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Sino-Russian military relations in People's Daily in 2014–2022

A.S. Archugova , L.V. Ponomarenko  

*RUDN University,
6 Miklukho-Maklaya St, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation*

 ponomarenko-lv@rudn.ru

Abstract. The significance of the topic under study is due to substantial advancements in Sino-Russian military cooperation amid the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and Russia's deteriorating relations with the West. After the USSR collapse, Sino-Russian military relations and cooperation have significantly expanded through further development of form and content. Sino-Russian military diplomacy is playing an important part in comprehensive strategic partnership and coordination in the international arena. Since the onset of crisis in Ukraine in 2014, a confrontation have escalated between Russia and many Western countries, which indirectly prompted Russia's pivot to Asia. In this context, military cooperation between China and Russia is getting increasingly closer. The purpose of this study is to clarify the state and prospects of Sino-Russian relations in the sphere of military diplomacy in the period between 2014 to 2022, as reflected on the pages the People's Daily newspaper. A general analysis of the articles made it possible to identify major areas of cooperation and principal features of interaction in this sphere.

Keywords: Sino-Russian relations, People's Daily, military diplomacy, military cooperation, strategic partnership of coordination

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Российско-китайское сотрудничество в военной области по материалам газеты «Жэньминь жибао» в 2014–2022 гг.

А.С. Арчугова , Л.В. Пономаренко  

Российский университет дружбы народов,
117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6

 ponomarenko-lv@rudn.ru

Аннотация. Значимость темы исследования обусловлена углублением и расширением российско-китайского сотрудничества в военно-технической сфере на фоне украинского кризиса 2014 г. и ухудшения отношений России со странами Запада. После распада Советского Союза взаимодействие и сотрудничество между Китаем и Россией в военной сфере значительно расширились. Российско-китайская военная дипломатия постепенно заняла важное место в стратегическом партнерстве и координации деятельности на международной арене. Начало украинского кризиса в 2014 году побудило Россию перенести свой стратегический центр в Азию. В этом контексте военное сотрудничество между Китаем и Россией становится все теснее. Цель исследования — изучить состояние и перспективы отношений России и Китая в сфере военной дипломатии в период с 2014 по 2022 гг., и их отражение на страницах газеты «Жэньминь жибао». Общий анализ статей позволил выделить основные направления сотрудничества и особенности взаимодействия в данной области.

Ключевые слова: российско-китайские отношения, пресса Китая, военная дипломатия, военное сотрудничество, стратегическое партнерство

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Introduction

Military cooperation is a strategically important area of international relations. Since the diplomatic relations between China and Russia were established in 1949, their military cooperation has gone a long way from alliance in the 1950s, through confrontation of the 1960s — 70s to normalization in the 1990s, and finally to the “comprehensive cooperation” and “strategic partnership” of recent decades.

In 1998, China issued its first white paper on national security — *China's National Defense* (*zhongguo de guofang*, 中国的国防), which for the first time proposed “developing an omni-directional and multi-level form of military

diplomacy” [1]. In 2019 The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (SCIO) published a white paper called *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (xinshidai de zhongguoguofang, 新时代的中国国防), which once again emphasizes that “China is actively developing constructive relationships with foreign militaries and a new model of all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-tiered military diplomacy is taking shape” [2]. Thus, China’s military diplomacy is effectively a part of its overall diplomacy, with all its forms and policies aligned with China’s national interests.

Contemporary Sino-Russian military relations have not received sufficient academic coverage so far, with relatively few studies mostly focusing on Russia-China military-technical cooperation, which hampers objective assessment of the state of Sino-Russian military diplomacy. Among those Chinese scholars who made a significant contribution to the research is Wang Haiyun, a former Chinese military attaché to the Russian Federation, Major General of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and Senior Advisor to the China Institute for International Strategic Studies. In his academic works, Wang Haiyun regards military relations as “principal driving force of international ties,” and suggests that Russia China should “turn their armies into especially friendly troops” [3].

Li Chenghong, based on a plethora of facts and data, compares Chinese, Russian and US perspectives on the problem and points out that in the early 20th century, “the blind pursuit of unipolar hegemony by the United States seriously threatened the core national interests of both Russia and China”. These nations in order to guarantee the protection of their core interests are building up mutual military trust and promoting military cooperation, but due to negative experiences of Soviet-Chinese military relations in the 60–70s, there is still serious doubt among experts and academia whether Russia-China military cooperation should be further expanded [4. pp. 19–25; 5. pp. 87–116].

Chang Latan’s *Review and Reflections on the History of Sino-Russian Military Cooperation in 40 Years of Reform and Openness* [6. pp. 24–29] and Zhang Xingxing’s *Sino-Russian Military Cooperation within the Non-Alignment Framework* [7. pp. 85–88] offer a detailed overview of history, significance, role, conditions and prospects of Sino-Russian military diplomacy. The scholars outline their take on the direction of development with greater focus on positive aspects of China-Russia relations, but stop short of pointing out the problems. A detailed

analysis of the problems in Sino-Russian military cooperation and ways to solve them are suggested in the articles by Zhang Qianzhen *On the Content, Meaning and Vision of the Future Development Of Sino-Russian Military Cooperation past the USSR Collapse* [8. pp. 129–134]. [8. pp. 129–134] and Lin Shengli's *Sino-Russian Military Relations: Problems and Prospects* [9. pp. 40–43].

Put simply, the views of Chinese scholars on Sino-Russo-China military diplomacy are as follows: 1) China seeks cooperation rather than alliance. 2) The sides need deeper mutual strategic trust. Researchers emphasize that Russia and China's national interests are quite similar, hence the need to deepen mutual confidence between the two states and work towards total elimination of mutual distrust and towards deeper cooperation on international security. 3) Stable development of Russia-China relations are not only in the best interests of the two nations, but also guarantees international order and strategic balance.

Currently, there are no systemic studies of Sino-Russian military diplomacy in Russia, but the very term "military diplomacy" is widely used in Russian official documents and related academic works. K.V. Makienko, a military expert and founder of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), summarizes the information on the problem available in Russia and draws important conclusions on the prospects for Sino-Russian military cooperation in terms of Russia's arms sales, impressive technological progress of China's armed forces, and on the role of Russian arms supplies in the problem of Taiwan and the balance of powers in Southeast Asia [10].

M.G. Evtodieva, PhD in Political Science, Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Military-Economic Security Studies, singles out two stages in China-Russia military-technical cooperation: from 1992 to 2013 and from 2014 to the present. The author emphasizes China's interest in purchasing Russia's latest weaponry and analyzes the impact of political factors on military-technical cooperation between the two states [11. pp. 68–78].

S.G. Luzyanin of Higher School of Economics distinguishes three principal directions in Sino-Russian military-strategic cooperation: commercial ties, military-strategic partnership and geopolitical partnership [12. pp. 21–28].

Western and American researchers of Sino-Russian military cooperation mainly focus on the military power Russia and China have demonstrated to the

outer world. Among the noteworthy works published in English are those by Eileen Baviera [13. pp. 15–39], A. Kuchins [14. pp. 129–137], Paul J. Bolt [15] and others. They represent the following viewpoints on the development of Sino-Russian relations and their impact on other countries:

1) Sino-Russian military cooperation is incrementally moving forward, but is not devoid of problems. A Polish political scientist Michał Lubina in his work *Russia and China* compares Sino-Russian relations to a stable and successful marriage of convenience. He believes that there are two issues in the military regard, extremely important for both Russia and China –whether China is superior to Russia in terms of military technology, and whether China’s growing military power will ultimately threaten Russia’s own security interests [16].

2) The degree of military cooperation between Russia and China is insufficient to pose a threat to third countries. Richard Weitz in his *Analysis of Sino-Russian Military Exercises* looks at important joint military undertakings by China and Russia, such as series of joint military exercises Peace Mission and Naval Interaction, and notes that although the number of joint exercises increases by year, they never go beyond the framework of exercise and as such pose no threat to third countries, although they do have a certain impact on neighboring countries [17].

It should be noted that most academic writings by Western researchers are mainly focused on practical component of Sino-Russian military cooperation and its role in regional and global security.

In a strategic partnership, military exchange and cooperation are important aspects that reflect military and strategic perspective of both sides. Of particular interest in this paper is the review of Sino-Russian military cooperation as reflected in publications of the People’s Daily (人民日报, RénmínRìbào). In the context of rapidly developing Sino-Russian relations, Chinese party media are expected to objectively reflect the latest developments, while expressing at the same time the will of the state. Besides being a mouthpiece for the CPC and an unbiased observer of international events, the People’s Daily also bears responsibility for shaping public opinion internationally and at home.

Since the early 21st century, Sino-Russian military relations have been developing in multiple directions at the same time. The Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO) founded in 2001, for one, played an important role in this, as it has markedly expanded the scope and forms of Russia and China's joint effort in the field of military cooperation. Since 2014, amid domestic economic downturn and escalating tensions with the US and EU over the Ukraine crisis, Russia's defense policies and military strategies have become more proactive and flexible. China welcomed Russia's initiative to deepen military cooperation. Its interest is primarily due to the ban imposed by the U.S. and EU on arms trade with China following the events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. In the current geopolitical environment, Russia and China continue to expand and deepen their interaction on regional and international security issues.

A general analysis of People's Daily articles revealed that from the Sino-Russian friendly relations stage to comprehensive strategic partnership stage, military issues have always been present among People's Daily publications. As shown in Figure 1, the number of reports on Russia-China military cooperation increased significantly between 2014 and 2022. Thus, in 1991–2000, among the publications on Sino-Russian relations, 15 were on military cooperation, while in 2001–2013 there were 58, and in 2014–2022—115.

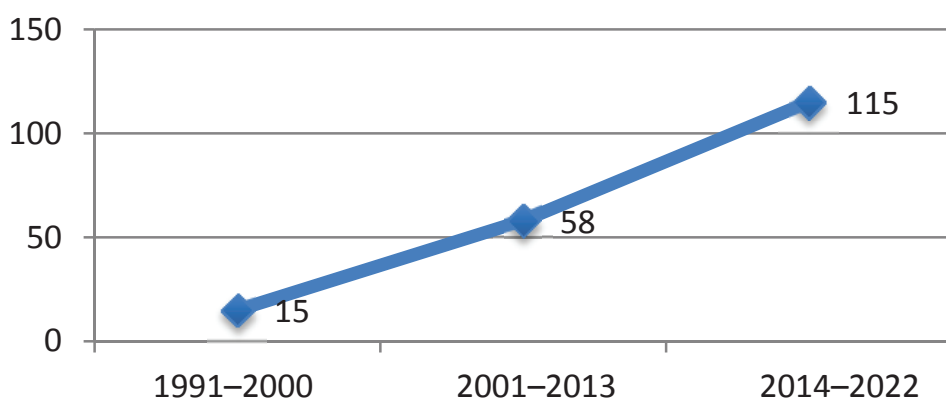


Figure 1. The number of People's Daily articles on Sino-Russian military cooperation in the period between 1991 and 2022.

The entire body of People's Daily publications on Sino-Russian military cooperation in the above-mentioned period can be classified alongside three principal directions: summit meetings and exchange of visits, military exercises, and military-technical cooperation (Table 2).

Table 2

**People’s Daily articles on Sino-Russian military cooperation
in 2014–2022 by topics**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Summit Meetings	6	6	6	1	3	8	6	5	6
Military Exercises	11	3	9	7	5	2	2	8	4
Military-Technical Cooperation	2	1	1	2	1	0	0	2	3
Other Issues	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	1

Mechanisms for Military-Technical Cooperation

Since Sino-Russian diplomatic relations were re-established in 1991, both countries have been gradually expanding military cooperation mechanisms in place. In 1992 Chinese then-Minister of Defense Qin Jiwei came to Russia for the first-ever visit by a Chinese official to negotiate military cooperation. Following the meeting, Beijing and Moscow established the Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation (MICTIC) to coordinate joint effort in MTC sphere. In 1993, a return visit was paid by Russian Defense Minister (1992–1996) P.S. Grachev. The sides signed the Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement thus launching a string of regular meetings between Russian and Chinese Defense Ministers. In 1997, a mechanism was developed for strategic consultations between the Chiefs of General Staff. However, according to A.N. Korolev, a senior researcher with Russian Academy of Sciences Center for Political Studies and Forecasts, such consultations “cannot be viewed as a highest-level instrument of interaction” due to a wider range of topics discussed at the meetings, as well as the fact that similar mechanisms exist with other countries in both Russia and China [18. pp. 138–160].

Another driving force behind the two countries’ military cooperation was the launch in 2004 of strategic security consultations as a new mechanism for discussing

Russia's and China's current national interests and security issues. This was the first interstate mechanism established by Russia and China that involves other countries.

Today, steady development of Sino-Russian military relations is a logical outcome of broader political and economic cooperation between the two countries, as Sino-Russian strategic partnership is increasingly being translated into practical actions. At this stage, Sino-Russian military security consultation are characterized by an increased level of participation and a large number of summit meetings.

Detailed reports on meetings between high-ranking Russian and Chinese officials have always been *People's Daily* specialty; such reports always reflect warm and friendly relations between the countries at any levels of cooperation, with the sphere of strategic security being no exception. Articles on Sino-Russian military cooperation mainly focus on summit meetings. Such meetings are held several times a year, with their closing statements reflecting common views of the two countries on major issues in the sphere of military-technical cooperation and security.

Close Sino-Russian military-to-military cooperation includes as its integral part the cooperation between military and civil leadership of the highest rank. More than 100 official visits took place between 2013 and 2023, including those by defense ministers, military commanders and other high-rank delegations, alongside joint exercises and trainings, joint escorts and other forms.

Russian Defense Minister Army Gen. S. Shoigu, has visited China on several occasions and met with President Xi Jinping¹, Premier Li Keqiang², Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Chairman Yu Zhengsheng³, Defense Minister (2013–2018) Chang Wanquan⁴, Defense Minister (2018–present) Wei Fenghe⁵, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Zhang Yuoxia⁶, and others.

During the meetings, Russian Defense Minister S.K. Shoigu and First Deputy Defense Minister V.V. Gerasimov, who participated in summits in Moscow, repeatedly emphasized that Sino-Russian military cooperation “has become an important component of strategic cooperation between the two countries.” China

¹ *People's Daily*. 2018. 19 October. p. 1.

² *People's Daily*. 2014. 19 November. p. 1.

³ *People's Daily*. 2016. 24 November. p. 3.

⁴ *People's Daily*. 2016. 24 November. p. 2.

⁵ *People's Daily*. 2020. 7 September. p. 3.

⁶ *People's Daily*. 2019. 23 October. p. 3.

is a “priority” area of Russia’s international military cooperation, and Moscow is ready to continue “to carry out practical exchanges and cooperation in the field of joint military exercises”⁷.

For their part, Chinese officials reiterated that China “puts a great value on and supports deeper friendly and pragmatic cooperation between the two armed forces”⁸ and that their high-level visits, exchanges and joint military exercises “have further cemented strategic mutual trust and long-standing friendship between the two armed forces”⁹. President Xi Jinping of China, in a meeting with Russian Defense Minister, said, “Military relations between China and Russia are an important symbol of the highest level and unique nature of relationship between the two countries, as well as an important support for strategic cooperation”¹⁰.

Many articles emphasize the positive role of Sino-Russian military cooperation in building mutual trust between the two countries and further development of strategic relations, and express praise for joint actions in the field of military cooperation. Ever since 2013, Chinese officials and mass media has been describing Sino-Russia military relations as “fruitful”, and recent achievements in the sphere as “significant”¹¹.

Since 2016, People’s Daily articles on Sino-Russian meetings in the framework of military cooperation have been getting more substance with more reports of the two sides’ being in agreement on major issues of international relations.

For one, in 2016, when the US deployed its THAAD missile defense system in South Korea under the pretext of an alleged threat from North Korea, Russia and China exchanged views on the situation within the framework of the Strategic Security Consultation Mechanism. People’s Daily reported that the two countries emphasized the need to “prevent escalation on the Korean peninsula”, and opposed the deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea¹². In 2019, China hosted a symposium as part of the Beijing Xiangshan Forum. Its media coverage specifically noted Russia and China’s common desire to prevent

⁷ People’s Daily. 2015. 17 April. p. 3; 2014. 5 November. p. 18; 2018. 19 October. p. 3; 2019. 5 September. p. 3; 2016. 24 November. p. 3.

⁸ People’s Daily. 2015. 18 April. p. 3.

⁹ People’s Daily. 2016. 24 November. p. 2; 2014. 28 August. p. 2.

¹⁰ People’s Daily. 2018. 19 October. p. 2.

¹¹ People’s Daily. 2016. 13 September. 2014. p. 2; November. p. 2; 2019. 23 October. p. 2.

¹² People’s Daily. 2015. 18 April. p. 3.

space militarization and arms race¹³. The article headlined *China, Russia Issue Joint Statement on Enhancing Modern Global Strategic Stability* condemns US “irresponsible” withdrawal from the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles Treaty (INF Treaty) in 2019. The article quotes Chinese officials as saying that the termination of INF “will trigger arms race and increase the risk of conflicts across various regions of the world”¹⁴. It also criticizes US actions related to development and deployment of anti-missile systems in other regions and in outer space and their negative impact on international and regional security. In addition, the newspaper openly accuses the U.S. and “certain Western countries” of intensifying their interference in Russia’s and China’s internal affairs¹⁵. In the current global context, Russia and China deem it necessary to “further strengthen coordination and cooperation on major international and regional issues, jointly respond to challenges posed by unilateralism and protectionism, and maintain world peace and stability¹⁶.”

Various articles also note Russia’s and China’s common views and desire to promote a settlement on such international issues as nuclear policies of Iran, Afghanistan, Venezuela, the Korean Peninsula, etc.

People’s Daily reported that in 2020 S.K. Shoigu and Wei Fenghe held a video conference, where they agreed to extend the Agreement on Mutual Notification of Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Vehicle Launches for 10 years¹⁷.

In 2017 and in 2021, Russia and China signed a roadmap for military cooperation between the two nations. Since the inception of Sino-Russian military cooperation, each year the two sides are to agree on a cooperation plan for the next year. In 2017, under the initiative of Russian Defense Minister S.K. Shoigu, the roadmap was signed for the period until 2020¹⁸, and in 2021 — for the period until 2025¹⁹. In 2021, Russian Defense Minister S.K. Shoigu and Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe held a videoconference and signed an agreement on closer

¹³ People’s Daily. 2019. 23 October. p. 3.

¹⁴ People’s Daily. 2019. 6 June. p. 3; 2019. 5 December. p. 3.

¹⁵ People’s Daily. 2019. 2 December. p. 3.

¹⁶ People’s Daily. 2019. 5 September p. 3.

¹⁷ People’s Daily. 2020. 16 December. p. 3.

¹⁸ People’s Daily. 2017. 30 June. p. 2.

¹⁹ People’s Daily. 2021. 25 November. p. 3.

military relations between the two states, outlining a roadmap for further cooperation between the two armed forces throughout the next five years.

Forms of cooperation are gradually expanding to include joint patrols in the Asia-Pacific region as one of its newest forms, which did not come unnoticed by the international community. S.K. Shoigu and Wei Fenghe stated that both sides “have a common interest in more extensive Sino-Russian strategic military exercises and joint patrols”²⁰.

The afore-mentioned facts demonstrate not only the willingness of the two sides to strengthen their practical cooperation, but also a high degree of mutual trust.

Chinese media and *People’s Daily* in particular also paid close attention to the participation of *People’s Liberation Army* in the Red Square Victory Parade, as well as to the Russian army participation in Beijing parades in 2015 and 2020.

Military parade on Red Square devoted to the 70th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War was also attended by President Xi Jinping of China and his wife Peng Liyuan. Its media coverage dwelled on personal friendship between the two leaders and suggested that against the backdrop of Russia’s deteriorating relations with the West over Ukrainian crisis, Xi Jinping’s presence at the parade “was a great political support for Russian President”²¹.

That same year, Russian President V. Putin and Defense Minister S. Shoigu paid a return visit to attend the parade in Beijing where a unit of the Russian Armed Forces was also to take part. A month before the event, *People’s Daily* published a report on preparations for the parade, emphasizing that there had been an official confirmation from Russia that the President and the Russian military would attend²².

The two leaders’ mutual presence at the commemorative events was of great significance in bilateral relations and had major international repercussions, as was noted by *People’s Daily* in various articles on the above-mentioned events. First of all, it is the first time that Russia’s and China’s armed forces have participated in each other’s military parades, which fully “embodies the rich connotation of Sino-Russian strategic cooperation” and a unique character of Sino-Russian relations. Second, it also demonstrates, which every article on the event emphasizes, that Russia

²⁰ *People’s Daily*. 2021. 24 November. p. 3.

²¹ *People’s Daily*. 2015. 10 May. p. 1.

²² *People’s Daily*. 2015. 4 August. p. 1.

and China strongly oppose “any attempts to interfere in the history of World War II and challenge the post-war international order”²³. Third, the absence of Western leaders and the presence of Xi Jinping is an indirect evidence that Moscow’s and Beijing’s take on the matter is identical.

Again in 2020, Russia invited a delegation from China headed by Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and the PLA guard of honour to participate in the Red Square Parade as honoured guests. The event received a high praise from People’s Daily reporters, “At this crucial moment when the world is fighting the epidemic, a delegation from China took part in a military parade in Russia, thus demonstrating the highest level of comprehensive strategic cooperation between the two countries, deepening trust and cooperation between their armed forces, demonstrating their mutual determination to firmly adhere to the outcomes of the Second World War and oppose any revision of the post-war settlement”²⁴.

Sino-Russian Joint Military Exercises

In 2005, China and Russia officially launched Peace Mission — their first joint anti-terrorist military exercise. In his memoirs Wang Haiyun PLA Major General recalls that Russia had repeatedly expressed its readiness to hold Sino-Russian joint exercises even prior to 2005 and the Major General himself was much in favour of those, but for various reasons the decision was postponed. In 2004, it was China that came up with the initiative to hold joint exercises. “The next day, at a meeting with the PLA commander-in-chief, Russian Minister of Defense (2001–2007) S.B. Ivanova expressed Russia’s desire to jointly conduct a large-scale strategic military exercise with a possibility to engage strategic nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers” [19. pp. 37–48]. Since then, the mechanism of Sino-Russian military exercises has been developed, with their scope expanded from land to sea, air, network security, and other areas.

The scope of Sino-Russian military cooperation has gradually been expanding, and, with closer ties and boosted trust between the two countries, joint exercises and other forms of military cooperation have become commonplace. Joint Sino-Russian military exercises have always been among People’s Daily headlines

²³ People’s Daily. 2015. 4 December. p. 1; 2015. 9 March. p. 1.

²⁴ People’s Daily. 2020. 25 June. p. 3.

throughout all these years. Its publications on Peace Mission military exercises and Naval Interaction joint maneuvers provide detailed descriptions of participant countries, observer states, numbers of troops and military equipment, as well as exercise scenarios. Examples include articles on Peace Mission 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021: “*Peace Mission 2014: All for the First Time*”²⁵, “*China Leads Peacekeeping Mission Exercise with Military Attachés from 60 Countries Watching On*”²⁶, “*Peace Mission 2018 Opening Ceremony*”²⁷, “*Troops of Eight Peace Mission 2021 Participant Countries Arrive at the Exercise Site*”²⁸, “*Joint Anti-Terrorism Exercise ‘Peace Mission 2021. China Withdraws Troops*”²⁹.

Articles on Naval Interaction maritime exercises first held in 2012 prevail over those on ground exercises. In addition, while the articles on Peace Missions feature greater focus on a detailed description of China’s army and weapons with Russia’s role left somewhat in the shadows, although it always comes second in the list of participant countries, the articles on Naval Interaction maneuvers put more emphasis on Russia-China cooperation. Thus, the article on Naval Interaction 2014 notes that “close cooperation between the two sides in joint exercises not only establishes friendlier ties between officers and soldiers of the two countries and fosters the spirit of mutual assistance, but also raises professional excellence of officers and soldiers on both sides”³⁰. Special emphasis is also put on high-level meetings timed to coincide with the exercises. In 2014, President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Xi Jinping of China took part in Naval Interaction opening ceremony. People’s Daily reports: “In the afternoon, Putin arrived at a military port, where he was met by Xi Jinping. The two heads of state took to the podium together. Respective national anthems were played and the two leaders jointly inspected the naval guard of honour.” Here People’s Daily reporters as always accentuate warm interpersonal relations of the two heads of state. Xi Jinping pointed out an outstanding role of naval exercises in China-Russia military cooperation, “These exercises play an important part in Sino-Russian military cooperation, and this year will once again demonstrate the two countries’ firm determination and will

²⁵ People’s Daily. 2014. 19 August. p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ People’s Daily. 2018. 26 August. p. 3.

²⁸ People’s Daily. 2021. 12 September. p. 3.

²⁹ People’s Daily. 2021. 26 September. p. 2.

³⁰ People’s Daily. 2014. 19 May. p. 9.

to jointly respond to new threats and challenges, to maintain regional security and stability, and demonstrate to the world a new level of China-Russia mutual trust and strategic cooperation”³¹. Other articles on Naval Interaction exercise include “*Joint Exercise Held as Part of Sino-Russian Naval Interaction 2016 Exercise*”³² and “*Defense Ministry Holds a Regular Press Conference*”³³.

Of particular importance for Russia-China relations were the 2021 military exercise, which coincided with the 20th anniversary of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation (FCT). At the news conference, Chinese Defense Ministry Spokesman Senior Colonel Tan Kefei stressed that, “China is willing to work with Russia to vigorously promote the concept of friendship throughout generations, fully implement the consensus reached by the heads of state, continue to deepen relations between the two armed forces, intensify strategic coordination and strengthen practical cooperation at all levels and in all fields”³⁴.

A regular joint strategic exercise West 2021 was held 10–15 September 2021. This is the first large-scale joint military exercise in which China let other country’s (namely Russia’s) troops enter inland China to participate in the drill.

Russian Defense Minister S.K. Shoigu flew to China to oversee the exercise and hold talks with Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe. This was S.K. Shoigu’s first visit to China to participate in a military exercise in this capacity. Chinese Defense Minister expressed his satisfaction over an opportunity to meet “his old friend”. In the course of talks, as reported by People’s Daily, Wei Fenghe reiterated that “following major changes and with pandemic still in place, the military will carefully implement agreements concluded by the heads of state, strengthen strategic coordination and comprehensive cooperation.” The article also emphasized Russia’s desire to “strengthen strategic ties with China”³⁵.

According to a People’s Daily report, Chinese Defense Ministry Spokesman Wu Qian confirmed at a news conference 24 November 2019 that Chinese and Russian militaries had launched their first joint strategic air patrols in Northeast

³¹ People’s Daily. 2014. 21 May. p. 1.

³² People’s Daily. 2016. 17 September. p. 4.

³³ People’s Daily. 2018. 27 April. p. 4.

³⁴ People’s Daily. 2021. 28 October. p. 8.

³⁵ People’s Daily. 2021. 14 August. p. 3.

Asia, and stressed that the patrols were in strict compliance with international law and did not violate the airspace of other countries³⁶ [53. pp. 3].

Thus, since 2019, in addition to joint exercises, Russia and China have been carrying out joint air patrols, since 2021 reinforced by joint naval patrols.

The articles note that the patrols are carried out “on the basis of annual planning and are not directed against any third party,” with their purpose being “to boost Sino-Russian partnership and raise the level of interaction between the armed forces of the two nations”³⁷ [54. pp. 10].

As repeatedly emphasized in various People’s Daily articles on Russia-China military exercises, they are meant to demonstrate the determination and aptitude of both sides to combat terrorism and in tandem maintain regional peace and security. However, now that the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region is undergoing major changes and Russian-US and Sino-US relations are being increasingly tense, all sides are analyzing and assessing those exercises from different perspectives.

Some Western experts describe Sino-Russian military exercises and joint patrols as “provocative” and see them as a harbinger of a China-Russia military bloc, as allegedly evidenced by a parallel between the exercises and concurrent global events. For example, Naval Interaction 2016 included among other things a mission to “take control over islands,” and was carried out in the context of China’s claim to territories in the South China Sea [20].

Others believe that it is premature to expect such an alliance, and that “it would pose no existential threat to the USA anyway” [21].

Nevertheless, as many articles on Sino-Russian military exercises repeatedly emphasize, the exercises “are not aimed against third parties and are unrelated to the situation in the region”³⁸, “are purely defensive in nature and pose no threat to the European community or neighbouring countries”³⁹.

Peace Mission, Naval Interaction, East 2018, Centre 2019 and other joint military exercises testify to ever-deeper Russian-Chinese relations in the field of military cooperation and ever-growing mutual trust between the two nations. As stated in the 27 January 2022 article *China and Russia Standing Side by Side*

³⁶ People’s Daily. 2019. 29 August. p. 3.

³⁷ People’s Daily. 2021. 25 October. p. 10.

³⁸ People’s Daily. 2021. 28 October. p. 8.

³⁹ People’s Daily. 2018. 12 September. p. 13.

to *Protect the World*, joint military exercises “reflect the high level of military cooperation between the two countries”, with Russia and China acting, as reporter Zheng Fanfang put it “back-to-back”, building a solid foundation for regional and global stability⁴⁰.

Military-Technical Cooperation

Russia-China military-technical cooperation has a long history. In the 1920s, the Soviet Union dispatched scores of military advisors, armory and military equipment to China to support the Chinese revolution. After New China was founded in the 1950s, the Soviet Union not only provided a full complement of armament and equipment to the People’s Liberation Army, but also helped New China launch 156 major projects, of which 44 were military. In the 1960s and 1980s, due to breakup in Soviet-Chinese relations, military-technical cooperation between the two sides went into decline.

When the USSR collapsed the Cold War was over, large-scale Sino-Russian military-technical cooperation resumed. In order to bridge the gap in the sphere of armament, China made a decision to massively introduce Russian military equipment of the latest generation [4. P. 20]. Of importance is also the fact that at that time the USA and some Western countries imposed an embargo on arms sales to China, which made Russia virtually a unique source for China to acquire advanced weapons and equipment. At the same time, following the USSR collapse, Russian defense industry was undergoing major difficulties, and cooperation with China helped the industry not only “survive” but also “remain competitive” [22].

In 1992, Russia for the first time sold China Su-27 fighter jets, followed by T-72 tanks, APCs, multiple launch rocket systems (MRLS), S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, modern destroyers, submarines, Su-30 fighter jets, etc. The two sides established a mixed intergovernmental commission on military-technical cooperation. This significantly accelerated China’s military modernization, provided opportunities for Russian military enterprises, and played a significant role in cementing political relations between the two countries.

China has been one of Russia’s principal arms importers for years. In the 2000s, the scope of Russia-China arms deals narrowed, since Chinese market was

⁴⁰ People’s Daily. 2022. 27 January. p. 3; 2021. 25 October. p. 13.

close to saturation and Russia feared that the arms could possibly be counterfeited and sold to third countries, thus competing with Russia's own arms sales. However, following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and Russia's "pivot to the East", Russian arms imports started gaining momentum once again, and a decision was made to gradually move from arms trade as such to joint research and development.

Between 2013 and late 2022, China and Russia made a tangible progress in the sphere of military cooperation, as reflected in the level of military exchanges of the two nations and in an increase in the number and scope of joint military exercises. It should be noted, however, that publicly available information on military-technical cooperation is becoming increasingly scarce, with the CPC official newspaper evading from publishing specific figures or details of Russian arms exports or military-technical cooperation, but confining itself to general information and a few comments from high-ranking officials. Thus, on 30 August 2014, *People's Daily* in its *Ambassador's Say* section published an article by Li Hui, Chinese Ambassador to Russia (2009–2019), where he noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in person to discuss a 30-year natural gas sales contract worth \$400 billion, and expressed hope for further Sino-Russian military-technical cooperation⁴¹.

Unlike the limited information on China's purchase of Russian arms, there are quite a lot of reports on other joint projects within the framework of military-technical cooperation on *People's Daily* pages. Among major projects of strategic cooperation between the two nations covered by the newspaper are the development of heavy helicopters under the agreement between China's state-owned AVIC Helicopter Co. and a holding company Russian Helicopters⁴². As part of Russia-China "space program," there are plans to construct a joint research module on the Moon⁴³, to create a satellite navigation system and Earth remote sensing, and organize the production of Russian rocket engines in China. *People's Daily* article of 17 April 2018 stresses that Russia's and China's capabilities successfully complement each other, as Russia has always been "a leader in rocket engines and manned space flight", while China "has advantages in microelectronics and satellite development"⁴⁴.

⁴¹ *People's Daily*. 2014. 30 August. p. 5.

⁴² *People's Daily*. 2016. 9 March. p. 5.

⁴³ *People's Daily*. 2021. 28 April. p. 3.

⁴⁴ *People's Daily*. 2018. 17 April. p. 22.

Since the USSR collapse and Russia-China relations return to normal, China has been and remains Russia's key partner in military-technical cooperation. The 2014 Ukrainian crisis, sanctions against Russian manufacturers and chill in relations with EU states not only made Russia increase its arms supplies to China, but also launch major joint projects. People's Daily articles on Russia-China military-technical cooperation fully reflect this unprecedentedly high level of mutual trust between the two nations.

Conclusion

A detailed analysis of People's Daily articles on Russia-China military cooperation enables to pinpoint the following distinct features of the interaction:

- Extensive mechanisms of highest-level and high-level contacts on military cooperation between the two countries are being expanded and enriched with new essence.
- Military-technical co-operation has grown from a sale-and-purchase relation into a partnership.
- China and Russia have conducted a range of military exercises on land, at sea and in the air, as well as joint parades. The purpose of the exercises is to not only share combat experience and boost security in the Asia-Pacific region, but also to increase trust between the two armed forces, and to “demonstrate to the world that Russia-China joint strength is not to be ignored” [23. pp. 1–5].
- Russian-Chinese military cooperation has a major impact on regional security.
- Russian and China leadership are in favour of multipolarity and openly accuse the US of provocations and pursuing a Cold War policy. Boost in Sino-Russian cooperation in the military sphere creates a united front of deterrence against the United States.
- Sino-Russian military cooperation helps modernize their respective armed forces. With the West still adamant on military technology embargo against China while imposing more sanctions on Russia, joint research and development is becoming key in military cooperation between the two countries.

Sino-Russian military cooperation is a rare case of close military collaboration between the countries in the history of global bilateral relations. Growing two-way transparency in military strategy, assured strategic military cooperation, advanced military cooperation mechanisms, joint training and interaction of the two armies create an unprecedented platform for regional and global security, while joint research and development leads to accelerated technological progress on both sides. Russian-Chinese military cooperation is comprehensively supported by top leadership of the two nations and has an important impact on Russian-Chinese relations as a whole.

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Information about authors:

Archugova Anna S. — Applicant, Department of History of Russia, Senior Lecturer, Foreign Languages Department of, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, RUDN University, Moscow, e-mail: archugova-as@rudn.ru. ORCID: 0000-0001-7034-3912

Ponomarenko Liudmila V. — Doctor of Historical Sciences, professor, Foreign Languages Department, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, RUDN University, Moscow, e-mail: ponomarenko-lv@rudn.ru. ORCID: 0000-0002-9994-3097