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Russia, China Launch Largest Joint Naval Exercise In History

By Matthew Bodner

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Marines of Chinese People's Liberation Army

Russia and China on Thursday launched the second phase of their largest joint naval exercise to date against the backdrop of increasingly frequent and large-scale military exercises conducted by NATO and Russia, which some say are escalating tensions.

The exercise features 22 warships, submarines and assorted support ships, 20 aircraft, over 500 marines and 40 units of armored vehicles, Vice Admiral Alexander Fedotenkov, the deputy chief of the Russian Navy, was quoted by news agency TASS as saying Thursday.

Roman Martov, a spokesman for Russia's Eastern Military District, which commands the Russian vessels taking part in the exercise, characterized the Joint Sea II 2015 maneuvers as the largest "in the modern history of cooperation between the [Russian and Chinese] navies," TASS reported.

Martov said the active phase of the exercises will be conducted later next week, from Aug. 24 to 27, and will focus on "joint anti-sabotage, anti-submarine, anti-aircraft and anti-ship defense operations," as well as a beach assault and various live fire exercises against simulated air, sea and underwater targets.

The first Joint Sea 2015 exercise took place in the Mediterranean Sea in April, and the latest drills are the fifth cooperative exercises conducted by the Russian and Chinese navies since 2005.

The Chinese contingent is made up of two destroyers — one of which is Russian-built — as well as two frigates, two landing craft, and a supply ship. They are complemented by six helicopters, five airplanes, 21 amphibious armored vehicles and 200 marines.

The remainder of the force participating in Joint Sea II 2015 is Russian, led by the Pacific Fleet flagship Varyag, a large guided missile cruiser.

The latest exercises take place amid heightened political and military tensions between Russia and the West in the wake of Moscow's annexation of Crimea last year. The two sides have been conducting ever larger military exercises in recent months.

Last week, the London-based European Leadership Network (ELN), a think tank, released a report warning that the increasing size and frequency of Russian and NATO war games — which appear to be training to fight each other — could drive the two sides into an actual war.

ELN director Ian Kearns told The Associated Press last week that the exercises were responsible for some of the closest encounters between Russian and NATO militaries at a time when both sides were preparing for possible conflict with the other.

In 2015 alone, Russia has planned over 4,000 exercises ranging in size across all branches of its military, while NATO has planned around 270. The largest Russian exercise this year took place in March and involved 80,000 personnel, while NATO's Allied Shield drills in June saw 15,000 NATO troops mobilized from across 19 alliance nations.

Eastern Military District spokesman Martov said that the latest Russia-China naval exercise is not directed at any potential foe in particular, but was simply geared toward building interoperability between the two countries' navies.

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