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Political Aspects of the Joint Russian-Chinese Naval Exercise in the Black Sea

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The joint naval exercise that was held by the Russian and Chinese navies at the end of July has undoubtedly become one of the most important events in the modern international politics. Even though the scale of this exercise was significantly smaller than the one conducted by American-Japanese-Indian navies, known as the Malabar, that was held at the same time in the Bay of Bengal.

The naval exercise in the Baltic Sea is particularly important due to a number of factors, including the states that were taking part in it, the political background that accompanied the exercise, as well as the region and time frame within which this whole event happened.

In terms of raw production levels China has already become a leading global power. In January 2017, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, China's President Xi Jinping publicly announced his country's readiness to take on the role of the engine that would drive world's economy. His vision of the One Belt, One Road project (OBOR) has already become the basis of Chinese foreign policy.

The emergence of China as a new global superpower is perceived in Washington as a principal threat to the continuation of its unchallenged dominance in the world. Today we witness the exact same situation that occurred on the turn of 20th century, when the struggle between the old superpower (Great Britain) and the emerging ones (US, Germany) centered around the control of maritime trade routes.

Yet, this particular aspect remains the most vulnerable element of China's project of becoming the new world leader. Therefore, one shouldn't be surprised that the development of the modern navy is a top priority for China. Today, Chinese military ships are not just successfully controlling home waters, they are also patrolling the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

However, a voyage across half the globe from home bases to the Baltic Sea undertaken by a group of Chinese military ships with the sole purpose of holding a joint exercise with the Russian naval forces is a truly unprecedented event. It displays the capabilities of the modern Chinese navy along with the important role that Russia plays in Beijing's global plans.

Yet another reason for the unexpected appearance of Chinese military ships in the Baltic Sea is the extremely slow rate that the relations between Beijing and Brussels are evolving. Together with the problems of US-Chinese relations, this topic is gradually moving towards the center stage of the global geopolitical game.

An important component of this process was a idea that China put forward in front of a group of Eastern European states that centers around the creation of a transport infrastructure that would stretch from Greece to Poland. Since 2012, this idea has been discussed at a special forum with the participation of Beijing and a total of 16 Eastern European countries.

However, Washington has recently been trying to get the same group of countries involved in its own projects by taking advantage of Poland. The joint Chinese-Russian "projection of power" in this region can put an end to these games. It is quite possible that Germany will be willing to silently assist this duo.

As for Russia, it's curious that just like a hundred years ago it being perceived by "certain forces" as the "weakest link" (this time in tandem with China) and therefore Russia is becoming the target of all sorts of attacks.

Therefore, against the backdrop of the well-known recent events, Russia's political support from the second world power in the form of joint exercises in the Baltic proved to be extremely timely.

However, the same exercise can be regarded in a different way, as Moscow's attempt to provide political support to China, since the above-mentioned annual Malabar exercise is aimed at countering China's development.

While suffering from the same political, economic and military-strategic pressure applied on them by a single group of states, it's only natural that China and Russia are naturally expanding and deepening their strategic partnership. However, they don't transform those ties into a military-political alliance, thus retaining the freedom for maneuvering in their relations with the countries of the West. However, this maneuvering feels so much better when you know that somebody is covering your back.

That is why during the naval exercise in the Baltic Sea, the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nikolai Patrushev held a meeting with with a member of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Yang Jiechi within the framework of the 13th round of Russian-Chinese consultations on strategic stability. According to media reports, the talks touched upon a wide range of issues related to security and military cooperation.