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## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

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#### CHINA

##### **The Russian paradox in East Asia**

In mid-September, China and Russia have conducted an eight-day joint naval exercise in the South China Sea which involved a range of operations, including search and rescue drills, anti-submarine warfare, and “joint-island seizing missions.” While not formal allies, the two countries have steadily increased their military cooperation and Moscow has foreborne from taking a stance on the controversy over Beijing’s claim to almost 90 percent of the South China Sea which was overruled by Hague’s International Court in July.

In the wake of the July ruling, Russia predictably issued a neutral statement with a view to maintain good relations both with Beijing and with Hanoi which staunchly opposes China’s claim and has a close defense relationship with Russia. As a matter of fact, Russia is in the paradoxical situation of sharing with China anti-submarine tactics while selling Vietnam its diesel-electric improved Kilo-class submarines.

Moreover, earlier this year, ahead of the Hague ruling, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov reached what Beijing described as an “important consensus” on the South China Sea. According to a statement by the Chinese foreign ministry, Lavrov said that Russia

believes that the South China Sea dispute should be resolved through bilateral negotiations between China and each country concerned, which is the position adopted by Beijing.

The statement added that “forces outside the region should not intervene,” obviously referring to the United States whose navy has been carrying out regular freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, drawing Chinese criticism.

In addition to naval exercise, Russia and China cooperate on counterterrorism, holding every year the so-called “Peace Mission” exercises. “Russia and China stick to points of view which are very close to each other or are almost the same in the international arena,” Russian President Vladimir Putin said last June, during a visit to China.

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