

Russian Naval Activity in the Asia-Pacific: The Herald for a New Alliance?

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The paper evaluates Russia's increased naval presence in the Asian-Pacific region, considering the naval interactions with China, India, Vietnam, the Philippines etc., an important component of Russia's national strategy and maritime policy in the region. By strengthening cooperation with the navies of these countries in different parts of the world, Moscow demonstrates its political preferences and military capabilities by checking the combat readiness of its own Navy, as well as modernizing its strategy and tactics, taking into account the modern experience of combat operations among the other fleets. It then presents a valuable opportunity for Russia to defend its national interests while remaining a non-aligned and predictable actor. By analyzing the dynamics, metrics and substance of Russia's naval activities, the author tries to clarify the strategic goals of the Russian and other countries' navies, and also to define some qualitative characteristics, such as the level of interaction between the Russian Navy and each of its partners, operational tasks of the exercises, etc. In addition, Russia's joint maneuvers not only maintain its status as a great maritime power and raises its international authority but also may serve as a balancing factor for the U.S. and Chinese navies to improve the security situation in the Asia-Pacific.

Keywords: Russia, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Asia-Pacific region, naval exercise, maritime policy, security

Introduction

The continuing political crisis with the West made the ongoing “Russia's pivot to Asia” more visible, while the growing presence of the Russian Navy in the Asia-Pacific region (APR) is one of its critical components. By increasing its naval activity in the APR, Moscow not only demonstrates its strengthening military and political potential, but also supports its national security interests in the region. International activities of the

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Russian Pacific Fleet include: visits to international ports and hosting foreign ships in Russian ports, participation in international arms exhibitions, etc. However, the greatest attention is paid to exercises at sea that are planned and executed in the APR taking into account: the peculiarities and changes in the geopolitical and regional security, the aggravation of the situation in regional “hot spots,” bilateral alliances and partnerships’ obligations, historical preferences in relations between states, etc.

In recent years, the Russian–Pacific Fleet has been systematically taking part in naval exercises in the Asia–Pacific with China and India, Russia’s key strategic partners. Russia also has intensified its military and particularly naval cooperation roadmap with India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia and Laos. Considering the United States, the last series of bilateral Russian–American naval exercises took place in the 1990s, while nowadays some express deep concern about Russian–Chinese naval exercises.¹

Aimed at demonstrating Russia’s physical presence in the APR and high military capabilities *vis-à-vis* regional security threats, should Russia’s naval maneuvers with China and India amidst deepening naval cooperation with the Philippines, Vietnam, etc. be considered the start of forming new alliances and an attempt to reshape the Asian–Pacific security order or not? It is argued that by naval interactions, Moscow ensures high combat readiness and its effective interoperability with partner countries’ navies to secure Russia’s interests in the APR, which in a political sense serves as a security component of the regional diplomacy to improve the security situation in the Asia–Pacific.

To get a better perception of this issue, the first part of this paper is devoted to the existing approach to Russia’s naval presence in the APR based on its national security and national interests. The second part of the paper is focused on the metrics of Russian naval contacts in the APR with its key strategic partners (China and India), as well as with Vietnam, the Philippines, Myanmar, etc. The third part analyzes Russia’s naval maneuvers with the United States to clarify the strategic goals achieved by the Russian navy and summarizes the role of joint maneuvers for maintaining security in the Asia–Pacific.

Russia’s National Security Strategy and Maritime Policy in the Asia–Pacific

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia wants to be recognized as a full-fledged participant in the Asian collective security system and tries to maintain national security by inducing stability in the strategic environment.² A number of scholars have contributed to studying this theme in the military domain, carrying out research in accordance with the postulates of the neorealist paradigm in international relations, often basing it on the pre-selected principle “we vs. alien” (“friend or foe”). Most focus exclusively on the evaluation of the Russian bilateral naval relationship with China.

Strategic interactions with China and India is of a “privileged character” and an important factor of Russia’s economic and political security.³ The interest toward other activities in Asia is less significant, not to mention bilateral Russia–U.S. naval ties that

have been frozen since 2014. Besides, priority in the Russian military doctrine is given to counter-terroristic, peacekeeping and strategic operations by coordinating efforts in countering new military threats with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states⁴ (China and India are among them).

Soviet maritime policy in the late twentieth century reflected some features of naval nationalism.⁵ As a maritime power, Russia proposed and approved the Maritime Doctrine—a basic document representing a set of officially adopted views on its maritime policy in different regions.⁶ In this context, works of the Russian experts that are based on the country's doctrinal documents in the security sphere postulate that after the critical decrease of its military might in the 1990s, nowadays Moscow has all the rights and should increase its military activities in the areas of its critical interests. For example, Aleksandr Balyberdin, in his work, called modern Russian marine doctrine as the basis of Russia's revised national interests, making accent on strengthening its role as a major power that should increase maritime activities in order to strengthen the country's security.

The Navy had a global remit: "The Navy is intended to ensure protection of the national interests of the Russian Federation and its allies on the World Ocean by military means, maintaining military and political stability at the global and regional levels ensures the naval presence of the Russian Federation, shows the flag and demonstrates military capabilities on the World Ocean."⁷

Russia's areas of strategic interest were recast on a wider scale again; "The Russian Federation identifies the Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific, Caspian, Indian Oceans and Antarctic areas as the main regional priority areas of the National Maritime Policy." (Also see Balyberdin.) Hence, western observers of Russian affairs should not be surprised when the new ideology of "integrationism" becomes supplemented by a more traditional balance of power policy within which Russia reverts to a limited defense build-up to protect its interests.⁸

For instance, in the report carried out by the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission to the American Congress, Ethan Meick revealed the upward trend of Russian naval activity in the APR, defining the two countries' (Russia and China) militaries and defense establishments that have steadily worked to minimize and overcome any differences and are now experiencing arguably the highest period of cooperation. Meick noted, though, it could have significant consequences for the United States, challenging U.S. air superiority and posing problems for the United States, allies, and partner assets in the region.⁹

A deeper analysis of joint exercises between Russia and China is made by David Scott from the Center of International Maritime Security. By adding the evaluation of both countries' maritime Doctrine strategies, he argues that as "great maritime powers," Russia and China returned their cooperation to Northeast Asia, at a time when both are moving to strengthen involvement in the Korean peninsula, and shape developments in their favor.¹⁰

Focusing on the military aspects of the Sino–Russian Partnership, Elizabeth Wishnick highlights Russian Navy visits to the Philippines, Burma and Vietnam, describing it

as a factor to balance its deepening partnership with China. Wishnick notes, however, that for Russia, the aim is to diversify and expand cooperation with Southeast Asian countries beyond arms exports, away from China, which has to potentially provide more legitimacy for its greater maritime military presence.¹¹ In this regard, Elina Sinkonen adds that joint naval exercises with Russia help the Chinese navy to gain experience in areas further away from the Chinese coastal regions. At the same time, according to Sinkonen, sophisticated naval exercises combined with the sales of Russian advanced technologies to China serve as an efficient form of geopolitical signaling (primarily to the United States).¹²

In turn, Rob De Wijk in his book *Power Politics: How Russia and China Reshape the World* described that the development of both countries' navies heavily influenced the politics of the South China Sea and the construction of naval facilities in and around the Indian Ocean. Though concentrating on Russian and Chinese maritime activities in Europe, he loses the scent of the Russian Pacific fleet,¹³ while Moscow sometimes is blamed for contributing to the militarization of the Asia-Pacific.

One of the experts of Russian Maritime strategy, Yu Koizumi, considered various episodes of Russian–Chinese exercises, which are essential to Japan (and the United States) as it is usually depicted as a conditional enemy in the maritime exercise scenarios (for example, “Honkoriya” at Vostok, 2018, is a state in conflict with Russia due to the island disputes). He also noted that regarding military goals Russia still considers China as an enemy when plotting ground exercises scenarios in the Far East. By these actions, however, Russia is showing a readiness to protect the “northern territories” (south Kuril Islands). In conclusion, Koizumi adds that though military collision between Russia and Japan is unlikely, if Japan will not compromise, Russia will further close its gap with China in the military domain.¹⁴

Some Russian scholars also mention that such an example of Russian diplomatic behavior is seen by the West as “biased” and “pro-Chinese,” while Russia’s strategic cooperation with China is viewed as a testimony of an “anti-Japanese conspiracy.”¹⁵ Moscow Carnegie Center’s expert Vasily Kashin agrees that Russia and Japan are both responsible for regional security, but mentioned Russia takes a neutral position on sharp regional conflicts that determine military and political security in the region, in particular in disputes between the PRC and Japan over the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu) and in disputes over islands in the South China Sea. By conducting naval exercises though, Russia confirms its status as an influential world power, which can put forward common initiatives in the area of regional security. The main goal is not the exercises themselves, but the development of diversified trade and economic ties and, consequently, productive political relations with all the major players of the APR.¹⁶

Being far less influential of ideological and historical factors in Asia than in Europe, the Russian naval strategy has some similarities with the Chinese one, though. Kejin Zhao and Hao Zhang noted that the rise of naval nationalism from within has pushed the central leadership to respond with determination for the sake of maintaining credibility as ‘national savior and protector’, but it can be predicted that China will assume a more moderate, cooperative, and constructive attitude towards maritime disputes.¹⁷

The renewed Russian pushback seeks to restore Russia's position "among the leading maritime powers." It stressed that the "instrument of foreign policy and naval activities are the highest state priorities." (Also see Balyberdin)

According to Vladimir Terekhov, the main goal of Russia's regular participation in naval exercises is to encourage Moscow to "choose a partner" in the U.S.-China global confrontation, given a rational combination of flexibility and firmness in Russian military activity.¹⁸ Sergei Sevastyanov argues that taking into account the strained relations between Russia and the West, further intensification of naval exercises (the United States and its allies on one hand, and Russia and its partners, on the other) could be considered by both groups as a logical step aimed at maintaining strategic parity between them in the APR.¹⁹

Characterizing existing literature on Russia naval activity in the Asian-Pacific region, we may suggest that most publications on this subject show Russia's naval activities in the Asia-Pacific region are of particular importance, but lack a comprehensive analysis of Russian maritime strategy. As far as foreign experts, however, many authors tend to underestimate Russian national and regional security interests, by merely fixating on a growing number and diversification of the Russian-Chinese exercises, but do not include other participants.

As the Russian Navy's contacts with the navies of these countries (particularly China) have intensified, is this the herald for a new military alliance? Some scholars raise doubts about this, suggesting that Russia and China lack the integrated command and control mechanisms, lagging behind NATO allies or the USA, South Korea and Japan.²⁰

The research's purpose is not only to focus on Russian-Chinese naval interaction, but also to add India, Vietnam, the Philippines, etc. to address the global impact of Russian naval strategy in the APR. In a reaction to the research question formulated above and the controversial discourse by the Russian and foreign experts on this issue, the author postulates the first principled argument of this paper as follows: the increased frequency, scale and diversification of the Russian naval activity, including naval exercises, not limited to Chinese-Russian ones, are contributing to a gradual improvement of the security situation in the Asia-Pacific.

Indeed, while the United States supports multilateral exercises at sea, Russia prioritizes bilateral exercises in the APR, which are easier in interoperability. However, the dynamics of Russian-Chinese and other exercises demonstrated that Russia also sophisticates the command and control stages to increase attractiveness of the exercises for China and India, as they are now interested in better inter-military operability, as well as being involved in U.S. exercises (MALABAR, RIM of the Pacific).

In this context, the author puts forward the second thesis of this paper: in parallel with the strengthening strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia, the level of interactions between other parties directly displays the level of the political partnership between the particular states.

The implementation of such contacts, however, could be considered to be a part of Russia's international politics aimed at strengthening the "bloc" component

of the exercises *vis-à-vis* naval maneuvers arranged by the United States with its partners. The timing, scale and scenarios are often elaborated taking into account the international situation in several well-known “hot spots” in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the Taiwan issue, Sino-Japanese dispute over the Dyaoyuydao / Senkaku islands, multilateral territorial dispute over the ownership of the Spratly islands, etc. In this backdrop, the following sections will reveal special features of the Russian naval exercises with China, India, the Southeast Asian countries, as well as the United States and will try to assess their strategic value and substance.

Naval Exercises and Cooperation between Russia and China

With the deepening of Russia’s strategic partnership with China, in recent years the Russian Navy’s contacts with the navies of these countries have intensified, and the frequency of joint naval exercises with them has increased. Moreover, Russia regularly conducts bilateral naval exercises with China (“Peace Mission” and “Joint Sea”).

The first Russian–Chinese bilateral naval exercise “Peace Mission 2005” (in Chinese—和平使命, in Russian—Мирная Миссия) was held in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), devoted to the disengagement of the conflicting parties and the maintenance of order at the borders of the conditional state in which ethnic differences arose.²¹ It included the maneuvering of the Russian Pacific Fleet’s and the People Liberation Navy’s ships and the joint landing of the Chinese–Russian marines on the unequipped coast of the peninsula captured by the “enemy” formations. The main role of the ships according to “Peace Mission 2005” was to free the peninsula by eliminating them of landing forces.

Initially China offered to conduct Peace Mission 2005 in the Zhejiang Province, which is located near the Taiwan Strait.²² As a result of the talks, the parties chose the Shandong Peninsula for the exercises, but the political context was preserved at the sea stage, with missile launches conducted both from surface ships and from a Chinese submarine. The exercises in 2005 became the only maritime “Peace Mission.” Afterwards these exercises regularly became land-based and multilateral (with permanent SCO members).

Another series of bilateral exercises, named “Joint Sea” (in Chinese—海上联合, in Russian—Морское взаимодействие), have been developed as joint operations of the two countries’ navies in the maritime space, with a sequence of maneuvers in the waters of each side. Previously both parties coordinated their activities by executing antipiracy tasks that were carried out by Russian and Chinese navies in the Gulf of Aden since 2009. Subsequently it contributed to arranging a new format of bilateral naval exercises and, since the beginning of the series in 2012, those naval maneuvers became annual (with a year gap in 2018). Unlike “Peace Mission,” which was partly held on land, the “Joint Sea” format was initially devoted to ensuring the safety of navigation at sea, as well as the joint defense of coastal areas.²³

Compared with 2005, the number of Russian warships attracted to the exercise has

increased. Additionally, the joint maneuvers involved antisubmarine ships (ASW) and a missile cruiser—a ship that does not exist in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy. Meanwhile, a trend of a smaller amount of PLA warships has been preserved during subsequent exercises between Russia and China (see Table 1).

In 2012, Russia and China trained in escorting civilian vessels while maintaining the combat readiness of the ships. In addition, navies practiced joint ASW missions (according to Chinese experts, it was the most important task for the naval exercise, which can be described as actions directed against a powerful enemy with modern naval weapons. Moreover, PLA Chief of General Staff, General Chen Bingde, said it (the exercises) shows the will of China and Russia to rebalance the power structure in the region.²⁴

In 2013, the strike force of the Russian Pacific Fleet had increased. The Su-24M fighter-bomber and diesel submarine of the Kilo class were involved, showing a tendency to diversify participants and to increase their aggregate power. This time the PLA Navy presented a record-breaking number of modern warships (built in the 2000s) operating outside its national borders, capable of a wide range of tasks from fighting submarines, ships and aircraft to guarding convoys at sea. The antiterrorist component became more visible: anti-terror units practiced the rescue of captured vessels using helicopters and high-speed boats. Also, joint artillery firings were supplemented by episodes of joint defense against underwater and air enemies, firing at air targets, and searching for and destroying enemy submarines. Thus, the combat component of the exercises expanded significantly.

In January 2014, Russia and China mastered the joint protection of maritime communications in the Mediterranean Sea, when Russian and Chinese ships ensured the removal of chemical weapons from Syria. The next "Joint Sea" was held in the East China Sea in May 2014. Thus, in 2014, for the first time, two bilateral naval exercises had been conducted by Russia and China in one year's time.

Table 1. Russia–China Naval Exercises (2005–2019).

Year	Month	Venue (Area)	Ships (Russia)	Ships (China)	Other
2005	August	Yellow Sea	5	60	ASW aircrafts, marines,
2012	April	Yellow Sea	7	18	ASW aircrafts, marines
2013	July	East Sea	11	7	ASW aircrafts, SWAT units
2014	May	East China Sea	6	8	ASW aircrafts, marines
2015	May	Mediterranean Sea	6	3	ASW aircrafts, marines
2015	August	East Sea	15	7	ASW aircrafts, marines
2016	September	South-China Sea	5	10	ASW aircrafts
2017	July	Baltic Sea	4	3	ASW, tactical and transport aircrafts
2017	September	Japanese, Okhotsk Seas	12	4	ASW aircrafts, marines
2018	September	Okhotsk, Bering Seas	80	-	ASW aircrafts, marines, ground units
2019	April–May	Yellow Sea	7	15	ASW aircrafts, marines

An important episode of the exercise in May was the joint escorting of a civilian vessel and counteraction against enemies' speed boats, thus, the practice in the joint protection of maritime communications, launched in the Mediterranean episode of exercises, continued. Significantly, more attention was paid to the command and staff phase, as the skills of managing ship groups were developed. It was also synchronized with the visit of the Russian President to China and his participation in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit in Shanghai.

In 2015, the region of the exercise changed from the Pacific to the Mediterranean. In the strategic domain, Russian goals for "Joint Sea 2015" were to strengthen its naval presence in the region by restoring the Soviet practice of maintaining a permanent naval group there.²⁵ China sent two new missile frigates (commissioned in 2012 and 2013) and a support vessel. During the exercises, the parties exchanged radar data, practiced the management of the unified group and comprehensive protection of ships being a part of tactical groups, to be able to conduct joint naval operations in various regions of the World Ocean.

In the second stage of the "Joint Sea 2015" combat group, both Russia and China strengthened the grouping of assault and amphibious aviation and armored vehicles, as a part of ground components. The "Joint Sea 2015" in many ways resembled the "Peace Mission 2005" in that the ships of both sides pushed out "enemy forces" entrenched in a separate territory by surrounding it with aviation and ground units. At the same time, unlike in 2005, the conditional goal of the participants in 2015 was the withdrawal of civilians from the conflict zone along a designated "security corridor."

The naval exercises in 2016 took place in the South China Sea off the coast of Guangdong (China). The key feature of those exercises was not the scale, but its content, as the sides conducted the assault landing on uninhabited islands. The special feature of that exercise had been the fact that participants used a "joint command information system," allowing "documents distribution...[and] command orders transmission...for command posts at all levels and for all combat units,"²⁶ and conducted drills without preplanning thus supporting more realistic combat training.

In the first stage of "Joint Sea 2017" in the Baltic Sea, Russia was represented by two new-generation corvettes, a rescue tug, and tactical and transport aircrafts. The PLA Navy the destroyer, frigate and supply vessel, which later took part in a large-scale celebration of the Russian Navy Day in St. Petersburg, participated in the exercises. This time there were artillery firings for sea and air targets, a training to assist the emergency vessel and to search and rescue people on the water. The Baltic Sea was chosen not by accident, because it helped Moscow demonstrate that the Baltic is not the internal waters of NATO.²⁷ For China, that venue was also important to demonstrate the possibility for a worldwide presence of its naval forces. In the Pacific stage of the "Joint Sea 2017," Russia allocated submarines and two deep-sea rescue vehicles,²⁸ to supplement the overland training of marines, joint naval artillery firings, maneuvering of ships in tactical groups, and ASW warfare.

Despite the 2018 exercises that were scheduled to be held in the Yellow Sea, Russia invited China to participate in its domestic war games "Vostok 2018" which have

become the largest drills of the Russian army since 1981. The naval phase was featured by both Northern and Pacific Fleet warships, as they practiced firing cruise missiles in the Sea of Okhotsk and antisubmarine drills in the Bering Sea. Chinese invitation to “Vostok” maneuvers have become well-established evidence of China–Russia enhancing military interoperability, which is a blatant signal of ever-closer strategic defense cooperation. As China’s military personnel, aircraft and armored vehicles did not participate in this naval phase, they practiced air-to-ground coordination and coordinated air-artillery strikes near the border with Mongolia, while focused mainly on counter-terrorism operations.²⁹

In 2019, Russia and China returned their naval cooperation to the start of the cycle that commenced in 2012. These exercises were held in Qingdao from April to May, slightly after the Chinese Navy 70th anniversary parade celebrations, where ships from Russia, Thailand, Vietnam and India also took part. Russia allocated a missile cruiser, two ASW ships, large amphibious ship, new types of corvette and a rescue boat, and a sea tanker, while the PLA Navy sent two submarines and numerous surface ships. A Russian naval force arrived to the exercises after a visit to Vietnam and Philippines, later performing the episodes of joint maneuvering, communications, missile and artillery firings, and search and rescue operations with the Chinese PLA Navy.³⁰

Thereby, the research results demonstrate that the operational tasks of the bilateral exercises have also undergone an exponential evolution. Each year, Russian–Chinese naval exercises have been taking place in a new theater of operations and becoming more complicated in terms of joint operations and communication. The operational aims and actions of both Navies became more unambiguous as they included strengthening joint combat naval power and expanding the range of joint tasks, and to achieve them both Navies jointly mastered numerous scenarios—from anti-terrorism and combating piracy to anti-aircraft defense, ASW defense and naval combat. Also, most of the time, both the PLA Navy frigates and the Russian missile ships participating in the exercises had been equipped with anti-ship missiles.

Since both parties carried out the regular convoying of vessels in the Gulf of Aden, both ensured the removal of chemical weapons from Syria, that was why they also practically executed the episodes of escorting, inspecting, and releasing vessels. The political context of the exercises indicated that Russia had demonstrated rapprochement with China, but at the same time distanced itself from open support of the Chinese territorial claims, for example in the South China Sea.³¹ Taking into account that Moscow never criticized Beijing’s position in the dispute,³² the involvement of the Russian Navy in the joint activities with the PLA Navy in the South China Sea seemed to play into the hands of China. However, at the G20 summit in Hangzhou, President Putin assessed the ruling of the arbitral tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at Hague as having no legal force,³³ but at the same time did not take sides in solving the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.³⁴

Although both countries regularly denied that the bilateral exercises’ scenarios are directed against any particular country, the location of each major exercise between China and Russia and the character of the drills executed gave us some ground to

think otherwise. For example, in 2015, the American newspaper *Los Angeles Times* characterized the joint naval exercises of Russia and China in the Mediterranean as “provocative,”³⁵ while in 2019, Russian Tu-142s ASW aircrafts have violated the South Korean zone as many as four times during the Joint Sea exercises.³⁶

The tasks achieved by the Russian and Chinese Navies in the joint exercises largely coincide. However, some experts raise doubts about the exercises’ value beyond some practical and technical gains for each side. For example, Richard Weitz, director of political–military analysis at the Hudson Institute, notes, “Russia and China lack the interoperability or integrated command, control, and support mechanisms required to conduct an effective combined military campaign. The Chinese and Russian armed forces do not rehearse integrated military operations to the same degree as, for example, do the U.S. military drills with its NATO allies or South Korea and Japan.” (See Weitz)

According to the former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gary Roughead, the United States likes to do more multilateral exercises, bringing more parties into the process, as they serve many functions.³⁷ Russia prioritizes bilateral exercises in the APR, which take place in particular areas and are easier in interoperability. However, the dynamics of the Russian–Chinese exercises demonstrated that Russia also sophisticates the command and control stages in order to increase the attractiveness of the exercises for China, as Beijing is now interested in better inter-military operability and reinforces the qualitative aspect of the trainings.

The analysis demonstrates that the scenarios and content of “Joint Sea” exercises fully comply with the National Security Strategy, Military and Maritime doctrines of Russia, which imply the deepening of China–Russia cooperation within the framework of strategic partnership. Overall, Russia is fulfilling its strong commitment to strengthening its strategic partnership with China, in addition to a general plan for bilateral military cooperation for the years 2017–2020. At the same time, Moscow did not hesitate to send the Russian Pacific Fleet ships to visit India or Vietnam, which are still in confrontation with Beijing on the various problems.

Russia’s Diversifying Naval Cooperation: India

India and Russia have a long history of defense and security cooperation, dating to the mid-1960s, when a flurry of high-level visits started taking place between the two countries, with the aim of boosting mutual defense. India takes a particular interest in sea-lane security because of its geographic position astride key sea-lanes and its rapid economic development.³⁸ In addition to regular joint training of crews during ships’ visits to each other’s ports, since 2009, the Russian Navy conducted joint convoys with the Indian navy off the coast of Somalia. The series of bilateral exercises “Indra” (this name is composed of the names of India and Russia) are the backbone of Russia’s military cooperation with the India Navy. As an inter-service exercise, it included naval and ground stages, alternating between land and naval forces since 2003 (both land and naval stages have been conducted as one since 2014).

Table 2. Russia–India Naval Exercises (2003–2019).

Year	Month	Venue (Area)	Ships (Russia)	Ships (India)	Other
2003	May	Bengal Gulf, West Coast	4	5	ASW aircrafts, strategic bombers
2005	October	Bengal Gulf	5	10	ASW aircrafts, airborne assault unit
2007	April	East Sea	4	5	ASW aircrafts
2009	January	Gulf of Aden	4	1	ASW aircrafts, marines
2012	December	Gulf of Aden	3	2	ASW aircrafts, marines
2014	July	East Sea	5	3	ASW aircrafts, marines
2015	December	Bengal Gulf	4	6	ASW aircrafts
2016	December	Bengal Gulf	2	3	ASW aircrafts
2017	October	East Sea	3	2	ASW, ground units
2018	December	Bengal Gulf	3	3	ASW aircrafts
2019	TBD	Indian Coast	TBD	TBD	TBD

The first large-scale naval exercise “Indra” was conducted in 2003 when ships from Russia’s Black Sea and Pacific fleets conducted missile launches in the Indian Ocean. Other operational tasks, such as joint maneuvering, artillery shooting for naval and air targets, ASW drills and assistance in distress at sea were executed. In the second stage, the ships of the Indian Fleet joined. In 2005, naval maneuvers by Russia had been represented by a missile cruiser, ASW ships and a destroyer, while India allocated 10 ships (see Table 2). The main goal of the exercises had been training in joint counteraction by Russian and Indian naval forces against the terrorist attack in the Bengal Gulf. Artillery and anti-aircraft missile firings, joint maneuvering and replenishment of the sea were carried out.

The political situation in the region, including strained Indian relations with Pakistan, influenced the scenario of the exercises, as the two navies worked out the joint seizure and examination of the vessel that allegedly had components of nuclear weapons on board. Thus, the main political task set by the Russian military command for that exercise was to clarify that Moscow had a stake in and was ready to make its input in strengthening stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

In the 2007 exercises, search and rescue operations were supplemented by the actions of minesweepers and ground naval forces, ASW and firing drills. In 2009 and 2012, the joint exercises had been conducted in a practically valuable format of the convoying and counter-piracy operations of Russia and India off the coast of the Horn of Africa (in 2009 they trained for the joint landing on a ship symbolically seized by terrorists, and in 2012 — joint maneuvering and artillery drills).

In 2014, three Indian and five Russian warships performed joint maneuvering, combined anti-submarine, anti-aircraft and anti-ship defense, helicopter operations, assisting a ship in distress, and restocking in the East Sea. At “Indra–2015,” Russia was represented by a missile cruiser, a destroyer and support vessels. From the Indian Navy, a diesel-electric submarine and five surface ships took part in the exercises. The navies exercised tactical maneuvering, inspection operations with the support of helicopters and

made joint rocket and artillery strikes against maritime and air targets.³⁹

In 2017, Russian–Indian inter-service exercises for the first time were held in an all-encompassing format (simultaneously at landfills in the Southern Primorskiy regions and at Peter the Great Bay in the Japan Sea). Instead of separate naval, air and anti-terrorist exercises which had been conducted in 2016 (Indra Navy 2016, Avia Indra 2016 and Indra 2016), this time the exercise was carried out based on a common plan and scenario with participation by Russia’s Navy, Army and Air Force units, and India’s Navy and Army units. During the naval phase of “Indra 2017,” Russia and India practiced escorting ships, creating humanitarian corridors, and detaining and inspecting ships that were conditionally captured by pirates. Practice for landing and occupation of the coastline with the use of assault landing ships accompanied these exercises, as well as the search of a simulated enemy’s submarine, counter-offensive naval battle, naval helicopter exercises, etc.⁴⁰

Analysis demonstrates that for a long time, the number of ships allocated by Russia and India for the “Indra” exercises stayed practically unchanged and has been relatively small (two to five ships and vessels from each side, see Table 2). The basic goals of both states are clear: maintaining a strategic partnership, demonstrating the flag in the Asia–Pacific region and checking the readiness of the respective fleets’ forces for action in coastal and ocean areas. Despite some attempts at diversification of sources, India’s dependence on Russia for naval equipment remains strong.⁴¹ For example, in 2012, Russia transferred a nuclear powered submarine “Nerpa” and aircraft carrier “Vikramaditya” in 2013, including the training exchange of Indian officers in the Russian Federation.⁴²

Russia’s Diversifying Naval Cooperation: Vietnam

The Soviet Navy moved in to take over the Vietnam naval base Cam Ranh, after Vietnam ousted U.S. military forces in Indo–China in 1975, but moved out after the breakup of the USSR. Today, Vietnam hosts the Russian Pacific fleet at its bases again, as there is a boosting convergence of the maritime military interests of Moscow and Hanoi amidst reports that the countries are intensifying military engagement, including collaboration between the two navies.

For example, in 2017, a missile cruiser and support ships visited Cam Ranh, aiming to foster the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries in general and the defense cooperation ties between the two navies in particular. Earlier that year, in addition to the Chinese PLA Navy, Vietnamese representatives took part in the Naval Parade in St. Petersburg. In 2018, two ASW ships of the Russian Pacific fleet visited Cam Ranh again, following the two defense ministries’ leaders meeting.

When they ratified an agreement on a simplified procedure for the entry of warships into the ports of Russia and Vietnam in June 2017, Russia became the only state that had such an agreement with Vietnam;⁴³ both parties also signed a Memorandum on peacekeeping cooperation on the UN Charter. Subsequently, Vietnam has agreed to

service U.S. non-combat naval ships at its facilities in Cam Ranh, whilst U.S. Defense Secretary visited Vietnam in March 2019 (just after the Russian Defense Minister).⁴⁴

According to the agreement for military cooperation in 2018–2020, Russia and Vietnam planned a large number of exercises, meetings, and other joint activities, including a search and rescue cooperation for submarines in distress. In 2018–2020, Moscow will also be pursuing closer military relations with Vietnam's western neighbor Laos, after signing an agreement on the sidelines of the seventh Moscow Conference on International Security.

Hence, Vietnam became part of both the United States' and Russia's strategic talks to establish naval facilities for ship repair, resupply and maintenance. In terms of this agreement, Cam Ranh will be available to all navies which are friendly to Hanoi and Moscow.⁴⁵ By intensifying its naval presence in Vietnam (as well as the United States), Russia has been signaling a determination to reestablish a global naval presence, where USSR had previously dominated.

As Vietnam fell into modernization of most surface ships and boats, it has become one of the most active customers of Russian naval equipment, including six Varshavyanka-class conventional fast attack submarines as a part of its counter-intervention strategy,⁴⁶ continuation of the shipbuilding program of guided missile boats and joint design of fast-speed patrol boats, a basing site and appropriate infrastructure. For example, a series of two Russian frigates of the 11661E project, launched in 2016 for the Vietnamese Navy and commissioned in 2018, is vital to Vietnam due to its ASW and anti-surface capabilities, as well as securing convoy operations and mine fielding.

A new military cooperation roadmap with Vietnam though, could bring Moscow into the ongoing power struggle between the China and the United States in the South China Sea,⁴⁷ as well as complications with China alone, as Vietnam faces relentless Chinese pressure in the contested waters of the South China Sea.

Russia's Diversifying Naval Cooperation: The Philippines

Unlike Vietnam, the Philippines has never really been a significant defense partner for Russia in the past, but has been in the spotlight as the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, a self-avowed socialist, has been looking to diversify his country's ties away from Washington, given the lack of "political conditionalities."⁴⁸ Much as it did for Vietnam, the Russian Navy has visited the Philippines regularly over the last several years, also helping to modernize the Philippine military. Russia has been eyeing the Philippines with interest since 2017, sending an ASW ship in January and a missile cruiser in April—shortly before President Rodrigo Duterte visited Russia in May for a defense cooperation agreement. Later in October, Russian Pacific fleet warships also arrived in the Philippines to ensure the delivery of donated military equipment of 5,000 AK-74M assault rifles, as well as ammunition, army trucks and steel helmets. Later Duterte instructed his defense minister to look into how the Philippines can acquire modern military equipment from Russia, like drones, night-vision gear, sniper rifles, and

even helicopters.⁴⁹

In 2019, two Russian ASW ships and a tanker docked in the Philippines for a “goodwill visit” amidst the annual Balikatan joint exercises between the Philippines and the United States. Reacting to the news of the Russian Navy’s arrival in Manila, the U.S. State Department said the “defense relationship between the United States and the Philippines remains very, very strong.”⁵⁰

It seems, however, by stepping up cooperation and training in areas where the Philippines has traditionally worked closely with the United States, Russia improves its position as one of the leading foreign investors in the Asia-Pacific as a whole, also in the hopes of cultivating new markets for Russian arms. In addition, Russia provides a fraction of the military aid that the United States does, but without the long-standing military-to-military ties and interoperability.

In general, Manila seems to consider Russia as a friendly state, a patroness and a defender of its interests in countering extremism and piracy through intelligence sharing and training, therefore the degree of closer cooperation in the military sphere is likely to improve. On the other hand, any snap naval exercises between the two are unlikely, as the Russian Navy uses a unique signaling system which makes communication difficult with other navies when operating in close proximity.⁵¹ Indeed, the level of interoperability needed in exercises that Russia achieved with China through a very long-term cooperation is an elusive prospect for the Philippines.

In addition, stronger naval ties between Moscow and Manila would naturally internationalize the local South China Sea disputes, thus increasing the cost of military action for other countries, such as China. It does not seem, however, that Russia is interested much in these disputes, as Russia’s naval presence in the South China Sea are limited, compared with those of China, Japan or the United States.

Russia’s Boosting Naval Interactions in Southeast Asia

In recent years, Russian Pacific fleet warships have also visited the ports of Cambodia, Brunei, Thailand, Singapore, Myanmar, etc. The significance of Russia’s boosting naval cooperation in Southeast Asia is nonetheless worth noting, covering a wide range of purposes: either celebrations or accessions to the throne, or turnover of weapons and naval activities (see Figure 1).

According to, Senior Editor of *The Diplomat* and expert on Southeast Asian political and security issues, Thailand, a U.S. treaty ally, is one of the key countries that Russia has been looking to boost defense ties with, including to the sharing of experiences in counterterrorism and joint anti-piracy drills. It proves that cooperation between Moscow and Bangkok has been on the uptick, amid reports that an intergovernmental agreement on military cooperation was signed, as Thailand planned on buying Russian helicopters and tanks.

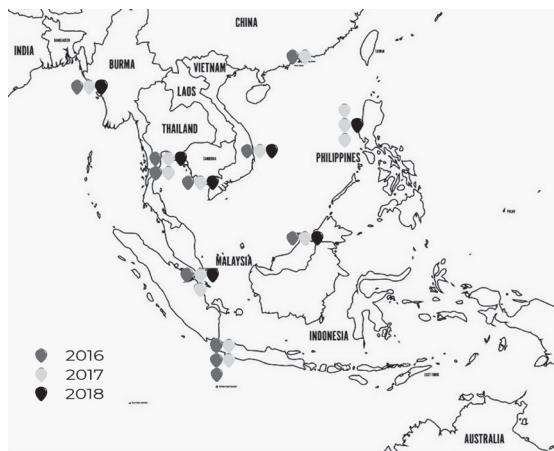


Figure 1. Russia's Naval Activity in Southeast Asia (2016–2018).

Russian warships' visit to Thailand in 2017 was set to host a series of commemorative military activities in conjunction with ASEAN's 50th anniversary, including the holding of an International Fleet Review (IFR) and associated events around Pattaya Bay. When visiting Singapore the same year, Russian warships took part in the 50th anniversary of the Republican Navy, IMDEX Asia maritime defense exhibition and (a year before it was Russia's participation in the "Indo Defense" Expo in Indonesia), multilateral naval exercise KOMODO and antiterrorist naval exercise SMOA, joint communication and maneuvering exercises of Russian, Singapore and Indonesian warships, as well as the PASSEX exercise of the Russian and Brunei Navies conducted in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

The engagement of the Russian Navy with the Cambodian one also brought into focus both the defense ties between the two countries as well as Moscow's role in Southeast Asia more broadly. The defense side of ties had been slower to develop, including number exchanges, dialogues, and ship visits. For instance, ASW ships and supply vessels of the Russian Pacific fleet arrived in Sihanoukville in November 2017.⁵² However, Russian ship visits in Cambodia in particular are nothing new, being part of the Russian Navy program for the demonstration of the flag in the APR (in 2015 the Russian Navy visited Malaysia).

Regarding Myanmar, Russian naval warships had quietly begun to pay port of call visits to the country, in 2013, 2016 and 2017, highlighting the interactions underway between the two sides on the defense side. It is important for Myanmar, probably due to the threat of ethnic groups in the north, armed by China. Russia also has sought to capitalize on the interest in Burma by diversifying its foreign and military ties away from China, as well as to reduce Western influence. In addition, Myanmar is the second largest export destination for Russian weapons in Southeast Asia, after Vietnam. For instance, the Burmese air force bought 21 Russian helicopters, while the value of Russian arms sales to Myanmar (\$1.45 billion from 2001 to 2016) exceeded that of China (\$1.42 billion) (see Wishnick).

Russia–Myanmar defense relations though, acquired the more visible manifestations of purchasing Russian military equipment and some training of military personnel, as the country’s government has seen Russia as another option on the defense side, given both the restrictions created by Western sanctions. Visits have still sought to translate some of this into tangible cooperation, with areas like education, exchanges, culture and technology. The scope of the pact is broad, covering not only naval cooperation, but peacekeeping, search and rescue, information exchange on international security and counterterrorism.

Maritime Interactions of Russia and the United States in the APR

A principal feature of the Russian–American relationship is that U.S. politics in the APR do not seem to contradict any critical interest of Russia, while the only visible issue for Moscow has been the U.S.–Japanese (and recently the U.S.–ROK) joint efforts to develop a TMD system. There are clear limits to what Moscow can accomplish in its military cooperation towards South Korea and Japan. However, as Russian naval ships arrived in 2018 to Seoul and Hakodate and Jeju naval bases, respectively, Moscow cooperation with U.S. traditional allies recommenced in the form of friendly visits for the first time since Western sanctions were imposed.

As for Russian–American military ties in the APR, they have been relatively positive over the year, including a series of different exercises and numerous naval port calls. The centerpiece of those bilateral events was “Cooperation from the Sea,” took place annually in 1994–98 with the main theme being coordination between the Navies in joint disaster relief operations. Staff personnel, surface combatants, amphibious ships, as well as the marines participated in the only series of bilateral naval exercises between the two countries in the post–Cold War era.⁵³

However, the above-mentioned Russian–American military interaction in the APR had always played a secondary role toward the Russian–American relationship in Europe (and recently in Washington, D.C.), and several times the worsening of bilateral relations there negatively affected bilateral ties in the Pacific. The Kosovo crisis, the NATO enlargement and other events effectively blocked bilateral military cooperation in the Asia–Pacific. For example, in spring 1999 the post–Kosovo effect put the “Cooperation from the Sea” series indefinitely on hold.

It took long years before Russia got and accepted an official invitation from the U.S. to take part in the “RIMPAC 2012” (“Rim of the Pacific”) multinational exercise. Starting its “pivot to Asia,” in 2012 the United States was strengthening traditional bilateral security alliances (with Japan, Australia, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines) and looking for new improved partnerships (with Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia and India). Accordingly, the “RIMPAC 2012” had been preceded by a series of naval maneuvers arranged with diverse participants: U.S.–Philippines in the southern part of the South China Sea, Australian–South Korean in the area to the south of the Korean peninsula, U.S.–Indonesian in the southern part of the South China Sea,

Japanese–Indian in the coastal waters of the Japanese Kanagawa and U.S.–Japan–South Korea to the south of the Korean peninsula.

These exercises included joint tactical groups maneuvering to protect areas of active navigation, helicopter exercises, artillery firings, rendering assistance to a ship in distress, etc. The author is providing this detailed information for two reasons: firstly, to clarify operational tasks executed by the exercises participants (more or less the same as those fulfilled in Russian–Chinese and Russian–Indian maneuvers) and their areas (most of them are arranged very near the so called regional “hot spots”). Secondly — just to give an idea about the very large scale of naval exercises arranged by the U.S. Pacific fleet and its partners in the APR (their annual number is many times more than the bilateral exercises arranged by Russia and China).

Agreeing to participate in the “RIMPAC” in 2012, Russian naval leaders were interested in assessing the combat readiness of the warships and professional skills of their crews in a more challenging joint professional environment, as well as to discover new naval tactics and the level of the interoperability between the United States and allied navies. By that time the Russian Pacific Fleet group had considerable experience in securing maritime safety and combating piracy off the coast of Somalia, so the American Navy had been also interested to share it.

During the “RIMPAC” exercises, Russia’s ships jointly acted with the U.S. Navy as part of the tactical group, thus positively contributing to the political role of the exercises. However, starting from 2014, the U.S. Navy conducted biannual RIMPAC exercises without Russia, since Washington suspended cooperation with Moscow in the military sphere due to the situation in Ukraine.

Despite the fact that at that time China and the United States supported competing economic integration models in the Asia–Pacific, and were facing critical differences in approaches to the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, subsequently the United States invited China’s PLAN to participate in the “RIMPAC” exercises. It became a clear demonstration of Washington’s flexibility in arranging interactions with its key geopolitical rival in the region. As far as India, its Navy also took part in the “RIMPAC” exercises. The United States and India are both concerned about the rising power of China in the Asia–Pacific region, and are apprehensive that Beijing may try to use force in the Spratly Islands. Thus, taking into account its growing economic and military capabilities, India’s importance as a strategic partner for Washington was steadily increasing.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Having examined Russia’s naval activity in the Asia–Pacific region, we can arrive at some preliminary conclusions for further consideration in ongoing research. Appreciable developments in Russian naval cooperation in the Asia–Pacific could become an indicator of increased Russian activity in the APR (see Tables 1 and 2), while the boost of naval visits of Russia to the Southeast Asian countries is nonetheless worth noting (see

Figure 1). One of the explanations for that phenomenon could be of Russian attempts at least partly to mitigate the consequences of the U.S. military politics, which has continued to maintain a very high level of naval activities in the region in unilateral, bilateral and multilateral formats.

Despite Russia sophisticating the command and control stages of the exercises, overall it still is many times smaller than the annual scale of naval maneuvers arranged by the American Navy and its allies and partners in the APR. Thus the decrease of this difference would contribute to the prevention of dominance in the regional system by one state or a group of states and to the better maintenance of the regional order. Compared with those of China and the United States, Russia's maritime security interests in the East Asia (South China Sea) are limited. Russia does not conduct full-scale exercises. However, ship visits have been given a higher profile by Moscow, increasingly isolated from the West and therefore, demonstrate a flurry of military relations with Vietnam, the Philippines, Myanmar etc.

By doing this, Russia definitely does not want to play second fiddle to China in Asia, carving out an independent role for itself in Southeast Asia. Another goal of Russia is to diversify and expand its maritime cooperation with all possible Southeast Asian countries in order to follow its maritime strategy as well as arms exports. In this regard the impact of new naval diplomacy between Russia and the Southeast Asian countries shows the impact on regional security, as Russia's interest is in diversifying ties, rather than in creating an alliance.

By this logical construction we are proving the principled thesis of this paper that increased frequency, scale and diversification of the Russian naval activity, including naval exercises, not limited by the Chinese–Russian ones, are contributing to the gradual improvement of the security situation in the Asia–Pacific.

In a military domain, exercises with navies have demonstrated the increased combat readiness of Russian warships and units to conduct operations independently, as well as being a part of joint tactical groups. Overall, the analysis of Russia's bilateral exercises' statistics and substance proves another thesis of this paper that in parallel with the strengthening strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia, the level of interactions achieved between other parties directly displays the level of the political partnership between the particular states.

If we go in reverse order, military contacts between the American and Russian Fleets, as in previous decades, have been determined by negative geopolitical dynamics in other parts of the world, and thus have been frozen since 2014. The Russia–India naval exercises have been maintained at the same level (the areas of exercises, the list of performed operational tasks, number and ratio of ships etc. did not change substantially). Such a situation so far suits both partners allowing them, on the one hand, to maintain a strategic partnership, and on the other hand—not to cause geopolitical discontent of most preferential strategic partners (China for Russia, and the United States for India). In this situation it might be a good time for Washington to resume the suspended practice of naval contacts with Russia on the way to improving regional security.

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