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China, Russia to Hold First Joint Military Exercise in August

By Joe McDonald Associated Press Writer
 Published: Aug 2, 2005

BEIJING (AP) - China and Russia will hold their first joint military exercise Aug. 18-25 with nearly 10,000 troops in two sites on China's and Russia's eastern coasts, the Chinese Defense Ministry announced Tuesday.

The announcement highlights warming ties between Beijing and Moscow after decades of Cold War hostility. Their reconciliation has been driven in part by mutual unease at U.S. power and a fear of Islamic extremism in Central Asia.

The exercises with army, navy and air forces will take place on China's Shandong peninsula and in the Russian city of Vladivostok and in nearby waters, the Chinese Defense Ministry said. It didn't give any other details of planned activities.

The exercises are meant to "strengthen the capability of the two armed forces in jointly striking international terrorism, extremism and separatism," the Defense Ministry said in a statement carried by the official Xinhua News Agency.

Plans for a joint exercise were first announced in December.

The Defense Ministry tried to reassure China's neighbors, saying the exercises "neither aim at any third party nor concern ... the interests of any third country."

Earlier Russian news reports suggested the exercises might be held near Taiwan, serving as a rehearsal for a Chinese invasion of the self-ruled island, which Beijing claims as part of its territory. The two sides separated in 1949, and China has threatened repeatedly to attack if the island pursues formal independence.

Russian news reports said Moscow also had asked to hold the exercises in China's Muslim-dominated desert northwest, which borders Central Asia, a region where both governments worry about possible threats from Islamic extremists.

The two governments have invited observers from other governments in the six-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a security group led by Beijing and Moscow, the Defense Ministry said.

The group, meant to combat separatism and Islamic extremism in Central Asia, also includes Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

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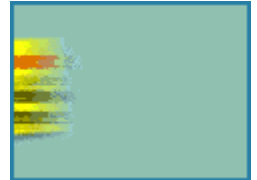
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▶ AP Sports
▶ AP Health/Science
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- ▶ Weather
- ▶ Things to Do
- ▶ Sports
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- ▶ Traffic
- ▶ Classified
- ▶ Real Estate
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- ▶ Information on Demand
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