

China and Russia Kick Off Largest-Ever Joint Naval Drills

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Sailors standing in formation on the Shijiazhuang missile destroyer as it neared Vladivostok for drills Friday.

BEIJING — China and Russia kicked off their largest-ever joint naval drills Friday in the Sea of Japan, a further sign of the broad-based progress in ties between the former Cold War rivals.

Eighteen surface ships, one submarine, three airplanes, five ship-launched helicopters and two commando units were taking part in the "Joint Sea-2013" exercise that runs through July 12. The drills will cover anti-submarine warfare, close maneuvering and the simulated takeover of an enemy ship.

The drills are considerably bigger than anything China's navy has previously held with a foreign partner. China's increasingly formidable navy is contributing four destroyers, two latest-generation guided missile frigates and a support ship, all of which sailed Monday from the port of Qingdao, where China's Northern Fleet is based, to the rallying point in Peter the Great Bay near Vladivostok.

"This is our strongest line-up ever in a joint naval drill," Rear Admiral Yang Junfei, commander of the Chinese contingent, was quoted as saying by state media.

China has long been a key customer for Russian military hardware, but only in the last decade have their militaries begun training jointly. The naval drills are to be followed by another round of anti-terrorism joint drills in Russia's Ural Mountain region of Chelyabinsk from July 27 to Aug. 15.

China's armed forces are eagerly pursuing stronger links with most regional militaries, with the notable exception of Japan, with which China is embroiled in a strongly emotional spat over control of an uninhabited East China Sea island group north of Taiwan.

Chinese land units have taken part in border security and anti-terrorism exercises organized by the six-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

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