
RUSSIA'S WAR DRILLS COME AS SURPRISE IN ASIA

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Military exercises seem becoming instrument of choice of the Kremlins foreign policy. Some of these drills also proved instrumental to raise eyebrows in Asia, and elsewhere.

Russia war games

Russia-Pakistan drill takes place at the same time the Indo-Russia joint military exercise Indra-2016 is being held in Vladivostok, Russia

In a surprise move, Russian troops landed in Pakistan on September 23 for the first-ever joint military exercises. Some 200 troops from the two countries take part in the drill, officially described as anti-terror exercise, to October 10. The joint military exercises were apparently intended to highlight growing defense ties between Moscow and Islamabad, the two former Cold War rivals.

The Russia-Pakistan joint drill raised questions whether it could adversely affect Moscow-Delhi traditional ties as the Kremlin was seen as siding with Islamabad in the territorial dispute with India. The Russian Embassy in India was forced to dismiss media reports that the Russia-Pakistan drill could be held in areas disputed with India, including Azad Kashmir, Gilgit and Baltistan. In response, India voiced concerns towards what New Delhi described as Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism and these concerns were also conveyed to its strategic partner, Russia.

Coincidence or not, the Russia-Pakistan drill takes place at the same time the Indo-Russia joint military exercise Indra-2016 is being held in Vladivostok, Russia, from September 22 to October 2. These biannual exercises, held between the two nations since 2003, were designed to highlight what was officially described as strategic alliance between Russia and India. Holding joint military exercises with India and Pakistan simultaneously came as Russias surprising stratagem as Moscow appeared undermining the decades-long strategic alliance with Delhi so as to develop defense ties with Islamabad.

The Kremlin held other surprising military exercises out there in Asia. Earlier this month, Russian and Chinese naval forces held the first-ever joint military drill in the South China Sea. The Joint Sea-2016 drill from September 12-19 was also the single largest joint maritime military exercise between Russia and China ever.

China claims nearly all of the South China Sea, but ASEAN countries, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, disagree with these claims. In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled that China has no grounds to claim these islands and reefs in the South China Sea. The Chinese authorities refused to accept the courts decision.

The Russian Foreign Ministry insisted Russia was not a party in this confrontation and was not going to get involved. However, the Sino-Russian joint drills were seen as having adverse repercussions for Russia-ASEAN.

The Joint Sea-2016 drill was held not in a contested part of the South China Sea. But willingly or unwillingly, Russia backed Chinas claim to the disputed islands there.

For Russia though, it would hardly have been worth holding drills in the South China Sea at all in the first place, as Moscow was undermining relations with ASEAN and antagonizing its traditional ally, Vietnam. Backing Beijings historic claims to South China Sea appeared to be a dicey game for Moscow as China could potentially have similar historic claims to sizable parts of Russias Far East.

The Joint Sea-2016 came as the latest in a series of high-profile joint military drills. In August 2015, Russian and Chinese naval forces held exercises in the Sea of Japan, featuring live-firing combat drills. In May 2015, both navies held joint exercises in the Mediterranean Sea and Black Sea, in an apparent challenge to US perceived dominance in the region.

This year, Moscow even held maneuvers with its smaller neighbor states. Last month, the first Russian-Mongolian joint drill was held in Russias Buryatia internal republic.

Russia also held major military exercises unilaterally. The Kavkaz (Caucasus)-2016 drill was held in Russia from late August until September 10. During the maneuvers, the Caspian Flotilla was training to use the Kalibr cruise missiles.

Meanwhile, Russias policy of war games also sparked concerns in the West. NATO officials reportedly complained that Russia held increasing numbers of large drills with no advance notification. Last week, Western media outlets floated Ukraines military intelligence claims that Russias nuclear forces were practising readiness for a large-scale nuclear conflict.

Last month, yet another Russian drill involved called for NATO soldiers to lay down arms. The exercises, named Cooperation-2016, was aimed at preparing troops to protect the countrys northwest borders from a hypothetical NATO invasion. While dubbing these exercises as World War 3 drills would probably be an exaggeration, the wording was sufficient to spark concerns in Western capitals.

The drills in Asia appeared to highlight Russias converging interests with China and Pakistan, despite possible adverse repercussions for relations with India and ASEAN. Yet the wisdom of Russias latest policy of war games can remain a matter of debate.

Kaynak/Source: