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China takes part in a large-scale Russian military exercise

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has dispatched more than 1.600 troops, aircraft, tanks, and military support equipment to a large-scale Russian military exercise, dubbed Center-2019 (Tsentri-2019), and held from the 16th to the 21st of September in Western Russia and in a number of Central Asian countries including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

According to Chinese media reports, the PLA's Western Theatre Command (76th Group Army) has dispatched an undisclosed number of Type 96A main battle tanks, PLZ-07 122 mm self-propelled howitzers, PLZ-10 self-propelled mortar-howitzer and a total of 30 aircraft, including H-6K strategic bombers, JH-7A fighter bombers, J-11 fighters, Il-76 and Y-9 transport aircraft and including eight Z-10 attack helicopters.

Next to China and Russia, the exercise has seen the participation of military personnel from member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as forces from the regional members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which includes India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

While the focus was officially on "counter terrorist" operations, according to Russia's defence minister, the exercise was also set to include repelling enemy air strikes and conducting combined conventional offensive air and ground operations. More precisely the drills comprise two modules:

- The first module to include counter-terror operations, repelling air strikes, reconnaissance operations and defensive measures,
- The second will focus on offensive operations to rout the notional enemy.

Meanwhile, Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu reached yet another agreement to deepen military cooperation earlier this

month. Notably, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the Russian Air Force also jointly conducted their first ever joint long-range aerial patrol in the East China Sea and Sea of Japan.

In fact, two PLAAF Xian H-6K long-range bombers were joined by two Russian Air Force Tupolev Tu-95MS strategic bombers in a mission over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea (23rd of July).

The Japan Air Self Defence Force (JASDF) scrambled fighter jets in response to the joint air patrol to intercept and escort the Chinese and Russian bombers as well as their accompanying support aircraft. According to the Japanese MoD, the two Tu-95MS bombers also flew through the Miyako Strait, situated between the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Miyako in the East China Sea.

Moreover a Russian Air Force Beriev A-50 airborne early warning (AEW) and control aircraft twice violated South Korean airspace over the Dokdo islets, called Takeshima isles by Japan. An incident confirmed by both Defence ministries.

It is clear that the deployment of obsolete bombers dating the Fifties, plus and AEW aircraft belonging to the Eighties of the past century, has just a demonstrative value, but the Dokdo/Takeshima incident shows clearly that Russia wants to divide the East Asian allies over old maritime disputes.

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