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Russia Wants to be a Contender  
The New Problem in the South China Sea  
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The South China Sea might be one of the most contested places on earth, but until last week, at least, one regional player had been conspicuously absent from the fray. Russia had staked out a precarious neutrality, maintaining a longstanding friendship with Vietnam while providing general support for China's regional positions. On September 12, however, the balance came into question when Russia joined China for eight days of joint naval exercises in Chinese waters near Zhanjiang in the south of Guangdong province, which is the headquarters for China's South China Sea fleet.

China and Russia have held joint naval drills annually since 2012, but the Joint Sea-2016 is the first to take place in the South China Sea. Although Russian diplomats reportedly [negotiated](#) [1] with their counterparts to ensure that the drills would be held in waters that are indisputably Chinese, the eight-day exercises involved [island and reef seizure](#) [2] maneuvers, as well as anti-submarine operations, air defense, and naval and air operations. Wang Hai, deputy commander of the Chinese Navy, who is directing the Chinese fleet during these exercises, said that they were designed to enhance Sino-Russian cooperation in countering "[common security threats](#) [3]."

Adding to regional worries about Russia's motivations was the fact that Joint Sea-2016 came just after the July 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favor of the Philippines' claims in the South China Sea. Immediately after the ruling, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement asserting Russia's [neutrality](#) [4]. At the September G-20 meeting in Hangzhou, China, however, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia stood "[in solidarity with China's position](#) [5]" of not recognizing the court's decision and opposing the interference of third parties in the South China Sea dispute.

All the while, Russia has sought to deepen its influence in the region generally. On May 19-20, 2016, it [hosted](#) [6] the conference marking the twentieth anniversary of Russia-ASEAN dialogue in Sochi. The resulting declaration called for exploring cooperation between ASEAN, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia also plans to institute a new eight-day visa-free regime in its far eastern city of Vladivostok [later on this year](#) [7]. A cosmopolitan city in the nineteenth century, Vladivostok became the base for the Pacific fleet in the Soviet era and was closed to foreign visitors until the early 1990s. According to [Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev](#) [8], the hope is that, by removing the visa requirement,

Vladivostok will be able to compete with other open ports in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Hong Kong and Singapore.

To be sure, Russia's poor business climate has [limited](#) [9] its options for economic influence in the region. Indeed, compared to China, Russia's economic role in Southeast Asia is minuscule. China is [ASEAN's largest trade partner](#) [10], recording more than \$345 billion in trade with the region in 2015. Russia's trade turnover with ASEAN during the same period amounted to just \$13 billion, declining from [\\$22 billion](#) [11] in 2014. Despite hopes for achieving \$100 billion in bilateral trade by 2020, Sino-Russian trade also [declined](#) [12] from \$95 billion in 2014 to \$64.2 billion in 2015, reflecting reduced Russian purchasing power, as well as the low price of oil and China's slowing economy.

The Sino-Russian naval drills must anger Vietnam, which top officials of both countries claim to be [Russia's bridge to ASEAN](#) [13]. Although Russian trade with Vietnam remains modest, it is the first Asian country to sign a free trade agreement with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. The Russian gas monopoly Gazprom and Vietnam's Petrovietnam likewise have several cooperative projects, including in the Arctic.

Meanwhile, despite backing away from projects with Vietnam in areas of the South China Sea claimed by China and refraining from overt support for the country, Russia continues to be Vietnam's top weapons supplier. Some of the [systems Russia sells](#) [14] to Vietnam are important for its effort to defend its claims in the South China Sea, and include Kilo-class submarines, Gepard-class frigates, and Molniya fast attack crafts. Russia's [Zelenodolsk shipyard](#) [15] is expected to deliver two more Gepard-class frigates to Vietnam by the end of September, which will support Russia's effort to maintain its neutrality between its two Asian partners after the South China Sea exercises.

Of course, both China and Russia continue to deny that the exercises were directed at any third parties. A spokesman for the Russian Defense Ministry asserted that the drills "were [not connected](#) [16] with any changes in the military-political situation in the particular region." A Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman also described the exercises as [routine](#) [17] and not directed against particular states, although Wang Hai, the director of Chinese forces in the drills, highlighted their "[strategic](#) [18]" nature.

Even after the drills, Russia is unlikely to jettison its historically close relationship with Vietnam for a closer alignment with China on the South China Sea. Russia has been unable to become a full-fledged player in Asia by building on its ties with China alone, and seeks to diversify its energy and defense partners in the region. China may not like Russia's relationship with Vietnam, especially their military cooperation, but with little support in the region for China's position on the South China Sea, the joint drills with Russia provide at least the appearance of agreement with Chinese positions in the South China Sea. Recent statements by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte that his country would [explore purchasing Russian and Chinese weapons](#) [19] and abandon joint patrols with the U.S. in the South China Sea only make Russia's two-track strategy more plausible.

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- [3] [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-09/13/content\\_26778527.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-09/13/content_26778527.htm)
- [4] <http://pronedra.ru/globalpolitics/2016/07/14/rossiya-ne-stanet-vtyagivatisya-v-spory/>
- [5] <https://sputniknews.com/world/20160905/1044988523/russia-china-putin.html>
- [6] <http://www.theasanforum.org/russia-southeast-asia-relations-in-chinas-shadow-2/>
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- [12] <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russian-chinese-trade-plummets-in-2015-51425>
- [13] <http://atimes.com/2016/05/vietnam-is-russias-bridge-to-asean/>
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- [16] <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2797822>
- [17] <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0729/c90000-9092514.html>
- [18] [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-09/13/c\\_135684892.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-09/13/c_135684892.htm)
- [19] <http://www.manilatimes.net/ph-to-buy-weapons-from-china-russia/285912/>