

Chinese, Russian Troops Join Central Asia Exercises

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Kazakh soldiers firing a cannon during an opening ceremony for exercises at the Matybulak military range Monday. **Robin Paxton**

MATYBULAK, Kazakhstan — Thousands of Russian, Chinese and Kazakh soldiers began two weeks of war games in Kazakhstan on Monday, preparing to counter regional threats ranging from drug traffickers to Islamist militants.

More than 3,000 troops will take part in the exercises at the Matybulak military range in southern Kazakhstan. Almost a third of them are Chinese, underlining Beijing's growing clout in Central Asia, a region Moscow still sees as within its sphere of influence.

The "Peace Mission 2010" exercises are the largest in three years involving the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a six-nation group led by Moscow and Beijing that some analysts say might one day become a counterweight to NATO.

The SCO, however, has limited itself so far to smaller military exercises and security initiatives.

Less than a month ago, U.S. and British troops joined more than 1,000 Kazakh servicemen for the "Steppe Eagle" program, which aimed to train Kazakh troops for future deployment with NATO peacekeepers.

The SCO, which also includes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, has focused in recent months on fighting terrorism and radicalism in the region, as well as drug trafficking from Afghanistan.

"Now and for the next few years, terrorism, separatism and extremism will remain serious factors in the stability of this region and the world," Ma Xiaotian, deputy chief of staff of the Chinese armed forces, said at a ceremony opening the exercises. "Upholding security and stability in the region is the main aim of every SCO member state and every officer and soldier taking part in this exercise."

The Matybulak military range is about 200 kilometers west of Almaty, Kazakhstan's commercial capital.

Kazakhstan's Defense Ministry said Russia, China and Kazakhstan had each contributed 1,000 troops, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan each sent 150. Uzbekistan was also invited but said it would not send troops.

The interim government of Kyrgyzstan, which hosts U.S. and Russian air bases, has struggled to control the nation's south where at least 400 people died in ethnic clashes in June.

Authorities in neighboring Tajikistan are also concerned about Islamist radicalism following two bombings and a series of armed skirmishes. Tajikistan has jailed more than 100 people this year for belonging to banned groups.

At the opening ceremony, troops marched past, accompanied by a brass band, and flags of the five participating nations were raised to their respective anthems and an artillery volley. A convoy of tanks then rolled across the steppe.

Kazakhstan's Defense Ministry said more than 300 military vehicles and 50 Kazakh, Chinese and Russian airplanes and helicopters would also join anti-terrorist drills on Sept. 24.

The SCO's member states have a population of more than 1.5 billion, or a quarter of the world's population.

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