

North Korea, Russia to Stage Joint Defense Drill

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TOKYO — North Korea and Russia are set to hold their first joint defense drill as early as this year in an attempt to balance the United States, South Korea and Japan's influence on the Korean Peninsula, the Asahi newspaper reported Tuesday.

Members of the two neighbors' navies and air forces will take part in a joint rescue exercise at sea, following an agreement reached last month by North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and President Dmitry Medvedev, Japan's Asahi said, citing a source close to the North.

Kim promised Medvedev when they met near Irkutsk last month that he would consider suspending nuclear arms tests and production if six-party talks — bringing together North and South Korea, China, Russia, Japan and the United States — resumed.

Moscow was the North's main ally for decades, giving military and economic support before the Soviet collapse.

It is rare for the North to conduct defense drills with other militaries. Japan and South Korea

are likely to keep an eye on the exercise, though it is not expected to involve the use of weapons, Asahi reported.

Pyongyang, which in 2009 walked out of talks aimed at providing it with economic and energy aid as an incentive to give up its atomic weapons program, has been making conciliatory moves in recent months.

But Seoul, Washington and Tokyo are wary and have called for a restart only when the North takes concrete steps to disable its atomic program such as allowing foreign nuclear inspectors into the country.

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