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Russia, China Kick Off Joint Military Drills

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More than 10,000 troops are taking part in the five-day Zapad/Interaction 2021 drills in northwestern China. **Video screen grab. China Central Television (CCTV)**

Russia and China have kicked off joint military exercises as the two countries seek to deepen cooperation amid regional security concerns and deteriorating ties with the United States, the Russian Defense Ministry announced Monday.

More than 10,000 troops are taking part in the five-day Zapad/Interaction 2021 drills in northwestern China's Ningxia Hui autonomous region. According to the Kommersant business daily, Russian troops will use Chinese-made weapons for the first time in history.

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The Russian military said that it had dispatched Su-30SM fighters, motorized rifle units and management personnel to the drill ground.

“The objectives of the exercise are to strengthen the development of Russian-Chinese relations, comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation,” it said in a statement.

The drills also aim to “increase the level of military cooperation and friendship between the armed forces of the two countries, demonstrate the determination and ability of Russia and China to fight terrorism and jointly protect peace and stability in the region.”

Zapad/Interaction 2021 comes amid the withdrawal of U.S.-led forces from Afghanistan, which risks destabilizing the Central Asian region that Moscow views as its backyard.

Russia and China have carried out bilateral as well as multilateral military exercises since 2005.

The sides have stepped up cooperation in recent years over their shared antagonism toward the U.S., with Russia “pivoting” toward China after its annexation of Crimea in 2014 triggered Western sanctions and sunk relations to post-Cold War lows.

President Vladimir Putin has hinted at a Russian-Chinese military alliance, an upgrade from the current strategic partnership, in the future.

Following Zapad/Interaction 2021, the Russian military and China’s People’s Liberation Army are planning exercises as part of the Russian- and Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in September.

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