Russia and China are two powerful countries, and their relations are essential for the entire world. Despite some hiccups and incidents between the two powers that took place in the second half of the 20th century, Russia and China have been engaged in close and fruitful cooperation in various fields, including defense, for several decades. In 1993, Moscow and Beijing signed a defense cooperation agreement according to which thousands of Chinese service members were trained in Russia.

In the recent years, the West has been increasingly antagonistic in its stance towards Russia and China. Confronted with a common adversary represented by Washington and its allies, Sino-Russian rapprochement picked up steam. As of recently, tensions with the West have loomed so large, that Russia and China had to put an increased focus on defense cooperation.

In September 2018, Chinese military took part in Russian military exercises Vostok-2018, Russia’s biggest drill since the Soviet era.

In July 2019, Russia and China announced that they were working on a new military agreement meant to significantly expand their defense cooperation. That same month also saw the first Sino-Russian joint air patrol as the nuclear-capable (but not carrying such weapons) strategic bombers of the two countries flew past Dokdo islands in the Sea of Japan, disputed by Japan and South Korea. The flight triggered a protest from both countries as they tried to call out Russia and China for violating their airspace. Russia and China, however, claimed that the patrol was completely in line with the international law. Immediately in the wake of the joint flight of Russian and Chinese bombers, Beijing unveiled its new Defense White Paper. This document says that one of China’s important tasks is to
develop military ties with Russia.

In December 2020, Russian Space Forces and Chinese Air Force flew a joint strategic bomber mission: without violating airspace of third countries six planes flew over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, a move that was yet again met with an outcry from Japan.

It is worth bearing in mind that Russia and China often have to deal with provocative maneuvering of NATO ships and planes in their waters and airspace. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that Russia and China, in their turn, occasionally remind Japan and South Korea, longtime US allies, of their military might.

In August 2021, China hosted joint Sino-Russian field training exercises Sibu/Interaction-2021. This large-scale event involved 10 thousand service members, more than a hundred aircraft — helicopters, UAVs and state-of-the-art combat jets such as fourth-gen Su-30SM and Chinese Chengdu J-20 fighters, and two hundred armored vehicles as well as artillery pieces.

In the course of the exercises, Russian and Chinese military practiced reconnaissance, searching and tracking of the token enemy, airdrop operations, capturing enemy fortifications and destroying targets with artillery fire and airstrikes.

To observe the final stage of the exercises, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu arrived at the Qingtongxia training ground in China. During the meeting with his Chinese counterpart Sergei Shoigu said that the practice of holding joint operational and combat training measures has become regular for Russia and China. The armed forces of both countries have reached a high level of interaction on land, in the air and at sea, and building it up is an important direction of further activity. As for Wei Fenghe, he pointed out that the success of the exercise is the testimony to Russia’s and China’s ability to jointly maintain peace and stability in the region.

At the end of the meeting, representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Chinese Central Military Council signed a memorandum on the establishment of twinning relations.

Sibu/Interaction 2021 exercise drew attention of NATO members. The Western media published various reports on China and Russia allegedly creating a military and political alliance.

On November 2-10, 2021, the US and its NATO allies conducted large-scale field training exercises Global Thunder during which the US military simulated scenarios featuring nuclear strikes against their adversaries.

The same month, on November 23, 2021, a new meeting of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe took place. The talks were held via video link. While discussing regional security issues, Shoigu said that Global Thunder saw 10 nuclear-capable American strategic bombers approaching the Russian border at a distance of only 20 km. Such behavior on the part of the West once again showcased the urgency of strengthening Sino-Russian defense cooperation. The sides agreed to further develop cooperation, including strategic exercises, joint patrolling in Asia-Pacific region (APAC), East China Sea and the Sea of Japan in particular. The meeting resulted in signing a roadmap for closer military ties between Russia and China encompassing the period between 2021 and 2025. According to Wei Fenghe, Russia and China will be expanding strategic inter-army cooperation, safeguard their vital interests and together maintain international security.

Foreign media, meanwhile, published numerous articles by Western experts saying that this meeting allegedly proves that Russia and China have come close to establishing a military alliance. It was also emphasized that such event, should it occur, would lead to significant ramifications both for Eurasia, APAC and the entire world since it would tangibly shift the global balance of power. At the same time, Western experts acknowledged that the strengthening of Sino-Russian defense cooperation is contingent on the ever-mounting economic and political pressure that Washington exerts on Moscow and Beijing.

To sum it up, it could be noted that no matter how complicated relations between Russia and China and the West have become, a full-scale armed conflict seems unlikely. Despite constant muscle flexing by the US military, Washington recognizes that its chances to survive a war with such potent adversaries as China and Russia are almost non-existent. However, it is the insight into the power of adversaries that dissuades all the sides from reckless actions, which means that this might should be enhanced and strengthened by any means imaginable. Combined, Chinese and Russian power can guarantee the security of the entire Eurasian space.
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