear strike.

But this year Vostok will mark the apogee of Russian military training, according to commander of the Ground Forces Col. General Alexander Postnikov. President Dmitry Medvedev has already promised to attend the war-game, during which troops will test the new chain of command (military district-operational command-brigade) and practice re-deployment from one region to another, chief of the General Staff Army General Nikolai Makarov told RIA Novosti on January 15.

While commenting extensively on the West war-games, top Russian commanders would not publicly identify either potential foes or the overall scenario for East-2010. One unnamed, but obvious foe to prepare for is Japan. In an April 7 interview Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Popovkin openly stated that one reason why Moscow wants to buy Mistral helicopter-carrying warships from France is because Russia has an unresolved territorial dispute with Japan.

The Russian leadership is also concerned about the unpredictability of the nuclear-armed North Korean regime and has even decided to deploy its newest air defense system – the S-400 – in the Far East, even though this system is not designed to shoot down ballistic missiles during the ascending or mid-course phases of their flight.

However, there is one more potential foe in the East whose growing military might requires Russia to prepare a counter-action strategy on the scale of Vostok-2010. And that potential foe is China.

### Acknowledging the Potential Threat

Until recently, Russia’s military-political leadership had been extremely careful not to mention China as a potential foe while taking pains to stress how much relations with its powerful eastern neighbor have improved. Indeed, the two countries have settled their border disputes, signed a friendship treaty in 2001 and became partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. They also agreed not to be the first to use nuclear weapons against each other or target their nuclear weapons at each other in a deal signed in 1992.

However, China is already challenging Russia’s dominance in oil- and gas-rich Central Asia. In the future, fast-growing China could come to pose a security threat to Russia’s resource-rich Siberia and Far East, especially given the growing disparity in population density, economic output and continuing labor immigration across the Russian-Chinese border.

But while Russian officials had avoided referring to China as a potential foe, perhaps, in order to avoid angering the eastern neighbor and buy time to prepare for its further rise, former officials and experts do point to the potential threat posed by China’s conventional supremacy. “After the end of the Cold War...Moscow lost its superiority in conventional forces over NATO, China and the far eastern alliance led by the U.S,” Alexei Arbatov, one of Russia’s most authoritative arms control

#### *Armed Forces Total Personnel (2008, in thousands)*

China	2,885
Russia	1,476
North Korea	1,295
Japan	242
Uzbekistan	87
Kazakhstan	81
Kyrgyzstan	21
Tajikistan	17

Source: World Bank World dataBank; <http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do?Step=1&id=4>

experts and the co-author of Russia’s new national security doctrine, observed in 2004. Now Russia sees its non-strategic nuclear weapons as the “nuclear equalizer,” compensating for the conventional forces lead held by the West and China.

More recently, the Defense Ministry top brass have begun to edge closer towards acknowledging the obvious. In July 2009 a reporter for the Defense Ministry’s newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* pointed out to Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Nikolai Makarov that one of the slides in the commander’s own presentation “show that it is, after all, NATO and China that are the most dangerous of our geopolitical rivals.” He then asked the general whether the brigades, which Makarov said are replacing Cold War era divisions to better prepare the armed forces to fight local conflicts as opposed to the all-out wars of the 20th century, will be ready to “conduct defensive operations in massive warfare.”

Makarov did not mention China in his answer. However, earlier at the same conference he did point out that “in terms of China, we are conducting a very balanced, well-thought out policy.” However, based on my experience working as a defense and security journalist in Russia for 15 years, *Krasnaya Zvezda* reporters typically seek pre-approval for the questions they ask top commanders, so the reference to China as “strongest geopolitical rival” is no accident.

Two months later chief of the Ground Forces Staff Lt. General Sergei Skokov made what leading Russian military expert Alexander Khramchikhin described as an “epochal statement.” When describing what kind of warfare the national armed forces should prepare for, Skokov said the following in September 2009: “If we talk about the east, then it could be a multi-million-man army with a traditional approach to conducting combat operations: straightforward, with large concentrations of personnel and firepower along individual operational directions.” Writing in *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozrenie*, Khramchikhin noted that “for the first time since the early days of Gorbachev, a high-ranking national commander has de facto acknowledged officially that the People’s Republic of China is our potential enemy.”

Should a conflict between Russia and China eventually break out, Russia should not hope that the conventional component of its one million strong armed forces will be able to stop the 2.8 million man People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China, whose military spending has increased at an inflation-adjusted rate of over 18 percent a year, according to G. John Ikenberry. Russia has repeatedly gamed out a limited nuclear strike

by air-launched cruise missiles to prevent a conventionally-superior foe from overwhelming its forces in a conventional conflict in the West and one may deduce from that that Russian generals have developed similar plans for conflicts in the East too.

However, while they serve as a powerful deterrent, nuclear weapons cannot be viewed as a panacea. Most importantly, even selected limited use of nuclear weapons, which Russian generals hope will demonstrate resolve and deescalate the conflict, can actually increase the risk that the foe will also choose to retaliate with nuclear weapons rather than sue for peace. Even the selective first use of nuclear weapons by Russia may prompt Beijing to respond by launching its ICBMs out of concern that Russia's nuclear strike may destroy most of its nuclear arsenal. And, as a 2003 Defense Ministry report, entitled "Urgent Tasks for the Development of the Russian Armed Forces," rightly notes: "When we speak about the nuclear deterrent, especially when this notion is applied to the deterrence of threats associated with the use of conventional forces by the enemy, we should also take into account that under contemporary conditions such deterrence can be effectively carried out only if well-equipped and combat-ready general-purpose forces are available."

#### **"It's the Economy, Stupid."**

However, neither nuclear weapons nor conventional weapons will be effective in reducing the risk factors that increase the likelihood of conflict between China and Russia. Among these is the growing demographic and economic disparity between the two countries. This gap is increasingly evident in light of the macroeconomic and social data describing Russia's Siberia and Far East.

China's economy has quadrupled in size since the late 1970s and may double again over the next decade. China already has a population of 1.32 billion and its GDP totaled \$4,326 billion in 2008, ranking third in

terms of GDP in the world, according to the World Bank. Russia's population totals some 141 million and its GDP totaled \$1,601 billion in 2008, ranking ninth in the world, according to the same source. China is most likely to continue growing at rates unattainable for Russia while the latter can count only on migration to prevent further depopulation.

As of the early 2000s Russia's Far Eastern and Siberian Districts had a total population of 27 million and their combined gross regional products totaled \$110 billion per year, according to then-governor of Krasnoyarskii Krai Alexander Khoponin's 2006 speech at the Baikal Economic Forum in 2006. The rapid growth of countries in the Asian Pacific region, which includes China, is the main challenge for Russia, Khloponin told a conference in September 2006, according to Russia's *Ekonomika i Biznes*.

Nevertheless, given the current pace of development, Russia is still decades away from a serious conflict with China, if one ever erupts. As Singapore's first premier Lee Kuan Yew, an astute observer of Asia, pointed out: "China wants time to grow. If there is going to be any conflict, they'll postpone it for 50 years." And before thinking of any conflict with Russia, China will of course want to re-gain Taiwan and establish its dominance in South-East Asia.

Russia should use the next several decades to pursue military reform until it produces a conventional force capable of deterring military threats along Russia's perimeter and on par with China's PLA, while also maintaining a robust nuclear deterrent. Russian authorities should also allocate resources and introduce incentives to reverse depopulation in the Far East and Siberia and facilitate the region's socio-economic growth to prevent the further deepening of the non-military disparities that increase the likelihood of a crisis in relations with China that may ultimately escalate into an armed conflict.

#### *About the Author*

Simon Saradzhyan is a fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School Belfer Center where he researches terrorism and arms control. This article is partially based on his January 2010 paper "Russia's Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons in Their Current Configuration and Posture: A Strategic Asset or Liability?", [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/19940/russias\\_nonstrategic\\_nuclear\\_weapons\\_in\\_their\\_current\\_configuration\\_and\\_posture.html?breadcrumb=%2Fexperts%2F1897%2Fsimon\\_saradzhyan](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/19940/russias_nonstrategic_nuclear_weapons_in_their_current_configuration_and_posture.html?breadcrumb=%2Fexperts%2F1897%2Fsimon_saradzhyan)

#### *Recommended Reading*

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