

More War Games: Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) & Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Join Hands

Responding to US threats: First theater-level joint military exercise

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MOSCOW. (RIA Novosti defense commentator Viktor Litovkin) – In an announcement that would have been sensational if it had not been so logical, Chief of Staff of the Russian military Army General Yury Baluevsky said that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) were planning their first theater-level military exercise. The decision was made almost unanimously on Thursday as CSTO chiefs of staff met at the organization's Moscow headquarters.

The wargame codenamed Peace Mission Rubezh 2007 will be staged in Chebarkul in the Russian Urals. While the scope and the plot have yet to be drawn up and are subject to change, Russia and China are expected to come up with airlift and other support capabilities and battalion-sized motorized rifle or airborne task forces; Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan will participate at a company level (Dushanbe is likely to send its air assault company); others will send platoons.

A Chinese military delegation has already “reconnoitered” the proposed training site, which reportedly led Beijing to allocate its newest battle tanks, in their first appearance abroad, and the latest FC-1 light multirole fighters better known as Super-7 or Chengdu J-10 or Lavi (Israeli version). It is really a plane with a storied past: powered by the Russian AL-31FN/FNM1 engines, it is based on an IAI-built airframe that Israel was eventually forced to sell to Beijing as the U.S. effectively banned it from building its own fighter.

Most countries involved, except China, Armenia and Belarus, are members of both organizations. Likewise, though the CSTO is a military-political alliance and the SCO is economy-powered, both have a number of overlapping challenges to address, which include terror, drugs, proliferation and all kinds of extremism, all expected to be included in the exercise plot.

Presidents of all participating countries – Russia, China, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – are expected to attend the final combat stage. There is still uncertainty over the attendance of the SCO observer nations (India, Pakistan and Iran), while, according to Baluevsky, the formal invitation to his Chinese counterpart Colonel General Liang Guanglie would be sent in the coming days. The exercise will also be open to outside observers.

Remembering the consternation in the Western media over last year's Sino-Russian joint

exercise in the Yellow Sea, fuelled by fears that the two countries were “rehearsing an assault on Taiwan,” who will be targeted this time might look like a perfectly legitimate question. This question was asked very selectively last year (the Indo-Russian exercise was labeled “a Russian attempt to dominate the Indian Ocean”, while at the same time the U.S. was running numerous supposedly peace-loving exercises with the Japanese, Australians and a dozen other nations). The new wargame will by no means go unnoticed – or uncommented-on. Don’t bother to bet on whether the comments will be positive.

Ironically, this will be for a good reason. Together, the CSTO and the SCO account for about half the global population and are increasingly keeping up with the U.S. and NATO in terms of leverage in the UN and elsewhere, to the shock and ire of many politicians there.

In a most recent example, Brussels has been foot-dragging over the CSTO’s proposals on Afghan drug issues. Although the NATO operation in Afghanistan clearly needs more coordination with the governments of neighboring CSTO member states to bring peace and security to the country, Moscow is apparently not treated as an equal partner. So much for such partnerships, then. But let’s get back to forthcoming awkward questions.

The target? Definitely not NATO or the United States or any other bona fide entity. There are enough terrorist and extremist networks in this world of ours.

Why bring in so many countries? It’s simple economics, gentlemen. All the parties concerned stage similar national exercises every year – so why exactly are they expected to do it alone, overlooking an opportunity to do the job much more cost-effectively than before?

And of course, multi-sided anti-terrorist exercises are not only about mobilization, deployment, interoperability and suchlike. An equally important objective is to better understand the combat logic and share best practices. While colorful and really fascinating, what the observers and the media will notice and highlight – heads of state proudly watching a bunch of embattled terrorists torn into pieces by air and missile strikes and eliminated by tanks and special forces – will, in fact, be little more than a show.

Days before that, the chiefs of staff will gather at Urumchi, China, to do the most important part: spread huge maps on the tables and learn to adjust the different military philosophies, determine best practices and align goals and views to achieve the final victory. There will arguably be no media fuss about that meeting, even though its forthcoming results are of greater gravity and consequence than anything visible to – or perceived by – outside observers.

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