

Sending a Strong Signal to Washington: Russia and China to Hold Drills in the South China Sea

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China will hold military exercises this week in the South China Sea ahead of a UN arbitration ruling, with analysts saying the drills are meant for peacekeeping while showing that China is capable of defending its territorial sovereignty.

The Maritime Safety Administration of China on Sunday posted a notice on its official website, saying that military exercises in certain waters of the South China Sea will be held from Tuesday to July 11, and all civilian vessels will be prohibited from those areas.

The exercises will finish one day before the UN arbitration court announces its decision on the South China Sea case initiated by the Philippines against China.

“China gave coordinates for the drills that cover an area from the east of China’s Hainan Island down to and including the Xisha Islands,” Reuters reported Sunday.

The Hong Kong Economic Times reported Wednesday that warships from the three fleets of the Chinese navy were spotted at the Sanya military port, Hainan. The warships allegedly included the guided missile destroyer Shenyang under the North China Sea Fleet, the guided missile destroyer Ningbo and the missile frigate Chaozhou under the East China Sea Fleet.

An official from the defense ministry told the Global Times on Thursday that this is a routine exercise according to an annual plan.

“The timing of the exercises in the South China Sea is subtle, but it’s not necessary to link it with the arbitration, because the exercise is a routine activity that was planned a long time ago,” Liu Feng, an expert on Chinese maritime issues, told the Global Times on Sunday.

Wang Xiaopeng, a maritime border expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the Global Times the drill is a normal naval activity to methodically maintain regional stability, which is not connected with specific events or targeted at certain countries.

The situation in the South China Sea is sensitive. However, given the sluggish global economy, it is more essential to improve regional cooperation, instead of making trouble like the US and Japan, Liu said.

Currently, there are some unstable elements in the area, mainly because of persistent intervention from the US and the arbitration case initiated by the Philippines, which have overshadowed the security of the area, Wang said.

China will continue constructing on reefs in the area and improve naval power in order to maintain regional peace and show the outsiders that China has the capability to maintain its own sovereign security, Liu noted.

Sino-Russian cooperation

China's defense ministry spokesperson Wu Qian confirmed to the Global Times at a press briefing on Thursday that China and Russia were negotiating on the "Joint Sea-2016" drills.

China and Russia have held six joint naval exercises since 2005.

In August 2015, 23 vessels and two submarines participated in the Joint Sea-2015 (II) exercise, which took place in the Peter the Great Gulf, the waters off Clerk Cape, and the Sea of Japan, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

In previous exercises when China served as the host, the directing fleets were the North China Sea Fleet and the East China Sea Fleet respectively. Therefore, this time it is very likely that the South China Sea Fleet will take its turn as the main power, and the location might be near the South China Sea as well, media reported.

"The time and location of the joint drills will only be decided by technical concerns, instead of political issues," Wang noted, adding that it shows the maritime interactions on sea between the two countries is strengthening.

"Since the US has been trying to gang up in the South China Sea, the joint drills show that China also needs support and understanding from the international society in order to defend its just title and maintain regional stability," Liu said.

China and Russia vowed to strengthen global strategic stability in a joint statement signed by Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on June 25 during Putin's visit to Beijing, Xinhua reported.

A Chinese fleet with about 1,200 sailors and officers arrived at Pearl Harbor Wednesday to take part in the Rim of the Pacific 2016 (RIMPAC 2016) multinational naval exercise. It is the second time the Chinese Navy has taken part in RIMPAC, Xinhua reported.

"Even though China and the US have some misunderstandings and conflicts over sea issues, cooperation is larger and more important," Liu noted, adding that China's participation in RIMPAC is beneficial to maintain regional safety.

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