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War in Ukraine

China and Russia join forces for Vostok military exercises

Kremlin keen to display 'business as usual' image and underline ability to bolster ties with allies such as India



Chinese troops march during the Vostok exercises in 2018 in eastern Siberia © Sergei Grits/AP

John Paul Rathbone in London 7 HOURS AGO

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Russia and China will embark on a series of military exercises this week, a sign of Moscow’s deepening ties with Beijing and of the Kremlin’s desire to project a “business as usual” image despite the mounting costs of its war in Ukraine.

The Vostok war games, which begin on Tuesday, are held every four years in Russia’s far east. A reported 300,000 of its troops drilled alongside those from China and Mongolia during the last exercises in 2018, with this year’s manoeuvres given added symbolism by the fighting in Ukraine, which is now into its seventh month.

Western officials and defence analysts say they illustrate the “friendship without limits” that was pledged just before war broke out by presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. The war games also underline the Kremlin’s ability to maintain ties with other non-western allies including Belarus and India, which will join the exercises.

Beijing has stressed that its participation in the Vostok exercises is “unrelated to the current international and regional situation”. Russia and China last held joint military exercises in China last year, and Washington has said it does not read any new significance into the latest drills.

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...saying the fact that Vostok means east tells you everything you need to know”, said a western defence adviser, pointing to Moscow’s support for Beijing when US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan, which China views as a renegade province. Putin described Pelosi’s trip as a “carefully planned provocation”.



Chinese troops take part in drills in 2018 © Sergei Grits/AP

“Russia has lost the information war in the west, and Putin is now showing to the east that Russian life is going on as usual: that ‘we’re doing what we’re doing in Ukraine, we’re strong, and we’re going to win’,” the adviser added.

In a show of that strength, two Russian naval convoys last week steamed through the Soya Strait that separates Russia and Japan, according to the defence ministry in Tokyo, suggesting they were heading to the exercises.

Still, with as much as three-quarters of the Russian army believed to be fighting in Ukraine, analysts said the exercises would mostly be military theatre. While cancelling them would have sent the wrong signal, they added, holding them may also be of little strategic benefit.

“The Vostok military exercises are a regular event, but today they make no sense,” said Pavel Luzin, an independent Russian military analyst. “Almost all Russian combat capable units are engaged in the war in Ukraine. It’s just pretending that everything is still all right.”

Ben Barry, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies think-tank, said Moscow was “keeping its shop displays going even as the upper stories of its building are on fire”.

Even some Russian analysts have found fault in the country’s recent military performance and its weaponry, which has been on display at an international arms expo taking place in Moscow this month.

Putin boasted at the expo’s opening that the Russian military was “decades ahead” of its competitors, and that he was willing to share its technology with allies.

However, Ruslan Pukhov, a military analyst and member of the Russian defence ministry’s public council, was critical of the armed forces for “not having enough high-precision weapons and modern aiming equipment” in Ukraine.

This meant that “in the case of an artillery duel, they often beat us”, Pukhov said in a [recent interview](#) that was unusually frank for a Russian expert.

While some of Russia’s weapons are on a par with leading western technologies, such as its S-400 air defence systems, a lack of western components has stymied the industry’s technical capacity and hurt arms exports, analysts say.

“Russia has been losing its defence export capabilities for several years,” said Luzin, adding that its military industry had “been in deep crisis for at least six years and will not survive the current sanctions”.

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