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How Russia war-gamed a Chinese invasion



Leaked military documents lay bare Moscow's long-standing fears about Beijing

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Angry mobs clashing with police in eastern cities. Networks of saboteurs smuggling arms across the border for attacks on police stations and military barracks. A resentful nuclear power boosting defence production as it accuses its neighbour of ethnic cleansing.

These all sound like [Russia's](#) playbook when it first invaded Ukraine in 2014, then launched a [full-scale war in 2022](#). But the storylines are all from Russian military training exercises based on a hypothetical Chinese invasion of its far east.

The war games, which were written by Russian officers between 2008 and 2014 and leaked to the Financial Times, offer an extraordinary window on the army's long-standing fears about Beijing's real intentions, according to experts who reviewed the files.

As well as offering unprecedented detail on [Russia's nuclear doctrine](#), they recount years of exercises rehearsing a possible Chinese invasion, revealing the military establishment's deep suspicion of Beijing even as leaders Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping began forging a "no limits" partnership.

Russia has been preparing for a possible Chinese invasion via its far east border or Kazakhstan





Though the prospect of war between China and Russia may seem far-fetched today, the scenarios give granular insight into how Moscow’s military thought about threats from China — as well as the tactics it deployed to wage war in Ukraine.

In one war game scenario, China pays fake protesters to clash with police in Russia’s far east, then sends saboteurs to covertly attack Russian security infrastructure. Once tensions reach a boiling point, China increases defence production and ominously deploys army units at the border as it accuses Russia of “genocide”.

Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin, said Russia regularly practised such war games during the 2008-2014 period against a China that “was obviously seen as a threat”.

“Many new weapons systems were deployed to the far east first, even though Russia always said [Nato](#) was the main threat and China was a partner.”

Fears in Moscow that Beijing could exploit Russia’s weaknesses along its sparsely populated end of their border were particularly pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s, including a seven-month undeclared military conflict in 1969. They rose again in the 1990s as a weak Russia faced up to its eastern neighbour’s rise.

But after Putin came to power at the end of the decade, the dynamic changed. China and Russia signed an agreement never to invade each other, or carry out a nuclear first strike, and dropped all territorial claims.





Chinese soldiers, standing on the ground, confront Soviet troops on a vehicle on a disputed island at the border between the two countries in 1969 © Xinhua/AFP/Getty Images

Putin built an even closer relationship with Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2012. Their co-operation became a “no-limits” partnership weeks before the invasion of Ukraine. Beijing has offered tacit backing for Moscow’s campaign, as well as an economic lifeline to lessen the blow from [western sanctions](#).

Putin’s spokesperson on Wednesday said the Kremlin “strongly doubts” the authenticity of the leaked documents. China’s foreign ministry meanwhile stressed that “eternal friendship and non-enmity” had been “legally established” between the two countries. “The ‘threat theory’ has no market in China and Russia.”

In the world of these military training scenarios, however, such friendship is viewed with suspicion — a facade for China’s imperial designs on Russia’s far eastern territories.

One document from a 2014 exercise describes relations spiralling towards conflict following the rise to power of “a new generation of nationalist leaders” in Dasinia, the fictional name for a country with China’s precise geography.

Initially, Dasinia is said to want to deepen its ties with the Northern Federation, the alias for Russia. But the deeply cynical Dasinians seek to exploit any tensions between the North and western countries.

Soon Dasinia is demanding “sharp increases of raw hydrocarbon materials at extremely disadvantageous conditions” from the North to power its overheated economy. Dasinia begins preparing for war after the North says no.

Some documents suggest concern that China might mount offensives via Kazakhstan — possibly leading to strikes on western Siberia and even the Urals. But in several exercises dating back as far as 2008, the invasion force’s ultimate goal is to take over the Russian far east.

The plots highlight Russian fears about the Chinese diaspora within Russia, who are depicted as an explicit foreign policy tool of Beijing. The population, however, is small — with fewer than 29,000 officially recorded in the 2010 census.

One of several exercises focused on an invasion of Kazakhstan and western Siberia, dated July 2014, says China wants to find more “living space” for its population there, turning the countries into “resource colonies”.



Chinese troops parade during Russia's Vostok 2018 military exercise. In recent years the two nations have held joint military drills © Mladen Antonov/AFP/Getty Images

Michael Kofman, a senior fellow at Carnegie, cautioned that the “road to war” in military exercises are often “contrived, designed to test the force, and set up the exercise”. “They’re not necessarily reflective of what is assessed as the likeliest or most realistic threat.”

Indeed in recent years Russia’s military has appeared to lower its guard with China. Large-scale Vostok drills held by Moscow’s forces in 2018 and 2022 in the far east included some limited Chinese participation, while Beijing has acquired some advanced Russian weaponry such as the S-400 missile defence system. The two countries held their [largest joint naval](#) and air exercise on Japan’s doorstep last year.

But William Alberque, a director at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said the military co-operation had still largely been limited to “photo opportunities and parades” rather than areas of particular sensitivity, such as joint operations, planning or dynamic targeting.

Experts say current Russian exercises with nuclear-capable missile systems near the Chinese border, held as recently as November, indicate the Russian military is still training for a possible conflict — one that could potentially involve tactical nuclear

weapons.

Spheres of competition between Russia and China remain, particularly in Central Asia. Russia's focus on Kazakhstan in the documents indicates how Moscow saw the challenge from Beijing in Central Asia coming through military diplomacy, said Jack Watling, senior fellow at the Royal United Services Institute.

“Kazakh personnel were being invited to Chinese staff colleges [for military education] at a scale that began to outmatch Russia's,” he said. “Many traditional Russian partners in the ‘near abroad’ were having to hedge between Moscow and Beijing.”

Gabuev said for now, though, the war in Ukraine has led an overstretched Russia to become more accepting of China in Central Asia. “Russia doesn't have the resources to be the main regional policeman on its own any more. It's looking towards sharing the burden with China to stop any kind of western presence.”

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