

Global Power Shift

Sarah Kirchberger
Svenja Sinjen
Nils Wörmer *Editors*

Russia-China Relations

Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?



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Global Power Shift

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Ample empirical evidence points to recent power shifts in multiple areas of international relations taking place between industrialized countries and emerging powers, as well as between states and non-state actors. However, there is a dearth of theoretical interpretation and synthesis of these findings, and a growing need for coherent approaches to understand and measure the transformation. The central issues to be addressed include theoretical questions and empirical puzzles: How can studies of global power shift and the rise of 'emerging powers' benefit from existing theories, and which alternative aspects and theoretical approaches might be suitable? How can the meanings, perceptions, dynamics, and consequences of global power shift be determined and assessed? This edited series will include highly innovative research on these topics. It aims to bring together scholars from all major world regions as well as different disciplines, including political science, economics and human geography. The overall aim is to discuss and possibly blend their different approaches and provide new frameworks for understanding global affairs and the governance of global power shifts.

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Sarah Kirchberger • Svenja Sinjen • Nils Wörmer
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Russia-China Relations

Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?

 Springer

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ISSN 2198-7343

ISSN 2198-7351 (electronic)

Global Power Shift

ISBN 978-3-030-97011-6

ISBN 978-3-030-97012-3 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97012-3>

Funding Information: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

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This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

In memoriam
Hannes Adomeit
(1942–2022)

Acknowledgments

This volume is the outcome of a 2-year research process in which several dozen people from all over the globe were involved in some form or other, and that took place largely during a global pandemic. A publication project of this type typically resembles a marathon that ends in a sprint, and this was no exception. Therefore, the editors are extremely grateful to each and every type of contribution to this project that they received along the way, whether large or small, and what follows below is by no means an exhaustive listing.

Above all, we would like to thank the contributors of this volume, who were all in some way or other detrimentally affected by the pandemic—some in a rather severe way—and yet, nonetheless, found the time to contribute their extremely valuable knowledge and energy to this project. We are hugely grateful to them for prioritizing this project among the manifold obligations and challenges they faced along the way, and hope very much that they are pleased with the outcome.

Svenja Sinjen of SWuD and Sarah Kirchberger of ISPK are especially grateful to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) for its extremely generous financial and intellectual support of their project idea from mid-2019. KAS provided the major portion of the funding for an expert in-person workshop in Berlin in mid-January 2020 and hosted two further in-person events, one in Berlin and another workshop in Brussels, all of which were decisive for sharpening the research agenda of this project. KAS also provided several active participants to the workshop discussions, including several moderators, and also very generously funded the production of this volume as an open-access publication. At KAS, the editors would particularly like to thank Daniela Braun for her constant, enthusiastic support of this research project right from the outset, as well as during the workshop in Berlin in January 2020 and during the publication process. Further KAS colleagues who collaborated with us during this process include Frank Priess, Philipp Dienstbier, Thomas Yoshimura, and David Merkle, who all attended and contributed to the Berlin workshop, and Denis Schrey and Susanne Conrad of the KAS Brussels office who hosted the Brussels workshop. We also owe Elisabeth Bauer of the KAS Office for the Baltic states many thanks for her help in identifying interesting experts. The various forms

of support from KAS, whether financial, organizational, or in terms of expert input and content, were truly invaluable for the success of this project.

At SWuD, we are indebted in particular to Astrid Kuhn, whose support of this research as part of the SWuD's "Global Transformation & German Foreign Policy" project was instrumental in allowing us to generate an initial concept for the research agenda and follow it through. We gratefully acknowledge the SWuD funding we received for the 2020 Berlin workshop. At ISPK, the editors would like to thank Stefan Hansen for his equally decisive support of this research project and the funding we received in support of the publication process.

The editors are especially grateful to all the Russia, China, and security experts who participated in various roles during the research of this project, whether as discussion partners, workshop presenters, peer reviewers, or sparring partners in heated discussions. We particularly benefited from our interactions with Heinrich Brauss, Mathieu Duchâtel, Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, Phillip Karber, Holger Mey, Hanna Katharina Müller, and Timothy Reilly, and are grateful for their extremely valuable input.

It is with great sadness that we acknowledge the debt to our contributor, advisor, and collaborator Hannes Adomeit who on April 25, 2022, passed away after a brief illness. He had taken part already in our first project workshop in January 2020, and besides penning the opening chapter for this volume also served as a reviewer and commentator. We were privileged to work so closely with him during the past two years, are immensely grateful for all his expert contributions to our project, and mourn the loss of a great scholar and dear colleague whose clear-sighted and uncorruptible analyses will be sorely missed, especially in times such as these.

We would also like to thank the many officials from several different nations who participated in our related Berlin and Brussels workshops and offered us their questions, observations, and remarks. All this input helped us to refine the agenda, sharpen our questions, shape our outlook, and ultimately allowed us to form some conclusions that hopefully have value for their own work.

Related to the production of this volume, at Springer Nature, Johannes Glaeser, Niko Chtouris, and Parthiban Kannan were enthusiastic yet patient and incredibly helpful supporters of this publication project. We kindly thank the editors of the Global Power Shift series at Springer for accepting this volume as part of their series.

We would also like to offer our thanks to the group of peer reviewers who have worked with us on helping the authors refine the contributions for this volume. Steen Gilbertson has done a fantastic job of copyediting the contributions, of which only a minority were written by English native speakers. Stella Kim at ISPK has rendered us invaluable editorial assistance and watched over our adherence to the style guide.

Lastly, the editors would like to thank their families and friends for their constant patience and support throughout the past two years. Juggling family obligations with work was particularly challenging during the times of lockdown, and has demanded unprecedented adaptability from everyone. We are therefore grateful for all the help and understanding we received along the way.

We submitted this volume to the printers in late 2021. While we now complete the final proofreading stage in mid-April 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022, is still ongoing and its outcome uncertain. Much as this Russian war of aggression and the ensuing Western sanctions have dramatically changed the security landscape of Europe, and as much as the course of this war will prove to be an important test case regarding the depth of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, only minor changes to our text were still possible at this stage of the publication process, with only cursory and preliminary remarks inserted here and there. The readers of our volume are kindly asked to bear this in mind.

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Introduction: Analyzing the Shifts in Sino-Russian Strategic Cooperation Since 2014



Sarah Kirchberger, Svenja Sinjen, and Nils Wörmer

The aim of this volume is to contribute to an ongoing discussion on the scope and meaning of Russian-Chinese cooperation since 2014, the year Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea. During the past few years, the number of research projects on Sino-Russian cooperation at Western think tanks has markedly increased¹, complementing a likewise increasing number of monographs and edited volumes that had begun to appear on related topics during the preceding years.²

¹Notable research projects of this type include the Carnegie Moscow Center's "Sino-Russian Entente Project" supported by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and led by Alexander Gabuev (since ca. 2019, homepage: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/specialprojects/sinorussianentente/?lang=en>); a videotaped conference "Towards a Russia-China Alliance?" that was convened by Simon Saradzhyan at FRS in Paris in mid-2019 (homepage with video footage: <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/events/2019-06-26-towards-china-russia-alliance>); a series of studies on Russia and China in Europe by RUSI that was launched in mid-2020 (homepage: <https://rusi.org/publication/russia-and-china-europe>); a series of research papers on Russia-China cooperation since 2020 by CNAS, led by Andrea Kendall-Taylor, that includes a related article series in *War on the Rocks* on Sino-Russian defense cooperation; and a methodologically interesting RAND study on "China-Russia Cooperation" (Radin et al., 2021). As this non-exhaustive list illustrates, compared with the time frame before, there has been a remarkable uptick in related think tank research activity since 2019, when our project also started.

²For a listing of recommended readings on Russia-China encompassing monographs, articles, and studies, see our Select Bibliography section. One recent edited volume in particular has followed a

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The present volume is the result of a research project that began in 2019 as an outgrowth of the Foundation for Science and Democracy's (SWuD) project "Global Transformation and German Foreign Policy" that was overseen by Joachim Krause and Svenja Sinjen.

In order to explore the new dynamics created by the increasing rapprochement of China and Russia—two Eurasian great powers that had emerged as the prime challengers of the US-dominated postwar order—the editors of this volume decided to focus on the bilateral relationship between Russia and China and its impact on their joint power to challenge the West. In late 2019, we began to convene an international group of experts on Russia, China, and international security affairs to initiate a process of fact-finding in various fields of Sino-Russian cooperation. The goal was to capture the multifaceted and, as we expected, far from uniform empirical reality of Sino-Russian coordination along and within various strategically relevant fields. The focus of our research lay primarily, but not exclusively, on the security and military domains of Sino-Russian cooperation, as well as on fields that can be assumed to hold strategic importance for either of the two countries—fields where significant vulnerabilities exist that are relevant for ensuring regime survival, or where both countries can be expected to see a high potential for disruptive, anti-Western "grey zone" activity.

In mid-January 2020, we convened a 2-day international fact-finding workshop in Berlin that was attended by 24 experts from 8 countries representing 14 institutions as subject matter contributors and 11 officials from 3 different countries as participants and discussants. Directly afterward, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) convened a panel discussion in Berlin and another closed workshop for European and NATO officials in Brussels where the results of the Berlin workshop, and in particular the military-strategic analyses, were presented and discussed. In the aftermath of these workshop discussions, we decided to make the key findings of our research process available to the public and present as many of the empirical case studies that these assessments were based on as possible.

Some of the chapter authors in the present volume were in attendance at the 2020 Berlin workshop and took its intense discussions into account when finalizing their contributions to the present volume. Other contributions to this book were commissioned later in the process with an aim of covering as broad a spectrum of relevant research topics as possible under the circumstances, with authors writing from different regional, professional, and institutional angles.

Looking back on the 2-year process of our research agenda, a lot has changed in the Russian-Chinese relationship, even within that short time frame. In line with this fast pace of development, the perception among Western scholars regarding the nature and quality of this bilateral relationship has likewise shifted. Earlier deemed

methodically similar, yet in some important respects different approach to the present volume (Bekkevold & Lo, 2019), and its editors have kindly agreed to participate in our project as contributors, using their previous work as the starting point for further discussions (see Chaps. 3 and 11).

by many Western observers to be no more than at maximum a “wary embrace” (Lo, 2017) or a “marriage of convenience” (Lubina, 2017), analysts became increasingly concerned about the scope and quality of the actual cooperation (Dibb, 2019; Kashin, 2019, October 22) and the potential synergies that could pose serious challenges to the Western alliance (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2021). Some erstwhile skeptics of a true Sino-Russian rapprochement were finding it necessary to rethink their earlier stance (Weitz, 2021, July 9; cf. also Gabuev, 2021, March 19).

The question is, however: to what extent could this be just an elaborate ploy, as it could be in the Russian and Chinese leadership’s interest to signal an entente to the USA and its allies as a form of “information warfare”? How can analysts even distinguish between purely symbolic gestures that are intended to inspire fear on the one hand, and actual indications of a deepening strategic trust on the other—the latter being a necessary precondition for a functioning alliance? And in case there is indeed cause to acknowledge such a deepening strategic trust and increasingly coordinated activity—where could this lead, what are its limits, how long might it last, how far could it go, and what would the consequences of all this be for the West, especially the USA, Europe, and NATO?

With two powers that are ruled by leaders who seemingly adhere to a starkly realist worldview that might have been formed through their socialization within a communist system and surviving the breakdown of order (Vladimir Putin during the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Xi Jinping in his youth during China’s Cultural Revolution), a key factor to study is the question of where the Russian Federation’s (RF) and the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) geopolitical interests align, where they diverge, and where the survival interests of Putin’s and Xi’s leadership systems align and overlap. Against the backdrop of a geopolitical climate that is increasingly characterized by systemic competition between democracies and autocracies, the Western practice of imposing arms embargoes and other trade sanctions as a measure against overbearing autocratic behaviors had the unintended consequence of pushing China and Russia closer together while limiting their options for closer cooperation with Western countries. Such outside structural factors that are creating constraints or incentives for cooperation need also to be factored into the analysis.

The editors of this volume propose that to gain a better understanding of where this bilateral relationship stands and where it might ultimately be headed, it is useful to focus on empirical analyses of the rather substantial changes in the breadth and depth of the actual cooperation that have occurred since 2014 in various policy fields that can be assumed to carry strategic importance for both countries. Enhanced cooperation in areas that were in the past deemed too sensitive can be a good indicator of reaching new levels of strategic trust. This first and foremost pertains to types of military cooperation, in particular joint exercises, defense-related cooperation agreements, military-technological exchanges, and actual vs. declared coordination of military activities against other countries, e.g., with regard to their timing. Other strategically important fields include areas where both countries have considerable vulnerabilities and/or overriding strategic interests, such as energy security and oil and gas exploration; Russia’s desire to maintain control over the Russian Arctic coast vs. China’s desire for Arctic development through its “Ice Silk Road”;

both leaderships' strong commitment to suppress domestic dissent and fight separatist forces; both countries' strong interest in cyber control, space development, and emerging ("4IR") technology cooperation; as well as the increasing coordination of their activities in the international arena, especially within the UN system, to fend off Western criticisms of their human rights violations which are seen as Western attempts at subversion.

Cooperative developments in each of these areas need to be weighed against significant and persisting constraints that have in the past worked against a full Sino-Russian rapprochement. These include Russian fears of Chinese economic domination and of illegal migration flows into Eastern Siberia, where China had historic territorial claims; the general Russian anxiety about foreign powers' activities near the Russian Arctic coastline; external constraints through both countries' long-standing strategic partnerships with other countries (such as India and Vietnam in Russia's case, or Ukraine in China's) with which the other party has significant territorial tensions; and last but not least, a long history of mutual betrayals and opportunistic behaviors to the detriment of the other. The question is how to evaluate current changes in one strategic field that point to significantly deepened cooperation against constraints that may still be at work in another field. It is important to note here that it would be unrealistic to expect any two countries, and much less countries as large and diverse as Russia and China, to ever arrive at fully convergent priorities, perceptions, and evaluations in all strategically important areas. That is not realistic even with much smaller powers within the EU or NATO, where long-standing animosities and, indeed, tensions can continue to exist, e.g., between Greece and Turkey.³ Therefore, expectations of China and Russia ever being fully in agreement about their respective national goals, priorities, and perceptions and for them to never experience instances of friction or clashes of interest would be naive. Rather, the degree to which they are demonstrably able to find common ground in fields where cooperation was in the past inhibited through constraints of various kinds may be measured against the situation during previous times where they had found themselves locked in competition bordering on hostility.

A path-dependent dynamic should be taken into consideration when evaluating their developing cooperation, because successfully concluded cooperation projects in one area may lead to the discovery of further synergies either in the same field or others. Further, a history of fruitful encounters between particular actors can induce the participants to adjust their originally negative or skeptical perceptions of each other and can gradually lead to the building of trust on the personal, and later institutional, levels, which can create a new and more positive dynamic. In Europe, long-standing historic enmity between neighboring countries such as Germany and

³It is indeed not unusual even within NATO for member states to have significantly different outlooks and priorities. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in a keynote speech during the NATO Talk conference hosted by the DAG and BAKS in Berlin on November 18, 2021, it does not take a large intellectual capacity to discover that there are differences between the 30 NATO member countries—rather, the challenging question is how to find common ground among them!

France, or Germany and Poland, has been overcome against very long odds (given the atrocities that Germany had inflicted on these neighbors) through just such a process of trust building that was enabled by an alignment of geopolitical interests and strengthened through successful cases of initially limited cooperation. In this, outside pressures, and in particular the geopolitical climate of the time, were undoubtedly a crucial factor, just as in the current Sino-Russian case. There is therefore, as such, no particular reason why a rapprochement should not be possible between Russia and China despite mutual historical grievances. Depending on the general geopolitical climate and what is at stake on both sides, both countries are arguably seeing each other increasingly as assets for protecting one's national interests and reaching one's geopolitical and regime survival goals rather than only through the lens of a competitor. The starting point of this development may have been Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, later reinforced by Russia's annexation of Crimea.

1 Changing Perceptions of Sino-Russian Cooperation over the Years

At the start of the research process behind this volume in 2019, there was still a surprisingly large variety of opinions among experts—Russian, Chinese, and Western—on the quality, trajectory, and potential of Sino-Russian strategic cooperation. Whereas strategists such as Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) had expressly feared such a development many years ago and warned against it as the worst possible geopolitical outcome for the USA and its allies, others (e.g., Lo, 2017) remained convinced that the challenges hindering Russia and China from ever cooperating on a deep strategic level would remain largely unsurmountable.

Some analysts express doubt that there is any genuine deepening in the strategic relationship between China and Russia that goes beyond opportunistic short-term gains and consider related leadership declarations of the deepening strategic partnership to be geopolitical signaling directed at the West. The arguments brought forward in support of such a viewpoint point to the stark power asymmetry between both countries in terms of their economic weight; to their long tradition of strategic distrust and betrayals; and to a historical lack of mutual understanding and people-to-people engagement, resulting in mutual ignorance and a lack of “empathy”; and, they note that the partnership seems primarily interest-driven rather than based on a genuine like-mindedness or affinity (Lo, 2017, pp. 7–9; Kluge, 2019, June 27). Other experts conversely note the increasing scope of Russian-Chinese defense-industrial cooperation that now includes the joint development of experimental systems and technology transfers involving Russian state-of-the-art systems that were long unthinkable. These developments seem to indicate a possible shift in this complex relationship that requires further attention. More recently, increasingly coordinated foreign policy behavior suggests that at the very least, China and Russia

Table 1 How Russian, Chinese, and Western policymakers and experts describe the Russian-Chinese relationship (according to Simon Saradzhyan, 2020)

Description of Sino-Russian relations	Expert(s) and year
An alliance already	Sergei Karaganov (2007) Vasily Kashin (2014)
Not yet an alliance, but likely to become one	Yevgeny Buzhinsky (2016) Yan Xuetong (2016) Zhang Wenmu (2016)
Not an alliance	Russian-Chinese statement of June 2019
Not an alliance and unlikely to become one	Fiona Hill and Bobo Lo (2013); Bobo Lo (2017), Sergei Ivanov (2014), Fu Ying (2016), Chao Xie (2016), Alexander Lukin (2018), Jim Mattis (2018), Graham Allison (2019), Mikhail Korostikov (2019), Dmitri Trenin (2019)
A partnership	Russian leaders and documents (“comprehensive”), Chinese leaders and documents (“comprehensive strategic”), Trenin (“close” in 2018), Lukin (“strategic” in 2018), Feng and Huang (“strategic” in 2014)
An alignment	Daniel Coats (2019), Graham Allison (2019)
Other definitions	Korostikov: Friendship at arm’s length (2019), Trenin: Entente (2018); Richard J. Ellings and Robert Sutter: Axis of authoritarians (2018)

Source: Saradzhyan (2020, pp. 4–5), slightly amended to include Ellings and Sutter (2018)

indeed share a similar strategic outlook and worldview and find themselves united in their desire to see an end to the unipolar post-Cold War world order, as outlined in their 1997 joint communiqué titled “The Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order” (Sinkkonen, 2018, January, p. 3). In that case, are we dealing with an “axis of revisionists” (Stent, 2020, February)?

Simon Saradzhyan in 2020 provided a useful overview of the various stances taken by notable Russian, Chinese, and Western experts until that point in time, capturing the wide scope of disagreement between them when trying to label the Sino-Russian partnership (Table 1):

Overall, it seems that depending partly on individual experts’ national or professional identities and experiences, but most of all depending on the main subject matter of their expertise, they come to widely diverging assessments, ranging from flat-out dismissals of Sino-Russian rapprochement as a pure propaganda ploy without substance on one extreme of the continuum to analyses that see an almost inevitable trend toward even a formalized security alliance on the other, with most falling somewhere in between.

One reason may be that in Western writings on Russia-China, the military-industrial and military-strategic aspects of the cooperation were for a long time somewhat under-analyzed. As a counterpoint to that type of view, other observers noted that after the Crimea annexation of 2014, which ended the period where Russia was still considered a “partner” of NATO and placed considerable strain on the

Russian national economy as a result of Western sanctions, unprecedented developments in Sino-Russian military-industrial cooperation and other military-strategic fields began to take off (Schwartz, 2019; Kofman, 2014, December 4; Kofman, 2020, August 6). Even if purely driven by need and a lack of alternatives, this seemed to indicate the development of some sort of strategic trust. At the same time, new and significant cooperation projects in Arctic LNG and other types of natural resource exploration, in a geographic area of particular Russian sensitivity no less, pointed in the same direction. Noting the significant synergies that Russia and China would be able to exploit economically, in terms of energy security, but also militarily if they came to an even deeper understanding, and with both regimes standing united in their shared opposition to Western notions of an international rules-based order, some analyses point out that the possibility of a far greater collusion in the future should not be discounted (Mitchell, 2021, August 22).

Interestingly, according to a study by Alexander Gabuev and Dmitri Trenin cited and analyzed by Radin et al. (2021, p. 222), “the Russian government conducted a detailed assessment of the benefits, costs, and risks of a closer engagement with China in early 2014” that led to “the reassessment of two risks: a threat of a Chinese takeover (demographic or military) of Russia’s Far East and China’s copying of Russian military technology, both of which were determined to be exaggerated or no longer important. In addition, Russian decisionmakers reevaluated Russia’s position on China’s BRI in Central Asia.” The same RAND study, in two appendices, analyzed numerous commentaries from within the Russian and Chinese policy and expert communities, bolstered by interviews, that show that a mutual process of positive reevaluation seems to have taken place since the Crimea annexation of 2014, which seemingly served as “a distinct inflection point.”⁴ Based on their “shared worldview” and having learned from a problematic past, many Russian and Chinese experts on both sides expressed the notion that neither of the two countries wants to return to their fairly recent state of non-cooperation (Radin et al., 2021, pp. 226–228). Rather, they tended to be overall optimistic about the future of the relationship, predicting ever closer integration (p. 243).

2 The Structure and Aims of This Volume

The present collection of papers brings together 20 authors from 9 different countries (Germany, France, UK, Poland, Norway, Finland, Estonia, USA, Australia) that are based at the time of this writing in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, the UK, Norway, Finland, Estonia, the USA, and Singapore. Some are Russia specialists, others are China specialists, and a few specialize in both, while some have primarily a transatlantic or NATO and defense policy focus. Some have previously been

⁴See the very useful appendixes B on Russian perspectives and C on Chinese perspectives in Radin et al. (2021, pp. 211ff. and pp. 253ff.).

among the most prominent voices in Western discourse on China-Russia, while others are focusing on Russia-China cooperation for the first time. Together, they bring a multitude of methodological, institutional, and regional perspectives to the project that enhances its scope and depth. All the chapters contribute in some way to answering one or several of the guiding questions of this volume:

- What is the *potential* for increased Sino-Russian cooperation based on their existing synergies?
- What *obstacles* stand in the way of fully exploiting these synergies?
- What is the impact of *structural incentives and constraints* on their cooperation?
- What is the likely broad *trajectory* of the bilateral relationship in light of all the above?
- What *problems* could ensue for NATO, and how could Western countries deal with them?

A particular focus of this volume lies on defense-industrial and military-strategic aspects of Sino-Russian cooperation, as these are especially sensitive areas that require a large amount of trust. They also hold the strongest implications for the question of what military synergies could be exploited by Russia and China and how likely the forming of a military alliance (in substance if not in name) ultimately is.

The volume is divided into four main parts. Part I contains analyses of mutual perception patterns and narratives about each other and the shifts that have occurred within these over time. Part II presents case studies of cooperation in fields that have a decidedly military-strategic or defense-industrial connotation. Part III contains case studies of cooperation within physical or nonphysical spaces—the Arctic, Eastern/Central Europe, cyberspace, as well as multilateral organizations. While these case studies discuss non-military issues, they nonetheless can be assumed to have strategic importance for both governments, as they are connected to issues of bolstering and projecting autocratic control while securing areas of regime vulnerability.

The case studies in all these fields look separately into the evidence of cooperation within that narrowly defined field in order to capture in their sum some of the complexity of actual Russian-Chinese cooperation along different fields before attempting a synthesis of “what this all means.”

This attempt is then presented in Part IV, which builds on the work of the previous parts and contains three analyses of the challenges—military and otherwise—that the trajectory of current cooperation presents to NATO, the Europeans, and the Americans.

In Part I on mutual perceptions:

Hannes Adomeit's chapter titled “Putin’s Russia: Global Strategic Outlook and Policies – What Role for China?” asks how the Putin administration views the world and how it evaluates the role of China in furthering the Putin administration’s domestic and geopolitical goals. Contrary to an often reiterated position that Russia as the “junior partner” has much to lose in relation to an ever more powerful China and was driven to embrace China primarily through Western “rejection,” Adomeit argues that Putin’s Russia stands to gain more from a strategic alliance than

even China and that it furthers Putin's geostrategic, economic, military, and systemic goals.

Jo Inge Bekkevold, in his chapter "Imperialist, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China's Changing Views of Russia," conducts a complementary analysis of the historically fluctuating perception of Russia in China, arguing that external pressures generated through great-power relations with the USA have to be regarded as the principal factor explaining the shift from China viewing Russia as a foe to embracing a partnership that is directed against the US-led West. Keeping China's strategic rear safe has an overriding import for China in its strategic competition with the USA, and the turn toward Russia is based primarily on security interests.

Following these assessments, **Marcin Kaczmarki's** chapter "Domestic Politics: A Forgotten Factor in the Russian-Chinese Relationship" sheds light on the role of domestic constituencies within Russia that have an opinion-leading role for shaping the perception of China in Russia. This analysis focuses in particular on societal forces that are key for supporting or resisting a deepened cooperation. Notably, he points out that groups interested in regime survival that influence the Kremlin's threat assessments and groups that have particular interests at stake, e.g., in the energy sector, exercise a strong influence in favor of deepening cooperation with China, forming an influential "pro-China lobby."

The case studies in Part II focus on the military and military-technological dimension of the unfolding strategic coordination.

Sarah Kirchberger's chapter "Russian-Chinese Military-technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor" discusses how arms-industrial cooperation between Russia and China was impacted and massively enhanced as a by-product of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. She argues that old resentment and distrust toward China within the Russian defense-industrial sector, while not completely overcome, was ultimately superseded by new incentives to cooperate more fully. Encouraged by strong Russian leadership support, this resulted in a greatly improved level of cooperation in strategically relevant and highly sensitive arms-technological fields with direct implications for other forms of military cooperation.

Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix's chapter "Russia-China naval partnership and Its Significance" takes an even closer look at the rich history and the current state of cooperation in naval technology and maritime security that goes back to the founding of the PRC. Despite instances of grave violations of trust, not least through Chinese reverse engineering of Russian arms on a massive scale, this has now evolved to include joint naval maneuvers in areas as far-flung as the Arctic, the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean and even to trilateral naval exercises with Iran. In marked contrast to Adomeit's earlier piece, Sheldon-Duplaix contends that it was primarily external pressures after 2014 and the Western sanctions against Russia that have brought about this remarkable shift.

Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska's chapter "Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the 4th Industrial Revolution" complements the previous analyses by focusing on emerging and disruptive technologies, shedding light on the question of how the two countries might develop their military-technological

cooperation into the realm of so-called “4IR” technology fields that could become military game changers—AI, robotics, unmanned systems, or hypersonics. While they see potential for joint development, they also note constraints in particular with regard to the stark asymmetry between both actors with regard to their economic power, which limits Russia’s potential to become a top-notch innovator in many 4IR technologies.

Finally, in a chapter entitled “China-Russia Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence,” **Brian G. Carlson** concludes this part with a sobering study of the significant disruptive potential that could be realized by Russia and China if they decided to combine forces in the strategic field of nuclear deterrence. Carlson argues that against the backdrop of historically very strained relations in the nuclear field, both countries have in recent years begun to act in a coordinated fashion and mutually support each other’s efforts to counter US missile defense and high-precision conventional weapons. The trajectory of this open development might point to synergies in nuclear deterrence that could have an impact on US nuclear deterrence in a crisis.

In the collection of case studies that comprise Part III, **Elina Sinkkonen and Jussi Lassila**’s chapter “Digital authoritarianism and technological cooperation in Sino-Russian relations: common goals and diverging standpoints” analyzes how both countries’ interests in controlling the cyber sphere and creating a high-tech brand of “digital authoritarianism” have led to significant synergies in the past few years, with Russia poised to learn from the more fully developed Chinese example of cyber control. However, they also note and explore some interesting divergences between both countries’ approaches, with China exercising far more sophisticated and complete cyber control than Russia.

In a chapter entitled “Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space” that deals with a key geographic region of traditional friction and distrust, but also of great mutual interest, **Frank Jüris** explores the current state of and significant potential for scientific research in dual-use technologies such as hydroacoustics that have important implications not only for seabed resource extraction but also for submarine operations. Concerningly, by mining Chinese scientific papers and organizational activities recorded on institutional websites, Jüris notes that there seems to already be rather substantial and institutionalized research cooperation in hydroacoustics between Chinese and Russian scientists in which numerous organizations with deep defense ties are involved on both sides.

The chapter by **Edward Lucas and Bobo Lo** looks at another region of potentially significant cooperation in which little coordination seems to exist so far. In “Partnership without Substance: Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe,” they conclude that despite significant activities on both sides, the synergies between the Russian and Chinese approaches to that region that theoretically exist have so far remained largely unexplored, rendering Central and Eastern Europe a mere “backwater” of Sino-Russian cooperation. Looking at this chapter alone, one might come away with the impression that there is not much evidence of any deepening strategic cooperation between the two great Eurasian powers. Lucas

and Lo even note a widening asymmetry that calls into question the longevity of the relationship but also note that “the real test [of the Sino-Russian relationship] lies elsewhere—Northeast Asia, Central Asia, the Arctic, Antarctica, and the future of the global order.” China’s lack of overt military support for Russia’s full invasion of Ukraine in 2022 tends to support that conclusion.

The final chapter in this part by **Olaf Wientzek** focuses on Sino-Russian collaboration in the international arena, taking the Geneva-based international organizations as a case study. In his contribution titled “Cooperation between Russia and China in multilateral organizations—a tactical or a strategic alliance?” he demonstrates that there is a rising degree of Sino-Russian coordination in the international arena that seems increasingly geared toward challenging the norms of global governance that have defined Western-led multilateralism during the entire postwar era. He describes this behavior as a tactical alliance that is “often defensive rather than proactive,” yet even in its limited form already poses challenges to rules- and values-based multilateralism, calling for measures to contain the influence of this “tandem.”

Building on the empirical studies presented in Parts I to III, Part IV, the final part, attempts to build on these case-based analyses of Sino-Russian cooperation to answer the question of where these developments could lead and what this ultimately signifies to NATO, to Europe, and to the USA. Is there really cause for concern that an alliance in form if not in name could be in the making? If so, what would be the political and security implications? Or, do the case studies conversely indicate that barriers to a deepening military cooperation seem hard to overcome in actual practice?

Realizing that there are significant divergences of perception and opinion among and between the various transatlantic allies regarding these issues, Part IV begins with a sobering analysis that was originally conducted by **Brigadier General (ret.) Rainer Meyer zum Felde** for our January 2020 workshop in Berlin titled “What a military alliance between Russia and China would mean for NATO.” Drawing on his experience in numerous official NATO functions, he details the concrete military threats that would emerge for the transatlantic alliance if Russia and China were to make even limited use of their military synergies and turned their strategic cooperation into a tactical, opportunistic alliance to exploit the potential of strategic simultaneity of Russian aggression in Europe and Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. He concludes that Europe is unprepared for such an eventuality, NATO having focused exclusively on scenarios where Russia would be acting alone. Meyer zum Felde stresses the urgent need that follows from this analysis of enhancing NATO’s deterrence posture in Europe and thereby assisting the USA in upholding deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, with an aim to influence both China’s and Russia’s risk calculus and make joint military adventurism on their part less attractive.

In the following chapter on “Options for dealing with Russia and China—a US perspective,” **Andrew A. Michta** addresses the question of what can and should be done to address the military concerns outlined in the previous chapter. Pointing to significant weaknesses in Europe’s defense, like Meyer zum Felde, he argues that rearming Europe is a necessity. He makes a plea for “burden transferring,” where the USA provides only high-end and nuclear capabilities to Europe, while Europeans

themselves take care of core military capabilities as the best way forward to counter the risks of a Sino-Russian alliance.

This American view is then complemented by a chapter penned by **Joachim Krause** titled “The way forward from Europe’s point of view.” Taking a historical perspective by discussing previous instances of authoritarian powers forming axes for opportunistic gain, he points out that the question of whether or not a Sino-Russian military alliance would be long-lived is ultimately not the truly pressing question. Rather, analysts should be concerned with the destructive potential that even a very short-lived, purely tactical collusion might cause and how the mere existence of such an alliance between autocrats already raises the risk of war. Like Meyer zum Felde and Michta, Krause stresses the need for Europe and NATO to rearm and enhance deterrence to discourage an attempt on the Baltic NATO members or Poland.

In that sense, all three chapters in the synthesis part of this book are largely in alignment in their analysis of the security challenges posed by Russia and China, and all three chapters agree that much is left to be done on the part of NATO, Europe, and also the USA to enhance deterrence in case Russia and China should decide to collude more strongly in the military realm.

The concluding chapter by **Barry Pavel, Sarah Kirchberger, and Svenja Sinjen** “Connecting the dots and defining the challenge” summarizes the main strands of the discussion presented throughout this book, addresses the discrepancies found between authors studying various empirical fields analyzed in the case studies, and reconnects these reflections with the overarching questions posed at the outset of the volume. Finally, it sketches out areas of Russian-Chinese cooperation that this volume was not able to include in its scope of analysis, but that would merit further empirical research, thereby proposing an agenda for future research.

By bringing their 2-year research process to a conclusion, the editors and contributors are delighted to make the results of their work freely available to all. They hope that their efforts will provide the research community food for thought, inspiration, and ample material for further analyses of the unfolding Russian-Chinese cooperation: a bilateral partnership between Eurasian giants that is poised, for better or worse, to shape the future of Eurasia.

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Part I
Mutual Perceptions and Narratives

Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?



Hannes Adomeit

1 Introduction

This examination deals with the mental maps and basic assumptions underlying Russia's foreign policy and how these relate to China. I will take issue with the narrative, advanced in particular by Kremlin officials and pro-Putin apologists in the West, that Russia's "pivot to Asia," with China as its centerpiece, can be understood as the consequence of the West having rejected Putin's outstretched hand for close cooperation, Russia's exclusion from an all-European security structure by pushing NATO's eastward expansion, and finally the imposition of economic sanctions. This, to complete the account, had left Russia with no other option but to turn to Asia. Such interpretations will be shown to be fundamentally flawed. Putin's China policies fit squarely into both the Russian power elite's global strategic outlook and its narrow perception of what is needed to hold on to power domestically. The benefits accruing to Russia from its liaison with China can be found in military, economic, and systemic dimensions, and they are for the most part asymmetric in favor of the Kremlin. The asymmetries may cause problems in the future, but for the time being, they are carefully managed so that they will not spin out of control.

2 Russia's Global Strategic Outlook

Discussion of Russian policies is often based on "Russia" as a synonym for *Putin*. This is certainly the equation fostered by his friends and followers, but there is some analytical justification for it. The system he has built has aptly been called the "Putin

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System.” It is authoritarian and autocratic and increasingly centralized, conforming to the Kremlin’s notion of the “vertical of power” (*vertikal’ vlasti*). Decisions of any significance in domestic or foreign policy cannot be made without participation and consent of the Kremlin’s chief. That applies even more so to the formulation of basic foreign policy directions.

However, a sharp distinction needs to be made between what could legitimately be considered Russian “national interests” and those advanced by Putin and his colleagues. The latter interests are more narrow, self-serving, and parochial. They flow from other essential features of the system, that of a “kleptocracy” (Dawisha, 2014; Åslund, 2019 and Åslund, 2021, March 14) and a “mafia state” (Galeotti, 2018; Harding, 2011 and 2020), with crime and corruption constituting major “building blocks” of the system (Adomeit, 2018, July).

Finally, the composition of the ruling circle is of considerable importance for any assessment of the essence of Russian domestic and foreign policy. The most important individuals with the foremost influence on domestic and foreign policy decision-making are what collectively have come to be known as the *siloviki*, literally translated as the “people of force” or “strongmen.” These are former or current officials of the secret and internal security services as well as “law enforcement” agencies forming a “secret services syndicate” (Mommsen, 2017), with the FSB as the “central element” of Putin’s power system (Galeotti, 2021, March 16). Putin learned about wider society as an officer of the KGB. He is a product of that system and deep down will always think like that system does (Belton, 2020, July).

Put in categories of international relations theory, the way Putin and the *siloviki* look at the world conforms to the precepts of the “realist” school that largely fails to do justice to the reality and realities of world politics and that, in particular, is blind to the cooperative, multilateral, and “win-win” aspects of international relations. Its core elements in the Russian post-Soviet context became visible as early as 1993 as the advocates of “Great Power” policies (*derzhavniki*), nationalism, chauvinism, and “Eurasianism” combined to dismantle the vestiges of Gorbachev’s New Political Thinking and the transatlantic approach as represented by then foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev. The “new” ideology was devoid of the previous Marxist-Leninist ideological component but restored many of the elements of the Soviet leadership’s ideas about international affairs. These include the following¹:

- Power, prestige, status, and influence of any given country in world affairs depend on the size of its population, geographical expanse, endowment with natural resources, volume of industrial and agricultural output, and access to or control over human and material resources abroad. The most important factor determining the influence of a country in international affairs is military power.

¹This reconstruction of the Russian power elite’s global outlook relies on both public and private statements as well as its foreign policy practice. The behavioral aspects of this outlook also uncannily resemble the principles associated with Nathan Leites’ “operational code” of the Soviet Politburo as discerned by Leites (1951).

The centerpiece of Russian military power and the foundation of its sovereignty are its strategic nuclear weapons.

- Military threats, whether explicit or implicit, will make opponents compliant. The greater the discrepancy between one's own military capabilities and that of the opponent(s), the more effective the threat. Both the domestic political orientation and the foreign policies of allies and adversaries can be influenced by external pressure (Westerlund, 2021).²
- In international relations, power vacuums cannot exist for long. "If Russia were to abstain from an active policy in the CIS or even embark on an unwarranted pause, this would inevitably lead to other, more active, states resolutely filling that [geo] political space" ("Vystuplenie na plenarnom," 2004, July 12).³
- The post-Soviet space is Russia's exclusive sphere of influence, an area of Russian special or privileged interests. It is politically and culturally part of the Russian World (*Russkiy mir*), which not only includes ethnic and non-Russian ethnic minorities in the Russian Federation but also 30 million members of the Russian national community (*obshchina*) and Russian speakers (*russkoyazychnye*) abroad. In fact, it unites all those who value the Russian language and culture, regardless of where they live, be it in Russia or beyond its borders (Putin, 2012a, January 23).⁴
- The West is fundamentally and irreconcilably ill disposed toward Russia.⁵ Its aim is to "contain" Russia, maximally to weaken and constrain it, to limit its global and regional influence and even, if it saw corresponding opportunities, to dismember it ("Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossii," 2004, September 4).⁶
- The Western governments' clamor for the universal dissemination of human and civil rights, pluralism, democracy, and the "free flow of information" as well as the deployment of so-called "non-governmental organizations" are part and parcel of hybrid warfare against Russia and designed to subvert its global and regional influence. One of the major techniques used by them are so-called color revolutions, that is, the overthrow of legitimate governments (Putin, 2007, February 10).⁷

²This is the conclusion to be drawn from current research on the role of the military in Putin's foreign policy as reviewed by Westerlund.

³Putin at a meeting with Russia's ambassadors and senior diplomatic representatives. CIS is the abbreviation for Commonwealth of Independent States, the term used by Russian officialdom essentially for the post-Soviet geopolitical space.

⁴The Russian World has found its institutional and organizational expression in the foundation of the same name chaired by Vyacheslav Nikonov, the grandson of former Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov.

⁵In the Soviet era, this was called "irreconcilable antagonism between two opposed world systems, imperialism and socialism."

⁶"Some would like to tear from us a 'juicy piece of pie.' Others help them. They help, reasoning that Russia still remains one of the world's major nuclear powers, and as such still represents a threat to them. And so they reason that this threat should be removed. Terrorism, of course, is an instrument to achieve these aims."

⁷"The so-called non-governmental organizations are formally independent but they are purposefully financed and therefore under [government] control. [...] We see them as an instrument that foreign states use to carry out their Russian policies."

The major source of the challenges and threats as perceived by the Kremlin is the United States with NATO as its instrument in Europe. It is this very context that establishes the basic perceptual reference and political framework for Russia's China policies. That can be convincingly demonstrated by focusing on the origins of the "strategic partnership" between the two powers.

3 Origins of the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership"

In contrast to the plethora of "strategic partnerships" both Russia and China have declared to exist as well as the (now defunct) German-Russia and EU-Russia "strategic partnership" (Adomeit, 2021), the partnership between Russia and China bears two distinguishing features: It does indeed possess a *strategic* quality, and it is, from the perspective of both signatories, directed against the *United States*.

The "strategic partnership" can be said to date back to 1996. In order to take into account the expanded economic, political, cultural, and security policy dimensions and institutionalized forms of cooperation, the relationship was renamed a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2011. The "pivot" post 2014 only accelerated a development that had begun two decades earlier.

In fact, common interests and perceptions between the power elites in Moscow and Beijing were already evident in the mid-1990s and expressed themselves in several agreements and reactions to international developments (Wacker, 2002 and Shtraks, 2015). When NATO in September 1995 had adopted basic principles for the admission of Central and Eastern European countries as members of the military alliance, it sparked loud protests in Russia. It helped first to dilute the pro-Western orientation as represented by foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev and then to stop it altogether in January 1996 with the appointment of Evgeni Primakov, head of the SVR foreign intelligence service, in his place. In preparation for president Boris Yeltsin's visit to Beijing in April 1996, Primakov persuaded the Kremlin chief to propose to Chinese president Jiang Zemin to elevate the term of "constructive partnership," used since 1994 for Russian-Chinese relations, to "strategic partnership."

At the same time, relations between China and the United States turned into a crisis. Its peak occurred in December 1995 when Washington responded to China's missile tests near Taiwan by sending a carrier task force led by the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz through the Taiwan Strait in the largest US show of force in Asia since the Vietnam War. In addition, in early April 1996, the United States and Japan agreed on several measures to strengthen their security alliance.

In the same month, the Yeltsin-Jiang Zemin summit took place. Fourteen agreements were signed, and the two powers declared their intention to develop an "equal, trusting partnership aimed at strategic cooperation in the 21st century." This intention was reflected 1 year later at the Moscow summit in the Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on Multipolarity and the Formation of a New Global Order.

Thus, for all practical purposes, the two powers assured each other that they would respect their self-declared spheres of influence, Russia in Europe and China in Asia, respectively, and insulate them against US “interference.” Apparently to provide substance to the mutual assurances and as signals to the United States and NATO, the two actors have increasingly cooperated in several dimensions over the past few decades.

4 The Military Dimension

Putin has characterized the scope and depth of Russian-Chinese military cooperation as follows: “We regularly conduct joint military exercises—at sea and on land in China and the Russian Federation—and share best practices in building the armed forces. We have achieved a high level of cooperation in the defense industry. I’m not just talking about exchanging or buying and selling military products [weapons and equipment] but also about sharing technology, which is perhaps most important. [...] Undoubtedly, the cooperation between Russia and China increases the defense potential of the Chinese People’s Army, which is in the interests of both Russia and China” (“Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba Valday”, 2020, October 27).

One of the aspects of such cooperation has been extensive Russian arms deliveries and assistance to China in the licensed production of weaponry.⁸ Another facet is joint military exercises, conducted by units of the Russian and Chinese ground, air, and naval forces in different geographical areas (Gressel, 2018, September 25; Paul, 2019; Gorenburg, 2020; Middendorf, 2021, February 1). Since April 2012, the Chinese Navy has held maneuvers with Russian participation in the Yellow, East, and South China Seas and Russia in the Japanese, Okhotsk, and Baltic Seas with Chinese participation.⁹ In 2018, China took part in the large-scale Vostok (East) maneuvers held in Russia with around 3000 Chinese troops, tanks, air defense forces, and bombers participating. On December 22, 2020, six strategic bombers—four Chinese and two Russian—completed a joint patrol mission over the East China and Japan Seas.

4.1 *Parallelism Russia/Ukraine and China/Taiwan*

Russia, throughout 2021, substantially enhanced its threat posture in relation to Ukraine. This was evident both verbally and by means of a series of scheduled

⁸Concerning the arms trade, see Chapter “Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor” by Sarah Kirchberger.

⁹For the scope and frequency of Russian-Chinese naval maneuvers, see Chapter “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix.

and unscheduled maneuvers and troop movements. These began at the end of March and lasted through April, with troop movements and exercises taking place all along the borders with Ukraine, in the Crimea, and the Black Sea, officially to test the “combat readiness” of the armed forces. According to chief of staff Valery Gerasimov, “more than 300,000 soldiers and 35,000 guns, vehicles and special equipment, 180 ships and boats and around 900 aircraft” took part in the exercises (“Bolee 300 tys voennosluzhashchikh,” 2021, April 29). However, based on the discrepancy between the huge number of weapons and military equipment and the number of forces, it is reasonable to assume that the number of 300,000 soldiers was still to be regarded as an understatement (Fel’gengauer, 2021, September 13, and Fyodorov, 2021, September 18). In August, the drills continued primarily on Belarusian soil in preparation for the main Zapad event (Kofman, 2021, September 8).

On September 10–16, 2021, troops from Russia and its neighbor Belarus, with the symbolic participation of military units from several other countries, held their quadrennial military maneuver Zapad (West) in part near the border with NATO member states Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania but also in the proximity of Ukraine (Adomeit, 2021).¹⁰ The participation of 200,000 troops, over 80 aircraft and helicopters, and up to 760 units of military equipment, including tanks, rocket launchers, and mortars, is noteworthy not only for its officially declared (although exaggerated) enormous size,¹¹ including 2 armies (the first Guards Tank Army and the 41st Combined Arms Army) and 3 airborne divisions (Gol’ts, 2021, September 13), but also for the fact that the main action did not take place in Belarus but more than a thousand kilometers to the east in the Nizhny Novgorod and Voronezh regions. Considering that the latter region (*oblast’*) borders on the separatist republic of Luhansk, it is safe to assume that one of the purposes of the maneuvers was to rehearse military intervention in Ukraine (Adomeit, 2021, September 27, and Fyodorov, 2021, September 18). Its political and military significance was underlined by the fact that the crescendo of the exercise took place at the Mulino training ground in Nizhny Novgorod *oblast’* and that it was attended by the top Russian political and military leadership, including president and supreme commander Putin, defense minister Shoygu, and chief of staff Gerasimov.

China did not participate in the exercises on European soil, but on August 9–14, Chinese forces conducted joint drills with Russian forces at a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) base in West China’s Ningxia Hui autonomous region, the exercises involving as many as 13,000 troops and 400 pieces of military hardware, including 200 pieces of armor, 90 artillery units, and 100 aircraft (Clark & Barros, 2021, September 17). Evidently to signal Beijing’s political support for Russia’s military

¹⁰For details of the Zapad 2021 maneuver and its significance, see the section below.

¹¹A good indication of actual numbers is assessments by Western military experts of the Zapad 2017 exercise, according to which around 50,000 soldiers were involved (Kofman, 2017, December 23). The inflation in numbers for Zapad 2021, contrary to the numbers officially provided for the April drills, is reflected in the discrepancy between the high number of troops and the low number of weapons.

moves in the European theatre and NATO context, the maneuver on Chinese soil was called the Zapad 2021 Interaction.

Apparently in preparation for yet another round of military pressure, the personnel that had taken part in Zapad 2021 returned to their bases, but their equipment was largely left behind (Gol'ts, 2021, September 13). At the beginning of November, they returned. Thus, components of the first Guards Tank Army were deployed to Maslovka close to the border with the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv in the country's northeast. A further concentration of military vehicles assembled around Rostov, also just east of Ukraine. This last move was presumably to enable Russia to infiltrate Ukraine's Donbas region, an intention strongly suggested by the high numbers of military transports that arrived at the airport in Rostov-on-Don (Gressel, 2021b, November 17, and Bennetts & Brown, 2021, November 16). Earlier, the Russian High Command had also increased the number of military assets in Crimea (Gressel, 2021a, September).

In conjunction with the military moves and maneuvers, the Kremlin sharpened its verbal threats. In a wide-ranging reassessment of history, president Putin rejected the legitimacy of Ukraine as a sovereign state and charged that its leadership was just willing tools of foreign interests (Putin, 2021, July 12).¹² Dmitri Medvedev, in his capacity as deputy chairman of the Russian national security council, called it "senseless" to talk to the Ukrainian leaders: It would be a waste time to deal with their "bastardish" (*ubliudochnyi*) and "moronic" (*debilnyi*) initiatives (Medvedev, 2021, October 11). The harsh rhetoric links up with earlier warnings by Putin that if Ukraine entered NATO, the country would "cease to exist as a state" (Blank, 2008, May 14, and Socor, 2008, April 14)¹³; in September 2014, that if he wanted, "Russian troops could not only be in Kiev in two days but also in Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw or Bucharest" (Brössler, 2014, September 18)¹⁴; and more recently, according to foreign minister Lavrov, that "anyone who tries to unleash a new war in the Donbas will destroy Ukraine" ("Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del," 2021, April 1).

The Kremlin's denial of legitimacy for a sovereign Ukrainian state; its claim that Russians, Belarusian, and Ukrainians are one people; and the threat that Moscow will do everything up to and including the use of force to prevent Ukraine from taking a European path of development and associate itself with the EU and NATO

¹²The rejection of the legitimacy of Ukraine as a sovereign state was blurred, coming in the form of Putin saying that "true [sic] sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia." Similarly indirect was his charge that the Ukrainian leadership was essentially subservient to foreign interests, saying that "it important for us to understand that our partner is defending its national interests but not serving someone else's, and is not a tool in someone else's hands to fight against us."

¹³At the Russia-NATO Council meeting in Bucharest in April 2008 and thereafter in meetings with US president George W. Bush.

¹⁴Based on a summary of talks between Poroshenko and EU commission president José Manuel Barroso on September 12, 2014. Earlier in the month, it had been reported that Putin had said in a telephone conversation with Barroso that "If I wanted, I could take Kiev within two weeks." The Kremlin subsequently did not deny the threat but criticized Barroso for allowing the content of the conversation to be made public ("Putin drohte mit Einmarsch," 2014, September 18).

find their counterpart in the Chinese leadership's assertion that Taiwan is just a renegade Chinese province and that, if attempts at peaceful reintegration fail, force will be used to achieve that legitimate aim.

Thus, in a major speech about the "unification" of Taiwan with China, on December 26, 2018, Xi Jinping stated that "We make no promise to abandon the use of force, and retain the option of taking all necessary measures." These could be adopted if there was "intervention by external forces." He also said that "Different systems are not an obstacle to unification, and even less are they an excuse for separatism." Ominously in the light of the dismantling of democracy in Hong Kong, Xi guaranteed that China would respect the Taiwanese people's religious and legal freedoms in a unified "one country, two systems" framework (Buckley & Horton, 2021, January 1). Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the CCP mouthpiece, the *Global Times*, also warned: "If US troops are present on the island of Taiwan, China will crush them by force" (Vittetoe, 2021, October 15). Another contribution to Beijing's threat posture was provided by the Chinese state-controlled magazine *Naval and Merchant Ships* detailing a three-stage plan to invade Taiwan involving ballistic missiles, fighter jet attacks, and amphibious landings on Taiwan's beaches (Knox, 2021, July 2). Sub-conflict operations or "gray zone" operations have already begun, including frequent airspace incursions by PLA fighter aircraft, shows of force by Chinese warships around Taiwan, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns designed to demoralize Taiwan's society and undermine popular support for the government in Taipei. The credibility of such threats is enhanced by the fact the actual use of military force is no longer hypothetical. China has tended to follow through on its warnings and threats. For instance, of all the islets and reefs in the South China Sea it has taken from Vietnam, the Philippines, and other neighbors, China has not surrendered a single one.

Another area where Russia's interests and policies coincide with and where it acts in parallel with China is the Near and Middle East, notably Syria and Iran.

4.2 *The Near and Middle East*

The origins of the Russian military intervention in Syria, the cooperation and coordination of policies with Iran in Syria, and the common approach with China toward Iran can be found in Libya. In the first few months after the mass demonstrations against the Muammar al-Gaddafi regime, Russian government reactions were by and large in line with Western analyses (Issaev, 2021). Thus, the foreign ministry discerned the causes of the turmoil in the Arab countries in the socio-economic and political spheres: the inflexibility of leaders and political elites; the low degree of social mobility; high unemployment, corruption, and other social diseases; and the refusal to embark on urgent reforms (Bogdanov, 2011, July 5, and Lavrov, 2011, May 12). In line with such perceptions, president Medvedev ordered Russia's abstention from UN resolution 1973 of March 17, 2011, which authorized member

states to take “all necessary measures,” including military measures, to protect civilians and areas inhabited by civilians against attack.

This decision and NATO's extension of the UN mandate, however, were severely criticized by Putin. He called the resolution “flawed and defective” and a “medieval call to a crusade.” After the bombing of Yugoslavia and the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, he charged, it was now apparently “Libya's turn” (Putin, 2011, March 21). The then Russian chief of staff, General Nikolai Makarov, anticipating by little more than a year the theoretical considerations about alleged Western concepts and the practice of “non-linear” warfare by his successor Gennadi Gerasimov, bluntly claimed that the leaders of some countries wanted to use the techniques of “color revolutions” to eliminate political regimes they disliked, including in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, and to advance their strategic interests in the Near and Middle East. He feared that the same techniques could be applied to Russia and its neighbors (Allison, 2013).

Furthermore, the failure to stem regime change in Libya and Ukraine strengthened Putin's determination to never again permit another “color revolution,” no matter where it would occur. This manifested itself in the qualitative upgrading of Russia's political support, arms deliveries, and the dispatch of military advisers to direct military intervention with its own troops and the construction and expansion of military bases in Syria (Kofman, 2020a, p. 38). Putin thereby not only aligned Russia's autocracy with its “strategic partner” Iran, the theocracy of Ali Khamenei, but also more closely with its “comprehensive strategic partner” Xi Jinping, on a solidly anti-American basis.

As in its relations with other countries, in contrast with China, the form Russia's engagement in Syria has taken is primarily *military*. In August 2015, Russia began to send troops, combat aircraft, tanks, and artillery to the Hmeimim airbase near the port city of Latakia and improve facilities at its naval base in Tartus. In September, it actively entered the war with airstrikes from the air base, and in October it struck targets in Syria with long-range cruise missiles from four warships of the Russian Navy's Caspian Flotilla. Russia is evidently planning to maintain its military presence for the long term. It operates the Hmeimim air base practically on its own and decided to turn it into a component of its permanent military contingent stationed in Syria (“Rossiya nachala formirovat,” 2017, December 26). Furthermore, in 2019 it signed a 49-year agreement to lease the Tartus naval base, thus expanding the facility, and to also entrench its naval forces in the country (Kofman, 2020a, p. 37).

Military aspects also extend to Russia's “strategic partnership” with Iran. For its cruise missile strikes from the Caspian Sea, it needed Teheran's consent for them to overfly Iranian territory, which was granted. Even more significant, it was allowed to use the Nojeh Air Base in the western province of Hamadan to strike targets in Syria. Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's supreme national security council, explained that “Iranian-Russian cooperation to fight terrorism in Syria is strategic, and we share our capacity and capabilities with each other” (Khalaji, 2016, August 17). Russian-Iranian military-to-military ties have involved not only joint maneuvers in the Caspian Sea and the Gulf, but have been extended by Tehran's offer to Moscow for the use of three naval bases on its Gulf coast (Goble, 2020, October 1).

China's military and security involvement in the war in Syria has practically been non-existent. In Iran, it has been less pronounced than that of Russia, but has been on the increase. Cooperation has included joint training and exercises, joint research and weapons development, and intelligence-sharing. In December 2019, joint naval drills took place between China, Iran, and Russia covering a wide area in the Indian Ocean and the Sea of Oman. The exercises took place just as tensions between the United States and Iran reached a crisis point (Haider, 2020). In September 2020, China, Russia, Iran, and some other nations held the massive joint military maneuver Kavkaz (Caucasus) in the Astrakhan region of Russia. The series of trilateral exercises, in part with the participation of other countries, continued in February 2021 in the northern part of the Indian Ocean.

Unlike Iranian officials, who generally exaggerate the importance of the exercises, conveying the notion that the drills signal a new triple alliance in the Middle East, Russian and Chinese officials have been more restrained, framing the joint exercises as part of routine anti-piracy operations, highlighting their peacekeeping priorities, and at times even seeking to depoliticize the exercises ("Russia, China, Iran," 2021, February 9). The message of the troika to the United States to refrain from military moves in the area is nevertheless unambiguous.

Russia's challenge to the United States in tandem with China even extends to Washington's "back yard," the Western Hemisphere.

4.3 *Venezuela*

Venezuela provides another example of Russian and Chinese involvement that runs in parallel but is in all likelihood uncoordinated. Nicolás Maduro would most likely not still be in power were it not for the support he has received from five countries: Russia, China, Cuba, Iran, and Turkey (Rendon & Fernandez, 2021, October 19). These states have provided varying degrees of financial, military, and intelligence support. Beginning in the Chávez years, Moscow has sold the country military equipment in the amount of several billion US dollars, including tanks, fighter jets, and small arms. While many of the purchases involved advance payment in oil, as of 2019 Venezuela owed Russia at least US\$10 billion for fighter jets it had purchased. The two countries have also established a factory in the country to produce rifles, as well as a facility to train Venezuelan pilots to fly Russian-made helicopters.

Putin has underscored his support for Maduro through symbolic military gestures. In December 2018, for instance, two nuclear-capable strategic bombers were sent to Venezuela. Three months later, two Russian military planes arrived in Caracas bearing troops and equipment. Furthermore, the Kremlin's involvement in Venezuela includes the Kremlin-supported paramilitary Wagner Group to help the Maduro regime to survive ("Band of Brothers," 2020, September 21, and Rendon & Fernandez, 2021, October 19).

China's involvement, in contrast, has focused more on deriving maximum economic benefit from the engagement. The Chinese, according to Chávez, offered

more flexible loans than other countries “without strings attached” (“Band of Brothers,” 2020, September 21). By 2015, China had loaned Venezuela more than US\$64 billion, primarily through two of its largest banks. The strings, however, may not always be so readily apparent. As in many other countries worldwide, China has mitigated risk in its state-to-state loans, for example, by collateralizing them through parallel contracts under which the loan recipient would deliver commodities to Chinese importers, including oil and gas, and if the recipient is unable to provide the goods or pay, China would demand compensation in the form of important assets.

Moscow's involvement in Venezuela, as in other countries, may not be coordinated with Beijing. The fact of the matter nevertheless is that their support for Maduro counteracts US interests, and as in Iran their involvement serves to circumvent the sanctions imposed by the United States on Venezuela's oil exports. This obviously serves the Kremlin's perceived interest to frustrate, to the maximum extent possible, US power and influence.¹⁵

To summarize, Russia has benefitted significantly from the growing cooperation with China in the military dimension; its exercises with China that have grown in frequency, geographic reach, and substance; the parallelism of its threat of the use of force in Ukraine and China in Taiwan; and more generally the replacement of Russia by China as the foremost military threat to the security of the United States. They have affected not just US perceptions and policies, but also and perhaps even more so those of its NATO allies.¹⁶ There are, however, important reasons why defense cooperation will not produce a military alliance. When Putin was asked whether he was aiming at the formation of an alliance, he replied that “we have not until now set ourselves this goal, but in principle we are not ruling it out either” (“Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba Valdai,” 2020, October 27). That point of view was confirmed by foreign minister Lavrov. He stated that “our relations [with China] are *not* a military alliance, and we are not pursuing this goal. We regard NATO as an example of a military alliance in the traditional sense, and we know that we do not need such an alliance. [. . .] Our relationship with China is completely different from that of a traditional military alliance. Maybe in a certain sense, it is an even closer bond” (“Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del,” 2021, April 1).

The benefits of cooperation in the military sphere can be said to accrue more or less equally to Russia and China. In the economic sphere, matters are more lopsided. The main beneficiary here is clearly the former rather than the latter.

¹⁵A comprehensive assessment in the Latin American context would also have to include Russian and Chinese involvement in Cuba, which counteracts US interests and policies there just as much as in Venezuela.

¹⁶Thus, for instance, German foreign minister Heiko Maas turned the argument of the geopolitical significance of the Nord Stream 2 project on its head. Anyone who questioned Nord Stream 2 had to think geostrategically and consider the consequences a stop would have. These could include the risk of decreasing “Europe's ability to exert influence on Russia and ‘bringing Russia and China closer together, creating the largest economic and military alliance there is’” (Maas, 2021, February 10).

5 The Economic Dimension

One of the main economic rationales of the Kremlin's turn toward China was expressed quite clearly by Putin in February 2012. The high rates of growth of the Chinese economy were not to be considered some sort of danger for Russia, he told his compatriots, but they opened up "colossal opportunities" for cooperation. They provided the chance to "catch the Chinese wind with the sails of our economy" (Putin, 2012b, February 27). This can be regarded as nothing but an astonishing admission of the asymmetry of economic development between China and Russia.¹⁷ Thus, a central feature of the economic dimension of the quadrilateral strategic and political relationship between the United States, China, Russia, and Europe is as follows: whereas Russia and China may be politically aligned, they are both more economically aligned with the West than each other. This leads to the counterintuitive conclusion that sanctions against Russia, for example, would drive Russia and China economically apart, not together, placing a strain on their political alignment (Kluge, 2021, November 30).

There are several manifestations of asymmetry. Whereas bilateral trade has risen significantly in the past 15 years, with China becoming Russia's largest trade partner and the trade volume reaching about US\$108 billion in 2020 (Kotova, 2021, March 8), the increase was due primarily to the expansion of China's GDP, much less than that of Russia. After the contraction in trade after the global financial crisis of 2009 and a drop in oil prices in 2014 that coincided with the annexation of Crimea and sanctions on Russia, 2021 represented a record year, as by the third quarter trade reached the levels of 2019, the pre-pandemic high. However, whereas China's share in Russia's foreign trade in 2021 was expected to rise to 20–25%, Russia's share of China's total trade since the mid-1990s has remained static at about a mere 2% (Kluge, 2021, November 30).

Second, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian arms sales to China were still a significant part of overall trade. In the 1990s, it was estimated to amount to a total of US\$5–US\$7 billion, increasing into the mid-2000s to US\$40 billion. Thereafter, however, the value of arms sales has declined dramatically, with India becoming Russia's dominant arms importer. Russian arms sales to China went from being perhaps 25 or more percent of the total value of trade in the 1990s, peaking in the early 2000s with a value of over US\$3 billion, declining dramatically and amounting to only 3% of the current trade between the two states (Kofman, 2020b, August 6).¹⁸

¹⁷The timing of the article, February 27, 2012, is of some importance. A presidential election was to take place on March 4 so that its publication could be considered part of Putin's election platform for his upcoming third turn as president. — From Putin's perspective, the primary aim of economic cooperation at that time may have been to use Chinese investments for the development of Siberia and the Russian Far Eastern province, but the importance of China soon broadened to become a "pivot" and motor for all of Russia (Quiring, 2020, 85).

¹⁸Concerning the arms trade, see Chapter "Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor" by Sarah Kirchberger.

Third, Moscow has made significant progress in its efforts at “de-dollarization” of its foreign trade. In 2014, when sanctions were imposed, the dollar’s share in Russia’s export of goods and services ranged between 75 and 80%. Subsequently, Russia reached several agreements on trade in national currencies so that by the end of 2020 the share of the dollar in Russia’s trade fell to 48% (“Dolya rossiyskogo eksporta,” 2021, April, 27). Russia was particularly successful in its trade with China. In 2014, almost all of its trade with that country was transacted in dollars. By 2019, the dollar’s share in Russian exports to China had declined to approximately 35% and in imports to about 70% (Kluge, 2021, November 30).

Fourth, Russia’s trade with China has reflected what president Medvedev in 2009 had called the country’s “centuries-old, humiliating dependency on raw materials,” notably oil and gas (“Poslanie Federal’nomu Sobraniyu,” 2009, November 12). Russia’s main exports to China are mainly raw materials, fossil fuels and lubricants, as well as agricultural products. China’s exports to Russia, in contrast, consist primarily of electronic products, machinery, vehicles, and chemicals (rising share) as well as textiles (decreasing share) (Kluge, 2021, November 30).

Fifth, the Russian reliance and development emphasis on the raw materials sector of the economy also applies to investments. Thus, the bulk of Chinese investments in Russia keeps flowing into fossil fuel projects. The Yamal LNG project in the Russian arctic, for instance, would have been difficult, if not impossible, without Chinese support. China provided financing through loans from state policy banks and investment through a state-owned enterprise. China also used the Silk Road Fund and another state-owned enterprise to invest in Sibur, Russia’s largest petrochemical company. Although 2020 can hardly be considered a normal year, it’s telling that Sinopec’s purchase of a 40% share in the Amur gas processing plant alone accounted for US\$250 million of US\$1.4 billion in foreign investment into the Russian economy in that year (Gabuev, 2021, March 19).

Sixth, concerning investment, in part as a result of economic sanctions by the West, foreign direct investment (FDI) into Russia contracted significantly starting from 2014. It declined from US\$37 billion in 2016 to US\$26 billion in 2017 and to US\$13 billion in 2018. The “pivot,” however, failed to produce meaningful substitution effects. Thus, although total FDI into Russia in 2019 increased to US\$31.7 billion, preliminary data for 2020 suggest that FDI inflows to economies in transition, which include Russia, will decline by about 38% (“Investment flows to transition economies,” 2019, June 19). According to its central bank, the stock of foreign direct investment from China and Hong Kong in January 2019 stood at just US\$3.6 billion, or 0.9% of Russia’s total incoming direct investment (Kluge, 2019, August). Since then, there has been no change (Kluge, 2021, November 30).

To conclude, hopes or expectations that the Kremlin may have had for investment winds from China to blow into the sails of the Russian economy and increase its speed have thus far been disappointed. Trade and investments have not only failed to drive the modernization of Russia’s economy but served to freeze the authoritarian, centralizing, and kleptocratic features of the economic and political system. The beneficiary of the “pivot to the East” has not been “Russia” but a narrow circle of Putin’s friends and associates at the apex of the power structure. Their interest is not

primarily the modernization of the country, but holding on to power, privilege, and property.

6 The Systemic Dimension

Putin's Russia has derived major benefit from the Chinese government having consistently, separately or in joint statements, rejected any kind of "interference" in their domestic affairs; opposed or suppressed movements for democratization, liberalization, and emancipation in their respectively claimed spheres of influence; opposed sanctions imposed for human rights violations; and denied legitimacy to any form of UN mandated humanitarian intervention.¹⁹ The Kremlin, thereby, has been able to avoid international isolation.

At the dusk of the Gorbachev era and for a brief period under president Yeltsin, a huge gap had existed between the "new" Russia's and the Chinese Communist Party's patterns of thought and behavior. Nothing could demonstrate better the wide chasm between the two systems of government than the bloody suppression of the Chinese students' calls for democratic change in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 and Russia's continuation of Gorbachev's democratization and liberalization drive domestically and engagement with the Euroatlantic community in foreign policy under Yeltsin until about 1993.

The Kremlin's shift away from that orientation thereafter occurred gradually and erratically, but it assumed a principled and fundamental quality near the end of the "tandem" interval at the apex of the Putin System, that is, the exchange of positions of president and premier between Putin and Medvedev. Large-scale demonstrations had taken place in many Russian cities after the parliamentary election in December 2011 and the presidential election in March 2012, with tens of thousands of people protesting against alleged large-scale fraud and manipulation of the elections, calling the government-supported United Russia party the party of "crooks and thieves" and demanding a "Russia without Putin."²⁰ Evidently, they had taken to heart Medvedev's calls for comprehensive reform and "modernization" to be achieved in close cooperation with the Euroatlantic world.

The conclusion that Putin and the *siloviki* grouping in the Kremlin drew from the massive protests was unambiguous and far-reaching (Adomeit, 2017a, January and 2017b, September 27; 2019, May 24). In their perception, the mere advocacy of reformist change in close cooperation with the West had begun to undermine the legitimacy of their rule and grip on power. They now asserted and in all likelihood

¹⁹The major exception is Russia's abstention from UN Resolution 1973 of March 17, 2011, on Libya (see above). China, in continuation of its previous practice of not casting a veto, also abstained.

²⁰The then slogan of United Russia being the party of "crooks and thieves" (*zhulikov i vorov*) was coined by blogger, anti-corruption activist, and opposition politician Aleksei Navalny.

believed that the West, after having engineered “color revolutions” in Russia’s neighborhood, was now attempting to bring about regime change in Russia itself. As a result, they embarked on a campaign of national-patriotic mobilization against Western influence, discrediting NGOs that had allegedly cooperated with Western counterparts as “foreign agents” and international organizations represented in Russia as “undesirable.” Abroad, they launched “hybrid” warfare with efforts to sow discord, to discredit, and to destabilize liberal democratic systems. Russia’s confrontation with the Euroatlantic world, therefore, has assumed a systemic quality. In conjunction with China, it has embarked upon a confrontationist path of authoritarianism versus democracy.

The perceived necessity by the managers of the two authoritarian systems to defend internal repression and human rights violations in their countries increased in the spring of 2021 as the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on Russian officials over the poisoning attack and jailing of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and the EU and the United States in coordination with Britain and Canada against Chinese officials over human rights abuses in China’s far western Xinjiang region. Meeting in southern China, Russian foreign minister Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi called for all countries “to stand together to oppose all forms of unilateral sanctions” and rejected Western attempts at “imposing their own rules on everyone else, which they believe should underpin the world order” (“China and Russia Show Solidarity,” 2021, March 24). Lavrov used the occasion yet again to warn the Europeans if they destroyed all the mechanisms of contacts and exchanges that had been created for many years, “then, probably objectively, this would lead to our relations with China to develop faster than what’s left of the relations with European countries” (“Vystuplenie I otvety,” 2021, March 23).

Moscow and Beijing have justified their support for the dictatorships of, among others, Bashar al-Assad, Ali Khamenei, Nicolás Maduro, and Aleksandr Lukashenko arguing that these were the heads of duly elected governments under threat of an externally instigated and organized coup. The justifications, however, are more appropriately to be considered rationalizations of geopolitical and economic interests, with the former uppermost on Moscow’s mind and the latter mainly in Beijing’s focus. Conclusions to that effect, to take just one example, can be drawn from the two governments’ acquiescence to the military dictatorship of Min Aung Hlaing in Myanmar.

That regime had come to power not as a result of popular demonstrations, some “color revolution,” incited not from the outside but by a coup against the existing legitimate government of which it formed a part. Externally, the coup occurred against the background of *military* cooperation between Russia’s armed forces and those of Myanmar. The latter, for instance, had taken part in the Kavkaz-2020 military exercises on Russian soil. Russia was the source of at least 16% of the weaponry procured by Myanmar (“Russia seeking to strengthen military ties,” 2021, March 26). Furthermore, whereas eight countries, including China, sent their military attaches to attend the ceremony and the military parade organized by the junta to

celebrate Armed Forces Day, Russia dispatched a high-ranking delegation under a deputy defense minister.²¹ China, in turn, had deepened its *economic* engagement in Myanmar with infrastructure investments under the umbrellas of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. In January 2020, Xi Jinping visited Naypyidaw to revive stalled multibillion-dollar BRI projects by signing 33 memoranda of understanding. Although the exact volume of China's BRI investments in the country is difficult to ascertain, a Myanmar government-appointed commission reported that the volume of Chinese foreign direct investment in the country as of March 2020 amounted to over US\$21 billion (Myers, 2020, March 26).

In addition to their claim that they are supporting legitimate governments against conspiracies of internal and external actors to manufacture "regime change," Moscow and Beijing justify their support for dictatorial regimes worldwide by asserting that they are acting in the interest of domestic and international "stability." Such explanations, too, must be regarded as untenable and self-serving because the "stability" of the Putinist and Xi Jinping's inflexible and repressive variant often merely serves to extend the life of a brittle system but not secure it forever, the collapse of the outwardly stable and strong Soviet system under Brezhnev being a case in point.

Concerning their own systems, both the narrow circle of Putin's *siloviki* and friends and associates at the apex of the Russian power structure and the more broadly based leadership of the Chinese Communist Party acutely feel the "threat" of infection with the virus of "color revolutions." In fact, they consider it to be an *existential* threat.²² In the Russian case, this is due to geographical proximity to Europe, the huge scale of contacts and exchanges between the two entities, the unbroken attractiveness of European culture and the way of life on Russian citizens, and Russia portraying itself as a European country adhering to the values as codified in the Council of Europe and OSCE, thereby perennially opening itself to charges that it is violating the norms to which it had voluntarily agreed. In the Chinese case, it is the attractiveness of democratic, modern, prosperous, and ethnically diverse Taiwan that constitutes a fundamental challenge to the repressive system on the mainland.

There are, however, also some differences. Whereas the Putin and the Chinese Communist Party's system of government share authoritarian, repressive, militarist, and "national-patriotic" features, there are also differences in how they operate and how they are affected by international developments.

First, Putin's Russia has more of a problem providing proof positive that its system is superior to that of the West. Lavrov has argued that "a big debate is underway about which [system] is more effective. The coronavirus infection has

²¹The celebrations were held on March 27, 2021, when the junta used live ammunition against unarmed demonstrators killing at least 114 people.

²²This is also the argument made by Marcin Kaczmarek in Chapter "Domestic Politics: A Forgotten Factor in the Russian-Chinese Relationship".

taken the debate up a notch.” The question had arisen, therefore, “To what extent the Western democracies have shown themselves capable of opposing this absolute evil and to what extent countries with a centralized, strong and ‘authoritarian’ government have been successful. History will be the judge” (“Vystuplenie i otvety,” 2021, March 23). The more than preliminary verdict, however, is that China has been much more successful than Russia, both in terms of controlling the virus and in economic performance.

Second, related to that difference, the sophistication and extent to which the Chinese government has been able to advance the organizational and technological control of the population by far exceed Russian efforts and possibilities. This extends to the scope to which Beijing has been able to cut the country off from the worldwide Internet by means of firewalls; the employment of IT systems able to control data traffic; and the employment of artificial intelligence, surveillance, and facial recognition technologies for a more perfect control of society.²³

Third, the Kremlin does its utmost to weaken and undermine Western political and social systems. The means employed are widespread disinformation and destabilization campaigns. Their rationale is exceedingly simple and time-honored since the Soviet era. Attempts are being made to enhance the legitimacy and moral superiority of one's own system by pointing to the alleged depth of irreconcilable social and political conflicts, instabilities, and moral decay of the adversary. To the extent that the deficiencies of one's own system are admitted, the propaganda machine immediately provides assurances that everything in the West, or in individual European countries or America, is “much worse.” Correspondingly, with the help of the secret services and troll factories, the Russian government tries to adapt political and social reality in the Euroatlantic countries to such claims. The Chinese government by and large has no particular interest in undermining Western political, economic, or social systems. It is much more interested in changing Western public perceptions and government policies.

7 Conclusion

The role allocated by the Kremlin to the “comprehensive strategic partnership” with China can hardly be said to follow a well-thought-out strategic design. It is easier to discern a general *framework of action* tied to three basic questions: What will serve to solidify the Russian power elite's grip on power and resources domestically; enhance Russia's power and influence internationally; and under the assumption that losses for the United States are gains for Russia, maximally weaken the United States and its allies?

²³For details, see Chapter “Digital Authoritarianism and Technological Cooperation in Sino-Russian Relations: Common Goals and Diverging Standpoints” by Elina Sinkkonen and Jussi Lassila.

Concerning the *military* and strategic dimensions, based on a plethora of high-level meetings, numerous military exercises in different parts of the globe, and common positions, Moscow and Beijing convey the notion of close coordination of their policies and the existence of an alliance in all but name. That serves the interests of both leaderships to deter the United States and its allies from “interfering” in their respective domestic policies and counteracting Russian revisionist and Chinese expansionist regional ambitions.

From the Kremlin’s perspective, the demonstrative “even better than alliance” relationship with China is an eminently useful instrument in its toolbox of military threats and pressure. The calculus in Moscow apparently is that its threat posture will create a “Stockholm syndrome” of good will and appeasement, notably among the United States’ NATO allies in Europe and thus far “uncooperative” neighbors, such as Ukraine.

Particularly in Europe and in the Middle East, Moscow is much more eager to show its capacity and readiness to engage in direct and “hybrid” projections of military power than Beijing, which has been much more reluctant to behave as assertively in these regions. Russia, vice versa, can contribute little in military power to China’s cause in the Pacific, while China’s military power projection in Europe is practically non-existent. This does not mean they cannot aid each other, but it will not take the form of direct military support.

The frequent military exercises do not reflect a desire to develop interoperability, or tactical level cooperation, so much as operational or strategic deconfliction, while setting the tone for military-to-military ties at the highest echelons. Exercises have important signaling functions. They are a source of frustration for the United States and allow both countries to project power outside of their respective regions, demonstrating themselves to be great powers. They are important expositions for future potential arms sales, the events help illustrate that neither country is isolated by US political efforts, and they send internal signals within their own establishments that they have threats in common that exceed the potential threat they see in each other (Kofman, 2020b, August 6).

As for the *economic* dimension of the relations, China provides a huge market for Russian raw materials, notably oil and gas. In that way, the state of affairs that has existed for centuries between Russia and Europe, first and foremost with Germany, is being replicated. There is a major difference, however. The Medvedev approach of forging “modernization partnerships” with the EU, Germany, and other EU member countries and close cooperation with the United States (Poslanie, 2009, November 12), if managed properly, had held the promise of pulling the country from the category of a “transition economy” based on raw materials to a modern industrialized economy producing internationally competitive high technology goods. Putin’s “pivot to the East” does not have such a design feature. It has failed to contribute meaningfully to the modernization of Russia’s economy, let alone of society and the political system. It has tied a stagnating economy and hardened political system to a dynamic “partner” that is increasingly likely to turn into a competitor.

Russia’s confrontation with the West and the “partnership” with China have *systemic* dimensions. Propagandistically, this manifests itself in the diatribes against “color revolutions” at home and in their claimed spheres of influence. One of the

dilemmas for Russia, however, is that historically and culturally, it is a European country. Its Far Eastern province is a piece of Europe in Asia, founded in part at China's expense. As a member of the Council of Europe, it professes to adhere to European values. Its narrative is not that it had developed a new system of authoritarianism, autocracy, and collectivism that it wants to spread to the transatlantic countries, but that the West had abandoned traditional Christian values to which Russia continued to adhere. In that sense, tying itself to China is not at all helpful.

Until recently, it was reasonable to conceive of the relationship between Russia and China as an "in tandem" arrangement in the sense that Putin and Xi Jinping sat on a tandem bike for a common journey. They would have had to agree, but obviously didn't, as to who got to sit in front and decide on the speed and direction of the journey. It was more appropriate, therefore, to see them traveling in parallel on separate bikes but on the same bumpy road of Via Antiamericana. The Russian troop movements in close proximity of the Ukrainian borders and on Crimea and the Chinese threats and frequent violations of Taiwanese airspace by fighter aircraft in 2021, however, may be an indication that separate but parallel measures have been replaced by a coordinated approach to deter US countermeasures.

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²⁴Unless otherwise indicated, access to all online sources was successfully verified by this author on December 2, 2021.

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Imperialist Master, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China's Changing Views of Russia



Jo Inge Bekkevold

1 Introduction

China's leader, Xi Jinping, told Russian state news agency Tass ahead of a trip to Russia in June 2019 that he regarded President Putin as "my best and bosom friend." A few days later, Putin prepared a small ice cream and champagne party for his Chinese counterpart, celebrating Xi Jinping's 66th birthday. In 2017, Putin awarded Xi the highest honor of Russia, the Order of St. Andrew, and a year later, Xi awarded Putin the first-ever Friendship Medal of the People's Republic of China.

Few, if any, state leaders spend more time together than Xi and Putin, and this pattern of behavior over many years clearly signals a growing bilateral relationship (Lo, 2019, p. 1). Since Xi's first visit to Russia as China's head of state in 2013, Xi and Putin have met more than 30 times. It has been suggested that the rise to power of Xi Jinping in China in 2012 and the return to office of Russian President Vladimir Putin the same year "invigorated China and Russia's growing alignment" and that the "authoritarian tendencies and shared world views of the two leaders have helped improve bilateral coordination while managing their differences" (Kamphausen, 2019, p. 7).

This chapter discusses how the policy choices of Xi Jinping and the Chinese leadership on Russia are formed and shaped. This is a tall order with regard to China, with little information available about the views and intentions of Xi Jinping and China's foreign policy elite. We can assume, though, that China's policy toward Russia is not driven by Xi Jinping's possible fondness for Putin or Russia, but by strategic calculations about what best serves Chinese interests.

The Sino-Russian relationship is often explained on the basis of values, identity, and ideology. For instance, Rozman (2014) contends that the identity overlap of

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China and Russia was strengthened throughout the 1990s and 2000s and that it is far stronger than acknowledged in Western countries. Welch Larson and Shevchenko (2019) suggest that China and Russia, in their search for great power status, share a common identity of pride as well as humiliation in their respective relations with the West. Lukin (2018) finds that economic and geopolitical interests have contributed to drive China and Russia closer together over the last couple of decades in spite of their political and cultural differences, and others emphasize that the pressure generated by the international system strengthens their partnership (Bekkevold, 2020; Korolev & Portyakov, 2019).

In this chapter, I argue that the realist school of international relations and balance of power theories are the best tools to explain China's growing ties with Russia. Realists contend that stability in the international system results from maintaining a balance of power and that economics is less relevant to national security than military might (Waltz, 1979). Realists acknowledge that constructivist variables may, under certain conditions, moderate actors' level of uncertainty about others' intentions, but insist that power structures exist by the mere presence of other actors and the harm they can do in the future (Copeland, 2000, p. 206).

During the last decade, China and Russia have finally managed to develop an economic partnership, but their level of interdependence is still relatively low. History, identity, and ideology are important variables for understanding China's relationship with Russia. Yet, few, if any, bilateral relationships between two major countries have changed back and forth so dramatically as that of China and Russia. Examining Sino-Russian relations across several time periods, this chapter illustrates that there is no single continuous historical narrative or identity in China on Russia. During the last century, China has seen Russia as imperialist, a comrade in arms, a foe, and a partner, and it is now discussing whether it should be an ally. China's policy choices in its relationship with Russia have first and foremost been shaped by their relative power position and systemic pressures from great power politics.

This chapter consists of six parts. The first part is a brief outline of the relationship during the Qing Dynasty and early communist period. The second part looks at China's relationship with the Soviet Union from the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 through the signing of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty in 1950 to the Sino-Soviet split. The third part explores China's rapprochement with the United States in the aftermath of the 1969 border clash with the Soviet Union. The fourth part deals with China's relationship with Russia through the 1990s and 2000s and discusses how China adjusted to the US hegemonic position. The fifth and main part examines the development of China's relationship with Russia during the last decade. The sixth part draws some conclusions from the analysis.

2 Russian “Imperialism”

Chinese indignation and resentment toward imperialism and the “Century of Humiliation” (1839–1949) resurfaces from time to time, although it is usually directed at Great Britain, France, the United States, or Japan, not at Russia. Nevertheless, Russia also played its part in imperialism in China. The “Great Game” between Britain and Russia in Central and South Asia in the nineteenth century also encompassed the western parts of China, with Russian operatives based in Xinjiang and a strong Russian influence in the region well into the 1930s. During the Second Opium War from 1858 to 1860, with the Qing Dynasty under heavy pressure from British and French forces, Russia used the opportunity to push for Chinese concessions. Through the Treaty of Aigun, concluded in 1858, and further concessions given in 1860, Russia gained the Amur Basin, the current Russian maritime province, and the island of Sakhalin (Paine, 1996).

The Sino-Japanese War in 1895 altered the balance of power in the region, with Japan on the ascendancy. In order to secure its own interests in the region and to stem Japan’s growing influence, Russia signed the secret Treaty of Alliance with China in 1896. Seen from Moscow, a seriously weakened China was willing to accept Russian financial assistance at the price of Russian political influence (Eskridge-Kosmach, 2008, p. 40). The 1896 treaty provided that the two powers would come to each other’s aid in the event of a Japanese attack on Russia in the Far East, on any Chinese territory, or on Korea. Moreover, it stated that all Chinese ports would be open to Russian warships during military operations against Japan, and China agreed to allow the construction of a railway line across Chinese territory in the direction of Vladivostok (Elleman & Kotkin, 2010). Russia was not the only imperialist power building railways in China, and the recovery of railway rights became a passionate issue in China’s nationalist movement (Spence, 1990, pp. 251–256).

In fact, the Russian influence on the railway and its access to Chinese ports would reverberate in China’s relations with Russia for decades. Russia lost control of it after its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, but regained control in 1924. Following the October Revolution in 1917, the Soviet Union repeatedly called on the other great powers to follow its lead and give up their trade and territorial concessions in China. Nonetheless, in 1924 Moscow signed two secret treaties with China, one with central authorities in Beijing and another with Chinese warlord Zhang Zuolin’s government in Manchuria, renewing its control over the Russian-built Chinese Eastern Railway. Some scholars speculate that if these treaties had been publicly known in China at the time, it could have changed the public view on imperialism and undermined the legitimacy of the communist movement in China (Elleman, 1994, pp. 459–460). However, it did result in a large-scale Russian military intervention in China in 1929 after the Chinese Northeastern Army attempted to take over the railway. Russia again lost control of the railway after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, only to regain it yet again during World War II. Russian influence on the railway as well as access to the Lushun port on the

Liaodong Peninsula was finally settled as part of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty in 1950.

From 1937 to 1941, the Soviet Union supported China in the Sino-Japanese War, but to Chiang Kai-shek's disappointment, it withdrew its support after it had signed a neutrality pact with Japan in 1941. For Stalin in World War II, Europe was the primary security concern. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States stepped in to support China against Japan. Moscow and Washington were chiefly concerned with Japan's power position in their respective Asia policies, and they both played the "China card" against Japan (Garver, 1987).

3 From "Comrade in Arms" to the Sino-Soviet Split

In December 1949, a few weeks after having proclaimed the foundation of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong travelled to Moscow to sign a Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union. Mao decided China was best served by "leaning to the one side" in the US-Soviet rivalry, and since the need for security against the United States was viewed as paramount, China tilted toward the Soviet Union (Nathan & Ross, 1997, p. 36). Communist China aligning with the socialist camp of the Soviet Union was an obvious choice, but the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Union was at times quite troublesome.

From the very beginning after the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet Union in its China policy pursued a dual policy of national self-interest and ideological ambition, weaving diplomatic and revolutionary activity together with the aim of fashioning in a new pattern of Russian power in the Far East (Whiting, 1954). Soviet support to the Chinese communist movement increased after World War II, cementing the Sino-Soviet alliance, and the relationship was further strengthened during the Korean War and the first half of the 1950s. In this period, the People's Republic of China both wanted and needed Soviet aid, and the Soviet Union served as a model that the Chinese Communist Party wanted to copy in terms of technological achievements, military structure, and society (Westad, 2012, pp. 290–306). Nevertheless, balancing great power ambitions and ideology in its China policy would soon become increasingly difficult for the Soviet Union.

The Sino-Russian split was the result of growing disagreements on a number of topics, which can be divided into four interrelated clusters of issues. First, the two parties developed different views on ideology. Soviet advisors in China voiced concerns and disagreements toward how Mao implemented socialism, and in particular the policies of the Great Leap Forward. This critique didn't go down very well with Mao (Westad, 2012, p. 336). Mao and Khrushchev also had two different views on the role of world revolution and the international communist movements (Westad, 2012, pp. 328–332; MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006, pp. 3–11).

Second, toward the late 1950s, they disagreed on how to deal with the United States. Whereas Khrushchev wanted to move toward a "peaceful coexistence" with the West, Mao wanted to use the apparent momentum of the "high tide of socialism"

to directly confront “US imperialism” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006, pp. 6–7; Westad, 1998).

Third, there was a strong feeling in China that it was not treated as an equal by the Soviet Union. In 1950, Mao got his treaty in Moscow, securing financial, technological, and military aid, but his national pride had suffered in the process (Westad, 2012, p. 293). Part of the price Mao had to pay was to accept Mongolia’s independence (Elleman & Kotkin, 2010, p. xiv). Moscow had also compelled Beijing to grant extraterritorial rights in China (Nathan & Ross, 1997, p. 39), which had been one of the hallmarks of Western imperialism.

Fourth, from the mid-1950s onward, China’s national security interests increasingly diverged from those of the Soviet Union. Their views on Taiwan differed, and when Khrushchev proposed a “joint fleet” and building a naval radio station on the Chinese coast to assist the Soviet Pacific Fleet, the Chinese declined. In 1958, Moscow halted its support for China’s nuclear program, as it could derail talks with the United States on de-escalating the Cold War. In 1962, the Soviet Union did not support China in its border conflict with India, and in 1963, China criticized the Soviet Union for negotiating the test-ban treaty with the United States (Garver, 2003; Nathan & Ross, 1997, pp. 40–46).

Even though Mao tried to save the Sino-Russian alignment (Wang, 2006), his vision had from the very beginning been to rebuild China’s power and status. In the age of Cold War superpower rivalry, however, China was too weak to achieve this goal on its own, and priority had to be given to survival (Goldstein, 2020). Leaning toward the Soviet Union was simply a tool in a larger vision. Mao never intended China to be Moscow’s satellite, nor did he foresee the alignment with Moscow lasting forever (Goncharov et al., 1992, pp. 203–225). Ideology played its part in China joining the Soviet camp and in the Sino-Soviet split, but on both occasions, Mao’s China made its choices based on regime survival, national security interests, and how to navigate great power politics.

4 From Sino-Russian Border Clashes to Sino-US Rapprochement

After the Sino-Soviet split, and with China successfully detonating its first nuclear bomb in 1964, the Soviet Union increasingly viewed China as a threat. The Soviet Union strengthened its military presence in the Far East, from 12 divisions in 1961 to 25 by 1969 (Nathan & Ross, 1997, p. 43), and it encouraged unrest in Xinjiang (Nathan & Ross, 1997, p. 44). The Sino-Soviet border clash in 1969 created the possibility for China and the United States to begin communicating with each other, laying the foundation for a Sino-American rapprochement (Yang, 2000). The rapid escalation of the border clash during the spring and summer of 1969 created a war scare in Beijing (Yang, 2000, p. 35), and Mao responded by issuing orders to ease relations with the United States (Westad, 2012, 367). Two decades after signing a

Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union, China decided to balance the Soviet Union through rapprochement with the United States. In 1971, Kissinger made a secret visit to Beijing, and President Nixon announced that he intended to visit China the following year. The next two decades would be characterized by classic balance of power politics between China, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

Moscow moved more divisions to the Chinese border and expanded its Pacific fleet. In 1971, Russia signed a friendship treaty with India, and in Southeast Asia, Russia established a strong influence through its collaboration with Vietnam. From 1979, Soviet ships and planes regularly operated from Cam Ranh and Danang in Vietnam, as well as from the Kampuchean port of Kompong Sam (Kelemen, 1984). By the mid-1970s, at a time when the United States seemed to turn more isolationist, the Chinese leadership was concerned about the Soviet Union's growing influence and possible encirclement of China in the Far East. In addition to leaning toward the United States, China responded by positioning itself as the leader of the Third World, in contrast to the US-led First World and the Soviet-led Second World. This campaign was in reality an effort to establish a global anti-Soviet front (Garver, 2016, pp. 324–330).

From establishing diplomatic relations in 1979 and through the 1980s, the United States treated China as a *de facto* ally in its rivalry with the Soviet Union (Westad, 2012, p. 374; see also Chapter “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix). Nonetheless, throughout the 1980s, Beijing and Moscow sent each other subtle messages signaling an intent to improve relations, and in 1986, Soviet communist party leader Mikhail Gorbachev took the initiative to normalize relations. The main reason was that its significant military presence on the Soviet-China border, on top of its arms race with the United States, was costly for Moscow. In its reply, Beijing linked normalization to three issues: the border, which involved settling the border dispute as well as withdrawal of troops from the border; ending the occupation of Afghanistan; and halting its support for Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia (Fravel, 2008, p. 138). China wanted to reduce the Soviet Union's influence in its neighborhood. Normalization of relations, however, would not be possible until 3 years later, with Gorbachev's visit to Beijing.

5 “Strategic Partner” in a Unipolar World

The balance of power and pressure generated by the international system would continue to shape China's policy toward Russia after the Cold War as well, although in a less prominent manner. After Gorbachev's visit in 1989, the pace of border negotiations quickened. Faced with international isolation and growing regime insecurity in the immediate aftermath of Tiananmen, China wanted to improve relations with Russia (Qian, 2006), and in doing so, it was willing to make concessions in the border negotiations (Fravel, 2008, pp. 137–144). China reached an agreement with Russia on most of the disputed border areas in the early 1990s, with the last issues finally settled in 2004. With its relationship to Russia normalized,

the border settled, and troops redeployed, for the first time in its entire history, China was now free from a security threat to its northern land border. With its strategic rear safe, China could give more priority to coastal defense, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, and it could channel resources into building sea power (Bekkevold, 2020; Goldstein, 2005, p. 142).

The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the balance of power in the international system, with the United States remaining the only superpower. China adopted a two-pronged policy toward the United States, combining cooperation with opposition. China needed close cooperation with the United States to achieve its goals of economic growth and integration into the world economic order, but it was skeptical about the new dominant position of the United States in the international system and opposed US policies that could undermine its security interests. In achieving the latter, China developed close ties with Russia.

China worked with Russia in the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to manage a highly unstable security environment and increased Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia (Bekkevold & Engh, 2017). Russia became an important source of modern weapons platforms that China could not produce itself nor obtain from the United States or European countries in the aftermath of Tiananmen (Lo, 2008, p. 80; see also Chapter "Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor" by Sarah Kirchberger). China appreciated Russia's support in opposing US plans for missile defense in the region (Goldstein, 2005, pp. 139–142), and Russia shared China's vision for a multipolar world order eventually replacing US hegemony. This was reflected in their Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order, adopted in 1997, as well as their engagement in the BRIC from 2006 onward.

In the early 1990s, China saw Russia as weakened and humiliated, but also as a country that wanted to restore its great power status, and China believed Russia still had great power potential (Deng, 2008, pp. 138–151). Being aware of Russian concerns about the growing power gap in China's favor, Beijing has throughout the post-Cold War period pursued a policy of reassurance vis-à-vis Russia (Hsiung, 2019). This was part of a larger Chinese strategy from the mid-1990s onward, countering growing concerns in the region about its rise through adherence to Deng Xiaoping's advice to "keep a low profile" in its foreign policy (Goldstein, 2005). China's reassurance policy toward Russia is arguably one of Beijing's most successful diplomatic achievements, although its success has been helped by Moscow's tense relationship with the United States.

In 1996, the two presidents Jiang Zemin and Boris Yeltsin signed a joint statement announcing their "partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and benefit and oriented toward the 21st century," formally establishing China's "strategic partnership" with Russia. In 2001, China signed the Treaty on Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation with Russia. China has no such friendship treaty with any other country. Nonetheless, despite its success, the Sino-Russian partnership remained a "limited" partnership throughout the 1990s and well into the 2000s, with modest economic cooperation and very little people-to-people contact

(Lo, 2008, p. 177; Andersen, 1998, pp. 10–12). In a study from 2010, Bobo Lo argued that there was a “high degree of indifference” among the Chinese elite toward Russia, and in particular within the Chinese public (Lo, 2010). However, the relationship has since moved on.

6 Sino-Russian Partnership in the Era of Sino-US Rivalry

The rapid development of the Sino-Russian partnership over the last decade is the result of two dynamics, one bilateral and one systemic. During the 1990s and 2000s, Beijing and Moscow managed to put in place a relatively solid platform for their relationship, with a border agreement, the 2001 friendship treaty, and regular high-level meetings. For instance, celebrating 70 years of diplomatic relations in 2019, the regular China-Russia Prime Ministers’ Meeting was held for the 24th time (MFA, 2019b, September 17), whereas Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and China’s top foreign affairs official Yang Jiechi conducted the 15th round of bilateral strategic security consultations (MFA, 2019a, April 12). Since the mid- and late 2000s, China and Russia have finally started to build on this foundation, adding economic cooperation, energy partnership, academic exchanges, and even growing tourism. Concurrent with this bilateral dynamic, an increased great power rivalry and the more prominent role of the United States as a common denominator have contributed to the closing of ranks between China and Russia. The return to a new bipolar world structure, with the United States and China as the two dominant powers in the international system, seems to have further strengthened the ties between Beijing and Moscow. I will outline here how systemic changes during the last decade have informed China’s ties with Russia, and how it may shape the relationship over the next several years.

6.1 *Balance of Power Politics*

China’s and Russia’s respective relationships with the United States have been in a downward spiral for the last 10–15 years, reinforcing the role of the United States as the common denominator in Sino-Russian relations. In the case of Russia, its annexation of the Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014 only reinforced a long-term negative trend in US-Russia relations that had been developing since the 2004 Orange revolution, the 2008 Georgian War, and disagreements over missile defense and the handling of Libya and Syria (Lo, 2015, pp. 165–200). In the aftermath of the Ukrainian Crisis, Russia used China as a counterweight against the United States. Russia’s “pivot to Asia” was embraced by China (Bekkevold & Lo, 2019). At the time, China’s own relationship with the United States was deteriorating. In 2010, after observing a more assertive Chinese foreign policy, Washington launched a policy shift toward Asia, also referred to as

the “US pivot to Asia” (Ross, 2012). Chinese policy elites regarded the US rebalancing of its policies to the Asia-Pacific region as a major strategic challenge, with some Chinese analysts seeing it as an attempt to contain China, while other more moderate voices simply saw it as an attempt to balance China’s rise and maintain US regional leadership (Zhang, 2016).

In the 2010–2014 period, two interrelated topics dominated the debate among China’s international relations scholars: the policy shift from the traditional principle of “keeping a low profile” (*tao guang yang hui*) to a more proactive foreign policy (*feng fa you wei*) and how to respond to the “US pivot to Asia” and the future of US-China relations (Wang & Meng, 2020; Liu & Liu, 2016; Duchâtel & Puig, 2015). One important strand of this debate was whether China should build an alliance with Russia. The viewpoints among Chinese scholars covered the whole spectrum, from strong advocates of an alliance to those opposing the idea (Wang & Meng, 2020; Liu & Liu, 2016). In other words, when Russia pivoted to China in 2014 and the two countries issued a joint statement declaring that their comprehensive strategic relationship had entered a “new stage,” this was a policy development that China had already been discussing for some time. Moreover, China embracing Russia’s “pivot to China” was the perfect response to Washington’s “pivot to Asia” strategy. Clearly, China intended to send a message that it had the option of strengthening relations with Russia to counterbalance the US strategic encirclement (Wang & Meng, 2020).

As a response, and partly as a corrective to the debate both within China and in the United States and Europe concerning the growing Sino-Russian relationship moving toward an alliance, Fu Ying published an article on Sino-Russian relations both in one of the leading Chinese IR journals, as well as in *Foreign Affairs*. From her position as the Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress, her message carried weight. She emphasized that even though Sino-Russian ties were better than ever, China had no intention of forming an alliance (Fu, 2016). For the time being, the Chinese view was that “forging a partnership without forming an alliance” (*jieban bu jiemeng*) carried lower costs and promised greater returns (Wang & Meng, 2020, p. 499).

Over the last decade, we have witnessed China’s economic and military rise gradually reaching a level where it has caused a shift in the distribution of power in the international system from a US unipolar system to a new bipolar world structure, with the United States and China as the two dominant powers (Tunsjø, 2018). When great powers rise, their foreign policy ambitions tend to grow accordingly. This has also been the case with China. It was evident in China’s more assertive policies in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and in Xi Jinping’s “China Dream” slogan and goal of rejuvenating the Chinese nation (Goldstein, 2020). Another expression of a more powerful and ambitious China is its growing sea power and “blue water” capabilities (Ross, 2018).

The emergence of a bipolar US-China international system has three consequences for China’s relationship with Russia. First, in a bipolar structure, the rivalry between the two dominant powers is expected to intensify (Waltz, 1979). The Sino-US rivalry will mainly be a naval rivalry (Ross, 2018). Thus, the main thrust of

China's geostrategy will for the foreseeable future be directed toward the Pacific and the wider Indo-Pacific theater, away from Russia. This geopolitical situation "helps" China to maintain a cordial relationship with Russia despite the growing power gap between them.

Second, a bipolar system compels secondary states to choose sides (Waltz, 1979). In the previous bipolar system, the Soviet Union was the peer competitor of the United States, and Beijing first aligned with Moscow before it realigned with the United States. This time around, China is the peer competitor of the United States, and Russia accommodates China. As of today, the Sino-Russian partnership is not an alliance. It is built on a geopolitical context that favors their cooperation. The greatest achievement in Sino-Russian relations is that they are managing to keep their common strategic rear safe without committing themselves to any mutual defense obligations. With its rear to Russia safe, China can channel more resources to its rivalry with the United States in maritime Asia, and with its rear to China safe, Russia can give priority to its European flank and stand up to NATO (Bekkevold, 2020). Russia's arms sales to China are conducted on the premise that China is more likely to use these weapon platforms in a maritime conflict with the United States than in a land campaign against Russia (Gabuev, 2019). Whether Beijing at some point prefers to form an alliance with Moscow will depend on the nature of its rivalry with the United States.

Third, in a bipolar system, the two rivals are also expected to view their interdependence as a mutual vulnerability (Waltz, 1979). In other words, both China and the United States will seek to decouple from each other, particularly in strategically important sectors, and this is already unfolding (see also Chapter "Options for Dealing with Russia and China: A US Perspective" by Andrew A. Michta). Hence, from a Chinese perspective, cooperation with Russia will be of increased importance over the next few years. In the following, I will briefly outline China's economic ties with Russia, China's narrative building of Russia including people-to-people contacts, and how systemic pressure shapes these ties.

6.2 *Economic Cooperation*

During the last 10–15 years, China and Russia have finally managed to add economic cooperation to their relationship as an important dimension. In 2010, China surpassed Germany to become Russia's largest single trading partner, and in 2019, Russia was China's tenth largest trading partner, accounting for 2.4 percent of China's total foreign trade in goods (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). However, the Sino-Russian economic relationship is not exclusive, and both countries have stronger economic links with the European Union, the United States, and US allies than with each other (Bekkevold, 2020). The United States, Canada, European NATO countries, Japan, South Korea, and Australia account for approximately half of China's exports, and Russia's relatively weak economy, with a GDP

smaller than that of Italy or Canada, is unable to replace China's economic relationship with these countries (Bekkevold, 2020).

Moreover, Chinese investors see corruption, red tape, and poor infrastructure as constraints to their operations in Russia (Hillman, 2020, July 15). The implementation of cooperative projects between northeast China and the Russian Far East has been particularly slow, despite the huge efforts put into these projects from national leaders and governments on both sides (Feng & Cui, 2019, September 30). For instance, of 20 special economic zones (SEZs) established in the Russian Far East in 2014 and 2015 to attract foreign investors, by 2019, only 6 had managed to attract Chinese investors, and out of 45 projects listed in the 6 SEZs that attracted Chinese investments, only 5 had started operating (Spivak, 2019, November 4). The Chinese side encourages Russia to open its arms to its neighbor more widely, meaning providing easier access for Chinese investors (Wang, 2019, December 9).

Nevertheless, Russia is an important partner for China in specific strategic sectors. It assists China in developing nuclear energy plants ("China-Russia joint nuclear power plant," 2021, March 29), and together with Saudi Arabia, it is the largest exporter of crude oil to China. Imports from the Power of Siberia pipeline started in 2020 and will continue to rise over the next few years (EIA, 2020). The growing Sino-Russian energy partnership is mainly the result of the two countries finally managing to benefit from their comparative advantages in an attempt to diversify their energy market (Russia) and sources (China), and not so much an outcome of systemic pressure or the conflict with the West in Ukraine (Bekkevold & Tunsjø, 2018). However, China's rivalry with the United States will increasingly shape its economic relationship with Russia. One sector where this is already unfolding is China's import of soybeans, as the trade war with the United States has forced China to replace the United States with Russia as one of its main import sources (Wishnick, 2020). Another example is the wide range of new 4IR technologies (Fourth Industrial Revolution), as the United States and its allies consider decoupling from China in high tech industries. Since 2015–2016, China and Russia have increasingly concentrated on technology and innovation in their partnership, signing a series of agreements with the aim of increasing cooperation in 4IR technologies (Bendett & Kania, 2019; see also Chapter "Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution" by Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska).

6.3 State-Society and People-to-People Relations

Public opinion and popular protests occasionally play a role shaping Chinese diplomacy and foreign policy. Chinese popular protests targeted toward other countries are usually responses to particular events and incidents, with demands for Chinese authorities to take a tougher line in its diplomacy. However, the protests are often mobilized by the authorities in the first place and feed on nationalistic feelings related to China's "century of humiliation" as well as a more current

narrative of the West attempting to undermine China's rise. Moreover, the narratives feeding public opinion and protests are partly based on historical facts and partly on a top-down-driven process of socialization and propaganda through the Chinese media and the educational system (Gries & Sanders, 2016).

Japan is the most common target of Chinese popular protests, including a wave of anti-Japanese public mobilization that swept across China in the early 2000s (Reilly, 2012), and during the Diaoyu Islands Crisis in 2012–2013, with popular protests shaping a tougher Chinese approach to Japan (Gries et al., 2016). Other notable examples are the Chinese consumer boycott targeted at the French retailer Carrefour after French protesters disrupted the torch ceremony in Paris in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Economy & Segal, 2008) and how the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 sparked mass protests from Chinese across the globe (Gries, 2001). Russia also played its part in China's "century of humiliation," and it was China's main foe in the latter half of the Cold War. Still, in the top-down process of rebuilding Sino-Russian relations after the end of the Cold War, Russia has been portrayed in a more positive light, one that fits in with how Chinese leadership sees world affairs.

A study of Chinese urban citizens' attitudes toward the European Union, Japan, Russia, and the United States undertaken in 2010 found that the respondents had the most positive attitude toward the EU, followed by Russia, and then the United States, whereas the attitude toward Japan was predominantly negative (Noll & Dekker, 2016). A similar study of Chinese elite students' attitudes toward six countries (the European Union, Japan, Russia, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States) done in 2014 discovered that students held the most positive feelings toward Russia. The study furthermore observed that mainland Chinese students held significantly warmer feelings toward Russia than their non-mainland counterparts, suggesting that China's educational system and media promote a more favorable image of Russia when compared with those impressions conveyed outside mainland China (Zhou, 2018).

While a young student in Beijing in the early 1990s, I was asked to play a minor role in a Chinese television series, portraying one of the Russian pilots in the Soviet fighter squadron secretly sent to support China during the Sino-Japanese war between 1937 and 1941. This television series was an early attempt at restoring the image of Russia in post-Cold War China. In fact, constructing a joint identity related to their participation in World War II is one of the main building blocks in the top-down-driven narrative building of China and Russia. Just like the "Great Patriotic War" in 1941–1945 is important for Russian national pride, China's "War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression in 1937-1945" plays a crucial role in China's national identity. China and Russia relate to each other's WWII experience, making this a powerful joint narrative. This narrative-building has been given extra promotion since 2010, with regular conferences, workshops, exhibitions, and media events conducted to commemorate their joint WWII experiences (Korolev & Portyakov, 2019, pp. 56–59).

In addition to the top-down narrative, a growing number of Chinese citizens now also interact with Russia. For instance, the number of co-authored publications

involving Chinese and Russian academics increased by almost one hundred percent between 2013 and 2017 (Mayo, 2019, June 20). Furthermore, the number of Chinese students in Russia more than doubled from 2015 to 2020, with 48,000 students from China enrolled in Russian universities in 2020 (Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2020, September 9). The United States remains the top destination for Chinese students, with the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada as the next three top student destinations (ICEF Monitor, 2019). From 2019 to 2020, universities in the United States hosted more than 370,000 students from China, accounting for 35 percent of all foreign students in the United States (Wang, 2021, January 2). However, in line with rising tensions between China and the United States, there is increased tension in their academic collaboration, with the United States debating whether Chinese students and academics are scholars or spies (Krige, 2020, October 12). In May 2020, three Republican legislators introduced legislation to ban Chinese students from graduate or postgraduate studies in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (Wang, 2021, January 2). One likely result of this may be a drop in the number of Chinese students in the United States and a further increase in the number of Chinese students going to Russia.

Tourism between China and Russia is also growing. In 2019, more than two million Chinese tourists visited Russia, up from 1.5 million in 2017, and only 158,000 in 2010 (Hillman, 2020, July 15; Russia Briefing, 2018, March 19). In fact, only the United States, France, and Germany now receive more Chinese tourists than Russia. Moscow tops the list of Russian destinations for Chinese tourists, with Vladivostok placing second (Russia Briefing, 2018, March 19). There is a trend toward Chinese visitors doing a specialized kind of sightseeing in Russia, exploring sites symbolizing their shared communist history and ideologies (Paulo & Phang, 2019, November 8).

7 Conclusion

Examining China's relationship with Russia over the last century and a half, it is obvious that the balance of power has shaped this relationship more than any other variable. China's view of Russia has shifted depending on their relative power position and the balance of power in the international system. With three decades of friendly ties after the end of the Cold War, the Sino-Russian partnership is no longer a limited partnership. It increasingly resembles a normal relationship between two neighboring countries, with close cooperation on a wide range of topics and an increasing number of Chinese, from all walks of life, interacting with Russians. Contemporary Sino-Russian relations have their own momentum regardless of the United States. Nonetheless, the United States is now also a stronger denominator in their relationship than at any time since the first half of the Cold War, and it is difficult to see this changing any time soon.

Where does the Sino-Russian relationship go from here? From a Chinese perspective, the current arrangement with Russia is perfect, with its strategic rear to

Russia safe, without having to commit to any defense obligations. With China's rivalry with the United States intensifying and the United States and allies decoupling from China, Beijing would want to further improve its ties with Moscow. However, entering into a formal alliance with Russia might bring more costs than benefits, but this is dependent on developments in the international system and above all China's relationship with the United States.

China no longer sees Russia as a rival. This is not the result of friendly ties, shared values, or growing economic cooperation, but an outcome of the dramatic shift in the balance of power between them. China has moved from an inferior position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union throughout most of the twentieth century to a current position of preponderance in relation to Russia. Since the 1990s, China has pursued a policy of reassurance toward Russia, but as the power gap between China and Russia continues to widen in China's favor, it could be increasingly challenging for Beijing to adhere to this policy. Thus, at some point down the line, Moscow might want to reconsider its alignment with Beijing in a similar fashion to what it did in the late 1950s. If Russia decides to realign with the United States, it would be a loss for China. It would not be a dramatic loss in terms of the power balance. Russia is already too weak in relation to China to constitute a major threat to Chinese interests. In 2020, China's defense expenditures were already four times those of Russia, whereas the gap in GDP (purchasing power parity) between China and Russia was equivalent to the gap between the United States and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it would be a significant geopolitical loss. If Russia realigns with the United States, the latter would be able to give full priority to balancing China.

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Domestic Politics: A Forgotten Factor in the Russian-Chinese Relationship



Marcin Kaczmarek

1 Introduction

Domestic politics rarely gets substantial attention in studies on Sino-Russian relations, with Gabuev (2015), Skalamera (2018) and Wilson (2019) being notable exceptions. Strategic considerations, national interests and pragmatic benefits tend to occupy a privileged position in the process of explaining the dynamics of the post-Cold War relationship between Moscow and Beijing. For many, these relations are driven by systemic factors/systemic pressures as defined by neorealism and neoclassical realism. In other words, US material primacy and specific US policies push Russia and China closer together. But even those who do not subscribe to the (neo)realist explanation of the dynamics in the relationship are sceptical about the relevance of domestic politics. The implicit assumption is that in this particular relationship, Russia and China act as unitary and rational strategic actors. Moreover, this assumption is reinforced by the centrality of both leaders, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, to the relationship. After all, the Sino-Russian relationship has clearly accelerated since Putin and Xi's programmes of power centralization. There is almost a consensus on Putin and Xi giving an impetus to the Sino-Russian cooperation and ensuring that domestic politics works in favour of this relationship (Xu & Reisinger, 2019).

Meanwhile, scholarship on Russian foreign policy recognizes the variety of domestic political factors as increasingly relevant in shaping Moscow's activities in the international realm (Marten, 2015, 2019; McFaul, 2020; Stoner, 2021). With regard to China, the role of domestic politics in shaping external activities has also attracted scholarly attention (Breslin, 2021; Takeuchi, 2019), with the Belt and Road Initiative flagship project coming under particular scrutiny (Ye, 2019). These shifts

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coincide with the growing popularity of state fragmentation theory (Hameiri et al., 2019) on the one hand and the growing insight into the role of regime survival on the other (Weiss, 2019).

This chapter argues that domestic politics plays a significant role in shaping Sino-Russian relations. Domestic political factors strengthen certain trends in the relationship and, more occasionally, generate obstacles. In structural terms, the growing similarity of political systems, characterized by a high degree of centralization of power in leaders' hands and the rising crackdown on dissent, shapes the threat assessment. It is more acute in the case of Russia, a weaker side. The Russian ruling regime is not challenged by Beijing, hence an increase in China's power and influence. While disadvantageous geopolitically, it does not pose a threat to regime security and regime survival in the Kremlin. Domestic actors have contributed to Russia's policy towards China in two ways: by influencing the leadership's threat assessment and by implementing particular policies. In some areas, such as energy cooperation, a privileged position on behalf of certain actors enables them to promote closer cooperation with China. There is no openly anti-Chinese lobby within the ruling elite and its supporters. In a couple of cases, domestic politics has trumped the drive for cooperation. More often than not, domestic politics acts as a facilitating factor, which mitigates systemic pressures related to China's rise and growing asymmetry between Russia and China and creates a conducive environment for bilateral cooperation with China in certain sectors.

This chapter does not aspire to create *causal* links between domestic politics and the developments in the relationship. Its aim is more modest—to map relevant domestic players and the domestic setting, which may either facilitate cooperation or slow it down. The aim of this chapter is neither to deny that Russian policy towards China tends to be formulated in the Kremlin within a narrow circle of Vladimir Putin and his trustees, nor do I claim that strategic considerations do not matter for this policy. It instead aspires to demonstrate how domestic politics has created conducive conditions for Russia's rapprochement with China and how it continues to moderate power asymmetry between the two states that otherwise could have generated more cautiousness on the part of the Kremlin.

The rest of the chapter is arranged as follows. The next section discusses the issue of regime survival and its role in providing a shared background for China and Russia to cooperate. The third part focuses on the Russian case and the role played by domestic actors in shaping Russia's policy towards China. The penultimate section explores domestic politics as an obstacle to closer cooperation. The final section summarizes the chapter's findings.

2 Regime Survival: Domestic Structural Conditions

The authoritarian nature of the Chinese and Russian political regimes (with particular acuteness after 2012 in the latter case) makes regime survival a top priority for both Beijing and Moscow. The possibilities offered by bilateral cooperation, both

directed against the United States and concentrated on mutual learning and sharing best practices in strengthening one's resilience vis-à-vis the opposition and popular dissent, create a powerful incentive for Moscow and Beijing to deepen their mutual ties.

The regime's survival considerations are of particular importance for the Russian ruling elite. As the Russian elite does not perceive China as a threat to regime security and regime survival, it is easier for Moscow to interpret China's rise as non-threatening and accept the growing asymmetry with China in terms of material capabilities and influence. The Russian ruling elite does not consider China a threat to its domestic power. Unlike the West, which—according to the reasoning prevalent in the Russian elite—is keen on regime change in Russia, China does not intend to undermine Putin's regime legitimacy or interfere with domestic politics. Taking regime survival into account may influence the Russian leadership's threat assessment and contribute to the downplaying of the power asymmetry. In the case of Russia's relations with the United States and the West in general, meanwhile, the power disparity is amplified by the lack of political security.

Whereas many scholars identify regime security and the consolidation of the domestic regime as the main driver of Russia's assertive foreign policy (Adomeit, 2019; McFaul, 2020; Stoner, 2021) and interpret foreign policy as the continuation of domestic politics (Cadier & Light, 2015), the factor of regime survival plays an important role in shaping Russia's policy towards China. It cannot be considered a direct cause behind Moscow's constant rapprochement with Beijing, but it provides conducive conditions for such a rapprochement.

Mutual fears of the West's alleged attempts to weaken and even overturn their regimes have the potential to lead to convergence in the Russian and Chinese elites' worldviews. Both ruling elites have perceived 'colour revolutions' as being inspired by the West since the mid-2000s (Wilson, 2010). The revolution in Ukraine in 2014 and the protests in Hong Kong in 2019–2020 have only reinforced this perception. The 'colour revolution' factor helps explain why Beijing was willing to tacitly accept Russia's annexation of Crimea, a move which challenged a number of China's long-established positions in international politics. The Russian action undermined the principle of not supporting separatist forces. The referendum, however skewed, signalled that it is the people that can choose their own statehood, a dangerous precedent from the perspective of Beijing's policy towards Taiwan. At the same time, Beijing seems to consider Russia's moves as a proper response to Western-led 'colour revolutions' (Cole, 2016, August 2). Thus, Moscow's support for Chinese statements about the Western 'hand' behind Hong Kong's protests can be seen not only as an opportunistic move, aimed at scoring points with a partner, but also as a reflection of a deeper—and shared—suspicion about Western motives.

The converging worldviews seem to lead to sharing 'best authoritarian practices'. The legislation related to banning foreign funding, limiting the manoeuvring room for NGOs as well as other instruments used by the governments to crack down on the opposition, strongly resembles each other. Regular consultations provide an institutional venue for sharing both regimes' experiences of stifling dissent. Both states' internal troops—Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) and China's People's

Armed Police—have organized several rounds of joint exercises. This may imply increasing cooperation.

3 Domestic Actors: The Case of the Russian Federation

The political-economic system that has matured in Russia in the 2010s privileges a number of domestic players, including security communities, state monopolies and oligarchs with close ties to the Kremlin (Dawisha, 2015; Miller, 2018; Sakwa, 2020). While those actors ultimately remain controlled by the Kremlin, they still have substantial room to manoeuvre, especially in terms of their role in the implementation of broad-brush directives issued by the Kremlin.

In terms of Russia's policy towards China, domestic actors who take part in shaping and implementing the policy represent a spectrum of attitudes. However, there are no major players who would perceive China as a threat to their political and economic interests. Even those who have not benefitted from closer cooperation as they expected in the wake of the Russian-Western post-2014 crisis—partly due to Chinese companies' unwillingness to risk secondary sanctions from the United States—have not formed an active anti-Chinese lobby.

The actors analysed in this section have been selected on the basis of their relevance for either the political system (e.g. intelligence and security services), the Russian economy (e.g. energy companies) or Russian foreign and security policy (e.g. the military-industrial complex). In addition, the (alleged) closeness of particular actors/leaders/CEOs to Vladimir Putin has been taken into consideration. All actors that have been chosen constitute the pillars of Putinism and Putin's political-economic power.

For the purpose of analysis, the chapter proposes a typology of the attitudes of particular players towards China. The first category, termed *beneficiaries*, includes those actors who have benefitted economically from closer cooperation with China and who can be seen as in favour of strengthening those ties. These actors are the most plausible candidates for the 'China lobby'. The *caught in-between* category refers to those actors who on the one hand benefit from cooperation with their Chinese counterparts but whose economic interests are also undermined by competition from China on the other. The third category, *converts*, includes those actors who have changed their attitudes towards China, from sceptical/cautious to positive, and engaged in cooperation with China, but often under the pressure from the Kremlin.

There are two main ways in which the domestic actors analysed below may influence Russia's policy towards China. First, their views have a bearing on threat perception and the threat assessment of their leadership. The absence of strong players within the Russian political-economic system who would regard China's rise as a threat to their parochial interests and thus would try to enrol the state's assistance makes it easier for the Kremlin to pursue a policy of rapprochement with Beijing. Thus, these actors partially at least 'filter' international pressures and

opportunities, such as power asymmetry, and mitigate factors such as historical grievances or suspicions. Second, domestic actors are of primary importance in the implementation process, in the course of which they can modify policies' outcomes compared to the original intentions of the leadership. While they are obliged to follow general directions from the Kremlin, in many cases the details of a policy are left to their own discretion.

3.1 Beneficiaries

Beneficiaries include those domestic actors who have systematically benefitted from cooperation with China and can be expected to act as an informal 'lobby', making a case for ever deeper ties. The two biggest beneficiaries—Rosneft and Novatek—represent the energy sector, oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), respectively. Other players that have also benefitted from Sino-Russian cooperation include Russian Railways, a state-owned monopoly; Roskomnadzor, a state cyberspace watchdog; and Rosgvardiya, a militarized internal security agency.

Rosneft, Russia's leading state-owned oil company, can be considered the oldest and most consistent beneficiary of China's rise and of closer collaboration between Russia and China. As early as 2004, Chinese banks provided the US\$6 billion loan that allowed Rosneft (with the help of Vneshekonombank acting as intermediary) to take over Yuganskneftegas and thus profit from dismantling Yukos, the company owned by Mikhail Khodorkovsky (Meidan, 2016, p. 11). In return, Rosneft entered into a long-term oil supply contract ('Russia And China Strike A Deal', 2009, November 2). Several years later, in 2009, as part of negotiations over the route of the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline, Rosneft received a US\$15 billion loan from the China Development Bank and entered into another long-term oil supply contract (Sotiriou, 2014, p. 220). Even temporary setbacks did not discourage Rosneft from increasing cooperation with China. In 2011, a dispute over pricing took place, as a result of which Rosneft agreed to reduce the price for oil sold to China. Regardless of this dispute, Rosneft chose to conclude another long-term contract in 2013 (Rosneft, 2013, June 21). Following that deal, Rosneft's Chinese partner, China National Petroleum Corporation, CNPC, provided it with US\$70 billion prepayments, which initially enabled Rosneft to complete a takeover of the TNK-BP joint venture ('Rosneft Says China Starts', 2014, January 15) and later allowed for debt repayment despite Western sanctions (Farchy, 2015, November 25).

The unintended outcome of Rosneft's close ties with Chinese counterparts has been the de facto revision of Russia's energy strategy. Since 2003, the Kremlin planned to diversify oil exports to Asia, including such customers as China, Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asian states, having hoped to reach the level of 1/3 of its oil and gas resources to be sold in the eastern markets. The construction of two branches of the ESPO pipeline—one to China and one to the Pacific coast—was supposed to ensure that diversification. However, as a result of Rosneft's activities,

China has emerged as the dominant buyer, purchasing between 70 and 80% of the oil sent to Asia ('Viewpoint: China to maintain', 2018, December 28).

What adds to Rosneft's weight in the Russian political-economic system is the position of Igor Sechin, its CEO, and the de facto *kurator* of the Russian oil industry. Sechin is considered to be one of Putin's most trusted allies, which may also explain why Rosneft's setbacks (such as the failed investment deal with the Chinese company CEFC) have not weakened his position. With Rosneft as his main instrument, Sechin can be considered the most powerful proponent of close cooperation with China in Putin's entourage.

Novatek, a publicly listed company, has emerged as the key player in the Russian LNG sector. Novatek began its cooperation with China in 2013. At that time, having faced a stalemate in talks with Gazprom over a gas pipeline route, Beijing decided to engage with the nascent Russian LNG sector. Chinese energy company, CNPC, purchased a 20% stake in Novatek's Yamal LNG project. China's Silk Road Fund, created to help with the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, bought another 9.9% of the project's shares in 2016 (Novatek, 2016, March 15). This move was followed by \$12 billion in loans provided to Novatek by the Chinese banks ('China Lenders Provide \$12 bln', 2016, April 28). This financial injection enabled the company to start the Yamal LNG project ahead of schedule and avoid the fallout from Western sanctions. In 2019, two Chinese energy companies, CNOOC and CNODC, acquired 20% of the shares of another Novatek LNG project, the Arctic LNG-2 (Novatek, 2019, July 22).

While Novatek remains a privately owned energy company, its owners, Leonid Mikhelson and Gennady Timchenko, are considered to belong to Putin's circle of friends. They both vehemently deny the connection, although Novatek's successes in the tight-knit Russian political economy are difficult to explain without receiving some support from the Kremlin. The US government recognized Timchenko's links with the Kremlin when it included him on the sanctions list in July 2014 (Belton, 2020).

Russian Railways, even before the ESPO pipeline was built, profited from links with China as the company delivered oil sold by Rosneft to China. The monopolist joined the circle of beneficiaries with the establishment of China-Europe cargo railway connections. What is now part of the overarching Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) began in 2011, with cargo trains sent from China's central and western provinces to Germany and Poland. The route via Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus offers the most convenient, shortest and cheapest connection. Russian Railways acts as the operator on the territory of the Russian Federation, benefitting from the surging number of trains travelling in both directions. The Russian company also established the Eurasian Railway Alliance with railway operators from Kazakhstan and Belarus.

Roskomnadzor, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, has increasingly been tasked with stricter control over Russian cyberspace. For the last couple of years, Russian authorities have been exploring different options for Internet and cyberspace control, with informal censorship hidden behind the façade of laws against extremism and the

concept of the sovereign Internet as the most recent iteration of these plans. In this area, its Chinese counterpart, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), seems to have the most to offer among potential international partners. Formal and informal cooperation with China offers the opportunity to exchange ‘best practices’ and transplant at least some Chinese solutions—both legislative and practical-technical—onto Russian territory. Both commercial cooperation, in particular in the area of 5G, and international collaboration in international fora will strengthen this link.

Rosgvardiya, the Federal Service of the Troops of the National Guard, was created in April 2016 with the major, albeit unofficial, task of protecting regime security. Its Chinese counterpart, the People’s Armed Police, can share authoritarian ‘best practices’. Less than a month after it was established, Rosgvardiya signed an agreement with its Chinese counterpart to conduct joint ‘anti-terrorist’ exercises. The first edition, codenamed ‘Cooperation 2016’, took place in the summer of 2016, with subsequent joint drills in 2017 and 2019.

3.2 *Caught In-Betweens*

*Caught in-between*s include actors who face contradictory incentives in terms of their engagement with China. On the one hand, cooperation with China provides them with tangible economic benefits. On the other hand, their Chinese counterparts have emerged as potential competitors in third markets. This group includes Rosatom, Rosoboronexport and Russian United Aircraft Corporation (OAK).

Rosatom, a state-owned corporation and major exporter of civilian nuclear technology, has been present in the Chinese market since the 1990s. It constructed four nuclear units at the Tianwan nuclear power plant: the first two by 2007 and the other two by 2018–2019 (NS Energy, [n.d.](#); Thomas, 2018, p. 238). Rosatom entered the Chinese market before the domestic nuclear boom. Since then, Chinese companies have gained expertise by collaborating with all major nuclear energy producers. However, despite what might look like a saturated domestic market, in 2018 Rosatom managed to sign a contract for an additional four blocks: two at Tianwan NPP and two at a new location, Xudapu NPP. In May 2021, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping witnessed (virtually) the ceremony of laying the foundations for two blocks at Tianwan and Xudapu (‘Xi, Putin Witness Launch’, 2021, May 20).

Rosatom has managed to maintain its presence in the Chinese nuclear market despite its Chinese counterparts’ making enormous progress in the last decade. It is impossible to say with certainty to what extent China still needs Russian-made reactors and how much it is a gesture towards Russia, an element of transferring benefits to key players in the Russian economic system. At the same time, Chinese companies have the potential to emerge as competitors in third markets, even though they are still newcomers. So far, China has been building nuclear power plants only in Pakistan and Argentina, but its prospects in the market are growing in tandem with its impressive domestic economic developments. Its cooperation with France has

made its entrance on the British nuclear market highly plausible (Hinkley Point project), whereas the UK market remains practically closed for Rosatom.

The Russian military-industrial complex began to cooperate with China in the early 1990s. At that time, orders from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) literally saved the Russian arms producers from collapse. Following the consolidation of the sector in the 2000s under the aegis of Rostekh, a state-owned enterprise, cooperation with China has waxed and waned. Rosoboronexport, a subsidiary of Rostekh and an arms exporter monopoly, however, regarded China as both a potential buyer and an actual competitor. In the mid-2000s, Russian exports to China were brought to a halt due to accusations of reverse engineering and intellectual property theft. Rosoboronexport gradually revived its exports to China, with major contracts on Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 anti-missile systems concluded in 2014 and 2015, respectively. China remains a potential buyer of other high-end weapons systems (including fifth-generation fighter jets) as well as a customer for their servicing. China's defiance of US sanctions on Rosoboronexport raised the importance of Beijing as a customer unwilling to bow to US pressure (even though India and Turkey have challenged the United States on this point as well).

However, the number of weapons systems in which the PLA could be interested is tending to decrease (see Chapter "Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor" by Sarah Kirchberger). China's growing military-industrial complex has matured over the last decade and has emerged not only as a reliable supplier of its own armed forces but also as a serious competitor to Rosoboronexport in third markets. Chinese corporations offer comparable equipment for lower prices, including weapons systems constructed on the basis of Russian originals (see Chapter "Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance" by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix). While the Russian military intervention in Syria showcased and advertised Russian weapons—a feature the Chinese companies are not able to replicate — the Chinese military-industrial complex has excelled in certain types of technologies where its Russian counterpart lags behind, such as drones (see Chapter "Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution" by Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska).

Whereas Rosatom and Rosoboronexport have long had experience in dealing with China, the Russian United Aircraft Corporation (OAK) is a relative newcomer to the world of Sino-Russian politics. The Russian state-owned enterprise (SOE) is engaged in a joint venture with the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC), named China-Russia Commercial Aircraft International Corporation Limited (CRAIC). Both companies aim at producing a wide-body passenger jet (CR929) that aspires to challenge the Boeing-Airbus duopoly (Reid, 2019, August 20). At the same time, both states can be expected to compete in the market of narrow-body passenger jets. OAK is attempting to launch MC-21 while COMAC the C919 (Pask, 2020, April 8). While both states' domestic airlines may be forced to purchase their local types of planes, fierce competition in third markets can be expected. Thus, OAK is an exemplar of a domestic player both benefitting from cooperation with China and potentially suffering from competition.

3.3 *Converts*

Converts refer to those actors whose attitudes towards China have evolved from distrust and suspicion towards greater openness for cooperation, but often under pressure and on direct orders from the Kremlin. This category includes domestic security services and the armed forces as well as Gazprom.

The Federal Security Service (FSB), whose responsibilities range from counter-espionage to preventing illegal migration and border security, used to regard China as a potential challenge in a number of respects. Industrial and traditional espionage used to be a major threat emanating from China. In the Russian Far East, illegal migration prevailed as a key problem (regardless of its real scale). These two problems stood out in the mid-2000s. Since then, a number of factors seem to have led to changes in the FSB's attitudes. Legislative solutions and heavier policing have led to the stabilization of the situation in the Russian Far East. The rise in anti-Western attitudes, coupled with the authoritarian turn since Putin's return to the presidency in spring 2012, has paved the way for closer collaboration with China. As in the case of Rosgvardia, Chinese domestic security structures have a lot to offer in terms of sharing experiences and 'best practices'.

The General Staff and the armed forces have cooperated with their Chinese counterparts on a number of occasions. The scenarios of the 2010 and 2014 editions of the *Vostok* strategic exercises still indicated China as a potential military threat. Thus, the Eastern Military District was provided with modernised equipment on par with other military districts. The most visible sign of changing attitudes on the part of the General Staff and the armed forces was a shift in the scenario of the *Vostok* strategic military exercise. The Chinese troops were invited and participated (3000 troops) in the 2018 edition of the exercises, the largest strategic exercise since the 1980s (Boulègue, 2018). However, as the majority of observers agree that the armed forces follow political directives and do not play an independent political role, this shift can be the result of a political decision by the Kremlin rather than a sign of evolving perception on the part of the military. It is difficult to assess to what extent internal assessments of Chinese power and intentions have mattered. The consideration of the Chinese armed forces as a necessary partner and the experience gathered in the course of joint exercises and contacts might have played a role in this regard.

These actors would prefer to remain on the sidelines of Russian-Chinese cooperation, but have been incorporated as a result of pressure from the top leadership.

Gazprom's cooperation with China can be interpreted as mostly politically driven, especially when compared to other players in the energy sector discussed earlier. While Gazprom attempted to enter the Chinese market throughout the 2000s, many of these attempts could be considered either half-hearted or insincere. Both Gazprom and the Kremlin attempted to convince China to construct the *Altai* pipeline, which would have linked West Siberian gas fields with northwestern China (Henderson, 2014). From the Russian perspective, such a solution would have allowed the exercise of leverage over the European Union, as these fields supply European customers. From the Chinese perspective, the proposed pipeline

made much less sense, especially since the successful construction of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline from Turkmenistan. In addition, China was not ready to pay the European prices that Gazprom had expected.

Against the backdrop of Gazprom's failures, the conclusion of the contract on the eastern gas pipeline, *Power of Siberia*, in 2014, was a game changer. The very signing of the contract needs to be ascribed to pressure from the very top, i.e. Vladimir Putin's personal engagement in the last phase of negotiations. Gazprom seemed to oppose the conditions offered by its Chinese counterparts, but following the crisis in relations with the West over the annexation of Crimea, Moscow needed a highly publicized success. However, even this contract did not lead to the expansion of cooperation on a scale that could be compared to that of either Rosneft or Novatek. Following the conclusion of the contract, Gazprom refused the Chinese offer of prepayment for gas deliveries and invested its own capital in the construction of the pipeline and the necessary accompanying infrastructure. The pipeline began its operations towards the end of 2019, and Gazprom insisted on constructing additional pipelines, the *Altai*, renamed *Power of Siberia-2* and the *Power of Siberia-3*, which is supposed to go through Mongolia. The future of both projects remains uncertain, however, especially when compared with other projects pursued by Gazprom more successfully in Europe (namely, Nord Stream 2 and Turk Stream).

4 Domestic Political Obstacles

While domestic politics tends to be conducive to the Sino-Russian relationship, at times it constitutes the key obstacle to Moscow and Beijing advancing their ties. The most acute example has been the case of the failed investment of CEFC in Rosneft.

In 2017, CEFC, a private Chinese company that quickly and unexpectedly rose to prominence in the oil sector, was about to purchase 14% of the shares of Russia's oil behemoth Rosneft for the sum of US\$9 billion. The shares were to be bought from a joint venture established by Glencore and the Qatar Investment Fund (Kaczmarek et al., 2017). This transaction would have made CEFC a major player in the global oil market and China a major stakeholder in the Russian state-owned oil giant. However, before the deal was finalized, the CEFC chairman was arrested for suspected 'economic crimes' and his company effectively nationalized (Zhdannikov, 2018). The reasons behind this move remain unknown. The ultimate result, however, was that China lost an opportunity to become a major shareholder in the key Russian oil sector corporation. Domestic politics seems to have taken precedence over strategic considerations and the cooperation hailed with Russia.

Russian domestic politics have also occasionally intervened in the relationship. On 25 February 2021, the Russian court convicted Vladimir Vasilyev to 8 years for handing over 'information that constituted a state secret to China's intelligence services' ('Russia jails man', 2021, February 25). This was one of several cases made public in 2020–2021. Prior to that, the Russian authorities appear to have kept sensitive cases concerning China under the radar. This event and the publicity

surrounding the case can be interpreted either as a clear signal sent to China, or as proof of the existence of Sino-sceptic factions in Russian power structures (such as the FSB) and of Sino-sceptic individuals in the leadership (as one of them would have to agree to making the information about the spy case public).

5 Conclusions

The literature is dominated by widespread scepticism towards the role of domestic factors in Sino-Russian relations. As this chapter illustrated, while not often the main driver behind the Sino-Russian rapprochement, domestic politics cannot be ignored. Domestic politics has provided a fruitful backdrop for Sino-Russian cooperation. The fears of regime survival are bringing Moscow and Beijing closer together, regardless of a growing asymmetry between the two powers. As this chapter has demonstrated, a number of key Russian domestic players have benefitted from closer ties with China, and a pro-Chinese lobby seems to remain prevalent in the corridors of the Kremlin.

This conducive domestic backdrop to bilateral collaboration makes Sino-Russian ties more durable and more resilient to potential changes. They go beyond geopolitical and strategic considerations, becoming entrenched in the political-economic structures of both states' ruling regimes.

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Part II
The Military Dimension of Sino-Russian
Cooperation: Case Studies

Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor



Sarah Kirchberger

1 Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, China has been on a quest to transform its military into a modern, networked (or “informationized,” *xinxihua*) force. This ambition has long been hampered by a Western arms embargo that was imposed on China after the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen massacre and remains in place to this day. To make up for lost opportunities to import state-of-the-art weapons systems, China focused strongly on indigenous innovation, but combined it with technology imports and know-how transfers mostly from post-Soviet arms producers Russia and Ukraine. While both countries have in the past mostly supplied older, Soviet-era arms technologies to China, their deliveries had a slightly different focus and impact, with Russia exporting complete weapons systems and Ukraine chiefly supplying subsystems and the expert knowledge that Russia was unwilling to provide. According to an assessment by *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, in 2000–2011 China imported Russian defense products worth US\$1 to 3 billion annually and accounted for about 20% of all Russian export orders from 1997 to 2007, while Russia was China’s prime supplier of defense technologies in that timeframe (Anderson, 2011a, June 20). In contrast, Ukrainian exports to China were worth on average only a few hundred million US\$ per year, but despite that smaller figure, some Ukrainian exports had a particularly strong qualitative impact on China’s military modernization due to their type (Grevatt, 2011, August 9).

The dynamics in this arms-industrial triangle shifted markedly in 2014, when, as a result of its annexation of Crimea, Russia was sanctioned by the West while Ukraine and Russia severed their mutual defense-industrial ties. Until early 2014, the Chinese-Russian and Chinese-Ukrainian arms trade had been conducted against

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the backdrop of a near symbiotic arms production relationship between those two suppliers (Kofman, 2014, December 4; Anderson, 2014, February 25). After the annexation of Crimea, that symbiosis came to a sudden end as Russia found itself in a similar position as China in 1989 by becoming the object of international arms trade sanctions. This led to a massive restructuring of the Russian and Ukrainian arms-industrial complexes, resulting largely in new and enhanced opportunities for China to acquire arms technologies and know-how.

2 Soviet Arms-Industrial Support for China

After its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) relied heavily on Soviet military aid (see Chapter "Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance" by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix). Complete weapons systems and entire production facilities as well as teaching materials were transferred wholesale (Li, 2009, pp. 122–125). The history of Soviet arms exports during the Mao era (1949–1976) was, however, by no means a linear success story. From the start, the Soviet Union hesitated to transfer state-of-the-art technologies to a potential geopolitical rival and restricted its exports to the supply of older systems. Initial support for China's nuclear arms program was withdrawn in the context of the Sino-Soviet split from about 1960 onward. When ties began to sour, China resorted to reverse engineering its previously imported vintage systems and embarked on the difficult road of indigenous innovation, eventually succeeding in some strategically important fields such as nuclear warheads and nuclear propulsion systems (Bussert & Elleman, 2011, pp. 5–6).¹

2.1 *A Brief Period of Western Arms Transfers During the 1980s*

From 1978 onward, Deng Xiaoping's policy of economic reconstruction initially focused on enhancing people's welfare while putting defense modernization on the back burner. Massive overcapacities, a depletion of skilled workers due to better-paid job options in civilian industries, and over-bureaucratic practices afflicted the arms production sector.

At the same time, modern Western arms technologies became available to China for the first time. Following a warming of relations between the United States and

¹Notable successes during this period included the development of an atomic bomb (first tested in 1964) and a hydrogen bomb (first tested in 1967). China also managed to develop a nuclear submarine propulsion system that was first integrated into the Type 091-class nuclear attack submarine (SSN) ca. 1974 (Cole, 2010, pp. 7–18; Lewis, 2014, p. 23, 47).

China during the Nixon era and given the US interest in containing the Soviet Union, the Reagan administration decided to relax technology transfer restrictions and in 1984 made China eligible to receive support for US arms purchases within the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system (cf. Bussert & Elleman, 2011, pp. 5–6; Zhang & Hyer, 2001, pp. 96–98). China received US and European arms technologies including missiles, sonar, propulsion, and defense electronics in transfers that included joint production in avionics, aircraft power plants, and naval gas turbines. Chinese industries, furthermore, used every opportunity to upgrade production plants with the help of Western experts (Cheung, 2009, p. 62). Notable systems transferred to China during this brief honeymoon included the French Exocet and Crotale missiles, TAVITAC combat direction system, and Sea Tiger air search radar, Italian Aspide missiles and sonars, and American gas turbines (cf. Friedman, 2006, p. 516; Shambaugh, 2004, p. 268). Some of these systems later formed the basis of indigenous Chinese innovation attempts.

2.2 The Impact of the 1989 Arms Embargo Against China

After the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen massacre, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was deployed to suppress unarmed dissidents, Western support for lethal arms exports to China ended. Military exchanges were suspended and an arms embargo was imposed by the United States, the EU, and US allies in the Asia-Pacific that has to this day not been lifted, even though individual countries have interpreted the restrictions differently.

Although loopholes continued to exist, e.g., in dual-use technologies such as helicopters, sonar systems, marine diesel propulsion plants, or space systems, the embargo nonetheless caused large-scale disruption to China's then ongoing procurement projects due to a sudden unavailability of key components. Curiously, that situation was mirrored in Russia from 2014, when ongoing Russian surface ship-building projects had to be suspended due to a sudden lack of access to key Ukrainian and Western systems around which these vessels had been designed.²

Apart from slowing down the pace of China's military modernization during much of the 1990s, the embargo had two other effects: China's reorientation toward post-Soviet arms producers Russia and Ukraine, who provided alternative sources of high technology, and the employment of various strategies by Chinese experts to overcome the effects of the embargos. With the Chinese leadership's approval, Chinese arms developers resorted to various methods to alleviate technological bottlenecks, from exploiting academic exchanges with Western countries (cf. Joske, 2018) to capturing technology through forced technology transfers

²Russian loss of access to Ukrainian gas turbines impacted 31 out of 54 then ongoing surface warship acquisition projects, among them the Admiral Gorshkov and Admiral Grigorovich-class frigates (Moore, 2014, May 27; Dunai, 2015, June 3).

(cf. Hannas & Chang, 2021, pp. 6–7), to reverse engineering Western arms (including those from wreckages and unexploded shells that were indirectly obtained via third countries or collected from war zones),³ to outright state-sponsored espionage (cf. Hannas et al., 2013). These activities were not limited to Western targets. They also led to friction between the Chinese and Russian arms industries on several occasions when China was accused of having developed weapons systems through reverse engineering imported systems, such as the Su-27 fighter plane, the Kilo-class submarine, or the Mineral-ME fire-control radar system.⁴ Frictions notwithstanding, Russia and Ukraine remained the only available suppliers of some advanced military technologies that China's arms industries were not yet able to develop indigenously.

3 Post-Soviet Russia's Interest in Delivering Arms Technologies to China

From the point of view of the Russian arms industries, export relationships with large, rapidly modernizing countries such as China and India became a priority after the breakup of the Soviet Union. A massive contraction of the national economy and shrinking defense budgets had a dramatic impact on the Russian arms industries, as is evident from their declining share in the world's total arms production. In 1985, Russian arms production had still represented about one third of the world's total, but in 1996, this share dropped to merely 4%. In the early 1990s, about one-fifth of the Russian industries were considered close to bankruptcy. Given the fact that the defense sector constituted about 60% of the entire Russian industrial production output and employed about four million workers, the difficulties of the defense sector affected a large portion of the country's industrial production capacity overall (Tsai, 2003, p. 121).⁵ Furthermore, some Russian regions were affected disproportionately due to their high degree of dependence on local defense industries. More than a decade later, Russian news reports still indicated that by 2009, approximately 30% of the Russian defense companies were at the verge of bankruptcy, with only 36% considered solvent, many solely due to export orders.⁶

³China seems to have obtained US cruise missile shells collected in Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Sudan and reportedly received access to wreckages of aircraft such as a F-117 stealth attack aircraft that was shot down in Serbia in 1999 and possibly the wreckage of an unidentified stealth helicopter that was left behind during the Bin Laden assassination on Pakistani soil on May 1, 2011 (Parsons, 2011, May 6; Anderson, 2011b, August 30).

⁴Details on these cases can be found in Johnson (2015, November 25); "Frictions Between Russia & China" (2009, December); and "Russia and China Have A Widening Difference" (2009).

⁵According to Frolov (2017, p. 9), in 2014 the Russian defense-industrial complex still consisted of 1339 organizations and about 1.3 million employees.

⁶Exports made up ca. 60 percent of total sales, and arms systems were in many cases developed primarily for export purposes rather than tailoring them to the Russian military's needs. Cf. Neuman (2009, p. 62, 74).

The Western withdrawal from the arms trade with China in 1989 thus almost coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the breakup of its giant military-industrial complex now spread over the post-Soviet states. The Russian need to bolster arms exports for keeping its defense industries afloat thus came at a time when the arms embargo had already hit China's ongoing naval programs hard, causing delays and disruption. This likely prompted China's decision in 1996 to sign a contract with Russia over the import of two ex-Soviet steam-powered Project 956E Sovremenny-class destroyers, with two further ships procured in 2002. Despite the fact that China, in the same period, was developing its own guided-missile destroyers and submarines, these and other Soviet-era ships were imported as complete weapons systems. They gave China access to a range of new technologies, which included the Saphir-U combat direction system that was later also installed on China's indigenous Type 051C-class DDGs, the Mineral-ME fire control radar (NATO reporting designation "Band Stand," later copied by China) controlling the supersonic sea-skimming SS-N-9 or SS-N-22 SSMs, as well as a long-range air defense capability through the SAN-7 Shtil SAM and MR-90 "Front Dome" tracking radar (cf. Kirchberger, 2015, pp. 188–189; see also Chapter "Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance" by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix). The Mineral-ME radar provided the Chinese Navy with an over-the-horizon fire-control radar system for the first time. It was subsequently integrated (either in the original or as a cloned version) into all major modern Chinese surface warships up until the Type 052D destroyer.⁷

Because the decision to procure two additional Sovremenny-class destroyers was made as late as 2002, it is safe to conclude that China was at that time not fully satisfied with any of its three simultaneously developed destroyer classes—the Type 052B, the Type 051C, and the Type 052C.⁸ However, the Type 051C destroyer became the first Chinese ship outfitted with two Russian 30N6E1 phased array Flap Lid antennae (Bussert & Elleman, 2011, p. 43). This was a first step toward the development of an AEGIS-like combat system: In the US Navy, a passive phased-array radar system (AN/SPY-1) constituted the cornerstone of AEGIS.

A similar pattern of foreign procurement supplementing simultaneous indigenous development could be observed regarding diesel submarines. China decided to import two batches of submarines from Russia while developing its own designs, the Project 877 Kilo and the more advanced, improved Project 636 Kilo-class. In the area of fighter planes, China chose to import the Russian Su-27, but quickly made an indigenous copy (Johnson, 2015, November 25). On the downside, the fact that most of the imported technologies were alien to Chinese industries at the time meant that China had to rely on extensive Russian maintenance and training support to operate them, a fact that led to recurring friction (cf. Bussert & Elleman, 2011, p. 33, and "Frictions Between Russia & China," 2009).

⁷For more detail cf. Kirchberger (2015, pp. 189–193).

⁸The Type 052C design, however, ultimately became the basis for China's indigenous 052D "Chinese Aegis" destroyer, of which at least 25 vessels are projected to be built.

To sum up, after decades of blocked Sino-Russian arms-industrial contacts, economic pressures after the implosion of the Soviet Union created strong incentives for Russia to cooperate more closely with China, while China was out of alternative options due to the Western arms embargo. These exigencies were reflected on the political level: In 1996, Russia and China formed a “strategic partnership of coordination” and in 2001 jointly founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for a closer coordination in Central Asia (Sinkkonen, 2018, January 16, p. 3).

Meanwhile, post-Soviet arms industries that were now located in different independent countries continued to engage in joint production with each other and accepted a division of work between them. Ukraine in particular had inherited some key Soviet arms-industrial capacities that Russia continued to rely upon.⁹ This was a sensible arrangement from Ukraine’s point of view at the time, not least because Ukraine had inherited control over some ex-Soviet capacities and unfinished projects that its own armed forces had no use for, e.g., an unfinished Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier hull and the *Nazyemniy Ispitateiniy Treynirovochniy Kompleks Aviatsii* (NITKA) aircraft carrier flight training center near Saky on Crimea. Russia leased the latter facility as well as the naval fleet base of Sevastopol, a base critical for Russian fleet access to the Black and Mediterranean Seas (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 93; Kashin, 2015, p. 17). Russia also continued to rely on the supply of key systems and components as well as repair and maintenance services from Ukraine, while Ukraine successfully marketed some of its unwanted Soviet-era arms technologies to China.

3.1 *A Dip in Russian-Chinese Arms Trade During 2005–2012*

During the period from about 2005–2012, the volume of Russian-Chinese defense trade markedly declined. China’s defense-related imports in general dropped approximately 58% from 2007 to 2011; while the country began to be more active on the arms export market from 2001 to 2011, Chinese defense exports increased by 95%. To many experts this indicated a growing sense of self-sufficiency by Chinese arms producers and seemed to signify a decreasing degree of dependency on Russian systems and Russian technical support (Lague & Zhu, 2012).

Another factor contributing to the decline of Russian arms transfers to China during that time was frictions arising from Russian allegations of Chinese reverse engineering¹⁰ and illegal copying of Russian systems (Tsai, 2003, pp. 173–175).

⁹Ukraine had inherited about one third of the Soviet Union’s military-industrial complex. Until 2013, it provided an estimated 3000 product lines to the Russian military industries, among them critical systems such as aero engines, gas turbines, transport aircraft, armored vehicles, and heavy missile parts. Cf. Dunai (2015, June 3).

¹⁰Reverse engineering “defines the process of discovering the technological principles of a device, object or system through analysis of its structure, function and operation” (Stumbaum, 2009, p. 11, fn. 17).

Russian arms industry representatives voiced some of their complaints in interviews with the magazine *Kanwa Asian Defence* in 2009: As one unnamed Russian source explained, China had officially procured eight Mineral-ME radar systems plus a large amount of spares that in sum were “sufficient to assemble several additional sets” (“Frictions Between Russia & China,” 2009). According to that same source, after China’s acquisition of the Project 956E Sovremenny-class destroyers, “almost identical ‘cloned versions’” of the Mineral-ME and Fregat-ME radar systems were produced by Chinese experts and integrated into the Chinese Type 054A-class frigate (cf. Figs. 1 and 2).

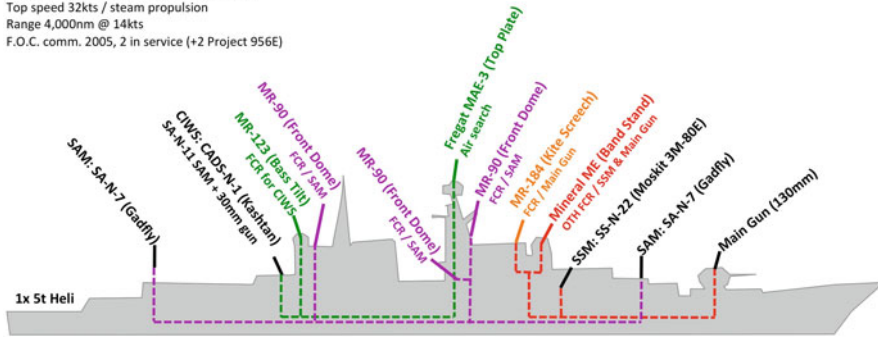
Furthermore, the Chinese repeatedly requested Russian assistance to solve technical problems in the radar systems purchased that upon inspection were found to be caused by unsuccessful attempts at replacing original Russian components with Chinese imitations. “Through such contacts with our experts, they intended to identify the problems in their imitation projects.” When confronted about the sudden appearance of seemingly identical Mineral-ME radars on the new Chinese frigate, the Chinese side implausibly claimed that the system in question was wholly indigenously developed (“Frictions Between Russia & China,” 2009). The copied version of the Mineral-ME radar was subsequently integrated into all the major Chinese surface combatants up until the Type 052D destroyer (cf. Fig. 2).

This friction was likely exacerbated by Chinese attempts to obtain technical information from Ukraine on imported Soviet-era systems that Russia had not been willing to provide, such as maintenance blueprints for the Kilo-class submarines. Russian experts themselves wanted to perform the maintenance services at specialized yards in Russia rather than educate their Chinese counterparts. As *Kanwa* reported, at least one of the Kilo subs was berthed for at least 2 years in a row, which points to either operational problems or attempts at reverse engineering. Furthermore, the indigenously developed Chinese Type 041-class submarine appeared to Russian experts to be a clone of the Kilo-class submarine (cf. “Russia and China Have A Widening Difference,” 2009). The operation of the imported Sovremenny and Kilo-class vessels reportedly necessitated the buildup of specialized Russian “support cocoons” staffed with Russian assistants and specially trained Chinese personnel, one for the Sovremenny destroyers at the port of Dinghai on Zhoushan Island and another at the harbor of Xiangshan (Bussert & Elleman, 2011, p. 33).

China’s acquisition of Su-27 fighter jets under a license agreement gave rise to similar complaints of reverse engineering after China halted the licensed production ahead of schedule and instead developed its supposedly indigenous Shenyang J-11B (Johnson, 2015, November 25). The tensions between both sides’ arms industries were partly resolved at a higher leadership level through an intellectual property agreement signed in 2008, although distrust continued to exist (Sinkkonen, 2018, January 16, p. 6). In the above-cited 2009 interviews with *Kanwa Asian Defence*, Russian representatives named India rather than China as their top priority for advanced Russian arms technology exports in the coming years.

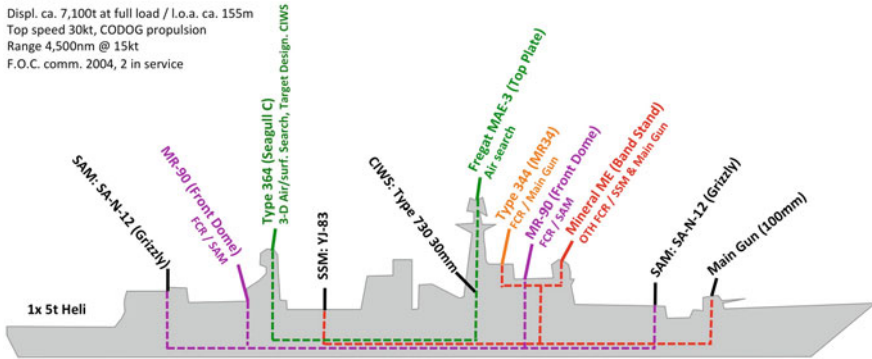
Project 956EM "Sovremenny" DDG

Displ. ca. 8,000t at full load / l.o.a. ca. 156m
Top speed 32kts / steam propulsion
Range 4,000nm @ 14kts
F.O.C. comm. 2005, 2 in service (+2 Project 956E)



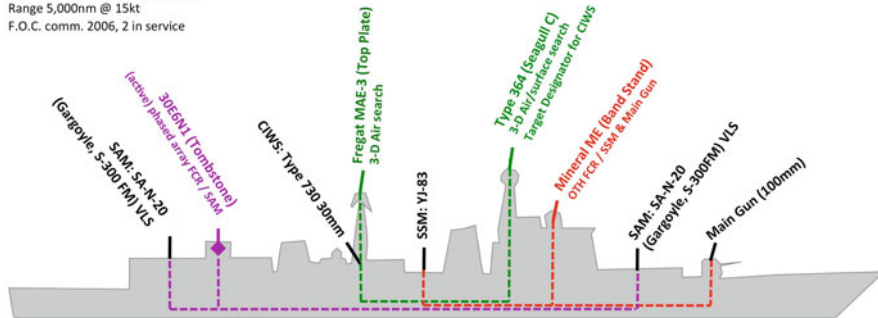
Type 052B DDG

Displ. ca. 7,100t at full load / l.o.a. ca. 155m
Top speed 30kt, CODOG propulsion
Range 4,500nm @ 15kt
F.O.C. comm. 2004, 2 in service



Type 051C DDG

Displ. ca. 7,100t at full load / l.o.a. ca. 155m
Top speed 29kt, Steam propulsion
Range 5,000nm @ 15kt
F.O.C. comm. 2006, 2 in service

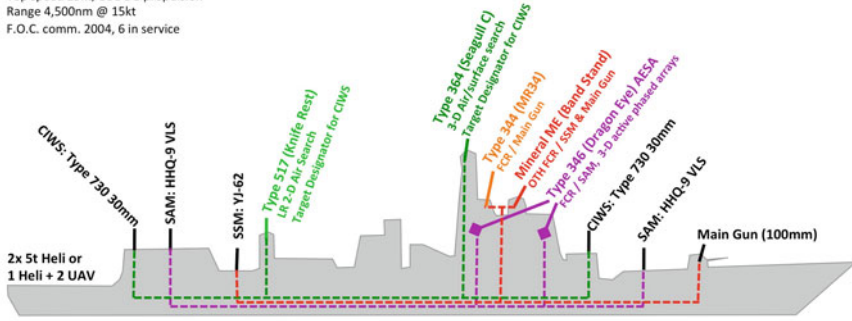


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Fig. 1 Combat systems of mid-generation Chinese destroyers: Main functional chains

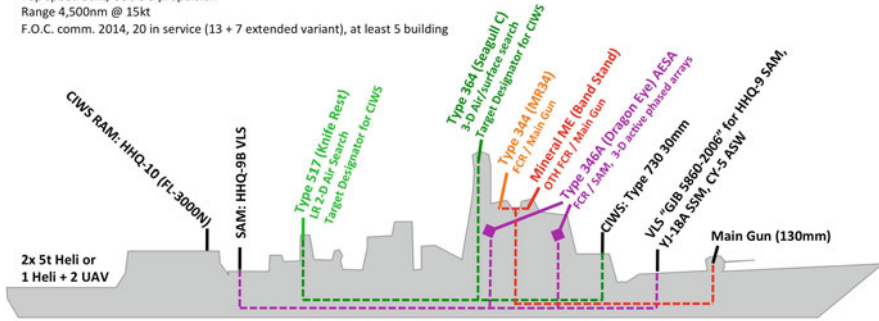
Type 052C DDG

Displ. ca. 7,100t fl / l.o.a. ca. 155m
 Top speed 29kt, CODOG propulsion
 Range 4,500nm @ 15kt
 F.O.C. comm. 2004, 6 in service



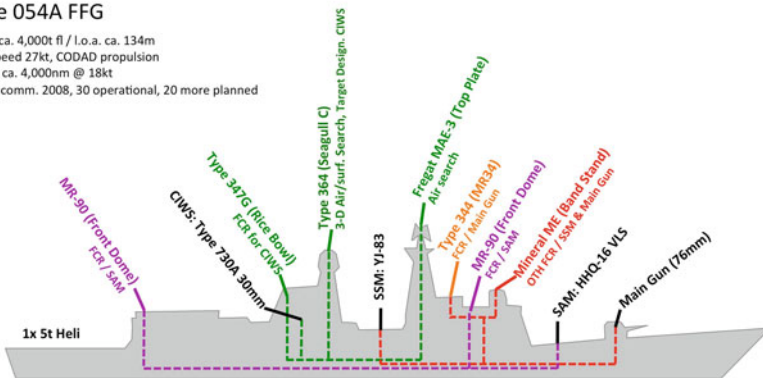
Type 052D DDG

Displ. ca. 7,500t fl / l.o.a. ca. 157m (extended variant: 161m)
 Top speed 30kt, CODOG propulsion
 Range 4,500nm @ 15kt
 F.O.C. comm. 2014, 20 in service (13 + 7 extended variant), at least 5 building



Type 054A FFG

Displ. ca. 4,000t fl / l.o.a. ca. 134m
 Top speed 27kt, CODAD propulsion
 Range ca. 4,000nm @ 18kt
 F.O.C. comm. 2008, 30 operational, 20 more planned



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Fig. 2 Combat systems of modern Chinese surface combatants: Main functional chains

4 The Impact of Ukrainian Arms Transfers to China Before 2014

In the context of the complicated Russian-Chinese arms trade relationship before 2014, it is instructive to look more closely at the role played by Ukraine. In the period after the fall of the Soviet Union and in the face of increasing friction between Russia and China due to the Russian unwillingness to share its most advanced technologies, Ukraine saw a chance to become an alternative supplier of some Soviet-era arms technologies to China. For China, this had the benefit of alleviating China's one-sided dependency on Russian support at least in a few areas. But even more important were Ukraine's contributions in several key fields that had strategic importance for China's military development. Notably, Ukrainian experts advised China regarding the development of nuclear warheads and offensive power-projection vessels. As pointed out by Chen (2017, December 28), "As early as the 1990s, Beijing received help from the Ukraine-based Yuzhnoye Design Office, when the PLA's infant nuclear division was seeking breakthroughs in multi-warhead technology and miniaturization of its nuclear warheads."

Another transfer from Ukraine that was critical for China's attempts to build blue-water naval power projection capability came in 1998 when Ukraine sold an unfinished Admiral Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier hull to China, where it was then finished and outfitted and rechristened the Liaoning. China's first indigenously designed and built aircraft carrier, the Shandong, was modeled on that ship (Farley, 2018, October 6).

Ukraine also provided substantial help with the training of Chinese carrier pilots. In that context, it is interesting to consider the role played by the Soviet-era aircraft carrier training facility NITKA near Saky on Crimea, which was "the only former USSR base equipped with the hardware necessary to train pilots to fly the Sukhoi Su-33 and Mikoyan MiG-29K carrier-capable fighters off Admiral Kuznetsov-class carriers" (Johnson, 2012, August 29). As such, this facility was of special interest to China as well as Russia.¹¹ Due to its location on Crimea, Ukraine had inherited it after 1992, but the Ukrainian Navy had no use for it. Until the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia leased NITKA from Ukraine under a countertrade agreement that included "aircraft parts for Sukhoi fighter aircraft still operated in Ukraine" (Johnson, 2012, August 29). Political tensions after 2008 led to Russia temporarily being denied access to NITKA, but a new leasing agreement was concluded when Ukrainian president Yanukovich came to power in 2010. Russia meanwhile began building its own, more modern carrier pilot training facility in Yeysk in the Krasnodar region in 2009, and by early 2013 Russia indicated that it would eventually

¹¹ Carrier pilot training is a weak spot in the Russian Navy, as became obvious during Russia's 2016 aircraft carrier operation near Syria that saw several casualties: "fewer than two dozen Russian pilots are certified to land on an aircraft carrier, and their average age is 50 years old" (Urcosta, 2017, February 24).

discontinue the use of NITKA.¹² This likely led to Ukraine's late 2013 decision to offer NITKA to the Chinese Navy Air Force (PLANAF) for exclusive use (Johnson & Hardy, 2013, November 14). Despite having already built an indigenous carrier pilot training facility near Xi'an that was modeled after NITKA, China was reportedly interested in leasing NITKA. These negotiations ended when during the annexation of Crimea in early 2014, Russia forcefully took control of NITKA.

Apart from providing China with a carrier hull and invaluable consulting services for carrier pilot training, Ukrainian experts were reportedly also instrumental during the vessel's lengthy finishing process, with the Varyag's lead designer, Valery Babich, acting as a consultant throughout. Even though China has in the meantime turned toward building larger flat-top carriers for which the ski-jump design of the Liaoning can no longer serve as a model, Ukrainian experts are reportedly continuing to assist China in the design of its future carrier fleet. A Chinese-language report claimed that the then 76-year-old Babich, who had been intimately involved in the design of all the three Soviet-era Moskva-class helicopter carriers, the three Kiev-class aircraft carriers, the two Kuznetsov-class carriers, and the unfinished Soviet nuclear-powered steam catapult-equipped flat-top carrier Ulyanovsk, was serving at a research institute in Qingdao named the Qingdao Chinese-Ukrainian Special Ship Design and Research Institute Co., Lt. established in September 2014, that is, shortly after the breakdown of Russian-Ukrainian defense relations ("Liaoning jian zong sheji shi," 2017, September 4).

Babich's case seems far from unique: unnamed experts from other major Ukrainian defense industries, among them the aerospace company Antonov, the engine maker Motor Sich, the tank producer Malyshev Factor (formerly known as Kharkiv Locomotive), and Black Sea Shipyard, have reportedly been "making a beeline for numerous military firms affiliated with the People's Liberation Army, as Beijing dangles attractive remuneration at a time when career prospects back home in Ukraine are bleak" (Chen, 2017, December 28; cf. also Forrester, 2017, May 17 and Grevatt, 2017, September 20).

Yet another example of where Ukraine transferred critically important knowledge and technology to China concerns the development of phased-array radar systems for naval vessels. Such radars form the cornerstone of modern networked combat systems, such as the American AEGIS, as they can provide illumination and guidance for multiple missiles while tracking a multitude of targets. After having previously received two Russian 30N6EI Tombstone phased-array Flap Lid antennae, which were installed on the Chinese Type 051C destroyer, China in 2004 finally obtained the prototype of a Ukrainian C-band active phased-array radar (APAR) from the Ukrainian Kvant Design Bureau, together with the design package (Bussert &

¹²In 2017, Urcosta (2017, February 24) reported that unlike NITKA, "the nearly-billion-dollar Yeysk facility is thoroughly modern. Construction is almost complete, aside from the installation of arresting gear for practicing carrier deck landings. Moreover, the complex will eventually be equipped with a unique flight training platform, floating directly on the Azov Sea, for marine helicopter pilots to practice take offs and landings in choppy waters before having to put those skills into practice on board the Admiral Kuznetsov."

Elleman, 2011, p. 43; Luo & Yang, 2008, August 15). This transfer seemingly enabled China's Nanjing Research Institute of Electronic Technology to develop its indigenous Type 346 Dragon Eye APAR, which went on to become the cornerstone of the "Chinese AEGIS" area defense system and was first integrated into the Type 052C destroyer (Friedman, 2006, pp. 222–3; Wertheim, 2013, p. 115). Its derivatives, the Type 346A and Type 346B APARs, are installed on the Type 052D and Type 055 destroyers, respectively. Given that these ships are tasked with conducting area defense for Chinese aircraft carrier battle groups, the grave impact of this particular technology transfer is apparent.

Last but not least, in 1997, Ukraine's Zorya Mashproekt sold China its GT-25000 naval gas turbine and concluded a license production agreement with China. This alleviated the bottleneck that had resulted from the freezing of American gas turbine deliveries after the Tiananmen incident, which had disrupted China's then-ongoing destroyer programs (Bussert & Elleman, 2011, p. 29).

5 Chinese-Ukrainian Defense Cooperation Since 2014

China has long struggled with replacing jet engine imports from either Russia or Ukraine with indigenous models (cf. Majumdar, 2017, January 3; Schwartz, 2017, February 9). According to Ukrainian industry sources, China had difficulty in particular with replacing Ukrainian engines in its Hongdu Aviation L-15 jet trainer aircraft despite a vast effort in the context of its Minshan jet engine program. In light of this weakness, the Crimea annexation offered China the chance to profit on two fronts: by gaining more favorable export conditions from a sanctions-ridden Russia despite a history of mutual distrust, and by attracting top talent and investment opportunities in war-stricken Ukraine.

In the aftermath of Russia's Crimea annexation and its ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine where many defense industries are located, Ukraine lost about one tenth of its entire defense-industrial infrastructure. Furthermore, since many exports had previously been tailored to and directed toward Russia, the breakdown in defense relations with Russia deprived Ukraine's military-industrial complex of access to key components and to its most important export market.¹³ Ukrainian industries have tried to compensate for this by strengthening cooperation with the EU and NATO, ratifying the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement in late 2014, and joining a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the European Union

¹³In 2013, Ukrainian defense sales to Russia were estimated to be around USD400 million, a quarter out of total sales of USD1.6 billion. The number of product lines provided by Ukrainian defense industries to Russia was estimated as ca. 3000 (Dunai & Smith, 2014, March 5; Anderson, 2015, November 19). Cf. also Barabanov (2015, p. 194; 198) and Lavrov (2015, pp. 242–246).

on January 1, 2016.¹⁴ Ukrainian defense industries, furthermore, increased trade with other countries, and Ukraine concluded defense cooperation agreements, e.g., with Indonesia, Pakistan, Poland, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa, and in 2015 exported defense products worth USD 1 billion (Anderson, 2015, November 19). China, due to its huge market size and previous history of strategic deals with Ukraine, became an even more attractive export market. China, for its part, has seized the chance to take advantage of the new situation in Ukraine for advancing its military-industrial goals, with Ukraine torn between the need for investment and political support against Russia and the hope for closer integration into the West and eventual NATO membership.

In light of heavy American resistance against Ukrainian arms trade with China, not all possible areas of cooperation have actually materialized. In 2016, China seemed poised to profit from Ukraine's breakup with Russia and the subsequent stalling of the Soviet-era Antonov An-225 strategic airlift cargo aircraft program. Built originally to transport the Buran space shuttle, the An-225 is world's heaviest aircraft and can carry up to 250 t. Only one single plane was ever completed. In late August 2016, the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AICC) and Antonov agreed to restart production, beginning with the completion of the second, unfinished airframe. Lin and Singer (2016, September 7) reported in 2016 that the second stage of the project would "involve the complete transfer of technology, including the 23-ton thrust Progress D-18T turbofan engines, to China, for licensed production of a modernized version in Sichuan Province."

The ability to operate and produce this giant transport aircraft could massively enhance China's global power projection capabilities, according to Lin and Singer (2016, September 7):

The plane is large enough to carry helicopters, tanks, artillery and ballistic missiles to anywhere in the world, or even other aircraft like smaller fighter jets. The An-225's unparalleled payload could even make it a space launch platform, or the ultimate mothership for drone operations.

Nonetheless, by February 2021, this project had failed to materialize (Beresnevicius, 2021, February 3). In late February 2022, the An-225 was reported as destroyed by a Russian missile attack near Kyiv.

China's interest in Ukrainian aero engine technologies was even more evident from another envisaged cooperation project. In the fall of 2017, it became clear that a Chinese company founded in 2014 named Beijing Skyrizon Aviation had purchased a 41% share in the Ukrainian aircraft engine manufacturer Motor Sich and indirectly

¹⁴NATO's Communications and Information Agency (NCIA) signed a memorandum of agreement on cooperation in C4I (command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence) with Ukraine on April 24, 2015, to assist Ukraine in the modernization of its C4I networks and enhance interoperability with NATO. NATO has also launched several trust funds under the leadership of various NATO nations on behalf of Ukraine, which pertain to areas such as C4I, logistics, medical care, and military career management. Cf. Tigner (2015a, April 24) and Tigner (2015b, September 7).

controlled a 56% majority stake of the firm. According to a news report, Beijing Skyrizon:

[...] reached a deal in May with Motor Sich to invest US\$250 million in the Ukraine plants of the manufacturer, which employs [sic] nearly 22,000 people. The pair also agreed to a plan to set up a plant in the Chinese city of Chongqing for the assembly and servicing of plane engines. The deal was announced by Ukraine's First Deputy Prime Minister, Stepan Kubiv, when he was visiting Beijing for the belt and road international trade initiative summit in May (Liu, 2017, September 14).

However, despite this apparent political backing for the takeover, in September 2017 a Kyiv court froze the Chinese-held shares to protect “national security.” Motor Sich officials responsible for the deal came under investigation by Ukrainian security services, who accused them of “aiding the ‘withdrawal of assets of the enterprise from Ukraine’” with the aim of weakening Ukraine’s defense-industrial basis (Liu, 2017, September 14; Forrester, 2017, May 17). Finally, in March 2021, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy returned Motor Sich to state ownership, while the Chinese investor in turn prepared to sue for \$3.5 billion in losses. The Motor Sich leadership only acknowledged having received a \$100 million Chinese loan that they aimed to repay by 2026 (cf. “Motor Sich Case,” 2021, July 12). With a Chinese takeover of Motor Sich increasingly unlikely, it seemed that Ukraine was tilting more strongly toward the United States and NATO and would eventually become unavailable for official arms-industrial cooperation with China (Makichuk, 2021, September 10). The massive Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022 and the lack of Chinese support for Ukraine—despite a history of significant Ukrainian mil-tech transfers to China—will likely accelerate that trend.

6 A Revival of Russian-Chinese Defense-Industrial Relations After 2014

Roughly since Putin’s return to the office of president and Xi Jinping’s takeover as state and party chief in 2012, Russian-Chinese defense-industrial cooperation again intensified, soon reaching a previously unseen level. Russia was the destination of Xi Jinping’s first state visit in 2013, and Xi became “the first foreign leader to visit the Russian military command centre in Moscow” (Sinkkonen, 2018, January 16, p. 3; see also Chapter “Imperialist Master, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China’s Changing Views of Russia” by Jo Inge Bekkevold).

The fallout from the Crimea annexation of early 2014 soon provided additional incentives to both countries for closer military-industrial cooperation. Writes Schwartz (2017, February 9):

Shortly thereafter, Moscow and Beijing concluded two major new arms sales agreements, stepped up the level of their joint military exercises, intensified the pace of their military-to-military contacts, and even tightened coordination of their respective regional and global security policies.

The first reports of a new large-scale arms deal appeared in the Chinese state media during 2012 and 2013 and were officially confirmed in November 2015.¹⁵ The new agreement provided for the sale of 24 Su-35 fighter planes, 4 Project 677 Lada-class submarines, and 6 battalions of the S-400 air defense system (Foster, 2012, December 21; Johnson, 2013, March 26). The deal had been under negotiation at least since 2008, but before 2014, resistance within the Russian arms industry had impeded its conclusion. Under the changed circumstances following the occupation of Crimea, the direct involvement of the Kremlin paved the way for its successful conclusion. China was thought to be especially interested in two components of the Su-35 jets: the Saturn 117S jet engine and the NIIP N035 Irbis-E radar, a passive electronically scanning array (PESA), since Chinese arms industries had difficulty producing an indigenous equivalent. Russia was reportedly even willing to provide source codes to China's Shenyang Aircraft Corporation to enable the integration of Chinese weapons (Johnson, 2015, November 25).

The breakdown of the Russian-Ukrainian arms-industrial symbiosis thus offered China the chance to step in as a customer of both countries and in some cases even as a supplier of technologies. The already deepening military relationship between Russia and China received a boost through a June 2017 general plan for bilateral military cooperation for the years 2017–2020 (Sinkkonen, 2018, January 16, p. 2). The conclusion of unprecedented export and technology transfer agreements indicated renewed trust in bilateral military-technological cooperation that was also reflected in the conclusion of the new large-scale arms transfer contract mentioned above. The S-400 air-defense system, according to Schwartz (2017, February 9), given it “is by far Russia’s most advanced area air defense system,” was set to be “significantly outstripping other systems in [China’s] inventory.” The Su-35, while perhaps not a full-fledged fifth generation combat aircraft, still:

[...] employs many of the features found only on fifth generation fighters, including supercruise capability, precision air-to-air weapons, and advanced avionics. Designed for both short- and long-range air-to-air combat, it has much greater range and maneuverability than China’s other fourth generation aircraft, making it a significant upgrade for China’s overall air combat capabilities. (Schwartz, 2017, February 9)

In April 2019, it was reported that the transfer of the 24 Su-35 aircraft to China had been completed, with the delivery of all related subsystems including ground support equipment expected for the following year (Dominguez & Fediushko, 2019, April 16). The Su-35s were delivered with AL-41F engines that China could have intended to use for its own J-20 stealth fighter. An indication of such an intention might be the fact that China purchased six spare engines per fighter instead of the usual two (Schwartz, 2017, February 9).

The delivery of the S-400 air defense systems to China has, on the other hand, met with unexpected setbacks. The first two platforms were reportedly delivered to China in March or April 2018, but another shipment was damaged during sea

¹⁵For a Chinese state news report, see “Zhong E qianding junshou da dan” (2013, March 25). For comments on the deal, see Johnson (2013, March 26) and Foster (2012, December 21).

transport in a storm and the missiles had to be replaced with newly manufactured ones (“Channel Storm Damaged,” 2019, February 19). Completion of the order was initially projected for 2020, but in February 2020, a high-profile espionage case may have derailed those plans. At the time, the renowned Russian arctic scientist Valery Mitko was detained under suspicion of high treason for “delivering top secret information to China about hydroacoustic research and the detection of submarines,” which the accused denied (cf. “Russia Accuses Top Arctic Scientist,” 2020, June 16 and “Russian Scientist Facing High Treason Charges,” 2021, June 18; see Chapter “Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space” by Frank Jüris and Chapter “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix). Shortly thereafter, Russia decided to stall the delivery of further units of the S-400 system to China, ostensibly due to pandemic restrictions—while at the same time continuing deliveries of S-400s to India (Dasgupta, 2020, November 12). This might indicate new friction between Russia and China due to the espionage case or could be the result of a conflicted Russian stance toward China’s aggression against India during the Ladakh standoff given Russia’s long-standing defense-industrial relationship with India. Both the S-400 and Su-35 would bolster the PLA’s capabilities if deployed near the coastline for use in a conflict in the East or South China Seas or in a Taiwan contingency, but also in other conflict zones. Indian news sources reported in 2021 that two units of the S-400 were installed by China near the Indian border along the Line of Actual Control (“China Deploying S-400,” 2021, September 27).

As to the reported Chinese interest in the Project 677 Lada-class submarine, analysts were skeptical throughout whether a Chinese procurement would materialize given the fact that Russia curtailed its own Lada submarine program due to unsatisfactory performance. Russian officials instead suggested the more advanced Project Kalina-class to China. Nonetheless, by early 2016 China was reportedly still interested in the Project 677 Lada, likely to gain access to its advanced sonars, missiles, and quieting technologies, and planned to refit them with Chinese engines and electronic fire-control systems.¹⁶ One can infer that China was not yet fully satisfied with the performance of its own diesel-electric Type 039A-class submarine design at the time.

By 2020, however, the Russian news outlet *RIA Novosti* reported that Russia and China were planning to jointly develop a “new generation non-nuclear submarine” (cf. Larson, 2020, August 28). If this joint project actually comes to fruition, it would represent a significant departure from the previous arms trading relationship in which Russia was the (sometimes reluctant) provider and China the (not always trustworthy) recipient of advanced weapons. Jointly developing a strategically important weapons system such as a conventionally powered submarine signifies a hitherto unthinkable level of trust, as submarine technology counts among the most

¹⁶Cf. Russian and Chinese news report summarized by Keck (2014, March 28), and the discussion in “Ejun yanzhi xinxing changgui qianting” (2015, November 18). Schwartz (2017) on the other hand reports a continued Chinese interest in the Project 677 Lada boats.

heavily guarded military secrets in any country that operates such systems and is not necessarily shared even between close allies. How the joint submarine development plan might be impacted by the abovementioned Valery Mitko espionage case is unclear, but its public announcement by the Russian side notably happened after Mitko's detainment had become public knowledge.

Table 1 lists major milestones in the defense-industrial and military relationship between China and Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. As can be seen, the cooperation became more substantial over time and has the potential to lead to, or at least support, a further military alignment of both countries.

Another development that signified the deepening of Chinese-Russian defense-industrial ties was newly concluded agreements for joint research and production. One such agreement was signed between Russian Helicopters and China's Avicopter in June 2016 and concerns Russian assistance for the Chinese production of 200 to 300 helicopters capable of carrying a 15 t load within 5 years. According to Schwartz (2017, February 9), "Russia will supply the engines and certain other components, while China will be responsible for the overall helicopter design, development, and testing programs." In the fall of 2019, reports indicated that the program was still on track, but awaiting a final Chinese decision to go forward (cf. Jennings, 2019, October 22; "Russia, China May Sign," 2019, October 12). No such announcement has been made at the time of this writing, but that does not necessarily mean that the project is not moving forward given the reluctance of Chinese military planners to publicly discuss sensitive arms development programs.

Another potentially novel and interesting joint Russian-Chinese collaboration project concerns a rocket-launched drone design study. The agreement was concluded between China and the Russian Tecmash Research and Production group in order to develop an experimental "reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that is launched from a munition casing launched by the 9K58 Smerch multiple rocket system (MRS)" and has the approval of the Russian Defense Ministry (Gibson & Dominguez, 2018, April 3).

One further area of possible cooperation is missile defense, a common strategic concern of China and Russia. Citing an unnamed researcher at the PLA Academy of Military Science, Schwartz (2017, February 9) points out that:

the decision to deploy the THAAD system in South Korea "did force China and Russia to expand their anti-missile cooperation and speed up the modernization of strategic penetration capability." The two have even begun to discuss the possibility of creating a joint missile defense shield, which would be built and fielded under the auspices of the SCO.

As Table 1 shows, China and Russia have steadily intensified their cooperation in defense-related fields since 2008, but particularly from 2014 onward. By 2019, a new level of strategic trust seemed to have been reached, as indicated by Russian assistance for a Chinese ballistic missile early warning system. In a highly publicized speech and Q&A at the Valdai Discussion Club in early October 2019, Putin for the first time characterized the state of Russian-Chinese relations with the words: "This is an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership" (Valdai Discussion Club Session, 2019, October 3).

Table 1 Major milestones of Sino-Russian defense-industrial and military exchanges

Year	Significant Sino-Russian military or defense-industrial milestones
1992	Agreement on military technology cooperation
1994	China orders two project 877EKM Kilo-class submarines from Russia (delivered in 1995)
1996	Establishment of a “strategic partnership of coordination.” China orders two improved project 636 Kilo-class submarines from Russia (delivered 1997–1998) and purchases two unfinished project 956 Sovremenny-class destroyers (delivered 1999–2000)
1998	China starts licensed production of the export version of the Russian Su-27 fighter aircraft as the Shenyang J-11
2001	Sino-Russian treaty of friendship concluded
2002	China orders eight improved project 636 M Kilo-class submarines from Russia (delivered 2005–2007) and two improved project 956EM Sovremenny-class destroyers (delivered 2005–2006)
2008	Agreement on intellectual property to prevent illegal copying of technologies
2008	Peaceful resolution of border dispute; defense ministers of both countries establish direct phone line
2011	Joint venture for servicing all Russian-made helicopters operating in China
2012	First round of annual joint naval exercise series “Joint Sea”
2013	Air forces exercise together for the first time
4/2015	Start of regular meetings within the framework of a “Sino-Russian Northeast Asian security dialogue” in response to THAAD deployment plans in South Korea
2015	Conclusion of new arms trade agreement over six battalions of the Russian S-400 air defense system and 24 Su-35 fighter aircraft, including delivery of extra engines and ancillary components, estimated to cost around USD3 billion
2015	Framework agreement on joint development of a heavy-lift helicopter
9/2015	Putin is present at China’s September 2015 military parade (an event largely boycotted by Western leaders)
6/2016	Agreement signed between Russian Helicopters and China’s Avicopter to jointly develop a new heavy-lift helicopter based on Russia’s Mi-26 design
11/2016	MoU signed between Russian satellite firm GLONASS and Chinese firm NORINCO for development of a new chipset for its navigation satellites
2016	First ever joint missile defense exercises
5/2017	Xi Jinping is guest of honor at Russia’s Victory Day parade on the 70th anniversary of the end of WW II (an event largely boycotted by Western leaders)
6/2017	General plan signed for bilateral military cooperation 2017–2020
12/2017	First Russian-Chinese anti-ballistic missile defense computer-simulated command post exercise takes place in Beijing
9/2018	First Chinese participation in Russia’s large-scale Vostok exercise
11/2018	Agreement signed between Russia and China on cooperation for the use of GLONASS and BeiDou global navigation satellite systems for peaceful purposes
7/2019	First joint strategic bomber patrol between South Korea and Japan near Dokdo draws warning shots from South Korean interceptors
7/2019	Russia passes law on GLONASS-BEIDOU SatNav cooperation
9/2019	A Chinese contingent participates for the first time in Russia’s Tsentr exercise
10/2019	Putin announces that Russia is helping China build a ballistic missile early warning system

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Year	Significant Sino-Russian military or defense-industrial milestones
10/2019	Putin for the first time publicly characterizes Russia-China relations as “an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership”
11/2019	First trilateral naval exercise between China, Russia, and South Africa off South Africa’s coast (“Naval Operation Mosi”)
12/2019	First trilateral naval exercise between China, Russia, and Iran in the Indian Ocean (“Operation Marine Security Belt”)
9/2020	A Chinese contingent participates in Russia’s Kavkaz exercise for the first time
10/2020	Putin publicly states that a military alliance with China “can be imagined” for the first time
8/2021	Russia and China hold “Interaction-2021” exercise in China for the first time, later branded as part of the Russian Zapad-2021 exercise
9/2021	Russia’s state space agency Roscosmos announces it will place ground stations for its GLONASS SatNav system across China and China will place ground stations for BeiDou in Russia
10/2021	First ever joint naval patrol of Russian and Chinese warships circling around Japan’s main island

Source: Assembled from various news sources and based on an earlier list in Sinkkonen (2018, January 16)

One year later, at the 17th Valdai Annual Meeting 2020, in response to a question by the Chinese IR scholar Yan Xuetong on “whether it is possible to conceive of a military alliance between China and Russia,” Putin replied:

It is possible to imagine anything. We have always believed that our relations have reached such a level of cooperation and trust that it is not necessary, but it is certainly imaginable, in theory. We hold regular joint military exercises—at sea and on land in both China and the Russian Federation—and we share best practices in the build-up of the armed forces. *We have achieved a high level of cooperation in the defence industry—I am not only talking about the exchange or the purchase and sale of military products, but the sharing of technologies, which is perhaps most important. There are also very sensitive issues here. I will not speak publicly about them now, but our Chinese friends are aware of them.* Undoubtedly, cooperation between Russia and China is boosting the defence potential of the Chinese People’s Army, which is in the interests of Russia as well as China. Time will tell how it will progress from here. So far, we have not set that goal for ourselves. But, in principle, we are not going to rule it out, either. So, we will see.

(Valdai Discussion Club, 2020, October 22; emphasis added)

Exactly one year later, on October 21, 2021, the Russian president seemed to backpedal on the issue of a possible Sino-Russian alliance when responding to a question by Fyodor Lukyanov on NATO’s new strategic vision of viewing “Russia and China as one common threat rather than two threats” and whether that meant that Russia should “unite with China and consider someone else as a threat.” Putin replied rather more cautiously than the year before:

[D]istinct from NATO, from the NATO countries, we are not creating a closed military bloc. There is no Russia-China military bloc and we will not create one now. So, there is no reason to talk about this. (Valdai Discussion Club, 2021, October 22)

Regardless of top leaders' rhetoric, significant potential synergies in the defense-industrial realm continue to exist.¹⁷ For instance, China and Russia traditionally shared a common reliance on Ukrainian naval gas turbines for powering their large surface vessels. In 2014, these propulsion systems became unavailable to Russia, which disrupted several Russian shipbuilding programs. China, on the other hand, has been producing Ukrainian GT-25000 gas turbines under a license agreement after first getting access to them in the late 1990s (Bussert & Elleman, 2011, p. 29). In June 2017, it was reported that China's Harbin Turbine Company concluded a "strategic partnership agreement" with Russia's United Engine Corporation "for the supply, production, and development of small and medium-sized industrial gas turbine units that could potentially also be used to power naval ships" (Dominguez & Capeleto, 2017, June 19).

Finally, discussions regarding the possible export of Russian RD-180 rocket engines to China in exchange for electronic components have reportedly been ongoing. This engine is attractive to China's space program for powering the new generation heavy-lift launch vehicles, but could also be used for ballistic missiles (Schwartz, 2017, February 9). In 2019, it became clear that Russia, far from being hesitant to let China have the RD-180, would in fact be keen to supply those engines to China (Liu, 2019, August 28). Further examples of intensified cooperation in the Chinese and Russian space programs merit closer scrutiny in terms of their significant dual-use aspects. Reports from 2018 suggest the possibility of China and Russia cooperating ever more closely in their respective global satellite navigation systems, the Russian GLONASS and the Chinese BeiDou ("Russia & China To Merge," 2018, April 1). In September 2021, Russia's state space agency Roscosmos announced it will place GLONASS ground stations across China and that China will reciprocate by placing BeiDou ground stations in Russia ("Russia Will Install GLONASS," 2021, September 24). Enhancing the resilience and resolution of GNSS signals through cooperation between BeiDou and GLONASS has the potential to enable—among other applications—precision strikes.

The actual progress of such initiatives will be a good test case to see whether traditional Russian-Chinese strategic distrust can be outweighed by strategic and technological synergies. According to some indications, under the assumption that Russian defense industries may be unable to effectively compensate for the loss of access to Western technology since 2014, China and Russia could be about to switch their traditional roles, with China becoming more and more a supplier to Russia. Russia's Deputy Prime Minister responsible for the defense industry, Dimitry Rogozin, stated in June 2015 that Russia had to replace about 640 key components from EU and NATO countries, mostly optical and radio-electronic components (Dunai, 2015, June 3). Consequently, the areas where China was and is most likely to become a Russian supplier include electronic components, e.g., for the Russian space program; marine diesels, where China's Henan Diesel Engine Corporation

¹⁷For an analysis of potential synergies in the naval field, cf. "Russia Could Cooperate" (2020, November 16).

already received an order for eight diesels for the Buyan-M missile corvette and patrol boats (that were originally built around German diesel engines); and the cyber dimension, where Russia has become increasingly reliant on Chinese support in the realm of Internet control (Schwartz, 2017, February 9).

7 The Outlook for Further Russian-Chinese Defense-Industrial Cooperation

The multilayered alignment between Chinese and Russian strategic interests after 2014 and the great-power rivalry between the United States and China has contributed to a climate of unprecedented willingness for more substantial arms-industrial cooperation between both countries. Ukraine initially had an incentive to deepen its relationship with China in the face of the Russian military threat and economic problems, which caused Ukraine to exploit opportunities to provide technology and knowledge to China (likely in exchange for political support) in order to make the best possible use of the remaining timeframe during which Ukrainian services and arms products might still be in demand there.

The intensifying Russian-Chinese military-technological cooperation has to be seen against the backdrop of a generally reinforced political and strategic coordination between the Xi and Putin administrations that encompasses not just declarations on the level of rhetoric,¹⁸ but substantial exchanges in several strategically relevant spheres, including the oil and gas trade, geopolitical coordination in Central Asia, joint military exercises, control of the information sphere, and mutual political support in international organizations (see Chapter “Russia’s Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?” by Hannes Adomeit and Chapter “Cooperation Between Russia and China in Multilateral Organizations: A Tactical or a Strategic Alliance?” by Olaf Wientzek). Russia has become China’s largest oil supplier, and the two countries have shown political convergence on issues as diverse as the Syria conflict and North Korea and are united in their criticism of liberal values and US hegemonialism and in their opposition to US missile defense (cf. “Friends Forever,” 2016, June 26). Furthermore, both China and Russia are aiming to bridge the technological gap that for decades separated their respective military-industrial complexes from the Western arms industries and may even be able to surpass the technological standard of Western arms industries in a few select areas, such as AI and unmanned systems (Bitzinger & Popescu, 2017, p. 3; see also Chapter “Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution” by Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska). Their military-technological exchanges have the potential not only to deepen the political and strategic coordination between the two countries, but due to a commonality of hardware could result in deeper military cooperation. Joint exercises of increasing complexity point to such a

¹⁸See, e.g., O’Connor (2018, April 3).

possibility, and a particularly worrisome area is the field of potential cooperation in nuclear deterrence (see Chapter “China-Russia Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence” by Brian G. Carlson).

In the export market, however, they could soon find themselves in difficult competition. On its own, China is able to form defense-industrial export relationships with customer countries and is selling increasingly complex weapons systems, which could threaten Russia’s arms export interests in Southeast Asia and Africa (Raska, 2017, September 11).¹⁹ At the same time, Chinese dependency on Russian arms is inevitably dwindling. Time will tell whether recent reports that China is beginning to overcome its old dependency on Russian jet engines by powering its J-20 fighter plane with a fully indigenous propulsion are indeed accurate (cf. Lendon 2021, September 21).

How the full invasion of Ukraine that Russia began on February 24, 2022 will affect future Russian-Chinese military cooperation is still uncertain at the time of this writing. China will certainly continue striving to alleviate its remaining technological bottlenecks by enhanced acquisition of foreign technologies—especially against the backdrop of the intensifying great-power rivalry. The less than stellar performance of Russia’s military during the first weeks of the war has likely diminished the attractiveness of Russia as a mil-tech partner, while international condemnation and the unprecedented sanctions it faces as a result of its aggression against Ukraine are bound to significantly increase China’s leverage over Russia in this relationship.

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¹⁹Cf. Bitzinger (2017) for a discussion of Chinese arms exports and their potential to threaten traditional Russian markets.

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Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance



Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix

1 From Laying the Foundations of the PLA Navy to Breaking Up

From 1950 to 1959, Soviet assistance to communist China was instrumental in creating a navy through technology transfer and training. A veteran of the Long March and key actor, political commissar Liu Huaqing studied naval theory and command at the Voroshilov Naval Academy (1954–1958), now renamed Admiral Kuznetsov. The People’s Liberation Army was given its first submarines and soon started production of its own in Shanghai. From the Leningrad-based industries and institutes, Beijing acquired the know-how to make its first torpedoes.¹ The Soviet Union provided a handful of SAET-50M passive homing torpedoes before support was withdrawn. Naval guns were copies of Russian makes² (Bond et al., 2021). Beijing received numerous aircraft blueprints including the Tupolev Tu-16 bomber, which became the Xi’an Hong-6 in both the air and naval forces. In 1959, the Commander-in-Chief of the People’s Liberation Army’s Navy (PLAN) paid tribute to Soviet assistance: “. . . while our industry, our science and our technology were still relatively backward, the Soviet government, the USSR Central Committee and the Soviet people gave us selfless support. . .” (Swanson, 1982, p. 200; Bussert &

¹The Yu-1 (a version of the Soviet World War II 53–39, 533 mm; 300 kg warhead; 39–51 knots; 8–4 km range), the Yu-3 (a passive only ASW weapon with active/passive, wire guidance, and wake-homing variants may be closer to the French torpedoes L5 and older F17; 533 mm; 205 kg warhead; 35 knots; 10 km range), the Yu-4 (a version of the Soviet SAET-50M; 533 mm; 309 kg warhead; 40 knots; 15 km range). Cf. Bond et al. (2021, Annex F); Gallois & Sheldon-Duplaix (2022, p. 306)

²Including the 130 mm twin-tube mount, the 100 mm, 57 mm, 37 mm, 25 mm. Ibid., cf., Bond et al. (2021), Annex C

A. Sheldon-Duplaix (✉)
Flottes de Combat, Rennes, France

Elleman, 2010). However, the alliance came to an abrupt end. During his visit to Beijing in August 1958, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev sought bases in China to operate his new nuclear submarines and transmit orders to them from a communication station on Chinese soil.³ Considering that this project threatened national sovereignty, Mao turned down the request. Without consulting with Moscow and to distract his people from domestic difficulties, in August 1958 Mao attempted to seize the nationalist islets of Quemoy and Matsu. Fearing that Beijing's uncoordinated military initiatives might draw the USSR into an unwanted nuclear confrontation with Washington, Moscow suspended its alliance and technical assistance in 1960 (Lewis & Xue, 1994; Joyaux, 1994, p. 38, 164; Swanson, 1982, pp. 214–215).

The Sino-Soviet split dealt a terrible blow to the modernization effort, especially that of the Chinese Navy. According to the People's Daily, "[...] the Soviets suddenly and unilaterally decided to withdraw all their experts, cancel 343 contracts... and 257 other scientific and technical cooperation projects. They then suspended crucial transfers of equipment and spare parts."⁴ China lost access to Leningrad's naval research institutes and was forced to develop its own research facilities, specialized machines, and tools. US intelligence reports soon depicted how the shipyards' production and operational readiness were seriously curtailed. But against all odds, including the destructive Cultural Revolution, China completed programs for which it had received Soviet kits or plans before the breakup: among them the strategic test submarine Project 629 (Golf) launched in 1964 and P-15 Termit (Styx) anti-ship missiles intended for Chinese versions of Soviet Komar and Osa boats (HY-1) and, later, destroyers and frigates (HY-1 J) based on Soviet Kotlin and Riga class designs (Swanson, 1982, p. 214; Bond et al., 2021, Annex D1).

On March 2, 1969, the Chinese army attacked Soviet border guards on a disputed Ussuri River island (Damanskiy/Zenpao). According to some commentators, Mao wanted to demonstrate to his people and the Socialist Camp that he rejected Soviet leadership of the Communist bloc after the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia and that he also wanted to prove that China could simultaneously confront the USSR to the north and the United States in Vietnam. Ultimately, this risky border war caused Mao to establish relations with Washington, thanks to a common Pakistani ally. From now on the West played the role of a counterweight for China to balance the USSR. The West, in turn, saw its advantage in improving Chinese weaponry and forcing Moscow to devote more resources to its eastern border. Western military transfers to China included torpedoes, engines, surface-to-air weapons, and combat systems. After two decades of hostilities, including Beijing's support for the United States during the new Cold War (1979–1989), Beijing and Moscow resumed their exchanges in 1989, following Western sanctions and the arms embargo in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre (Lewis & Xue, 1994, p. 28).

³See the July 22, 1958 "Minutes of Conversation, Mao Zedong and Ambassador Yudin" (Mao & Yudin, 1958).

⁴Quoted by Swanson (1982, p. 214)

2 Closing the Technological Gap with Russia's Help

The Gulf War (1990–1991) demonstrated Iraqi military impotence when confronted with superior American technologies. Like the Chinese army, modeled after the Soviet Army, the Iraqi military impotence traumatized Chinese Communist Party leadership (“1991 nian de haiwan zhanzheng,” 2019, November 5). In an existential emergency, Beijing revised its strategic doctrine, moving from the concept of “winning local wars under normal conditions” to the concept of “winning local wars under high technology conditions.” Liu Huaqing, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission following his tenure as the navy chief (1982–1987), advocated the purchase of foreign weapons as an intermediate step to bridge the technological gap. Accordingly, in 1995 Liu Huaqing launched a successful reform of the military industry to achieve the industrial capacity necessary to produce advanced weaponry without outside help (Cheng, 2011; Pillsbury, 2000; Zhang, 2006).

During this process, the resumption of naval relations with Moscow became mutually beneficial. Through its exports to China, Russia kept alive its military-industrial sector, while the People's Liberation Army rapidly upgraded its forces through off-the-shelf purchases. In the aftermath of the Taiwan crisis (1996) when the United States deployed two aircraft carriers, Beijing bought twelve 877/636 (Kilo) submarines and four 956 (Sovremenny) destroyers from Moscow. Eight of those submarines came equipped with anti-ship cruise missiles⁵ with a range of 120 nautical miles, while the four destroyers were fitted with 3M-80ME (120 km) and 3M-80MVE (140 km) Moskit missiles (SS-N-22), a qualitative leap to help dissuade US aircraft carriers from approaching Chinese coasts (Bond et al., 2021, annex D1). For air defense, Beijing purchased two S-300 naval anti-aircraft systems (SA-N-6) intended for two Chinese-built 051C destroyers stationed in the Yellow Sea, extending the S-300 belt already protecting the Chinese capital. For its naval aviation, Beijing acquired 26 Helix helicopters, including 14 anti-submarine Kamov Ka-28 PLs, 3 search and rescue Ka-28 PS's, and 9 early warning Ka-31s (Pillsbury, 2000, p. 76).

Those imports enabled China to license products or reverse engineer and master key technologies and locally produce most major systems now equipping the Chinese navy.

In the area of ship-launched anti-land cruise missiles, Beijing developed the 290 km Ying Ji-18 (YJ-18) based on the Russian 3 M-54 Klub/Caliber cruise missile, with a subsonic cruise mode and a supersonic terminal attack phase (Mach 3). In the field of anti-ship missiles, the Ying Ji-18 generated two anti-ship variants: the YJ-18A installed on destroyers (052D and 055) and the YJ-18B launched by submarines.⁶ Based on the Russian Kh-31 (AS-17), the Ying Ji-91 is an airborne supersonic anti-ship missile carried by naval aviation fighter bombers.⁷

⁵The 3M-54 Klub/Kalibr (SS-N-27b Sizzler)

⁶Military charge, 300 kg; speed, Mach 2.5; range, 220–540 km (Gallois & Sheldon-Duplaix, 2022).

⁷Speed, Mach 4.5, range, 50–120 km. Ibid.

A surface-to-surface variant, the YJ-12A, was designed for and installed on the modernized Pr. 956 destroyers (“Yingji-12,” 2020, October 11).

For air defense missiles, the Hong Qi-16B (HHQ-16B) was developed jointly by the Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology (SAST) and the Russian company Almaz-Antey. The Hong Qi-16B is based on the Buk-M1/Buk-2 M surface-to-air missile,⁸ but was improved to be launched from a vertical VLS launcher so similar to the American Mk.41 that it is considered to be a direct copy from hacked Pentagon contractor data (“China hacked into Pentagon,” 2014, September 17). It constitutes the anti-aircraft armament of the 31054A frigates and two 051C destroyers. The Chinese Qi-9 (HHQ-9) long-range missile may borrow some features from the Russian S-300, but it is not an outright copy (“Hong Qi 9 [HQ-9] Air Defence Missile System,” n.d.).

With the delivery of the Kilo submarines, China acquired increasingly more advanced Russian torpedoes (wake-homing 53-65KE, TEST-71M, and MK wire-guided, and then TE-2-01 and TE-2-02). The wake-homing device has apparently been introduced in the Yu-6 national torpedo (“Yu-6 Torpedo,” 2010, March 25). China has also reportedly purchased the ASM APR-3E light torpedo that it has adapted for a national anti-submarine missile. A new 130 mm single gun turret (H/PJ-45A) was reverse-engineered from the Russian AK-130 twin-tube gun and fitted onboard Type 052D and Type 055 destroyers, while the Type 054A frigates, Type 056 corvettes, and Type 071 landing ship docks feature a compact 76 mm single turret (H/PJ-26), reverse-engineered from the Russian AK-176. By contrast, the 30 mm H/PJ-13 multi-tube turret is the stealth-enhanced licensed production version of the Russian AK-630 M. For fire support against land targets, the PLA Navy uses a local version of the Russian 122 mm rocket launcher BM-21 (Grad), type 81H (Gallois & Sheldon-Duplaix, 2022).

As for radars, more than half of the main current systems in the PLA Navy inventory are derived from Russian radars (see Fig. 1):

- The Type LJQ-366 microwave active/passive over-the-horizon target designation radar is an improved copy of the Mineral-ME (NATO Band Stand). It appears to have been reverse-engineered and not license-produced or jointly developed unless there was a secret protocol. It corresponds to an improved design with five working frequency bands that can cover 360-degree azimuth work if not for the superstructure. When working in active mode, the maximum number of processed targets is three times that of the passive mode. This radar is installed on at least 62 platforms, the Chinese Navy’s 054A 31 frigates and 31 of the 052 series destroyers (“Weikepu: Zhongguo haijun,” 2015, March 16).
- The 382 or three-dimensional Sea Eagle, an improved copy of the MR-710 Fregat (NATO Top Plate), was apparently developed without a license agreement, unless this development took place within a secret protocol (the maximum power of the Type 382 was increased to 100 kW from the 90 kW of the original

⁸Weight: 328 kg. Range: 50 km. Ibid.

Type	Russian systems	Characteristics	Chinese Derivative(s)	Known characteristics	No. of warships equipped
Over-the-horizon target designation radar	KRS-27 Mineral-ME (NATO Band Stand)	Consists of the Mineral-ME1 active radar & Mineral-ME2 passive radar mounted in a back-to-back configuration & the Mineral-ME3 mutual data exchange, navigation and joint combat operation control station. Atmospheric refraction bends electromagnetic energy, such as radar waves, as they travel. This duct effect enables Mineral-ME to have a range of 135 nm against a medium-sized target.	Type 366 over-the-horizon target designation radar	Improved design with 5 working frequency bands that can cover 360° azimuth work. In active mode, the maximum number of processed targets is three times that of the passive mode.	62
3D air search and target designation radar	MIR-710 Fregat (NATO Top Plate)	Created by Salyut. Designed to detect air and surface targets and issue target designation to fire weapons. Frequency range: E; Number of radar channels: 2; Range: 300km; azimuth: 360°; height: 30km; elevation angle 55°; Detection range: fighter 230km, rocket 50km	Type 382 or three-dimensional Sea Eagle	Maximum power is increased to 100 kW from the 90 kW of the original MIR-710, while the maximum range against fighter-sized target is increased to 250 km from the original 230 km.	34
Fire control	MP-90 (NATO Front Dome)	X-Band target illumination radar for semi-active homing surface-to-air missiles	Unknown designation	X-Band target illumination radar for semi-active homing surface-to-air missiles	70
Data transmission	Unknown designation (NATO Light Bulb)	Provide data transmission to long-range missiles (1 - 12 GHz frequencies)	Unknown designation	Provide data transmission to long-range missiles (1 - 12 GHz frequencies)	70

Fig. 1 Major Russian naval sensors and their Chinese derivatives produced without apparent license or under a secret agreement

MR-710, while the maximum range against a fighter-sized target was increased to 250 km from the original 230 km of the MR-710). This radar is installed on at least 34 platforms, the Chinese Navy's 054A 31 frigates and 3 of the 051 series destroyers (Gallois & Sheldon-Duplaix, 2022).

- The 352 Fire Control, a version of the NATO-designated Square Tie.
- A Chinese version of the MR-90 (NATO Front Dome), which ensures target designation for the benefit of the anti-aircraft missile HHQ-16.

3 Intellectual Property Issues

The resumption of arms relations with Moscow helped Beijing to achieve the technological revolution envisioned by Liu Huaqing and significantly improve the PRC's military and industrial capabilities. Chinese engineers didn't just duplicate imported pieces of equipment; they reverse-engineered them to understand them, adapt them to Chinese requirements, and sometimes innovate and improve their performance (see Fig. 1). As a result, after 2007, Russian arms sales to China slowed down, with the Chinese industry itself now producing most systems (Gallois & Sheldon-Duplaix, 2022, pp. 303–429).

In some cases, Chinese weapons have been the product of joint developments with Russia. Some sources report that the Hong Qi-9 (HHQ-9) air defense system was developed with Russian assistance and benefits from Russian technology transfers, supplemented with technology allegedly provided by Israel ("HQ-9," n.d.; Gallois & Sheldon-Duplaix, 2022). It includes an anti-missile variant, the HHQ-9A on earlier destroyers 052C and the HHQ-9B as the main air defense system for destroyers 052C, 052D, and 055. In the field of anti-ship missiles, China might consider itself sufficiently advanced to replace its Russian Moskit missile for the Type 956 destroyers with the Ying Ji-12A missile apparently derived from the Russian air-launched Kh-31 ("Yingji-12," 2020, October 11).

Chinese practices are raising intellectual property issues with Moscow. Russia and China have established an intergovernmental commission on military-technical cooperation (MTC) to address those issues. In 2008 a delegation led by then Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov signed an agreement with the Chinese side on the protection of intellectual property in the field of military-technical cooperation ("Kitay poobeshchal," 2008, December 12). But Russian experts doubted that the document would solve the problem of China counterfeiting Russian military equipment ("Zarubezhnyye konkurenty," 2019, December 13; Nersisyan, 2016, December 12). They quoted sources in the Russian foreign ministry listing cases of violation of intellectual property by China. The S-602 cruise missile is very similar to the Russian X-55. The Tai Hang WS-10 engine is analogous to the AL-31F for Su fighters. The most blatant case is China duplicating the Su-27 fighter-bomber. In 1995, the Russian and Chinese sides signed an agreement on the licensed assembly of 200 Su-27SK aircraft (in the Chinese version: J-11) at a plant in Shenyang. From 1998–2004, China received about a hundred assembly kits,

but refused the second delivery. It became apparent that China had managed to produce the components in order to assemble its own version of the Su-27, the J-11B. Chinese media even acknowledged the creation of the J-11B with a Chinese engine and radar of its own design (“Shanzhai zhi wang,” 2009, July 30, Hangzhou dianshitai, 2016, December 23). Based on the J-11B, the Shenyang J-15 Flying Shark carrier-borne fighter-bomber is also an illegitimate copy of the Soviet Su-33 from a prototype purchased in Ukraine. In 2009, at MAKS, the general manager of the Russian arms export company, Rosoboronexport, Anatoly Isaykin, declared that Russia and Sukhoi “would investigate the J-11B case as being a Chinese copy of the Su-27” (“Zarubezhnyye konkurenty,” 2019, December 13).

In the same year, Beijing signed a contract with Kiev for the purchase of two Project 1232 Zubr hovercraft and the construction of two more in China. Renamed project 1232.2/type 958 Bison, the first was delivered in May 2013, followed by the second in March 2014. The intellectual property was owned by Russian designer Almaz of St Petersburg, and Moscow accused Kiev of copyright infringement, arresting a Russian engineer who had transferred technical data to Ukraine. China continued production with a fifth and a sixth unit. The annexation of Crimea where the production site is located led to the withdrawal of the Ukrainian supervisors, while Kiev suspended delivery of the MT70 gas turbines replaced with Chinese gas turbine QC70.

Moscow has seemed to come to terms with the patent issue because it has now taken over Ukraine’s role of supervising the construction. But the problem is more general. On December 14, 2018, Yevgeny Livadny, head of the intellectual property protection service of the Rostec state defense conglomerate, accused China of illegally copying a wide range of Russian weapons and other military materials: the licensing of our equipment abroad is a huge problem: “There have been 500 cases in the past 17 years . . . China alone has copied aircraft engines, Sukhoi fighter jets including fighters on aircraft carriers, air defense systems including an analogue of the medium range Pantsir system.” Highlighted by those who do not believe in the Sino-Russian partnership, the issue of intellectual property seems to have been set aside by the need for a security partnership (Simes, 2019, December 20; see Fig. 2).

4 Simulating an Alliance

On April 26, 1996, a treaty on deepening confidence-building measures was signed in Shanghai between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. On April 24, 1997, the same countries signed a treaty on the reduction of military forces on their borders. On June 15, 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was formed with a sixth partner, Uzbekistan. On July 16, a Sino-Russian treaty of good neighborliness, friendship, and cooperation was signed. It enshrines a “strategic partnership” between the two countries, with Moscow aligning itself with Beijing on the Taiwan issue (article 5 of the treaty), the two parties committing to peacefully

Type	Russian systems	Characteristics	Chinese Derivative(s)	Known characteristics	Observations
Sub-launched land attack/ anti-ship missile	3M-54 E Klub-S or 3M-54E1 Klub-S	L: 780-2,300 kg; length: 8.2m; diameter: 530mm; warhead 200kg HE; turbojet engine; 118 mm; sea-skimmer; terminal speed: Mach 2.9	YJ-18B submarine-launched	Mach 0.8; inertial guidance system using Beidou; 1560mm; sea-skimmer	China acquired the 3M-54 E or E1 Klub-S with the submarines Pr. 636.
Surface-launched land attack/ anti-ship missile	3M-54TE Club-N	Length: 8.9 m; diameter: 533 mm; warhead: 400 kg HE; solid fuel rocket; 118mm; terminal speed: Mach 2.9.	YJ-18A vertically-launched ship-borne anti-ship, YJ-18C land-attack version	Mach 0.8; inertial guidance system using Beidou; 1560mm; sea-skimmer	The Club-N is not known to have been acquired by China; YJ-18A may be a genuine development, based on the sub-launched 3M-54 E or E1 Club-S.
Air-launched Anti-ship missile	Kh-31P/ AS-17 Krypton	0.6t; length: 4.7m; diameter: 0.360m; Mach 1.5; up to 60mm; inertial guidance with passive radar	YJ-91 / YJ-93	0.6t; length: 4.7 m; diameter: 0.360m; warhead: 165kg	In Dec. 1997 200 Kh-31P had reportedly been delivered to China. The resulting YJ-91 was developed by Hongtu Aviation.
Anti-aircraft missiles	SS90 Uragan / M-22/ SA-N-7	690kg; L.: 5.55m; diameter: 0.4m; warhead: Frags-HE 70kg Radar; proximity fuse; Solid propellant rocket; Range: 16m; flight altitude: 14,000m; Speed: Mach 3; semi-active radar homing	HHQ-16B	L.: 6.3m; diameter: 0.756m; warhead: 205-500kg	YJ-12A resembles an enlarged Kh-31. It is based on both the Kh-31 family and the 3M80 family as the ramjet in the YJ-12A is larger than the Kh-31.
Artillery systems	AK-130	130 mm (twin) ship-borne automatic gun	H/PJ-45	130 mm (single) ship-borne automatic gun	Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology (SASTI) in 2005 began joint development with the Russian Almaz-Antey, based on the Buk-M1/ Buk-2M surface-to-air missile systems; improved to be launched from a VL5 launcher similar to the American Mk41.
	AK-176	76 mm, ship-borne automatic gun; 75 ready rounds	H/PJ-26	76mm ship-borne automatic gun; ready rounds for the H/PJ-26 are doubled to 150 rounds	Reverse-engineered by the Zhengzhou Mechanical-Electrical Engineering Research Institute (713th Research Institute of the 7th Academy) and improved.
	AK-630M	Close-in weapon system Rotary cannon MP-123-02 fire control radar	H/PJ-13	Cloisecan weapon system rotary cannon	Reverse-engineered by the Zhengzhou Mechanical-Electrical Engineering Research Institute.
Torpedo	UGST Kolibri 294	detects the wake of moving ship then follows the chopped water in an S-pattern until impact from 10.3mm	Yu-6	Anti-submarine/anti-ship heavy torpedo, differentiated from UGST homing device derived from UGST replaced by the Yu-1	China received an unknown number of UGST torpedoes; YJ-6 developed by the XU'an Precision Machinery Institute (705 Institute).
Carrier-borne aircraft	Flanker Suv-33	Russian torpedo based on the US Mk 46 Mod 2	Yu-7	Lightweight ASW torpedo now replaced by the Yu-1	China may also have recovered a US Mk 46 Mod 2 torpedo Mod 2 in the south China Sea
		All-weather carrier-based twin-engine air superiority fighter	Shenyang J-15	All-weather carrier-based twin-engine air superiority fighter	Developed from J-11B as well as from studying the T-10K-3 acquired from Ukraine in 2001 and reverse-engineered.

Fig. 2 Current imported Russian naval weapons and their Chinese derivatives: license produced (blue), without license (purple), without apparent license or unknown (pink)

settle the remaining border issues. The first Russian-Chinese military exercises took place in 2003 in Kazakhstan, following the establishment of the Shanghai security organization in 2001 (Allen et al., 2017). From 2005 on, China and Russia joined forces for the major Sino-Russian “Peace Mission” exercises. Since May 2016, the Russian and Chinese armies have been engaging in cooperation in the fields of aerospace security, missile defense, and staff exercises. In 2018, Moscow invited Beijing to the big quadrennial Vostok exercises, traditionally oriented against China (Felgenhauer, 2008), for the first time. Bilateral naval exercises between the two countries began in April 2012 near Qingdao. These Sino-Russian games have been repeated annually ever since: in July 2013 (off Vladivostok), in May 2014 (on the Yangtze River’s estuary), in May 2015 (in the Mediterranean), in August 2015 (off Vladivostok), in September 2016 (off Zhanjiang), in July–September 2017 (in the Baltic and Sea of Okhotsk), and in April–May 2018 and 2019 (off Qingdao) (Chang & Liu, 2019).

5 Shared Security Interests and Perceptions of Inferiority

Moscow and Beijing have condemned the 2011 Western intervention in Libya as twisting a UN Security Council mandate they had not vetoed. Both have denounced as destabilizing, unilateral Western interventions made possible in their view by US technological superiority. In July 2019, the Chinese Defense White Paper stated: “Through technological and institutional innovation, the United States is committed to the pursuit of absolute military superiority” (State Council Information Office, 2019). Russia has denounced the United States’ exit from the framework of treaties concluded during the Cold War. In 2002 and 2019, respectively, the United States abandoned the treaties signed with the USSR in 1972 and 1987 on the limitation of anti-ballistic missiles and prohibition of intermediate-range missiles, citing Russian treaty violations of these limitations. In November 2016, during a military council in Sochi, president Putin declared: “while the United States is engaged in the creation of advanced weapons systems, we have strictly and constantly respected the international obligations; unfortunately [...] some countries [the United States] now deny the agreements that had been reached, for example, in the field of anti-missile defense. Of course, this is all done with the idea of gaining a one-sided advantage” (Kremlin, 2016, November 18).

The Chinese and Russians stress that they spend much less on defense than the United States. China insists on the relatively low percentage of its military budget compared to the volume of its economy, that is, about 1.3% of its GDP from 2012 to 2017. In comparison, the United States spends around 3.5% of its GDP and Russia about 4% (Tian & Su, 2021; Funaiolo & Hart, 2021, March 5). If the Chinese document highlights the first place of Russia in terms of percentage of military spending in relation to GDP or government spending, it ignores the economic weakness of Russia, whose GDP represents only one eighth of Chinese GDP and one twelfth of US GDP. The Russian defense budget remains between seven and ten

times lower than American defense spending and four times lower than Chinese and European defense spending (Wezeman, 2020, April 27; “Military budget of Russia,” 2021, September 17). Those figures are in nominal terms and there is also a difference between officially declared and actual defense expenditures.

China has blamed Washington for maintaining military pressure on them, in particular through freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea. The Russians have reacted negatively to the extension of NATO to the east, accompanied by a rejection of Russian membership proposed between 2000 and 2010. In 2011, NATO and Russia even carried out their first air and naval exercises, following annual FRUKUS exercises with the American, British, and French navies, BALTOPS with Baltic nations and BLACKSEAFOR with Black Sea neighbors (Swartz, 2016, p. 237). It all ended in 2014 with Russia’s annexation of Crimea, which gave a new dimension to the Sino-Russian rapprochement.

The core of the problem was Russian opposition to future NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, culminating in the Maidan instant recognition by Western powers without inviting Russia to co-organize a transition toward new elections. This instant recognition of the Maidan government led to the bloodless takeover of Crimea and bloody insurrection in Eastern Ukraine (“Spiker krymskogo parlamenta,” 2014, February 20; Parliament of Crimea, 2014, January 24). While Russia cited the precedent of Kosovo to justify the referendum and its annexation of Crimea, the Western members of the UN Security Council voted not to recognize the results, while China abstained and Russia imposed its veto. The UN Ambassador from China explained that the situation in Crimea involved a “complex intertwining of historical and contemporary factors.” While Beijing rejected the Kosovo partition, analysts explained that China abstained to oppose the Western double standard in Crimea where a majority supported a return to Russia (Zhang, 2015, April 1; Matsuzato, 2016).

6 Seeking Political and Strategic Benefits

China and Russia have used naval exercises to signal their willingness to cooperate in sensitive strategic or political areas. Bilateral Sino-Russian naval exercises began in April 2012 near Qingdao 1 year after 10 Western and 19 Arab countries intervened in Libya. In September 2013, in accordance with the decision of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the Russian and Chinese navies participated in the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons in accordance with resolution 2181 of the United Nations Security Council. The Chinese frigate *Yancheng* (relieved by the *Huangshang*), joined Danish, Norwegian and Russian ships tasked to escort these weapons from Syria to an American ship for their ultimate destruction. In May 2015, the two navies carried out their annual naval exercise in the Mediterranean Sea, displaying an unexpected Sino-Russian partnership on the Syrian question (“Chinese Warship in Cyprus,” 2014, January 4).

In September 2016, the exercise was held in the northern part of the South China Sea near Hainan, affirming Russian solidarity toward China after the July 2016 Hague international tribunal ruling favoring the Philippines against the Chinese and Taiwanese arguments. This show of solidarity is relative: Moscow does not recognize Beijing's claim to the South China Sea. Russia just criticized the fact that the decision was forced upon China.

In November and December 2019, China and Russia stepped up the political stakes of their cooperation by conducting trilateral naval exercises for the first time with South Africa in the Cape of Good Hope and with Iran in the Arabian Sea. The exercise with South Africa enabled the two partners to work with a navy aligned with NATO standards. The exercise with Iran followed the mysterious attack on a Saudi oil field and tensions between Tehran, Washington, and London over freedom of navigation, with another mysterious attack on a Japanese tanker and the Iranian seizure of a British tanker. Moscow and Beijing's posture suggested that they might oppose by force an attack on Iran while proclaiming that the security of the Arabian Gulf is assured despite evidence of Iranian involvement in the previous disturbances (Song, 2021, August 24).

7 Operational Benefits

In 2016, the American Defense University calculated that Russia was China's most assiduous partner for combat exercises (4.8%). With Russia, the PLA participates in more training and competitions related to combat than with any other country. This peculiarity is not surprising considering that Western countries are reluctant to share their tactical expertise with the PLA. Since 2005, the Peace Mission exercises of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have focused on counterterrorism and combat (air defense, bombing, air refueling). Since their inception in 2012, the Sino-Russian Joint Sea series (*hai shang lianhe*) exercises have focused on combat and combat support. As two Chinese researchers wrote, "The Joint Sea series of bilateral exercises have been held eight times consecutively [and they will] become a 'model' of military exercises between China and Russia. The themes relate to . . . counterterrorism, escort, search and rescue, air defense, anti-ship and anti-submarine activities, submarine rescue, and combat training." The two authors added that these "joint command" exercises saw the participation of a large number of personnel over a very long period of time. According to the authors, "the level of mutual trust and military cooperation has reached an unprecedented level" (Chang & Liu, 2019).

Indeed, the PLAN's most complex bilateral exercises are the Joint Sea (*haishang lianhe*) exercise series with the Russian navy, which includes well-prepared, combat-related drills.

The April 2012 edition near Qingdao included combined air defense, maritime replenishment, combined anti-submarine warfare, combined search and rescue, and the rescue of a hijacked ship, as well as surface-to-surface, anti-submarine, and

surface-to-air live-fire practice. The hospital ship *Peace Ark* participated, visiting Vladivostok and conducting an exercise in Peter the Great Bay in the Sea of Japan.

The 2013 edition in the Sea of Japan involved 18 ships from both sides performing similar activities to the ones from the previous year. The PLAN deployed four destroyers, two frigates, one comprehensive replenishment ship, three helicopters, and one special operations detachment, the Chinese navy's single largest overseas deployment for exercises with a foreign country.

The 2014 edition included joint verification and identification for use in the Chinese-declared air defense identification zone in the East China Sea and also featured combat drills without a preplanned scenario, a first for any PLA service in a combined exercise (Allen et al., 2017, p. 3). Also for the first time, ships from both navies operated in joint formations against a common adversary by sharing tactical data from their combat systems. In 2016, the exercise in the South China Sea involved an anti-submarine dimension and the landing of 90 Russian and 160 Chinese marines. The two navies once again shared tactical data for the anti-submarine and anti-aircraft phases. From July to September 2017, the exercises in the Baltic, Japan, and Okhotsk seas still focused on submarine rescue, air defense, and anti-submarine operations.

Similar exercises were repeated in 2019 and 2021. The 6-day Sino-Russian "Joint Sea-2019" military exercise "completed all objectives" according to the official statement and concluded on May 4 off Qingdao. For the first time, the two navies realized mutual underwater rescues of submarine crews and joint anti-submarine maritime air patrols. Two 636 Russian-made Kilo submarines participated. The two navies also carried out the rescue of a hijacked ship at the Qingdao Dagang Wharf ("Zhong E 'haishang lianhe-2019,'" 2019, May 4). The tenth Sino-Russian "Joint Sea-2021" military exercise started on the 14th of October off Vladivostok. Zhang Junshe, a former Chinese naval attaché in Washington, underlined the level of trust reached by the two sides: "the time, scenarios, and equipment involved in this exercise all reflect the high level of strategic mutual trust between China and Russia. The two navies continue to deepen mutual understanding. [As a consequence] the region is safe and stable." Once more, the two navies conducted air defense and anti-submarine drills, joint maneuvers, and live fire at sea targets. The topic of this 2021 edition was "maintaining the Security of Strategic Maritime Channels." Zhang Junshe believes that this shows that the nature of the Chinese and Russian naval exercises "is defensive," the main purpose of the exercise being to enhance the capabilities of the Chinese and Russian navies to jointly respond to maritime security threats and maintain regional peace and stability. Zhang Junshe believes that throughout the years China and Russia have gradually formed more mature and standardized methods for the organization of joint exercises, improving their joint operations capabilities. Zhang Junshe stressed that "air defense, anti-submarine and other exercises require the two sides to open up their ships to each other. Such exercises can only be conducted between the two militaries with a relatively high degree of strategic mutual trust." Zhang Junshe noted the participation of the Nanchang super destroyer, the latest addition to the Chinese fleet ("Zhuanjia jiedu 'haishang lianhe-2021,'" 2021, October 17).

It is a fact that Sino-Russian naval exercises are far more sophisticated than simple PASSEX (exercises between ships passing by). Their sophistication implies that the two fleets share tactics and procedures, facilitated in this specific case by common sensors and combat and data link systems. Chinese destroyers and frigates share common or very similar sensors such as the MR 710 (Top Plate)/382 three-dimensional radars and the Mineral-ME (Band Stand)/366 beyond the horizon targeting sensors with Russian platforms (“Shendu: Zhongguo xin zhanjian,” 2016, July 1). Taking advantage of the particular propagation of waves on the layers of the atmosphere, the latter provides detection ranges for anti-ship warfare, nonexistent in Western navies. This commonality and tactical privacy suggest scenarios where a Sino-Russian fleet could intimidate Western navies with the greater range of its supersonic anti-ship missiles and the detection ranges of the Mineral-ME. Common systems also facilitate air defense, both strategic on land and tactical at sea.

Strategically, Russia has reportedly pledged to help China acquire the technology for advanced warning systems to detect ballistic missile launchings. An American author reported that China had asked Russia for the possibility of deploying submarines to the Arctic (Goldstein, 2019, June 1). With China working on technologies that allow submarines to break the ice, these two reports suggest that Russia and China may be planning to coordinate their naval deterrents against the United States one day (“China and Russia plan to boost,” 2019, December 28).

8 Lasting Distrust

While Zhang Junshe insisted on the trust that such exercises implied, we have shown that since the two navies’ main systems were of Soviet/Russian conception, Sino-Russian exercises don’t compromise too much sensitive information (“Zhuanjia jiedu ‘haishang lianhe-2021,’” 2021, October 17). They certainly reveal procedures and practices, but most of the systems are well-known by both sides. The submarine area is probably different. While Russia has leased a project 971 (NATO Akula) nuclear attack submarine to India for 9 years (2012–2021), Moscow does not appear to be committing its nuclear-powered submarines to naval exercises with China, an area in which its lead over China must be preserved. So far, pictures have just revealed the participation of 877/636 NATO-designated Kilo-class submarines, in service both with the Russian and Chinese fleets. The participation of other classes of submarines would be an interesting development.

The prosecution of a retired Russian naval officer with an irreproachable reputation, the head of the St Petersburg’s Arctic Academy, accused of sharing hydroacoustic information on Russian submarines with China, illustrates the limits of the Sino-Russian naval cooperation in the underwater domain (see also Chapter “Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space” by Frank Jüris). The scientist is being prosecuted for having betrayed state secrets in his annual conferences on hydroacoustics at the Dalian Maritime University and is accused of having been tasked to do so by Chinese intelligence.

The accusation seems remarkable because according to his defense, the scientist no longer had access to classified data and was just using open-source material. While the accusations against this outstanding scientist who apparently gained nothing appear extraordinary, the frontline publicity given to this case demonstrates the distrust that persists between the two countries.⁹ It signals redlines not to be crossed by Russian specialists and defiance to Chinese espionage methods against Russia.

In 2017, a Chinese academic gave his opinion on the superficiality of this new partnership: “Concerning Russia, our first consideration is purely bilateral, we need a good relationship; it may not bring much benefit to China, but if the relationship is bad, it could be the biggest threat to our security. It’s all about negative interests, avoiding trouble. But there are also economic interests. They are our primary supplier of oil and we need their natural gas. On a human level, we don’t love each other. We don’t trust each other and the partnership is unreliable. It’s just that we don’t have a choice, because we are great neighbors. Russia’s strategic position is isolation. The Russians only like Europe and the United States, but it is not reciprocal because nobody likes them.”¹⁰ The same year, at the Sorbonne, at the international relations seminar of Alain Gauthier, then secretary general of national defense, the Russian diplomat Alexander Lukin, delivered the Kremlin’s standard portrayal of the reasons for the deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West, blaming the United States followed by its European allies for ignoring Russia’s strategic interests, for cancelling the treaties on strategic armaments, for seeking to extend NATO into Georgia and Ukraine, for destabilizing Ukraine, and for imposing sanctions on Moscow after its annexation of a predominantly ethnic Russian Crimea from Ukraine, setting a double standard with Kosovo detached by NATO from Serbian sovereignty under the very same justification. According to Lukin, this policy led Moscow into its partnership with Beijing, a partnership “born from disenchantment” (Lukin, 2018a, 2018b, February 26). Putin had previously stated, “Russia is part of European culture . . . I don’t imagine my country isolated from Europe . . . So it is difficult for me to see NATO as an enemy.”¹¹ He has, however, also stated that Russia is not just simply another European country but had some separate “Eurasian” identity and that he considers NATO and its eastern enlargement as a violation of Russia’s national interests.

It is also a fact that Russia has not stopped its cooperation with China’s foes, while China maintains its military cooperation with Ukraine. Vietnam and India are two of the most important military customers for Moscow (see also Chapter “Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor” by Sarah Kirchberger). A state-owned company, the Russian gas group Rosneft is working with Vietnam and the Philippines and has not suspended its activities in the South China Sea as requested by Beijing (“Rosneft says South China

⁹See the reporting in: “Russian Arctic Scientist Charged” (2020, June 15); “Russian Arctic Academy president accused” (2020, June 15); “Russia accuses top Arctic scientist” (2020, June 16).

¹⁰May 2017, author’s own interview with the source, Beijing

¹¹Quoted by Nester (2019, p. 219); see also Davydov (2000).

Sea drilling,” 2018, May 17; Pearson, 2018, May 17). The “special and privileged strategic partnership” between India and Russia seems to be much deeper than the Sino-Russian security relationship. In the event of a Sino-Indian conflict, it is almost certain that Moscow would remain neutral or side with New Delhi.

9 Conclusions

On the strategic level, the Kremlin describes the Sino-Russian military cooperation as “special relations.... including (on) the most sensitive (areas) linked to military-technical cooperation and security and defense capabilities.” In 2019, Moscow committed itself to help Beijing build an early warning system to detect missile attacks. The same year, those “special relations” were exemplified by Russia holding its largest military drills since the Soviet Union, inviting China to take part, a move seen as signaling much closer military ties (Balmforth, 2019, October 4).

On the naval side, since their inception in 2012, we have witnessed increasingly sophisticated annual exercises between the two navies. However, no known documents or frameworks exist to formalize this naval cooperation. Meanwhile, Russian arms sales to China have declined dramatically, amounting to 3 percent of the current trade between the two countries. While some alleged Chinese patent breaches are actually secret Russo-Chinese joint developments, the intellectual property issue remains a concern for Moscow. As for NATO, it has arguably never contemplated such a big picture. Its offering a MAP for ultimate NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia has generated lasting distrust in Moscow, explaining Russia’s reaction to the West supporting the Maidan revolution in Kiev, while large numbers of Ukrainian citizens of Russian descent opposed the new rulers in Crimea and Donbass. Earlier, Russia had manifested its interest in joining NATO, very clearly to balance the Chinese challenge to the vastness and emptiness of its Siberian spaces, as noted in its 2001 maritime doctrine. It is the Alliance’s ignorance of Russian interests that served as a catalyst for Moscow and Beijing to partner. Once a potential Western associate for blocking the Iranian nuclear program and perhaps deterring Beijing from invading Taiwan, Russia now goes to China like the Athenians to the Romans. Both continental nations also see themselves as maritime nations. Both are forging a defensive non-committal partnership to better protect their interests from the sea.

Commenting on the Sino-Russian relationship, a Russian analyst observed that “new challenges and common threats are unlikely to lead in the foreseeable future to the creation of a Russian-Chinese military-political alliance”... such as the start of the Cold War imposed on us. We will be “together, but different,” concluding “our cause is just” (Tavrovsky, 2019, June 4). A Taipei-based Russia specialist observed: “what Americans have been unable to understand is that Russia, like China, would have gladly traded this Russia-China partnership for better relations with the United

States.”¹² Indeed, without refraining from cooperating with each other’s foes, Moscow and Beijing are developing a common military capacity for political and strategic use, essentially against the United States and its anti-Russia/anti-China unequivocal stand. The Sino-Russian military and naval partnership is almost exclusively aimed at counterbalancing US actions. It is claimed by Moscow and Beijing to be born out of necessity and rejection and that it is the product of the US military pressure.

While demonstrating that freedom of navigation is a legitimate goal, the media coverage given to American FONOPS in the China seas or off Russia plays into the hands of hawkish factions in Beijing and Moscow and helps secure more funding for their respective navies. By contrast, other American FONOPS go unreported in most areas of the world. It can be argued that the publicity given to US FONOPS near Chinese and Russian waters has been a factor in the new Sino-Russian naval partnership. The United States fails to see that by ignoring Russian interests, it has made Russia an unnecessary adversary while stimulating the PLAN developments through a succession of naval incidents on the Chinese maritime borders. Publicizing the Air-Sea Battle doctrine in 2009 was also a factor in forging the defensive Sino-Russian partnership.

The Sino-Russian partnership is fragile, but its potential cannot be underestimated. It can be speculated that in the future, the Sino-Russian partnership may seek to prevent a Western coalition from carrying out an intervention that Moscow and Beijing would deem destabilizing. Russia and China may be capable of blocking a Western intervention against Iran, a new partner in those naval exercises. As a consequence of this partnership, Russia would probably abstain from opposing China if Beijing were to seek a military solution to the Taiwanese stalemate.

While the United States is struggling to keep up with a growing Chinese fleet, it fails to acknowledge or understand its own miscalculations in the making of this Russo-Chinese naval partnership. As a consequence, the US submarine fleet is clearly insufficient to tackle a combined Chinese and Russian underwater challenge augmented by North Korea and Iran. This acute challenge explains why Washington has offered Canberra its nuclear submarine technology.

For reasons hard to understand, the United States has ignored the 1997 premonition of George Kennan, its Veteran Cold Warrior and Russian specialist:

[. . .] expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era. Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking. (Kennan, 1997, February 5)

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine comes as a consequence of Western refusal to acknowledge Moscow’s security concerns, repeatedly stated since 2000

¹²January 2020, author’s own interview with the source

(cf. Voyennaya doktrina, 2011). While Beijing denounces NATO's expansion as the cause for the War, China deplors the violence, expressing signs of disapproval which may call into question the intimacy of Russo-Chinese military and naval cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022, April 12).

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Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution



Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska

1 Introduction

The first industrial revolution began in the late eighteenth century, and it was an age of steam and iron, exemplified by the first mechanized industry—textiles—and the birth of the railroads. This was superseded in the late nineteenth century by the second industrial revolution, the age of steel, oil, electricity, the internal combustion engine, and heavier-than-air flight. The third industrial revolution—the digital revolution in which we exist and operate today—began in around 1950 with the invention of the solid-state transistor and integrated circuitry, which subsequently led to the widespread development and use of computers, digital telecommunications, and the Internet.

Now we supposedly stand on the cusp of a *fourth* industrial revolution (“4IR”): artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, automation and robotics, 5G networking, quantum computing, big data, and the “Internet of Things” (IoT). AI describes computers that can “think” like humans—recognizing complex patterns, processing information, drawing conclusions, and making recommendations. Technologies such as cloud computing, quantum computing, and the IoT are enabling computers to process vast amounts of data faster than ever before and then permit this data to be safely stored and accessed from anywhere with Internet access, at any time. In particular, the 4IR is about *connectivity*: the IoT permits users to collect data from constantly connected sources and subsequently transmit and share this to the total network (McGinnis, 2018, December 20). The 4IR differs from earlier IRs in that it is more about software than hardware. The first IR is synonymous with the steam engine, the second with the internal combustion engine, and the 3IR with microelectronics. The 4IR has no great identifying piece of hardware, except perhaps

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even more advanced semiconductor chips. Nevertheless, 4IR technologies promise to create new opportunities and new challenges in identifying new and significant military technologies and understanding how these capabilities could provide a military advantage in the decades to come.

It should come as little surprise, therefore, why Russia and China are so keen to exploit the 4IR for military leverage and political gain. Few countries are more appreciative of the potential military impact of 4IR technologies than these two. At the same time, it is important to note that most 4IR technologies are firmly centered in the civilian realm, that is, most research—and certainly the biggest breakthroughs—is occurring in the commercial science and technology (S & T) base. This has two implications for future military-technological innovation: first, that the 4IR is only further eroding the already blurring distinction between military and civilian technologies and, second, the growing criticality of 4IR technologies to future military capabilities has correspondingly raised interest in how countries can use the 4IR to exploit such commercial technologies for military-technological innovation.

2 China: Exploiting the 4IR Through Military-Civil Fusion

2.1 Chinese Military Modernization: Mechanization and Informatization

Since the late 1990s, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been engaged in an aggressive, concerted effort to modernize and upgrade its capabilities. According to China's 2019 white paper on defense, China's "strategic goals" for the long-term development of its national defense and military are:

- By 2020, the PLA was expected to generally achieve mechanization with significantly enhanced informationization and greatly improved strategic capabilities. This "double construction" approach of "mechanization and informatization" (Ji, 2004, November 24) called for both the near-term "upgrading of existing equipment combined with the selective introduction of new generations of conventional weapons" and a longer-term transformation of the PLA along the lines of the information technologies-based "revolution in military affairs" (RMA) (Cheung, 2009, pp. 30–31).
- By 2035, the PLA is to achieve "complete military modernization," by comprehensively advancing "the modernization of military theory, organizational structure, military personnel, and weaponry and equipment in step with the [overall] modernization of the country."
- By approximately 2049 ("the mid-twenty-first century"), the PLA is to be transformed into a "world-class" military (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 14).

The next 15 years or so (2020–2035) could likely be the most crucial phase of this modernization process. In this regard, the concept of *informationization* is central to understanding what China means by the “complete military modernization” of the PLA. “Informationization” (*xinxihua*) means that information technologies, especially those capabilities relating to command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR), are considered paramount to expanding military effectiveness. This entails, among other things, dominating the electromagnetic spectrum through integrated network electronic warfare as well as exploiting technological advances in microelectronics, sensors, propulsion, stealth, and especially cyber to outfit the PLA with new capacities for long-range strike and disruption.

“Informationized warfare” also puts a much greater emphasis placed on both space and cyber operations. China’s 2019 defense white paper bluntly states that “outer space is a critical domain in international strategic competition” (State Council Information Office, 2019, July, p. 13). As such, the weaponization of space is increasingly a fact of life and a key future battlespace, and China plans to develop the capacity to “enter, exit, and openly use outer space.” At the same time, cyberspace is regarded to be “a key area for national security, economic growth and social development,” and therefore the PLA is accelerating the building of its cyberspace capabilities (State Council Information Office, 2019, July, p. 14).

2.2 *Intelligentized Warfare and Artificial Intelligence*

While the PLA labors to adopt “informationized warfare,” it is already thinking about the next phase of military modernization, which it has termed “intelligentized” (*zhinenghua*) warfare. According to Elsa Kania, “military intelligentization” builds upon earlier phases of “mechanization and informatization.” As *China’s 2019 defense white paper* put it, “war is evolving in form towards informationized warfare, and intelligent warfare is on the horizon” (State Council Information Office, 2019, July, p. 6, emphasis added). At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping urged the PLA to accelerate the development of military intelligentization, and this “authoritative exhortation” has in turn “elevated ‘intelligentization’ as a guiding concept for the future of Chinese military modernization” (Kania, 2021, p. 528).

Intelligentized warfare essentially entails the militarization of the fourth industrial revolution—in other words, exploiting the 4IR in order to create “intelligentized weaponry” (Kania, 2021, p. 531). *The 4IR, in particular, is seen as a key enabler in China’s efforts to gain a dominant technological advantage over the US military.* According to Work and Grant, “the Chinese believe artificial intelligence (AI), big data, human-machine hybrid intelligence, swarm intelligence, and automated decision-making, along with AI-enabled autonomous unmanned systems and intelligent robotics, will be the central feature of the emerging economic and military-technical revolutions” (Work & Grant, 2019, p. 13).

China particularly values artificial intelligence as a critical technology that could prove consequential its strategic competition with the United States. Chinese military thinkers believe AI likely will be the key to surpassing the US military as the world's most capable armed force. Consequently, China has laid out an ambitious program for it to lead the world in AI by 2030. In July 2017, Beijing released its "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan." This plan has three main strategic goals: first, to bring China's AI sector up to the level of the global state of the art; second, to achieve major breakthroughs in terms of basic AI theory by 2025; and third, by 2030, make China the global leader in AI theory, technology, and application, as well as the major AI innovation center of the world (Slijper et al., 2019, April, p. 12).

In addition to these investments in AI, China is seeking to become a world leader in other 4IR technologies, including quantum computing, 5G, robotics, and biotechnology, among others. Beijing sees its strategies to lead in AI and these other technologies as mutually reinforcing; accordingly, it is investing heavily (e.g., through its "Made in China 2025" initiative) in associate technologies, companies (both domestic and foreign), and human capital in order to realize those ambitions of global superiority (National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, 2021, p. 256).

China's New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan, together with other strategic investments in key technology sectors, is intricately tied to the modernization of the PLA and its eventual mastery of intelligentized warfare. AI in particular is explicitly linked to "national defense construction, security assessment, and control capabilities" (Slijper et al., 2019, April, p. 12). Ultimately, the aim is to "inject AI" into nearly every aspect of the PLA's table of equipment and inventory of operational systems (Work & Grant, 2019, p. 14).

2.3 *Intelligentized Warfare and Military-Civil Fusion*

This emphasis on the revolutionary and disruptive nature of 4IR technologies when it comes to future military advantage means that Chinese military modernization will be increasingly entwined with *civilian* technological innovation, since most 4IR breakthroughs—particularly in the areas of AI, machine learning, big data, etc.—are taking place in the commercial sector. This dependency on commercial technologies has, in turn, raised the importance of "military-civil fusion" (MCF—also known as "civil-military integration," or CMI) as a *core military-technological innovation strategy*. MCF has become an essential ingredient in Beijing's long-term effort to make China a technological superpower, in both military and civilian respects.

China's national approach toward military-technological innovation is enabled by three ingredients: motivation, money, and manpower. In the first place, China's central leadership (i.e., the Chinese Communist Party and the PLA) has been unwavering in its commitment to modernizing the country's military. Reconstructing and upgrading the military-industrial base have been a priority for

more than 25 years. This steadfastness has, in turn, manifested itself in large, steady annual increases in Chinese military expenditures. In 2021, for example, China raised its defense budget by 6.8%, to US\$209 billion (Liu, 2021, March 5). According to the country's own official national statistics (which many experts nevertheless believed to substantially understate actual spending levels) (Tian & Su, 2021, January, pp. 4–21), Chinese military expenditures from 1999 to 2019 grew by at least 600% after inflation. These consistent and sizable defense budget increases have translated into more money for innovation, more money for military research and development (R & D), more money for procurement, and more money to upgrade the defense industry with new tools, new computers, and new technical skills. It has also enabled the growth and modernization of the nation's military-industrial workforce, from its R & D institutes to its factory floor labor force (Kirchberger & Mohr, 2019).

This innovation strategy is being replicated with regard to 4IR technologies and MCF. China is, for the most part, pursuing a two-pronged innovation approach, fostering R & D in critical, commercial 4IR technologies, such as AI, robotics, advanced microelectronics, and quantum technologies, while simultaneously promoting the spin-off of these technologies to the military sector. Beijing has expanded funding of S & T pertaining to 4IR technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. China is building and training “a new generation of AI engineers in new AI hubs,” particularly through the support of “national champions” like Huawei, Baidu, and Alibaba. Finally, it is carrying out a “centrally directed systematic plan” to extract 4IR (especially AI) knowledge from abroad through talent recruitment, technology transfer, investments, and even espionage (National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, 2021, p. 25).

Simultaneously, China has made the “aligning of civil and defense technology development” a national priority. China's 2015 *White Paper on China's Military Strategy*, for example, called for an “all-element, multi-domain and cost-efficient pattern of CMI.” At the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, President Xi was finally able to fully realize his vision for MCF. As Béraud-Sudreau and Nouwens put it:

The deepening of the CMI policy can be interpreted both as a way to tackle the lack of competitiveness and the lack of innovation. This has become an integral part of Xi's strategy to complete the modernization of China's armed forces by 2035 and turn them into a world-class army by midcentury. Xi reiterated the importance of CMI for China and for the PLA by declaring at the 19th Party Congress that “we will . . . deepen reform of defense-related science, technology, and industry, achieve greater military–civilian integration, and build integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities.” (Béraud-Sudreau & Nouwens, 2019, p. 12)

As a result, in 2017, Beijing created the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development, a new powerful body for overseeing MCF strategy and implementation. That same year, China issued the “13th 5-Year Special Plan for Science and Technology MCF Development,” which “detailed the establishment of an integrated system to conduct basic cutting-edge R & D in AI, bio-tech, advanced electronics, quantum, advanced energy, advanced

manufacturing, future networks [and] new materials,” in order “to capture commanding heights of international competition” (Cheung, 2019, April, p. 12).

Efforts to leverage artificial intelligence in order to drive the PLA’s adoption of intelligentized warfare highlight the centrality of military-civil fusion as a modernization strategy. Work and Grant argue that China’s New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan is the “poster child” for MCF, as it exploits advances in commercial AI to help leapfrog the development of technologies critical to future military modernization (Work & Grant, 2019, p. 14).

In recent years, China has implemented several reforms of its defense-industrial sector in order to improve MCF. Special attention is being paid to R & D, testing, and evaluation (RDT & E) in critical technologies such as jet engines, gas turbines, advanced microelectronics, artificial intelligence, quantum communications and computing, automation and robotics, and nanotechnology, as well as nuclear fusion, hypersonics, and space exploration (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 141). In 2016, as part of a general reorganization of the PLA command structure, the Central Military Commission (CMC) established a subordinate body titled the Science and Technology Commission (STC). The STC is intended to strengthen strategic management of science and technology in support of national defense, promoting cutting-edge technological innovation in the area of military technology, and encourage closer military-civilian cooperation in the development of advanced technologies. In 2017, the CMC created the Scientific Research Steering Committee, which functions largely along the lines of the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). This agency is intended to fuel technological innovation and the development of advanced technologies that might have military applications. The Scientific Research Steering Committee, along with the STC, forms a “new ‘top-level architecture’ of China’s military technology innovation system” (Ni, 2017, July 28). In addition, China has reorganized and refocused the PLA’s top three academic institutes—the Academy of Military Science (AMS), the National Defense University, and National University of Defense Technology; in particular, the AMS will emphasize scientific research related to military affairs, with an eye toward more closely aligning military theory with national S & T development (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 142).

China’s MCF development strategy is at the center of China’s current defense sector reforms. China emphasizes assimilating private sector innovation into the defense-industrial base. Responsibility for MCF was centralized in 2017 with the establishment of the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development, subordinate to the CCP Central Committee and intended to speed up the transfer of AI technology from commercial companies and research institutions to the PLA. That said, post-2017 MCF differs from earlier efforts in several critical ways. In the first place, it seeks to fully integrate its civilian industrial base into the PLA’s supply chain; for the first time, nondefense companies are being encouraged to sell directly to the military (Street, 2019, September 30). Second, MCF is being explicitly used to help China’s military access critical 4IR technologies, particularly AI. MCF entails the militarization of AI, as the PLA sees AI as critical for such tasks as command and control, for intelligence processing and

analysis (e.g., imagery recognition and data mining), targeting, navigation, etc. (Hille, 2018, November 8).

Third, given its demands for cutting-edge commercial technologies, MCF inevitably necessitates the redirection of foreign technologies to supporting the modernization of the PLA. This is because much of China's high-tech industrial base is still highly dependent on imported technologies, designs, and manufacturing equipment and processes. In many instances, private Chinese firms are being encouraged by the government to acquire foreign technology for its military (O'Keefe, 2019, September 25). This, in turn, risks making foreign companies doing business in China "de facto suppliers" to the PLA (Scissors & Blumenthal, 2019, January 14).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, MCF is part of a long-term and broad-based strategic effort by Beijing to position China as a "technological superpower," by pursuing guns *and* butter and having them mutually support each other. According to Levesque, Chinese leaders are using MCF to position the country "to compete militarily *and economically* in an emerging technological revolution" (Levesque, 2019, October 8). In this respects, Chinese MCF is far more ambitious and far-reaching than any present US efforts at CMI, particularly in its determination "to fuse [China's] defense and commercial economies" (Laskai, 2018, January 29). According to Laskai, "Since Xi Jinping ascended to power in 2012, civil-military fusion has been part of nearly every major strategic initiative, including Made in China 2025 and Next Generation Artificial Intelligence Plan" (Laskai, 2018, January 29).

It should come as no surprise, therefore, to see that MCF has intertwined military modernization with civilian technological innovation in a number of critical dual-use technology sectors, including aerospace, advanced equipment manufacturing, artificial intelligence, and alternative sources of energy. At the same time, MCF also "involves greater integration of military and civilian administration at all levels of government: in national defense mobilization, airspace management and civil air defense, reserve and militia forces, and border and coastal defense" (Levesque, 2019, October 8). As Laskai notes, the recently established PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF), which is responsible for space, cyber, and electronic warfare, has "energetically built ties outside the military, signing cooperation agreements with research universities and even stationing officers within an unnamed software development company" (Laskai, 2018, January 29).

To be sure, China is still intensely active in areas of R & D not conducive to MCF, such as missiles or submarines. For example, the PLA is working on several hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs), such as the DF-17, which has already been tested several times. The DF-17 is reportedly capable of flying up to Mach 10 (12,000 kilometers an hour) and could possibly be nuclear armed (Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, 2019, March). In October 2021, China test-flew an earth-orbiting missile that circled the globe before gliding at hypersonic speed toward its target (therefore also demonstrating a potential "fractional orbital bombardment" capability).

At the same time, 4IR technologies are being used to expand the capabilities of weapons systems such as drones (both armed and unarmed) by giving them greater

autonomy or creating new man-machine warfighting synergies (e.g., “loyal wing-man” drones or naval “motherships”).

China is only at the beginning of an arduous, multiyear (multi-decade, even) effort to harness commercial high technologies for the technological advancement of the PLA. The barriers to the widespread development and diffusion of many 4IR technologies to the military sector remain high. There is no certainty that Xi’s MCF initiatives will work any better than early CMI efforts. According to Béraud-Sudreau and Nouwens, many obstacles remain, including “the private sector’s lack of access to large-scale and high-tech facilities and experimental instruments” and whether private-sector companies will get permission and clearances to work on larger and more sensitive projects, or “simply be used to supply less sensitive components” (Béraud-Sudreau & Nouwens, 2019, p. 12).

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Xi, the Chinese Communist Party, and the PLA will walk away from the 4IR or the MCF anytime soon, even if they do experience setbacks. Beijing particularly believes that advances in AI will fundamentally reshape military and economic competition in the coming decades, and it is shaping its long-term plans accordingly. In particular, it is providing “significant” government subsidies to technology firms and academic institutions that engage in cutting-edge AI research (National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, 2021, p. 161). Moreover, Xi’s “personal legitimacy” is increasingly tied to the success or failure of MCF. According to Warden, MCF is categorically entwined with “long-term Party planning” and “Party consensus,” and any move to “de-intensify” MCF would come at a great cost to Xi’s authority (Warden, 2019, October 1). Consequently, “the Party-state’s long-term ambitions [for MCF] should not be underestimated,” and China’s “doctrine” of civil-military fusion will continue to serve as a “guiding principle” for its long-term strategy of parallel economic development and military modernization (Warden, 2019, October 1).

3 Russia: Weaponizing Artificial Intelligence

3.1 The Soviet Era: The Military-Technical Revolution (MTR)

Since the 1970s, Russian strategic thinkers became increasingly aware of the potential of emerging technologies, particularly in the US arsenal that created new military capabilities—force multipliers—threatening to exploit traditional Soviet quantitative advantages vis-à-vis US and NATO forces in Europe. As Murray and Knox noted, “the appearance in the 1970s of striking new technologies within the American armed forces. . . suggested to Soviet thinkers that a further technological revolution was taking place that had potentially decisive implications for the Soviet Union. . . from the Soviet perspective this was a particularly frightening prospect” (Murray & Knox, 2001, p. 3). At that time, the Soviets were also alarmed by the

military lessons of wars between Israel and its Soviet-armed Arab neighbors, in which radar detection and precision firepower combined with new technologies and weapons produced high attrition rates on both sides (Shimko, 2010, p. 6). Consequently, they studied the operational implications of the new AirLand Battle and Follow-on Forces Attack (FOFA) doctrines, which stressed “initiative, depth, agility and synchronization” by attacking deep in the rear through a combination of stand-off precision fire, interdiction, and ground offensive operations (Adamsky, 2008, pp. 257–94). From a Soviet perspective, this inherently threatened the potential for Soviet forces to rely on their traditional strategy of multiple echelons/combined arms formations pushing forward on the battlefield.

Recognizing these developments and changes in the “correlation of forces,” the Soviets, under the command of Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov, Chief of the Soviet General Staff from 1977 to 1984, began to intellectualize the contours of the emerging military-technical revolution (MTR). Throughout the 1980s, Ogarkov and others developed conceptions of the future of warfare, arguing that the MTR may render traditional Soviet operational art and strategy obsolete and stipulate a major discontinuity in military affairs in which quality is far more important than quantity. Ogarkov believed that advanced technologies—conventional precision-guided weapons coupled with enhanced sensors—would pave a way for qualitatively new and incomparably more destructive forms of warfare than ever before, diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in future wars. In his perspective, the effectiveness of new conventional weapons combined with “informatics” or advanced command, control, and reconnaissance systems would essentially correspond in magnitude to strategic or political effects as tactical nuclear weapons (Petersen, 1984, p. 34).

Back then, Russian military thinkers emphasized that the future battlefield would merge traditional conceptions of the front and rear areas, with new weapons, technologies, and information systems allowing a near-simultaneous engagement of entire arrays of targets at greater distances, precision, lethality, and speed. The increasing value of space-based systems, unmanned systems, and automated detection and engagement integrated in a network of networks would dramatically redefine linear concepts of warfare. Amid these changes, the Red Army would have to rethink its operational concepts, adjust force structure, and redefine methods of waging war in each military service. As Adamsky noted, “Soviet theorists argued that given the tendency toward greater mobility and deception, the time available for destroying a target once it was identified would be limited. Thus, there was an acute need to develop an architecture that would consolidate the reconnaissance systems with high precision, fire-destruction elements, linked through the command and control channels” (Adamsky, 2008, p. 257).

These efforts essentially shaped the development of two operational concepts: (1) reconnaissance-strike complexes (RUK) and (2) operational maneuver groups (OMG). Both concepts were essentially doctrinal responses to the Western “deep strike” ALB and FOFA doctrines, projecting a Soviet “deep strike” version—an integrated mix of long-range-fire systems, information systems, and command and control systems in a “network of networks” capable of engaging “a wide array of

critical targets at extended ranges with a high degree of accuracy and lethality” (Krepinevich, 1992, p. 6). In theory, the “RUK” (in Russian, *rekognostsirovochnoye-udarnyy kompleks*) would allow “simultaneous engagements of the enemy throughout the entire depth of his deployment... capable of destroying small, mobile targets with the use of long-range, high-precision munitions in combination with area sensors and automated command and control” (Watts, 1995, p. 2).

However, as the internal politico-economic conditions of the Soviet Union rapidly deteriorated in the late 1980s, leading to the eventual collapse of the Eastern Bloc and dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ogarkov’s MTR vision remained solely theoretical and conceptually focused on technological over operational and organizational factors. The Soviet Union lacked the technical capabilities and financial resources to pursue the MTR, while its seminal military writings on the MTR at that time projected a far more coherent understanding of its scope and implications than in the West—from abstract thinking to definitions of its sources, elements, and long-term consequences (Naveh, 1996). Therefore, the credit for the intellectual discovery of the MTR and later the RMA is largely given to them.

3.2 *4IR Exploitation Under Putin*

Russia also increasingly views emerging 4IR technologies—particularly AI—along with some form of MCF, as essential to the country’s future (“Whoever Leads in AI”, 2017, September 1). In October 2019, Putin approved a new Russian “National Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence Until 2030” (Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 2019, October 10). This new strategy document is intended to accelerate Russian development of AI capabilities, in particular by expanding research, training, and information-sharing in AI. In addition, in December 2019, the Russian government raised the status of AI to a strategic program in its national “Digital Economy” project (“Aleksey Volin obsudil voprosy,” 2015, November 27).

Together, these initiatives have the goal of raising Russia up to the level of global leaders in AI by 2030. Moreover, Russia appears to be increasingly keen on the idea of exploiting AI for military purposes. The Russian armed forces frequently refer to the “intellectualization” and “digitization” of the military and are actively exploring the use of AI for intelligence gathering and processing, as well as the development of robots and “multi-agent systems” (e.g., swarming) (Bendett, 2020, pp. 8–13).

In this regard, Putin has repeatedly called upon Russia’s scientific potential to improve the country’s defense capability via the *convergence* of military and civilian science. In 2012, Putin “clearly spoke out in favor of using Russia’s scientific potential to enhance the country’s defense capability,” arguing that “without a doubt, the normal development of military research is impossible without partnership with civil science” (Kozyulin, 2020, p. 7). Although how it might be

accomplished is still unclear, the stress on “convergence” very clearly points to some kind of strategy utilizing MCF.

In particular, Russia has made serious efforts to spread AI over the country. The Putin regime has over the past decade greatly boosted R & D in the field of AI, and the AI and digital economy programs launched in 2019 include several projects intended to promote national AI and other 4IR technology-development efforts, underwritten by a total budget of some US\$26 billion. Russian businesses and individuals engaged in AI research and applications are eligible for tax incentives or grants. Moscow is making “digitization” a dominant concept in such areas as finance and banking, law enforcement, and social services, and the Russian government increasingly stresses new concepts like “smart cities” and “smart transport.” Putin has publicly described AI as “a crucial element for safeguarding Russia’s own place in the world,” crucial to “protecting Russia’s ‘unique civilization.’” According to Samuel Bendett, Putin sees the development of AI and other digital technologies as one of the most important issues for Russia at this time, noting that the future of Russia is “simply impossible” without the development of AI (Bendett, 2020, p. 1).

Russia’s military is only just beginning to grasp the importance of 4IR technologies. According to a report released by Chatham House, the Russian armed forces emphasize “a repair-and-upgrade” and “retain-and-adapt” approach to military innovation that emphasizes only being “good enough to contest and deny the perceived conventional military advantage of more advanced competitors.” This is partly due to the fact that the country’s military R & D base remains limited in its abilities to develop and manufacture “genuinely new systems.” Consequently, “instead of trying to catch up with the West (and increasingly China) in the traditional way, Russia seeks to counter and contest by developing technologically enabled force multipliers” in specific sectors (Bendett et al., 2021, September 23, p. 12).

As such, the Russian armed forces have been slow to exploit 4IR technologies. However, they are increasingly and particularly keen on the prospects for exploiting AI for military use. Like other great powers, Russia sees AI as occupying an instrumental role in the battlefield of the future. The Russian military wants to integrate AI, big data, machine learning, and other digital technologies into such areas as autonomous systems, electronic warfare, and long-range strike, as well as improving data and imagery collection and analysis and increasing the speed and quality of information processing (Bendett, 2018, August 27).

3.3 Exploiting the 4IR

According to a Chatham House research report, innovation in Russia overall is very much a “top-down, state-driven” process (Bendett et al., 2021, September 23, p. 12). The report further delineates the process of military R & D in Russia as progressing along “three major pathways”:

- “Modernization and upgrading of existing and well-established nuclear and non-nuclear technologies”
- “Experimentation in and pursuit of ‘risky’ innovation projects within a broad spectrum of novel technologies that can potentially yield significant advantages”
- “Integration of some of the new technologies into the established weapons systems” (Bendett et al., 2021, September 23, p. 13)

As a result, almost all 4IR innovation initiatives in Russia—and particularly R & D and innovation in the area of AI—are carried out by the Russian government. This includes the “National Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence Until 2030” and the “National Program Digital Economy of the Russian Federation.”

According to Katarzyna Zysk, the “basic Russian innovation model” for enabling breakthrough technologies is to rely on state-sponsored, government-run “radical innovation centers”—also known as “technoparks,” “technopolises,” “futuropolises,” or “innopolises” (Zysk, 2021, p. 547). Accordingly, Russian R & D in the area of 4IR technologies is concentrated in various “innovation centers” established by the state as “generators of ideas and dual-use technologies” (Zysk, 2021, p. 544).

These innovation centers are particularly focused not just on AI but also on quantum computing, big data, smart unmanned systems (e.g., robots), machine learning, man-machine interfaces, hypersonics, and weapons based on “new physical principles” (Wright, 2018, December, p. 165; Kozyulin, 2020, pp. 30–31). Two of the best-known innovation centers are the ERA Military Innovative Technopolis and the Advanced Research Foundation (ARF). ERA is intended to develop technology specifically for the Russian armed forces. As such, ERA’s focus is on promoting scientific research and innovation in such breakthrough military technology areas as AI, robotics, microsats, automated control systems, informatics and computer technology, biotechnology, and nanotechnologies, among others (Kozyulin, 2020, pp. 30–31).

The ARF (also known as the *Fond perspektivnykh issledovaniy or FPI*) was established in 2012 to function as the equivalent of the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). According to Vadim Kozyulin, the ARF focuses on three key research fields—information systems, physical-technical, and chemical-biological—and also addresses “AI standardization” in four areas: image decryption, speech processing, the control of autonomous robotic systems, and information support of the life cycle of weapons and equipment (Kozyulin, 2020, p. 32). AI-enabled robot systems (e.g., aerial drones and unmanned ground vehicles) are a key research area; this takes into account such discreet technologies as image recognition, autonomous navigation, and control methods for group use (e.g., swarming techniques).

While the bulk of Russian 4IR innovation activity is state-centered and top-down, Moscow appears to have promoted some military-civil fusion efforts. This includes encouraging public-private partnerships in order to facilitate collaboration between the commercial high-technology sector and academic institutions on the one hand and the Russian armed forces on the other (Wright, 2018, December, p. 165).

According to Zysk, the ERA technopolis model is “a combination of laboratories, engineering centers, and ‘open spaces’” intended to nurture cooperative innovation between the military and academia. The goal is “to create a strong link between theory and practice in order to integrate all stages of the product generation cycle: from idea to limited-scale testing” (Zysk, 2021, pp. 549–550).

MCF is also viewed as a means to create new jobs and new civilian high-tech products, both for the Russian market and for export. Consequently, the Russian defense industry has been ordered to increase its output of “civilian and dual-purpose products” to 30% by 2025 (compared to just under 17% in 2016) and up to 50% by 2030 (Zysk, 2021, pp. 544–545).

Nevertheless, in spite of all these efforts, Russian successes when it comes to generating 4IR breakthroughs—especially via the pursuit of military-civil fusion—have been few. As Zysk put it, “despite grand ambitions, new initiatives, and modifications of the traditional defense innovation model to incorporate civilian and private-sector innovation, Russia struggles to leverage 4IR technologies” (Zysk, 2021, p. 546). According to many analysts, several factors have hindered Russia’s ability to develop and exploit the fourth industrial revolution. In the first place, Russia lacks sufficient resources to support innovative R & D in either the military or civilian sectors. The country’s defense budget, as well as its overall economy, is much smaller than its geostrategic rivals (i.e., the United States and China); Russian military expenditures are less than one-third of the official Chinese defense budget (in US dollars) (Kashin & Raska, 2020, December, p. 4; Bendett et al., 2021, September 23, p. 37).

Analysts have also noted the “low level of innovation in Russia’s overall economy,” a “decline in professional expertise and the human resources,” and “gaps in the Russian defense-industrial base.” These problems were made all the worse by sanctions imposed on Russia after Moscow’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Kashin & Raska, 2020, December, p. 37).

Consequently, Russia is not able to compete in 4IR technologies across-the-board or otherwise develop practical military applications for many of these emerging technologies. According to Kashin and Raska, Russian innovation priorities reflect these reduced resources and that therefore, for “Russia to remain relevant in the current defense technological race,” it needs to concentrate its efforts on a few, hopefully breakthrough technologies (Kashin & Raska, 2020, December, p. 4).

Most of all, this means AI. According to Samuel Bendett, the Russian armed forces are investing heavily in AI development while simultaneously attempting to expand collaboration between the military’s R & D base and the country’s commercial high-technology sector. At the same time, Moscow is putting a lot of effort into robotics, particularly unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs). As a result, the Russian army has deployed dozens of UGVs. The long-term goal is to marry AI with unmanned systems to create autonomous aerial and ground fighting vehicles (Wright, 2018, December, pp. 161–169; Bendett et al., 2021, September 23, pp. 47–62).

To be sure, Russia is still far behind the United States and China when it comes to the field of AI. It is estimated that total Russian spending on AI—around US\$12

million in 2017, projected to rise to US\$360 million during the period 2020–2024—is dwarfed by the *billions* of dollars that the US Defense Department alone has spent on AI (roughly US\$7.4 billion just in 2017) (Dougherty & Jay, 2018). Nevertheless, even if Russia cannot compete head-to-head in an “AI arms race” with China and the United States, it is forging ahead with a multipronged approach to wringing as much benefit as it can from its AI-related research capacities and activities (Gady, 2019, December 21).

4 Chinese and Russian Prospects for Exploiting the 4IR for Military Modernization

It is obvious that both China and Russia appreciate the potential military value of technologies embedded in the fourth industrial revolution. It is also apparent that both countries want to innovate with 4IR technologies and apply these innovations to their respective armed forces. As such, both countries are forging ahead with initiatives and efforts to develop 4IR technologies, with particular attention being paid to artificial intelligence, quantum computing, big data, and autonomous systems. Moreover, these efforts increasingly entail some form of military-civil fusion, that is, partnering military and commercial R & D in order to produce military-technological innovation.

All this is intended, ultimately, to enable what the Chinese have come to call “intelligentized warfare.” This means leveraging 4IR technologies in order to gain a dominant military-technological advantage over one’s likely competitors and adversaries by the middle of the twenty-first century. 4IR technologies lie at the center of the next great military-technical revolution.

That said, the path to realizing these ambitions faces many obstacles. Russia is particularly hindered by a lack of funding and a weak national R & D base, resulting in a relatively low level of innovation in the nation overall. Consequently, Moscow appears to be putting nearly all of its 4IR apples in the single basket of AI and autonomous systems. It remains unanswered, however, whether such a highly focused approach will be enough to produce a sufficient increase in military advantage.

Compared to Russia, China appears to have a stronger national innovation system in place, and it also seems to be further along in facilitating military-commercial technological cooperation. At the same time, it has a much more ambitious agenda when it comes to exploiting the 4IR for military gain—not just AI but also including other research areas like quantum computing, big data, 5G networking, robotics, human-machine interfacing, swarm intelligence, and automated decision-making, in addition to fields like hypersonics and biotechnology. China has other advantages over Russia, including a more advanced indigenous technology base outside the military-industrial complex, the presence of several globally connected and highly competitive high-technology companies (such as Alibaba and Huawei), extensive

and intensive linkages to Western high-technology sectors, and—perhaps most important of all—high levels of monetary support, both governmental and private. All of these factors make MCF—that is, the utilization of indigenous commercial high technology in support of military-technological innovation—more doable and more likely to produce results.

Despite these advantages, China still struggles with harnessing the potential of the 4IR. The technological challenges are daunting, and MCF is not assured of success. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Russia or China will abandon their efforts to exploit the 4IR for military gain, even if they do experience setbacks. In particular, both countries see AI as a real game-changer, one that could affect so many other areas of military-technological innovation. Since neither wants to miss out on the potential of AI, we should at the very least expect to see China and Russia emphasize spirited research efforts in this particular area.

5 Prospects for Sino-Russian Cooperation in 4IR Technologies

Chinese and Russian interests in exploiting the 4IR for military modernization—and their relative weaknesses when it comes to innovating 4IR technologies and applying these to military uses—beg the question of whether these two countries might come to see bilateral cooperation as a means to boosting their respective efforts. There is certainly considerable precedent for doing so. During the 1950s, the USSR provided substantial economic and technical assistance to the newly formed People's Republic of China (see also Chapter “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix and Chapter “Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor” by Sarah Kirchberger). The Soviet Union helped expand China's heavy industries, such as steel mills, shipbuilding, and locomotives, aided China's coal and oil sectors, and provided machine tools, engineers, and experts to modernize Chinese production. In addition, the USSR brought thousands of Chinese to Soviet Russia for education and training.

The Soviet Union also provided tremendous amounts of military assistance to China. This was not restricted to the supply of finished armaments but also included the establishment of turnkey facilities that permitted the Chinese to manufacture a wide variety of Soviet arms. In fact, the vast majority of Chinese arms produced during the 1950s and 1960s were simply copies of Soviet-designed and developed weaponry—but quite often these were the most modern weapons systems available. During this period, for example, China produced T-54 and T-55 tanks; MiG-15, MiG-17, and MiG-19 fighter aircraft; the SS-N-2 *Stryx* anti-ship missile (designated the HY-2 *Silkworm* by the PLA); the AA-2 air-to-air missile; and the *Romeo*-class diesel-electric submarine. In most cases, the USSR made these systems available for licensed manufacture by China within only a few years of deploying the weapons

with the Soviet armed forces. Moscow even made available to the PLA its then most potent fighter jet, the MiG-21. While this technology transfer arrangement was partly derailed by the Sino-Soviet split of 1960, the Chinese were able to receive enough MiG-21 airframes, kits, and technical documents so as to successfully reverse engineer the aircraft as the J-7. As a result, during 1950s and early 1960s, the gap between Chinese armaments and those of the rest of the world was not particularly wide.

Russian military-technical assistance resumed following the collapse of the USSR. In the early 1990s, China placed an order with Moscow for 24 Su-27 fighter jets, its first purchase of Russian military equipment in more than 30 years. This was followed up by subsequent buys of additional Su-27 and Su-30 fighters and later an agreement to licensed-produce 200 Su-27 s at the Shenyang Aircraft Corporation in Liaoning province. Between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s, in fact, there was a huge expansion in Russian arms transfers to China. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China received more than US\$21.5 billion worth of arms between 1992 and 2005 (SIPRI, 2021). In addition to Sukhoi fighters, Beijing bought 4 *Sovremenny*-class destroyers (armed with the *Moskit*/SS-S-22 supersonic anti-ship cruise missile [ASCM]), 12 *Kilo*-class diesel-electric submarines, and several dozen Mi-8/–17 *Hip* helicopters, along with Tor-M1 and S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, AA-11 air-to-air missiles, Il-76 transport aircraft, Kh-31 anti-radiation missiles, and 3 M-54 ASCMs. For much of this period, in fact, Russian weapons systems arguably constituted the most potent armaments in the PLA's inventories (Bitzinger, 2016, pp. 766–767).

While China's defense industry has subsequently improved to the extent that it no longer needs to import so much Russian weaponry or military technology (Bitzinger, 2016, pp. 780, 783–786),¹ the incentives to cooperate in other technology spheres remain, including 4IR technologies. In fact, according to Bendett and Kania, Beijing and Moscow “recognize the potential synergies of joining forces, in the development of these dual-use technologies, which possess clear military and commercial significance” (Bendett & Kania, 2019, p. 3). As a result, these countries have initiated collaboration in a number of so-called “new era” technology sectors, particularly AI but also robotics, 5G telecommunications, biotechnology, and the digital economy (Bendett & Kania, 2019, pp. 9–13). Consequently, Russia and China have agreed to cooperate, on a broad level, on a number of high-technology initiatives. These include (1) the establishment of an annual “Russian–Chinese High-Tech Forum”; (2) a “Sino-Russian Innovation Dialogue,” convened annually by China's Ministry of Science and Technology and Russia's Ministry of Economic Development; (3) the establishment of a Sino-Russian Science and Technology Park in Changchun, China, as a “base for S & T cooperation and innovation,” as well as a China-Russia Innovation Park in Shaanxi; and (4) an agreement to create a Sino-Russian high-tech

¹China still needs to import critical subsystems from Russia, particularly jet engines (e.g., AL-31 turbofan, used to power Chinese J-10 fighters) and helicopters. During the 2010s, in fact, China still bought, on average, US\$850 million worth of Russian military equipment every year (SIPRI, 2021).

center at the Skolkovo Innovation Center (Russia's wannabe "Silicon Valley"). In addition, Moscow and Beijing have established new S & T and investment funds intended to promote Sino-Russian technology cooperation, created innovation competitions, and expanded academic collaboration between the two countries, including joint research and personnel exchanges (Bendett & Kania, 2019, pp. 6–8).

Mutual strategic interests—that is, their respective strategic competitions with the United States—drive much of this Sino-Russian collaboration, and a high-tech partnership is viewed as a potential "force multiplier" (Bendett & Kania, 2020, August 20). Each sees a prospective benefit in leveraging the other's advantages in order to drive high-technology developments and innovations. Russia possesses proficiencies in various areas of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines (many of them legacies of the Soviet era), particularly at the level of basic research (i.e., S & T). At the same time, China is particularly adept in applied systems, particularly when it comes to Internet-enabled solutions (e.g., WeChat, Tencent) or telecommunications (e.g., Huawei, ZTE). Moreover, China has the deep pockets to invest in collaborative projects and programs. Clearly, there is the potential for a complimentary fit between the two countries. In particular, Russia would like to use China's globalized high-tech capacities to "jump-start" its own indigenous innovation (Bendett & Kania, 2019, pp. 16).

Both countries clearly see the advantages of collaboration in order to raise the respective levels of their national S & T bases when it comes to 4IR technologies. Both also recognize the vast potential military applications of such dual-use research efforts. Nevertheless, such cooperation could still be limited. In particular, the likely imbalance in Sino-Russian collaboration could be its undoing. Russia has certain strengths that it can bring to the table, but overall it lacks the resources or technological capacities (money and manpower, together with an already low level of innovation in the national economy) to function as an equal to China, at least in the long term. Moscow is particularly concerned that Beijing will emerge as the dominant player in this bilateral cooperation, given that China may soon (if it has not done so already) overtake Russia in critical technology areas like AI. Compounding these fears are that China will try—via collaboration but also intellectual property theft and espionage (areas where it has a long history)—to obtain Russia's high-tech "crown jewels" and become the "epicenter of global innovation" and eventually shut Moscow out (Bendett & Kania, 2020, August 20).

Should Moscow find itself playing the junior partner in 4IR collaboration, this would constitute a reversal of the historical Sino-Russian technology-sharing relationship. China might also eventually believe that it has gained all it can from such a partnership and decide to jettison Russia. In any event, Sino-Russian collaboration when it comes to 4IR technologies may have a built-in governor limiting the extent and depth of this cooperation. In this case, both countries could continue to struggle, separately, with achieving breakthroughs in the areas of 4IR technologies *and* applying these to military uses. In particular, military-civil fusion can only succeed where there is considerable progress in overall high-tech sectors (like AI or robotics) and where there are also mechanisms for translating innovations to the

military-technological-industrial sphere. Overall, both China and Russia still face considerable impediments to both.

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China-Russia Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence



Brian G. Carlson

1 Introduction

Relations between Moscow and Beijing have warmed steadily since the late Soviet period. This trend began with moves toward Sino-Soviet normalization, proceeded in stages following the Soviet collapse, and gained momentum in recent years, when the China-Russia alignment became particularly close. Nuclear issues have played an important role in the relationship throughout this period, acting as a source of both potential discord and emergent cooperation. The decline of Russian military power in the post-Soviet period and the concurrent growth of China's military capabilities aroused anxiety among Russian leaders and strengthened their determination to maintain nuclear deterrence of China. At the same time, facing preponderant US power in the wake of the Soviet collapse, both countries opposed the development of US military capabilities that could have undermined their own capacity for nuclear deterrence of the United States. China and Russia cooperated in opposing US plans that potentially threatened their second-strike capabilities, including the deployment of national or theater missile defense systems and the development of high-precision conventional weapons (Medeiros & Chase, 2017, July, pp. 6–7; Rumer, 2017, July, p. 24). As the China-Russia relationship grew steadily closer, sources of discord on nuclear issues faded to the background, while cooperation became increasingly prominent.

Beyond shared interests in the preservation of nuclear deterrence of the United States, China and Russia also strengthened their bilateral defense cooperation. The main features of this cooperation, including Russian arms sales to China, the conduct of joint military and naval exercises, and defense consultations, grew steadily over time and have expanded notably in recent years, especially since the onset of the

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Ukraine crisis (Kashin, 2018, August). China-Russia defense cooperation focuses on conventional weapons. Russian arms sales to China have made significant contributions to China's conventional military capabilities, including its capacity for anti-access/area denial (A2/AD), but they exclude nuclear weapons (Weitz, 2017, July, p. 30). Nor, at least according to publicly available evidence, have the two countries conducted joint research and development in nuclear, hypersonic, or other strategic offensive capabilities. The two countries' joint military and naval exercises have grown in sophistication, but they have focused primarily on scenarios of military conflict at the conventional level, below the threshold of nuclear escalation.

In recent years, however, China and Russia have strengthened cooperation on issues of broader strategic significance. In 2016 and 2017, they held joint missile defense exercises in the form of computer simulations. In 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed that Russia was helping China to build a missile attack early warning system. China and Russia continue to oppose US missile defense systems. Both countries have declared their opposition to US deployment of land-based intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Asia following the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (Blank, 2020b, p. 266). The two countries stand together in criticizing US development of high-precision weapons, opposing the weaponization of space even while testing their own anti-satellite weapons, and advocating positions on cyber issues that emphasize national sovereignty (Medeiros & Chase, 2017, July, p. 7).

Such cooperation and expressions of shared views demonstrate a common desire to place constraints on the exercise of US power. This desire, though hardly the only driver of the China-Russia relationship, has been an important stimulus for the two countries' growing cooperation. The recent strengthening of China-Russia relations has occurred amid downturns in both countries' relations with the United States (Ellings & Sutter, 2018). Convergent views on a series of issues, including shared opposition to a US-dominated international system and to the principle of an international order based on liberal political values, provide a firm foundation for the relationship (Rozman, 2014). This situation has important implications for the global balance of nuclear forces and for efforts to ensure strategic stability. Cooperation by China and Russia to strengthen their respective nuclear deterrents is already an important factor in international security and could grow in importance over time. This chapter assesses actual China-Russia cooperation in nuclear deterrence to date, as well as the potential for further collaboration in this area.

2 Nuclear Weapons and Great Power Competition

In recent years, US foreign policy has increasingly focused on great power competition with China and Russia, including the nuclear dimensions of this competition. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review assessed the challenges posed by both countries' growing nuclear arsenals. This document argued that Russia's modernization and expansion of its nuclear arsenal, including its stockpile of nonstrategic nuclear

weapons, reflected Russia's belief that it could use the threat or actual first use of nuclear weapons in order to "de-escalate" an armed conflict on favorable terms. It also argued that despite no change in China's official doctrine, including its commitment to no first use of nuclear weapons, China's nuclear modernization and lack of transparency raised questions about the country's future intentions (Department of Defense, 2018, February, pp. 8–11). In May 2019, Lt. Gen. Robert P. Ashley, Jr., director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, predicted that both Russia and China would expand their nuclear arsenals significantly, with China most likely at least doubling the size of its nuclear stockpile (Ashley, 2019, May 9). The Department of Defense's 2020 report on China's military power echoed this assessment, projecting that China over the following decade would at least double the size of its nuclear warhead stockpile, which the report estimated to be in the low 200s at the time of publication (Department of Defense, 2020, pp. ix, 85, 87). The 2021 report anticipated an even more rapid pace of development, projecting that China could have 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027 and 1000 warheads by 2030 (Department of Defense, 2021, pp. viii, 90, 92). The communiqué that NATO heads of state issued at the conclusion of their summit in June 2021 criticized both Russia and China for their nuclear buildups (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021, June 14).

For its part, the United States plans a program of nuclear force modernization over the next two decades to upgrade nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Some US delivery systems, including Minuteman ICBMs, have been in service for decades. Russia and China both argue that their own nuclear upgrades are necessary because US plans, including nuclear force modernization, missile defense programs, and the development of high-precision conventional weapons, threaten their nuclear deterrents. The United States maintains a traditional arms control relationship with Russia, as reaffirmed by the renewal of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in the early days of President Joe Biden's administration. This treaty limits both countries to 1550 deployed nuclear warheads and bombs. China has declined to enter international arms control negotiations until the United States and Russia reduce their total number of warheads to levels approaching the size of China's arsenal, which according to some estimates may hold up to 350 warheads (Kristensen & Korda, 2020a, pp. 443–444).

Putin's most recent nuclear policy guidelines, published in 2020, declare that Russia views nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence. The guidelines list several conditions under which Russia would use nuclear weapons, including confirmation of an incoming ballistic missile attack against Russia or its allies, the use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction against Russia or its allies, an attack on critical governmental or military sites that would undermine Russia's ability to respond with nuclear weapons, or an attack on Russia with conventional weapons that would put the state's existence in jeopardy (President of the Russian Federation, 2020, June 8). Many outside analysts argue, however, that such principles are not congruent with Russia's nuclear force structure, capabilities, and exercises (Johnson, 2021). In addition to the "escalate to de-escalate" concept suggested by the Nuclear Posture Review, other analysts argue that Russia's actual

aim is to “escalate to win” (Kristensen & Korda, 2020b, p. 105) or to maintain escalation dominance at all stages of a conflict (Blank, 2020a, p. 231).

Russia’s recent nuclear force modernization and deployments reinforce such concerns. In addition to modernizing all three legs of its nuclear triad, it has developed new intercontinental-range systems such as a hypersonic glide vehicle, a nuclear-armed, nuclear-powered cruise missile, and a nuclear-armed, nuclear-powered, undersea autonomous torpedo. Russia has also established superiority in nonstrategic, dual-capable systems that can be armed with either nuclear or conventional warheads. These include the SSC-8/9 M729, a ground-based cruise missile that the United States and NATO alleged was in violation of the INF Treaty. Russia holds an estimated stockpile of more than 4000 total warheads (Kristensen & Korda, 2020b, p. 102).

China’s most recent defense white paper, which was published in 2019, reaffirms the country’s policy of no first use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. This document adds that China refrains from engaging in nuclear arms races with other countries and maintains nuclear capabilities at the minimum level required for national security. The goal of the country’s nuclear arsenal, the document states, is to deter other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China (State Council Information Office, 2019, July).

China announced its NFU doctrine following its first successful nuclear test in 1964. For several decades thereafter, the country sought to maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent. By the early 2000s, China most likely possessed only a few dozen nuclear weapons that could strike the United States, all of which were silo-based, leaving them vulnerable. Since then, however, China has made significant strides in the modernization of its nuclear forces. It has deployed road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), equipped some of its strategic missiles with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), and deployed the PLA Navy’s first viable ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). China has also increased the size of its nuclear arsenal, though at least until recently it still appeared to maintain a “lean and effective” nuclear force rather than striving for numerical parity with the United States and Russia (Chase & Carlson, 2019, October, pp. 3–5). As noted above, however, US officials harbor concerns that China plans a major buildup of nuclear forces, which potentially could lead to changes in doctrine. In 2021, satellite images showed that China was constructing approximately 300 missile silos, adding to suspicions about China’s intentions for its nuclear arsenal (Korda & Kristensen, 2021, November 2; Warrick, 2021, June 30).

Beyond US apprehensions about Russia and China individually, cooperation by the two countries in nuclear deterrence is an additional source of concern. As this chapter details, the history of relations between Moscow and Beijing on nuclear issues is long and complex, at times mixing elements of cooperation and wariness. Their shared desire to maintain credible deterrence of the United States, however, now provides a basis for continued and expanded cooperation in this area. The next section offers a framework for analyzing the evolution of nuclear relations between Moscow and Beijing.

3 Evolution of Moscow-Beijing Nuclear Relations

Since China's acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1964, several years after the beginning of the Sino-Soviet split, relations between Moscow and Beijing in the nuclear sphere have passed through several phases. According to a typology proposed by Nikita Perflyev (2018a, December 4; 2018b, December 12), the nuclear relationship between the Soviet Union and China was explicitly adversarial from 1964 to 1985 before turning implicitly adversarial from 1986 to 2013, including periods of transition (1986–1993) and consolidation (1993–2013). As a result of the strengthened China-Russia relationship following the onset of the Ukraine crisis, the implicitly adversarial elements faded. This marked the beginning of a new phase featuring implicitly cooperative relations directed against the United States and its allies. The formation of an explicitly cooperative relationship similar to that between the United States and Britain now also loomed as a possibility.

During the 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split underwent transformation from an ideological conflict into a power struggle between two enemy states. Several events in 1964 exacerbated Sino-Soviet tensions. In addition to China's nuclear test, these events included China's announcement that it supported Japan's demand for the return of the Kuril Islands and Mao's assertion that a vast stretch of Soviet territory had been seized from China by tsarist imperialism. In response, the Soviet Union began a major military buildup along the Chinese border. China's Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, had a strong anti-Soviet tenor, and the Soviet buildup accelerated. By 1968, the size of Soviet forces along the border had doubled since 1961.

The growing tensions led to armed border clashes in 1969. On March 2, Chinese forces attacked Damansky (Zhenbao) Island in the Ussuri River. On March 15, the Soviets counterattacked and reclaimed the island. These events caused a shift in Soviet thinking, as Soviet leaders urgently upgraded their estimate of the threat. The Soviets adopted a policy of containment and intimidation toward China, accelerating the military build-up. Later that summer, following further border clashes in Xinjiang, the Soviet Union probed the United States to learn how it would react in the event of an attack, possibly even a nuclear strike, on China's nuclear facilities, to which the United States responded negatively. The border clashes and the ensuing tension throughout 1969 appear to have been a major factor in Mao's decision to pursue rapprochement with the United States. In subsequent years, China and the Soviet Union continued to eye each other warily. China deployed the DF-4 missile along the Soviet border in the mid-1970s. The Soviet Union, in turn, explored the possibility of laying nuclear mines along the border in order to stop a full-scale Chinese invasion should deterrence fail (Perflyev, 2018a, December 4; 2018b, December 12).

The Soviet Union soon attempted diplomatic outreach to China, however. In a 1982 speech, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev called for improved relations. Later that same year, irritated by continued US support for Taiwan, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping announced that China would pursue an independent line in foreign policy.

However, the Soviet Union remained unwilling to make the concrete concessions that could have improved Sino-Soviet relations. It was only during Mikhail Gorbachev's tenure that the Soviet Union took the necessary steps to mend the rift, ending the explicitly adversarial phase of nuclear relations.

4 Nuclear Issues from Gorbachev to the Ukraine Crisis

Despite the end of explicitly adversarial relations, the nuclear relationship between Moscow and Beijing retained its adversarial elements, though in a softer, implicitly adversarial form. The official shelving of nuclear issues in the China-Russia relationship meant that the two countries no longer officially recognized the existence of nuclear deterrence in their bilateral relations. Nevertheless, the security of the Russian Far East and Siberia still depended on nuclear deterrence. Thus, in the "great strategic triangle" that emerged during the post-Soviet era, the US-Russia relationship was characterized by symmetric deterrence, the US-China relationship by asymmetric deterrence, and the Russia-China relationship by latent deterrence (Arbatov & Dvorkin, 2013, pp. 12, 14).

4.1 *Establishing the New Relationship*

From 1985 to 1993, the new implicitly adversarial relationship passed through a period of transition. Gorbachev achieved normalization of relations in 1989 by satisfying China's three demands, namely, by ending the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan, securing the withdrawal of Vietnamese military forces from Cambodia, and ending the Soviet military buildup along China's border. The latter step included the removal of 171 SS-20s and 256 other missiles from regions east of the Urals under the terms of the INF Treaty that the United States and the Soviet Union signed in 1987, with China's encouragement (Charap, 2019, April 9, p. 4; Perilyev, 2018a, December 4; 2018b, December 12).

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his administration sought to integrate the new Russia into the West and initially scorned relations with China. During this period, Russia's security policy reflected these priorities. Thus, its first post-Soviet military doctrine, which was promulgated in November 1993, abandoned the pledge of no first use of nuclear weapons that Brezhnev had made in 1982. Many analysts viewed this change as an effort to establish nuclear deterrence against potential aggressors, especially China (Schmemmann, 1993, November 4; Garnett, 2000, pp. 8–9). Yeltsin soon reconsidered his approach and sought to strengthen ties with China, an effort made manifest in the two countries' nuclear relationship. During Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow in September 1994, when China and Russia declared the formation of a "constructive partnership," the two countries pledged no first use of

nuclear weapons in their bilateral relations. They also agreed not to target their nuclear warheads at each other (Garnett, 2000, pp. 8–9; Garnett, 2001, pp. 45–46).

These agreements signaled the end of transition and the beginning of the period of consolidation in the implicitly adversarial relationship. China and Russia later enshrined these pledges in the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation, which they signed in 2001. In the intervening years, the two countries formed a “strategic partnership” in 1996, opposed the 1999 US bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, and coordinated their opposition to US plans for theater and national missile defense.

4.2 Joint Opposition to US Ballistic Missile Defense

Both China and Russia opposed US ballistic missile defense plans, which gained momentum in the late 1990s, because they feared that such systems could threaten the effectiveness of their respective nuclear deterrents and entrench US military dominance. For both China and Russia, nuclear ballistic missile forces helped to offset the US advantage in overall military power. In a potential direct conflict, their possession of ballistic missiles introduced the risk of nuclear escalation, which could force the United States to exercise restraint in deploying conventional military forces. The deployment of reliable missile defense systems by the United States could reduce the risk of nuclear escalation by its adversaries. In this case, in the view of China and Russia, the United States might conclude that it could keep potential military clashes at the conventional level, where it held considerable advantages that were likely to endure, and avoid nuclear escalation (Goldstein, 2005, p. 140). In addition to their opposition to national ballistic missile defense, China and Russia also agreed that theater missile defense systems, which were not prohibited by the ABM Treaty, should not be deployed in ways that harmed other countries’ security. In particular, they agreed that the deployment of a theater missile defense system covering Taiwan was unacceptable. Between 1999 and 2001, China and Russia introduced three resolutions in the UN General Assembly calling for the ABM Treaty’s preservation, all of which received approval.

China and Russia maintained their united diplomatic front on ballistic missile defense during this period despite some differences in their national interests. Russia’s nuclear arsenal was much larger and more sophisticated than China’s. Therefore, although Russia opposed US efforts to revise the ABM Treaty or to withdraw from it altogether, Russian leaders remained confident that a limited US national ballistic missile defense system, designed to protect the country against accidental launches or limited strikes by countries such as Iran or North Korea, would be unlikely to pose a serious threat to the Russian nuclear deterrent. China, by contrast, feared that even a limited US national missile defense system could threaten the effectiveness and credibility of its nuclear deterrent (Goldstein, 2005, p. 140). China was also much more concerned than was Russia about theater missile defense systems, especially one that would cover Taiwan (Lo, 2008, pp. 50–51).

China's overall concerns about US missile defense were greater than Russia's (Goldstein, 2005, p. 141). This divergence of interests became clear later, when Putin mounted little resistance to President George W. Bush's December 2001 decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. China had hoped to maintain a united front with Russia on this issue, but Putin bowed to the inevitable during a period of warming US-Russia relations following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Putin acknowledged that the United States had the right to withdraw from the treaty, but he expressed confidence that Russia maintained the ability to overcome any potential missile defense system. In the view of Chinese leaders and analysts, Putin effectively gave tacit approval to the US withdrawal from the treaty. This was disappointing to Chinese leaders. The Chinese government, in contrast to Putin's mild response, strongly condemned the US decision. In later years, China and Russia continued to oppose US missile defense plans, including the deployment of the Thermal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea. Their diverging responses to the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, however, revealed that their positions on nuclear issues were not fully in harmony. This soon became apparent on a range of other nuclear issues as well.

4.3 *Areas of Discord*

Russia's relations with the West deteriorated throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, providing an impetus for closer relations with China. Nevertheless, Russia maintained largely unspoken concerns about China's growing military capabilities. Russia faced an increasingly unfavorable military balance in Asia resulting from increases in the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), particularly its conventional forces based in northern China. Despite the bilateral pledge of no first use of nuclear weapons against each other, the 2010 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation hinted that Russia's ability to deter a potential Chinese invasion ultimately depended on the country's nuclear forces, including both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons (Arbatov & Dvorkin, 2013, p. 12; Kipp, 2011). This deterrent was partly based on the threat to use tactical nuclear weapons in the early stages of a conflict (Kashin, 2013, May 1).

Russian concerns about China's growing conventional military power, including its large arsenal of intermediate- and shorter-range missiles, may have been an important factor in its violation of the INF Treaty. In 2007, then-Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov criticized the treaty publicly: "The gravest mistake was the decision to scrap a whole class of missile weapons—medium-range ballistic missiles. Only Russia and the United States do not have the right to have such weapons, although they would be quite useful for us" (Kühn & Péczeli, 2017, pp. 70–71). Putin also repeatedly complained that several of Russia's neighbors possessed missiles of this range (Charap, 2019, April 9, p. 4).

Russian leaders also expressed their desire for China to participate in future arms control negotiations. Following the signing of New START in 2009, Russian

officials declared their reluctance to participate in future arms control negotiations without China's participation. They also called for Britain and France to participate. China insisted that it would not participate in arms control negotiations until the United States and Russia first reduced their nuclear arsenals to levels that were close to China's, even as China maintained secrecy about its total number of warheads (Arbatov & Dvorkin, 2013).

Russia's discussions with NATO in 2010 about possible cooperative arrangements in missile defense were another potential source of tension in Russia's relations with China. Although China raised no public objections to these discussions, some Russian experts believed that China must have been concerned. In their view, China might have perceived a NATO-Russia cooperative missile defense system as an "anti-Chinese conspiracy" that would have damaged China-Russia relations and necessitated a large buildup of Chinese nuclear forces (Arbatov & Dvorkin, 2013, p. 20). These talks raised the possibility that Russia might be obligated to shoot down Chinese missiles aimed at Western countries, an arrangement to which China naturally would have objected strenuously (Alexei Arbatov, interview with author, Moscow, June 2, 2016.)

Some of Russia's military exercises during this period appeared to reflect its concerns about China. In 2009, China conducted military exercises (Stride-2009) simulating a large-scale land invasion, which looked to some Russian experts like a dress rehearsal for an attack on Russia (Khranchikhin, 2010, February 17; Khranchikhin, 2013, pp. 65–66). The following summer, the Russian military conducted the quadrennial Vostok (East) military exercises in the Siberian and Far Eastern military districts. Russian military officials insisted that the exercises were not aimed at "any one country or bloc." However, given the exercises' geographical setting, participating forces, and simulated operations, outside experts argued that the true purpose was to test the Russian military's ability to defend the country's eastern regions against a potential Chinese invasion (McDermott, 2010a, July 6; Kipp, 2010, July 12). On the final day of the exercises, the Russian military appeared to simulate a tactical nuclear strike against enemy forces. The exercise may have sought to determine how long Russian conventional forces could withstand an invasion by the PLA before resorting to the use of nuclear weapons (McDermott, 2010b, July 13). Three years later, when five Chinese warships sailed through the Sea of Okhotsk, Russia called snap military exercises in the region. Thus, on the eve of the Ukraine crisis, the latent deterrence in China-Russia nuclear relations remained in force.

5 Nuclear Cooperation Since the Ukraine Crisis

The strengthening of China-Russia relations following the onset of the Ukraine crisis and the resulting imposition of Western sanctions on Russia caused the implicitly adversarial elements of the nuclear relationship to fade. Although Russia's defense against a potential Chinese invasion continued to rely on nuclear deterrence, the

improvement of the China-Russia relationship meant that Russia no longer viewed China as a threat. China's participation in Russia's Vostok-2018 domestic military exercises clarified this shift. As mentioned above, Russia appeared to simulate a tactical nuclear strike against invading Chinese forces during the 2010 version of these quadrennial exercises. Four years later, despite the beginning of intensified Russian diplomatic outreach to China, the Vostok-2014 exercises were oriented toward the defense of the Russian Far East against an invasion by a state actor, a role that could only be played in the real world by China (McDermott, 2014a, September 23; McDermott, 2014b, September 30). China's participation in Vostok-2018, which marked the first time that China had participated in domestic Russian military exercises, thus represented a stark shift in Russia's outlook (Carlson, 2018, November). By inviting China to participate, Russia conveyed a clear message that it no longer viewed China as a military threat to its eastern regions (Gabuev, 2018, September 11). Following the onset of the Ukraine crisis, Russia also approved sales of the S-400 air and missile defense system and Su-35 fighter jets to China.

As the adversarial elements faded, the relationship entered a new period of implicit cooperation against the United States and its allies. The improvement in China-Russia relations led to bilateral cooperation on a range of issues connected to nuclear weapons and strategic stability. Geographically, Northeast Asia became a focal point. Indicative of the warming relationship was China's 2017 deployment of road-mobile DF-4 ICBMs in its northeastern province of Heilongjiang, near the border with Russia. This deployment positioned these missiles in such a way that they could strike the entire continental United States. It also put them within range of Russian missiles, but this was not a major concern for Chinese leaders in view of their strong relationship with Russia (Perfilyev, 2018a, December 4; 2018b, December 12).

5.1 Continued Opposition to US Missile Defense

In the new period, China and Russia continued their long-standing opposition to US missile defense systems. They cooperated in opposing the deployment of THAAD on South Korean territory, which the United States argued was necessary in order to defend South Korea and US military bases in Asia from North Korean missile strikes. China and Russia were united on this issue despite differences in their interests resulting from contrasts in their nuclear arsenals. China argued that this system posed a direct threat to its nuclear deterrent, noting that the monitoring range of the system's X-band radar reached far beyond the Korean Peninsula and deep into Chinese territory. Russian leaders knew that their country's nuclear arsenal remained large enough to overwhelm THAAD or any other prospective theater or national missile defense system, but they professed concern that the United States intended to establish a global missile defense system that could eventually threaten the

effectiveness and credibility of Russia's nuclear deterrent (Toloraya, 2019, February 19; Weitz, 2018, p. 85).

In June 2016, China and Russia issued a joint declaration on global strategic stability in which they expressed their shared opposition to THAAD, as well as to US deployment of Aegis Ashore missile defense systems, development of high-precision conventional weapons as envisioned in the Prompt Global Strike program, and weaponization of space (Xi & Putin, 2016, July 8). Efforts to prevent the deployment of THAAD were unsuccessful, as the United States began to install the system in South Korea during the spring of 2017. Opposition to US missile defense continues to be a major emphasis for China and Russia, however. The two countries responded harshly to the Trump administration's 2019 Missile Defense Review, which called for the augmentation of defenses against regional ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic missile threats no matter the source, effectively linking US missile defense plans to Russia and China for the first time (Reif, 2019, March).

5.2 Coordination in Northeast Asia

Much recent China-Russia cooperation on defense and nuclear deterrence has a distinct geographical focus on Northeast Asia. This includes opposition to the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, cooperation in addressing the North Korean nuclear crisis, joint air patrols in Northeast Asia, and efforts to limit force deployments by the United States and its allies in the region that China and Russia perceive as threatening. Although the two countries have no treaty obligations to provide each other with mutual support in scenarios of armed conflict, their close defense cooperation raises the possibility of joint operations in a military contingency. A potential military conflict on the Korean Peninsula that could involve Russian and Chinese nuclear weapons is especially relevant in this context (Blank, 2020b, pp. 267–268).

In recent years, China and Russia have closely coordinated their diplomacy toward the Korean Peninsula (Carlson, 2019). Both countries supported the denuclearization of the peninsula in principle, but they also viewed North Korea's nuclear program as the ultimate deterrent against US efforts at regime change. China and Russia have a shared desire to weaken the US strategic position in Northeast Asia, including the US-South Korea alliance. The existing regional security architecture, especially the US military presence in the region, offers China and Russia a strong incentive to protect the regime in Pyongyang (Lukin, 2017, October 25, p. 3).

China and Russia may also have discussed possible military contingencies in the region. No publicly available evidence suggests that the Chinese and Russian militaries have developed joint operational plans, but some Russian analysts suggest that the Korean Peninsula and Central Asia are the two regions most likely to be included in any such plans (Gabuev, 2018, September 11). Russia and China may have intended to use the Vostok-2018 exercises as a display of their military power in Northeast Asia in anticipation of the possible outbreak of armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula (Goldstein, 2018, September 5). In such an armed conflict, China

might wish to secure Russia's military support. Russia's recent combat experience and especially its nuclear arsenal could prove valuable, increasing the likelihood that China could achieve a favorable outcome (Lukin, 2017, October 25, p. 3).

Less than 1 year after the Vostok-2018 exercises, China and Russia offered a further sign of their intensified bilateral defense cooperation by conducting their first joint air patrol (Kofman, 2019a, July 26); Blank, 2019). Northeast Asia was the scene of the patrol, which occurred in July 2019 and featured two Tu-95MS strategic bombers and a Beriev A-50 airborne-warning and control aircraft on the Russian side and two H-6 K long-range bombers and a KJ-2000 battlespace management aircraft on the Chinese side. The air patrol featured no explicitly nuclear component. The H-6 K does not play a prominent role in China's nuclear deterrent because, although it carries high-precision cruise missiles, it has a limited range and is incapable of in-flight refueling. However, it makes an important contribution to China's A2/AD capability, enabling the PLA to launch massive nonnuclear missile strikes against US targets in the region. Russian strategic bombers such as the ones that participated in the air patrol, which have long been the crucial element of the airborne leg of Russia's nuclear triad, are now also capable of launching high-precision nonnuclear weapons. Because Russia's naval power in the Pacific is weak, long-range aviation is the country's primary means of power projection in the region (Kashin, 2019, July 30).

During the joint air patrol, the Russian and Chinese aircraft crossed into the air defense identification zones (ADIZ) of both South Korea and Japan in the East China Sea, prompting both countries to scramble fighter jets in response. The A-50 also flew close to Dokdo/Takeshima island, which is controlled by South Korea but also claimed by Japan, and entered what South Korea considers to be its airspace. The South Korean air force fired warning shots at the A-50, an action that drew criticism from Japan's foreign minister, who declared that protecting the airspace around the disputed island was Japan's prerogative. The location of the air patrol suggested that it may have been intended, at least in part, to drive a wedge between South Korea and Japan. This is one of China's primary objectives in the region, and Russia's participation suggested its willingness to support this effort. For Russia, the joint air patrol was an opportunity to show that it was still a significant power in Asia and also that it was willing to take risks for the sake of its relationship with China (Kofman, 2019a, July 26). A second, similar joint air patrol occurred in December 2020.

China and Russia were undoubtedly pleased with Japan's June 2020 decision, ostensibly for cost and environmental reasons, not to host the US Aegis Ashore missile defense complex. This decision could lead China and Russia to conclude that Japan is susceptible to pressure. If, for example, the United States attempted to deploy land-based intermediate-range missiles on the territory of its Asian allies following the demise of the INF Treaty, China and Russia might believe that they could pressure Japan to refuse its consent to such plans (Blank, 2020b, 258–259). Following recent upgrades to Japanese military forces, including the purchase of F-35 fighter jets from the United States, Russia strengthened its own military presence in Northeast Asia, deploying forces that are designed to counter the United States and Japan, not China. Russia deployed the S-300 V4, an advanced air defense

system, on one of the four disputed islands that Russia controls but Japan claims (Simes, 2020, December 16). Cooperation between China and Russia in a potential armed conflict in Northeast Asia, including combined efforts to ensure nuclear deterrence of the United States, is a possibility that US defense planners must consider.

5.3 Missile Defense and Early Warning

China and Russia held joint missile defense exercises in May 2016 and December 2017 in the form of computer simulations. In these exercises, the two countries employed their respective surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, the Chinese HQ-9 and the Russian S-300/400 series, to establish a joint area for air and missile defense (Kashin, 2018, August, p. 20). These exercises required the two sides to share information in sensitive areas such as missile launches, warning systems, and ballistic missile defense. The willingness of China and Russia to share such information and to display their C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) systems suggested a desire by both countries to improve their capacities for interoperability and joint command and control (Blank, 2020b, pp. 258–259).

In October 2019, Putin announced that Russia was assisting China in the construction of a missile attack early warning system. At present, the United States and Russia are the only two countries that possess early warning systems. China's acquisition of such a system could contribute to global strategic stability by reducing uncertainty in a crisis (Kashin, 2021, February 21; Kofman, 2019b, November 29). However, it could also prompt China to increase the alert levels of its nuclear arsenal and possibly adopt a doctrine of "launch on warning." Moreover, it could lead China to deploy ballistic missile defense systems and an integrated network of anti-satellite capabilities (Wishnick, 2020, March 1; Blank, 2020b, p. 260). From the perspective of China-Russia cooperation, the main significance of the deal lies in the high level of trust that it demonstrates between the two countries (Kashin, 2021, February 21; Gorenburg, 2020, April). It marks a notable shift into cooperation in strategic capabilities (Kofman, 2019b, November 29). It could conceivably lead to the development of an integrated China-Russia missile defense system, though the two countries have stated no such intention (Kashin, 2021, February 21).

5.4 Post-INF Cooperation

The demise of the INF Treaty was a potential source of tension in China-Russia relations. In August 2019, the United States withdrew from the treaty, which prohibited land-based missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5500 kilometers, on the grounds of Russia's violation. Russia insisted that its deployment of the

SSC-8/9 M729 was in compliance with the treaty, but it also withdrew. Following the treaty's demise, the United States was no longer bound by treaty obligations that would prevent it from deploying land-based missiles of this range in either Europe or Asia. The United States could now deploy such missiles on the territory of US allies in Asia as a means of countering China's growing military power. China therefore opposed US withdrawal from the treaty, just as it had supported the treaty's signing more than three decades earlier. As part of its effort to drive a wedge between Russia and China on nuclear issues, officials from former US President Donald Trump's administration reportedly told Chinese officials that if US missiles of this range were to be deployed in Asia, then they should blame Putin, not the United States, for the demise of the treaty that previously stood as an obstacle to such deployments (Detsch & Mackinnon, 2021, April 20).

To date, however, the INF Treaty's demise has been a source of cooperation between China and Russia. Rather than blaming Russia, as the Trump administration sought, China adopted a relaxed attitude toward the Russian missile deployment, viewing it as understandable in light of US and NATO actions toward Russia. For its part, Russia also took steps to alleviate China's concerns. Putin vowed that Russia would deploy no missiles previously forbidden by the treaty in any regional theater unless the United States were to deploy them in that theater first. If the United States were to deploy INF-range missiles in Asia, prompting a Russian deployment in response, then China would be unlikely to view the Russian missiles as threatening. The strong China-Russia relationship, which includes regular defense consultations, would offer ample opportunity for Russia to explain its intentions to China and to remove any possible friction (Charap, 2019, April 9, p. 6). Both China and Russia have declared that they would respond to a US deployment of INF-range missiles in Asia with their own force deployments directed against US and allied targets (Blank, 2020b, p. 263–264).

5.5 *Multilateral Arms Control*

Prospects for multilateral arms control are another area in which potential friction has been minimized as the China-Russia relationship has grown closer. Russian officials have ceased to insist on China's participation in future arms control negotiations (Pifer, 2020, February 19). During its final year in office, the Trump administration unsuccessfully sought Russia's assistance in bringing China into a new arms control treaty. In making its case to Russia, the administration shared unprecedented amounts of classified information about China's nuclear arsenal, including projections of its rapid growth (Sanger & Broad, 2020, July 1, p. A12). Despite these efforts, Russia refused to apply pressure on China. Russian leaders almost certainly would continue to welcome China's involvement, but they appeared to calculate that pressure would fail to bring China to the negotiating table and would merely antagonize an increasingly important partner. For its part, China has little incentive to join international arms control negotiations in the near future.

This situation further complicates the future of arms control, which is already fraught because of new and disruptive technologies. Russia continues to have an interest in using arms control to maintain strategic parity with the United States. China, by contrast, views arms control as a trap that is designed to stifle its rise. The United States is likely to seek, at a minimum, increased transparency about China's nuclear program. China is likely to insist that excessive transparency could weaken its nuclear deterrent, especially considering the quantitative and qualitative advantages of the US nuclear arsenal. In view of the increasingly close China-Russia relationship, including cooperation on nuclear issues, the United States is unlikely to accept a situation in which the combined nuclear arsenals of Russia and China gain a significant numerical advantage over the US arsenal (Chase & Carlson, 2019, October, p. 31).

6 Prospects for Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence

Since 1964, the relationship between Moscow and Beijing in the sphere of nuclear deterrence has evolved continuously. As this chapter has detailed, the relationship was explicitly adversarial for the first two decades before warming considerably during the Gorbachev era and becoming merely implicitly adversarial. Since the onset of the Ukraine crisis, the adversarial elements have faded. Latent deterrence still exists, but it has become much less prominent than it was a decade ago as a result of the strengthened bilateral relationship. As detailed in the previous section, China and Russia have cooperated on many aspects of nuclear deterrence in recent years, reflecting a new, implicitly cooperative phase of relations. These developments raise the possibility that the relationship could develop further and become explicitly cooperative against the United States.

Despite their growing defense cooperation, China and Russia have refrained from the formation of a political-military alliance, largely because both countries wish to maintain diplomatic flexibility and to avoid being drawn into the other's regional disputes. The 2001 treaty commits both countries to refrain from joining alliances directed against the other and provides for bilateral consultations in the event that either country faces a threat to its security. However, the treaty includes no mutual security guarantee, the crucial feature of an alliance. Both countries maintain that they have no intention to form an alliance, though Putin said in October 2020 that such an outcome was possible (Gabuev, 2020, December 2).

Although it falls short of a formal alliance, the close alignment of China and Russia in recent years has confounded the expectations of many analysts who emphasized the relationship's likely fragility. This alignment is partly a result of structural factors, as both countries have an incentive to cooperate in order to provide a counterweight to US power. Structural factors alone, however, seem insufficient to explain the relationship. If structure alone mattered, then by now Russia might have sought closer ties with the West in order to balance China's growing power, as several other countries along China's periphery have done. In the future, such an

outcome remains possible. For now, similarities in national identities and world views bring the two countries together (Rozman, 2014). Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping share similar views of domestic governance. They bristle at Western criticism of their human rights records and authoritarian rule, viewing such statements as efforts to interfere in their domestic affairs and ultimately to topple their regimes. They also share an antipathy toward conceptions of an international order based on liberal political values (see also Chapter “Russia’s Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?” by Hannes Adomeit).

These factors create a stable foundation for the relationship that is likely to endure for at least as long as Putin remains in power, a period that could last until 2036 following recent amendments to the Russian constitution. Putin and his advisers appear to have calculated that they have a window of opportunity to cooperate with China in order to increase their leverage in relations with the West. Following the onset of the Ukraine crisis, the Russian government reportedly conducted an inter-agency review of policy toward China that dispelled many concerns about a potential Chinese threat in the near term (Gabuev, 2017, May 24). For its part, China has a strong incentive to maintain Russia’s support, especially in light of its growing rivalry with the United States and rising tensions with several US allies and partners along its periphery (see also Chapter “Imperialist Master, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China’s Changing Views of Russia” by Jo Inge Bekkevold).

Given these sources of durability in the relationship, China and Russia are likely to continue their cooperation in maintaining nuclear deterrence of the United States. A shift to explicitly cooperative relations against the United States in nuclear issues appears unlikely, however (Perfilyev, 2018a, December 4; 2018b, December 12). Despite the close relationship that the two countries have built, some important factors are likely to impose limitations on its development. The two countries have a mutual interest in maintaining nuclear deterrence of the United States, but they lack a clear basis for cooperation in the development of strategic offensive capabilities. Russia seeks to maintain its status as a nuclear superpower, and it has no obvious interest in helping China to attain this status. The element of latent deterrence in the bilateral relationship has faded, but it has not disappeared entirely. Russian defense planners must continue to plan for the defense of their eastern territories against a potential Chinese invasion, even if such a possibility appears extremely unlikely for the foreseeable future. Defense planning for this contingency continues to rely on nuclear deterrence. For its part, China must also hedge against future changes in Russian nuclear force deployments (Charap, 2019, April 9, p. 5.)

Russian leaders have made a strategic decision to set aside long-term concerns about China’s rise for now. This decision reflects both their desire for cooperation with China in dealing with the West and their recognition of the damage that Russia’s interests could suffer from a breakdown of relations with China. In the long run, however, Russian leaders must hedge against the possibility that the relationship could deteriorate. One factor that could lead to such deterioration would be the emergence of an assertive or even potentially aggressive Chinese foreign policy that threatened Russia’s interests. If Russian leaders were eventually to conclude that China posed a greater threat than the West, then they could be forced

to reconsider their alignment with China and to explore possibilities for closer cooperation with the West in addressing China's rise.

Such considerations already impose some constraints on the China-Russia relationship, including in the area of bilateral defense cooperation. Russian arms sales to China are a cornerstone of the relationship, as discussed above, but these sales have been subject to important limitations. Russian officials have approved arms sales that improve China's air, naval, anti-ship, and air defense capabilities, all of which would be useful in maritime contingencies against the United States and its allies in Asia, rather than providing weapons for China's ground forces that could be used in a potential land invasion of Russia. Similarly, Russia has no obvious interest in strengthening China's nuclear arsenal, assisting China with the development of hypersonic weapons, or otherwise enhancing China's strategic offensive forces.

Despite these constraints, Western leaders should expect continued and potentially even strengthened China-Russia defense cooperation in the coming years, including in the area of nuclear deterrence. The two countries are likely to continue their efforts to maintain nuclear deterrence of the United States by opposing the deployment of US missile defense systems and high-precision conventional weapons. They are likely to apply pressure on US allies in Asia and Europe to reject the deployment of missile defense systems, land-based intermediate-range missiles, and other weapons systems on their territories. China-Russia cooperation could also take more surprising forms, including possible joint air and missile defense in the Arctic or even the deployment of Chinese SSBNs to this region, with Russia's approval, for deterrence against nuclear attacks. The latter possibility, which the 2019 Department of Defense report on China's military raised, has been a subject of discussion in Russian military analysis. Such deployments would not only reduce the vulnerability of Chinese SSBNs but also bring them within much closer range of potential targets (Goldstein, 2019, June 1; Department of Defense, 2019, pp. v, 114).

It is even possible to imagine scenarios of military conflict in which China and Russia might collaborate to ensure nuclear deterrence of the United States. Northeast Asia is a likely focus of such scenarios. A potential military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, in which both the Russian and Chinese nuclear forces would be factors, looms as one possibility. A two-front war that would force the United States and its allies to confront Russia in Europe and China in Asia simultaneously is another (Carlson, 2021). In such a scenario, both countries might introduce the risk of nuclear escalation in their respective theaters. Even if China and Russia refrain from cooperation in the development of strategic offensive capabilities, their cooperation in various aspects of nuclear deterrence could create pressing challenges for Western leaders and defense planners.

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Part III
Spatial and Multilateral Aspects
of Sino-Russian Cooperation: Case Studies

Digital Authoritarianism and Technological Cooperation in Sino-Russian Relations: Common Goals and Diverging Standpoints



Elina Sinkkonen and Jussi Lassila

1 Introduction

China and Russia have become increasingly authoritarian in recent years, and the ways in which they can use technology to control their own citizens and proliferate new surveillance methods to less developed authoritarian countries have caused concern. In July 2020, the law on mandatory preinstalled applications for smartphones, computers and smart TVs sold in Russia came into force. In March 2021, the government planned to speed up the collection of citizens' biometric data for the purpose of remote identification through administrative coercion. If a person does not disclose their biometric data, they are denied access to digital state services (Gavrilyuk & Builov, 2021, March 10). These new measures were claimed to give citizens new domestic options and better customer experiences, but critics are worried about information security and potential nonconsensual information gathering. Such concerns have proven to be true when data leaks revealed that a huge amount of information is available to citizens on the black market (Zakharov, 2019, April 25).

China passed a new regulation in December 2019 requiring all new smartphone buyers to scan their face before being able to use the phone. The regulation was framed as a part of a larger effort to ensure cyber safety by making it harder to access the Internet incognito. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic integrated public health into CCP's surveillance regime (Greitens, 2020). Chinese officials worked together with private companies such as Tencent and Alibaba to develop a health code app using a traffic light system which indicates the risk the user poses to public safety based on their predisposition to the coronavirus. Users were required to enter their personal and health information, and the app tracked their movements, contacts

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S. Kirchberger et al. (eds.), *Russia-China Relations*, Global Power Shift,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97012-3_9

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and even body temperature (Tan, 2020, May 4). The apps shared their data with the police and other authorities. These are only some of the recent examples of how authoritarian countries can use technology to monitor their citizens and boost domestic tech companies.

Attitudes and policies towards China and Russia have hardened in many countries in recent years along with China's and Russia's increasingly authoritarian governance and aggressive foreign policy. Tensions in China's and Russia's bilateral relations with the United States and other democracies are tightly intertwined with global competition in technology. Technological development changes the relationships between economic and military power and will define power hierarchies in the future. This great power rivalry in technology can be seen in US decisions to ban telecom companies Huawei and ZTE from its markets and in pressuring European countries to restrict Huawei's market access as well. China reacted to this by increasing its budget for the Made in China 2025 program and the China Standards 2035 initiative and by trying to reduce its reliance on US technology suppliers. China is also considering measures against Nokia and Ericsson, two European leaders in telecom networks, in case European Union member states ban Huawei from taking part in building 5G networks in Europe. On 20 October 2020, Sweden announced that it will not allow Huawei or ZTE gear to be used by firms taking part in its 5G spectrum auction. The Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed its disapproval of Sweden's decision and urged Sweden to 'correct its mistake and to avoid [a] negative impact on the Swedish businesses operating in China' (PRC Foreign Ministry, 2020, October 21). In October 2021, Huawei filed a case against Sweden in the Court of Justice of the European Union, a case that could set a precedent (Cerulus, 2021, October 6).

Meanwhile, the Russian National Technology Initiative 2014 also builds on the idea of competing blocs, and more recent plans aim to elevate Russia's competence to that of a leading technological power. Echoes of the great power rivalry can also be heard in the context of Internet regulations: Russia and China promote Internet sovereignty and oppose the free flow of information. Many experts have speculated that the Internet will become a 'splinternet', a network divided into two spheres with an authoritarian China-led version and a Western version.

It has been clearly visible that increased technological competition between China and Western actors has intensified into competition between liberal and illiberal political ideals. At the same time, Russia has an important, albeit in many respects unstable, role in intensifying technological and political competition. Against this backdrop, this chapter provides an overview of the state of digital surveillance practices in China and Russia, as well as their technological cooperation in the era of an increasing great power rivalry. Instead of inciting a narrative of an authoritarian threat alliance, discussion on technology cooperation between China and Russia should acknowledge differences between the countries and consider other ancillary threats where technological decoupling plays a real and significant role.

2 Digital Surveillance and Censorship in China and Russia

Advances in technology point to more potent surveillance. Today's surveillance technologies range from cameras, drones and satellites to surveillance systems' monitoring communications data. The essence of modern surveillance used for communications data is that programs are difficult to detect and easy to use remotely.

Based on data from the Varieties of Democracy and the Mass Mobilization Project, Kendall-Taylor et al. (2020, p. 106 & 112) state that authoritarian regimes that rely on digital repression are identified as being among the most durable. During the last twenty years, the challenge of popular protests has become more consequential for numerous authoritarian regimes around the world. This has increased the need to monitor and suppress opposition via digital means to secure regime survival. Digital technologies allow governments to monitor and track regime opponents, which can give them a head start in eliminating opposition forces before they manage to unite (Dragu & Lupu, 2021, p. 2). Furthermore, the adoption of digital repression has not diminished the use of physical measures, as the new tools are used to identify and control opposition members more effectively (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2020).

China is perhaps a prime example in many respects. The Chinese Communist Party has always taken social unrest seriously. Consequently, it has applied censorship of some sort ever since the Internet became commercially available in the country in the mid-1990s. Internet surveillance is now one among many forms of surveillance and control in a society that is permeated by digitalization and, increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI). Digitalized visual surveillance is one such form. China has invested heavily in CCTV cameras with automated facial recognition programs. In Xinjiang, monitoring includes obligatory DNA sampling used for ethnic profiling (Qiang, 2019). Xi Jinping's regime has also built the capacity to forecast large-scale popular protests and has adapted its political indoctrination to the era of big data by using AI in surveillance and censorship. US authorities have expressed concerns that China is exporting its facial recognition software and systems abroad (Vergun, 2020, January 24).

In addition, China aims to resolve different societal and economic problems with an emerging social credit system driven by information technology. By collecting data from different sources, the social credit systems can monitor, assess and change the behaviour of both citizens and companies. As state actors could not manage big data collection endeavours on their own, China's social credit system includes a wide variety of commercial actors. The system was supposed to be ready in 2020, but as there are data sharing problems between different parts of the system and sanctioning mechanisms remain underdeveloped (European Chamber, 2019), the 2020 deadline was not met. However, many parts of the system are operational (Credit China, 2021).

In some regional applications of the social credit system, the borders of public and private actors have been merged. Shanghai's 'Honest Shanghai' app launched in 2016 allows users to check their business and public credit scores. In Rongcheng,

local government has used the private commercial score as the basis for its municipal credit score. Blurring the lines of different actors makes it hard for users to know what is accounted for in a score (Bach, 2020, p. 495–497.) In 2021, the social credit system is still inconsistent, and Drinhausen and Brussee (2021, March 3) define it as a framework of initiatives rather than a coherent whole.

Despite the fragmented and opaque nature of China's social credit system, Kostka (2019) found a surprisingly high degree of support for it among citizens. Particularly unexpected was that wealthier and better educated Chinese residing in urban areas as well as older people reported the highest level of support. In interviews conducted after the online survey, some respondents explained that they are not worried about privacy when it comes to the social credit system. Chinese public actors already have access to all the information collected in the system, which is why respondents thought the social credit system could not worsen their situation (Kostka, 2019). In a follow-up paper, Xu et al. (2021) showed with field survey material that support for the social credit system tends to be linked with respondents' knowledge of the repressive potential of digital surveillance: a good understanding of the repressive potential of the social credit system was associated with a lower level of support.

In China's case, we do not have evidence of microtargeting in attitude formation in the style of Cambridge Analytica, which used an analysis of social media behaviour to tailor political messages to individuals according to their psychological and social profiles (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Against the background of relatively influential traditional censorship and propaganda, there is certainly the potential for individualized forms of public opinion management. Studies conducted in China have shown that the media environment influences educated respondents' views even if they recognize that the media is biased in its reporting (Sinkkonen & Elovainio, 2020).

In Russia, the results are contradictory in this respect. On the one hand, it has long been seen in surveys that a majority of citizens have followed the line taken by the Kremlin when it comes to, for example, foreign policy news coverage or support of political alternatives for the current political leadership ('Vybory i protesty v Belarusi', 2020, August 27; 'The return of Alexei Navalny, 2021, February 8). On the other hand, the structural change in the media field, above all the growing role of the Internet at the expense of state television, poses ongoing challenges to the Kremlin's information control ('Istochniki informatsii', 2020, September 28). There is a deepening generational gap in media consumption. In particular, the attitudes of younger Russians towards the system suggest that the regime's ability to control and manipulate information is at least as dependent on the attitudes of more conformist older Russians as its ability to bridge the widening gap with its technological capability. Overall, Russia's developments, combined with the nature of Russia's personalist authoritarian regime and modest resources compared to China's decades-old one-party dictatorship and far greater resources, are in many ways reflected in the use, development and growing cooperation of the two authoritarian states' control mechanisms.

In post-Soviet Russia, the legal (or illegal) foundations of the state's surveillance practices were formed in the 1990s when the System for Operative Investigative

Activities (*Sistema operativno-rozysknykh meropriyatiy*, SORM) was introduced. SORM comprised the technical specifications for the lawful interception of telecommunications and telephone networks. It obliges all telecom operators to install hardware specified by the Federal Security Service (FSB), which enables the comprehensive monitoring of communications. Although the original idea of using SORM was in line with Western practices in terms of legal control over the security services, its further use in the twenty-first century, also comprising the Internet, has shown that, in general, the rule of law poses no impediment to the powers of the FSB and intelligence services. The aim is to keep all communications under surveillance by using, for instance, so-called deep packet inspection (DPI) technology, which seeks to map the content of conversations over the Internet in great detail.

However, regardless of well-established foundations for the state's mass surveillance, SORM has faced financial and technological difficulties. In the absence of a single, state-controlled telecom operator, most independent operators have managed to 'shirk' the requirements while formally appearing to be following them almost to the letter. As one specialist pointed out: 'It's like a kind of Italian strike, where documents get passed back and forth for years but no one actually does anything' (Kolomychenko & Lindell, 2017, November 9). A common technological challenge stems from the fact that networks built in the past are simply incompatible with the hardware that the authorities would like to use.

Regardless of numerous shutdowns of allegedly harmful websites and acts of pressuring their authors, signs of the Kremlin's extensive capacity to control the information space are nebulous. Indeed, the importance of the Internet has grown at the expense of traditional state-controlled media, above all TV, despite ever-tightening Internet legislation ('Taking Control? Internet censorship', 2019, November 27). Through the Internet, Russian citizens are fully aware of protests, the elite's corruption and ecological disasters around the country. Internet shutdowns do not solve the problem of free information flows either, as they are very expensive. According to a study by the Russian NGO, Internet Protection Society (*Obshchestvo zashchity Interneta*), a one-day shutdown of the Internet as a whole would cost the country more than \$442 million, whereas shutting down only mobile connections would cost more than \$221 million. These calculations were based on coefficients of GDP and Internet penetration in different regions of Russia. Not surprisingly, the largest losses in the daily shutdown would occur in Moscow (4.8 billion roubles or \$65 million) and the smallest in the Altai Republic (13.7 million roubles, \$185,000) ('Analiz stoimosti internet-shatdaunov', 2020, December 22).

In short, the state's increasing investments in developing mass surveillance have not resolved the fundamental problem of the free flow of information. In this regard, the Kremlin's main strength in controlling citizens is based on the deterrence provided by punishment and physical control over the offline space rather than on comprehensive digital surveillance (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019). For instance, following the report on the freedom of the Internet in Russia in 2020 by the project 'Setevye Svobody' (Net Freedoms), physical violence increased significantly in relation to violations of freedom on the Internet. While 53 of such cases were registered in 2019, in 2020 the figure was 103. Correspondingly, the number of

criminal charges, as well as pressure on IT business and programmers, increased in 2020 compared to previous years. Instead, website closures or administrative pressure decreased from previous years. In sum, this dynamic reinforces the picture that in the control over the Internet, various repressive offline methods are largely used or even preferred to more sophisticated online practices ('Svoboda interneta 2020: vtoraya vona repressii', 2021).

Russia is a latecomer to Internet repression. Whereas there are credible national equivalents for Western technology in China, and the use of the Internet by citizens has always been under state control, there was virtually no control over the Internet in Russia until 2012. When the wave of restrictive measures began that year, the proliferation of smartphones and the nationwide penetration of the Internet forced the regime to adapt to ever-faster connections and the Western technology available to citizens. In other words, Russia's long-term integration into the global Internet and the lack of functional and attractive national solutions have made Russia dependent on Western technology and platforms (Apple and Google in particular). In order to efficiently control Russian information space, the regime has researched the possibility to create a sovereign Internet, Runet, by 2024 (Kukkola et al., 2017, 2019), for which China has been an important point of reference. However, as it has been the case with SORM, administrative, resource-laden and societal challenges have been obvious with the Runet project as well.

Russian opposition has also challenged its leadership with the help of technology, but so far the Kremlin has stayed on top of things. The network of the imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny initiated so-called 'smart voting' applications containing tactical voting instructions to concentrate votes for an opposition candidate in order to defeat a Kremlin candidate in single-mandate election districts. What is noteworthy in terms of digital authoritarianism was the September 2021 Duma election that saw the victory of Kremlin candidates in Moscow's opposition-minded single-mandate districts achieved with the help of electronic voting. Opposition candidates instructed by Navalny's smart voting were winning in these districts before the electronic votes were announced, and after their announcement, all lost to the Kremlin candidates (Sokolyanskaya et al., 2021, September 21). Efforts have been made to expand electronic voting for some time, but now it has achieved a result that the Kremlin was pleased with. Immediately after the election, the Kremlin announced that the presidential election in 2024 will be conducted as widely as possible using electronic voting ('Peskov: praktiku elektronnoy golosovaniya', 2021, September 23). It fits perfectly with the needs of an authoritarian regime that utilizes formal democratic procedures. Formally, it facilitates citizens' political participation. In reality, it makes independent election observation almost impossible and gives the regime new ways to stay in power.

3 Dilemmas for Western Tech Companies

As China and Russia become more authoritarian, foreign tech companies face hard dilemmas with increasingly repressive legislation making the companies participate in actions that are against company values and might backfire in Western market environments. China has been a difficult space for decades. Google's somewhat censored search engine operated in China between 2006 and 2010 and reached a significant market share of around a third of the total. In 2010, Google retreated to Hong Kong mainly due to a large-scale hacking attack and announced that it would not censor its search tool any longer. The Chinese Communist Party took a risk when expelling Google, as functioning information flows are important for any system hoping to nurture innovation and economic growth. Yet even without Google, the Chinese system developed, and innovative solutions such as WeChat emerged (Sheehan, 2018, December 19).

Over the years, Google has planned to return to China. It quietly designed the Dragonfly, a new censored search engine for the Chinese market, which caused outrage even among Google's own employees and was never launched (Gallagher, 2018, August 1). Google has not returned, although its AI expertise might be lucrative in the eyes of the Chinese leadership (Sheehan, 2018, December 19). The latest wave of companies leaving China includes LinkedIn and Yahoo, who were reacting to the even more difficult market environment due to the new Personal Data Protection Law, in effect since 1 November 2021 (Burgess, 2021, November 5). Apple remains one of the very few Western tech companies still operating in China.

In Russia, measures to shut down allegedly harmful apps and pressure on Western Internet giants have proved largely ineffective. The most famous episode was an attempt to shut down the instant messaging service Telegram in 2018, which did not prevent the service from functioning but ended up paralyzing millions of IP addresses, including governmental ones. In the summer of 2020, the blocking was officially stopped. Plans to prohibit the usage of the widely applied encryption technologies between user and site followed, as well as threats to slow down Facebook and Twitter in Russia after these companies refused to hand over data on Russian users to the authorities (Kolomychenko, 2020, September 21; Smirnov, 2020, September 29).

In March 2021, state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor slowed Twitter's operation after it had 'failed to remove prohibited content' ('Russia slows down Twitter', 2021, March 10). At the same time, numerous government sites no longer opened, the Internet slowed down everywhere, and yet the authorities denied that these difficulties were linked to the slowdown of Twitter. However, it is very possible that the targeted sanctions of the authorities simply did not work as intended and the same difficulties as in the case of Telegram in 2018 were repeated (Kodachigov, 2021, March 10). Immediately after the slowdown operation, Roskomnadzor issued an ultimatum to the effect that it would close Twitter in mid-April 2021 if the banned content had not been removed by then (Efimova,

2021, March 16). At the time of this writing, in mid-November 2021, Roskomnadzor had so far abandoned its intention to shut down Twitter.

In September 2021, on the eve of the Russian Duma election, Google, Apple and Telegram bowed to demands of the Russian authorities to censor the ‘smart voting’ applications on their platforms (Feldstein & Weiss, 2021, September 23). The demand is also very likely to be accompanied by an increasingly determined implementation of the ‘Sovereign Internet Law’, which entered into force at the beginning of November 2019, with increased demands and pressure on Russian Internet operators (Gavrilyuk, 2021, August 31; ‘Zablokirovat’ vse’, 2021, September 17). It is possible that previously failed attempts to shut down individual Western Internet platforms by the authorities (see the episodes with Telegram and Twitter above) have motivated the authorities to increase financial threats to Western Internet companies, which in their commercial calculations have deemed it necessary to comply with the requirements of censorship. Nonetheless, the demands of the Russian authorities to give the Kremlin’s main propaganda channel abroad, RT, free visibility on YouTube are also essential. After warnings and temporary blocking, RT was censored throughout from the German language YouTube in September–October 2021, and this has increased the Kremlin’s censorship requirements for channels it deems critical. This episode was also behind the initiative in the Russian Duma in October 2021 to demand that Google mark the Crimean Peninsula and the Kuril Islands entirely as belonging to Russia in its map services (‘Deputaty Gosdumy potrebovali’, 2021, October 25).

4 Technology, Decoupling and Chinese and Russian Investment Strategies

At the same time as China conducted increasingly powerful surveillance, it tried to develop internationally competitive high-tech companies. China’s industrial policy emphasized support for innovation in strategically important sectors where certain companies receive preferential treatment and state subsidies. *The Wall Street Journal* reported in December 2019 that between 2008 and 2018, Huawei received 17 times more state assistance than Nokia, the number two provider of telecom equipment (Yap, 2019, December 25). ‘Innovation-driven development’ has become a key priority in the Xi era, demonstrated, for example, in the Made in China 2025 plan launched in 2015. The plan highlighted ten priority sectors, including robotics, information technology, aircraft, aerospace technology and pharmaceuticals, in which China is aiming for global dominance by 2025 using a strategy combining import substitution and generous state financing (National Manufacturing Strategy Advisory Committee, 2015.) In a speech given at the Scientists’ Forum in September 2020, Xi Jinping emphasized the need for scientific innovations to help China survive international competition (‘Xi Jinping: Zai kexuejia zuotanhui’, 2020, September 11).

Another important aspect of the innovation-driven development is the export of Chinese products and services with the goal of not only gaining a market share but also trying to define technological standards through infrastructure investments. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes a project called the Digital Silk Road, which aims to propel China closer to the above-mentioned goals. In the age of increasing great power competition, technical standards have become a way to promote industrial and geopolitical agendas (Rühlig, 2021). Technical standards refer to processes of technical specification to ensure the compatibility of various goods and services, as well as to set criteria for the quality and security of various products.

Some even argue that the Chinese measures of defining and exporting technological standards alter the global competitive landscape (Zhao, 2020, p. 324). Through the BRI, for example, China promotes its satellite navigation system BeiDou, which reached global coverage in June 2020. China and Russia have been working together to ensure that Russia's GLONASS system is compatible with BeiDou (Muravyeva & Lemutov, 2021, January 11). At the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, China signed framework agreements on the mutual recognition of standards with 12 countries, including Russia, and in 2019 the number of countries with such agreements had risen to 49 (Seaman, 2020, p. 26). China Standards 2035 suggests that China intends to unite its various bilateral agreements on standardization cooperation into a regional organization, the BRI Standards Forum, which could potentially further fragment the existing international standardization infrastructure (Rühlig, 2021, p. 8). Along with China's increasing innovation capacity in fields such as ICT, AI or quantum communication, its ability to shape international standards in these emerging fields will strengthen (Seaman, 2020, p. 10).

Technical standards, BRI funding instruments and the rise of Chinese tech companies are helping China build entire technological ecosystems which can both help China evade integration into US-dominated technological systems and sell Chinese products abroad. China's priorities for 2021 include building technological strength, a new type of 'whole-of-nation' system and creating less interdependent industrial supply chains ('Zhongyang jingji gongzuo', 2020, December 18). Thailand serves as a good example of how the Chinese sell their complete technological ecosystems abroad. Thailand has adopted Chinese 5G infrastructure, satellite networks and surveillance systems and deepened research cooperation with China. The comparatively low prices of Chinese products play a role, and Belt and Road infrastructure projects often come with financial assistance earmarked for tech investments (Weber, 2020).

Xi's industrial policy has not always been well received abroad, as can be seen in China's ongoing trade war with the United States and the suspicions many Western actors harbour about allowing Huawei to construct parts of their 5G networks. Rühlig and Björk (2020) have analysed the 5G issue in Europe and Huawei's role in it. They divide 5G risks into network security risks and technological dependency, of which the latter is perhaps more significant, as Europe's technological dependence on China is already high.

The US campaign against Huawei manifests fears that China will turn the Huawei-built telecommunication system into a surveillance network, which would

bring it strategic advantages. Farrell and Newman (2019) argue that complex systems tend to form asymmetric network structures giving disproportionate power to actors in control of critical network hubs, making it possible to weaponize interdependence on the systemic level. The argument about weaponized interdependence is broader than that of network security per se as it relates to the longer-term characteristics of complex network structures. Chinese efforts to create their own technological ecosystems have been seen as threatening in the US, partly because they would undermine US ecosystems and the advantages they provide (Segal, 2021). Consequently, the US goal has been to strongly diminish its dependence on Chinese tech, with some success. The chances are that the Biden administration will continue, at least in some form, the Trump administration's Clean Network Initiative, which is aimed at removing everything sourced from China from US telecommunications and network systems. Biden has given an executive order to strengthen domestic 'supply chains for critical sectors and subsectors of the information and communications technology (ICT) industrial base, including the industrial base for the development of ICT software, data, and associated services' (The White House, 2021, February 24). The Kearney Reshoring Index reports that in 2019, there was a significant increase in the reshoring of US manufacturing away from China and, more broadly, Asia (Kearney, 2019). Intel, for example, has reportedly considered reshoring its production (Johnson & Gramer, 2020, May 14).

Yet in some sectors, such as semiconductors, supply chains are so complex and companies so specialized that no country can expect to reach 'strategic autonomy' in production (Kleinhans & Baisakova, 2020). China is heavily dependent on US-origin semiconductor technology and is trying hard to decrease its reliance on US components by investing more in domestic suppliers and trying to find alternative producers. The United States is doing the same, and as both countries are trying to decrease mutual dependence where they can, third countries hosting replacement suppliers will face pressure from both great powers.

China may be dependent on US semiconductor technology, but the United States needs rare earths in its tech industry, and China is the largest producer of many important minerals (China Power Team, 2021, May 12). There have been concerns that China might weaponize its position as the largest producer by limiting exports. Yet, Beijing is also increasingly concerned about the depletion of its own critical earth reserves (Cotting et al., 2019, July 3). Russia, for its part, is estimated to have the fourth largest reserves of rare earths, but its share of the world output in 2017 and 2018 was about 2%. To reach the 10% target, the country has announced that by 2025, Russia needs investment and technology to exploit its resources (Lyrchikova & Stoljarov, 2020, August 12). In the context of the ongoing Russia-West conflict, the only major player in this respect is China.

Compared with China's expansive commercial strategies in tech, Russia relies on an explicitly more inward-looking and confrontational approach. The Russian National Technology Initiative, launched by President Putin in his speech to the Federal Assembly in December 2014, draws on the idea of global competing blocs in trade, technology and politics. This document has since undergone numerous updates and roadmaps with which Russia intends to become 'one of the three

major technological states (along with the USA and China) by 2035' (Natsional'naya tekhnologicheskaya initsiativa, 2019). Due to a fundamental break with the West since 2014, the most natural partner has been China. However, this does not mean that Russia will in principle position itself as a solid partner of China. It will instead strive to be a leading player in the field of new technology from its own national starting points. The president's decree on the development of artificial intelligence in the Russian Federation, published in 2019, sees the future of artificial intelligence as a global struggle. The document points out that 'the few leading players [not mentioned by name] in the global market for artificial intelligence are taking active steps to ensure their dominance in this market [. . .], creating significant barriers for other market participants to achieve competitive positions'. Russia's failure to do so is perceived to lead to economic and technological backwardness (Ukaz Prezidenta RF, 2019, October 14).

The digitalization of governmental services has progressed relatively quickly. In 2020, according to official Russian data, the state's digital services were used 175 million times. However, these government projects are regularly characterized by listing quantitative objectives instead of opening up a qualitative assessment of services, such as their functionality or regional coverage. Various goals and roadmaps are drawn up, for example, in the development and use of artificial intelligence and applications. In this respect, even the officially announced targets are very modest compared to China. In February 2021, economic development minister Mikhail Reshetnikov announced a plan to invest 31.5 billion roubles (\$426 million) in the development of artificial intelligence by 2024, with non-state funding amounting to about 7 billion roubles. The goal is, among other things, to provide 90,000 schoolchildren and students with the opportunity to participate in artificial intelligence-related projects and more than 6000 people in in-service training in the field of artificial intelligence (Kostyleva, 2021, February 5).

Russia also harbours successful players, such as NTechLab, which does facial recognition; Yandex.ru, the country's largest Internet search engine and its closest equivalent to Google; and Zyfra, a provider of data analysis solutions to the extractive industries. On the other hand, the strong role of the state is not limited to funding but above all also to the inevitable political control of innovations. This does not provide strong incentives for the formation of nongovernmental start-ups but rather for the rent-seeking of top bureaucrats. Almost all actors in AI are directly dependent on government funding (Bendett, 2019, November 25). Furthermore, an important indicator of the discrepancy between the state's official goals and actual state of affairs is the low number of patents in relation to competitor countries. According to European Patent Office data, in 2018, Russia was not in any of the top 10 rankings concerning the fastest growing technological areas (Kurakov, 2018). This backwardness is not only related to the weakness of Russian business, let alone the lack of expertise, but also to the poor understanding of the importance of patents in international technological competition and, consequently, to the weak patent administration in Russia (Kurakov, 2018).

5 Sino-Russian Cooperation and Its Limits

Although China has been viewed as an important partner by the Kremlin since the early 2000s, a major rapprochement has taken place within the context of the ‘authoritarian turn’ in Russia since 2012. Now, China and Russia are jointly advancing shared interests in the international arena and are building up cooperation in the tech sector. Although both countries are lagging behind the United States in most sectors of AI, China is catching up and aggressively recruiting new talent. Furthermore, there are certain sectors in which China and Russia are global technological leaders and can both benefit if cooperation deepens in the future. To give a few examples, a Chinese research team has made significant advances in developing entanglement-based quantum encryption in satellite communication (Yin et al., 2020), and Russia has advanced with regard to hypersonic weapons (Gady, 2020, February 25). Aircraft and aerospace technology are listed as key areas of the Chinese investment strategy, and there are some ongoing joint projects with Russia, such as building heavy-lift helicopters. In March 2021, China and Russia signed a memorandum on the building of a joint lunar station (‘Rossiya i Kitay postroyat’, 2021, March 9).

2020 and 2021 have been designated as years for Russian-Chinese science cooperation with a focus on communications, AI and the Internet of Things. While the nature of the cooperation has been largely symbolic, some tangible elements have started to accumulate over time. For example, a Sino-Russian joint innovation investment fund was established in July 2019, and various research and development projects have been launched. These include a project dedicated to sharing big data (Sino-Russian Big Data Headquarters Base Project), as well as projects using AI to facilitate cross-border commercial activities. In May 2019, the Huawei Innovation Research Program was launched in Russia, and Russian institutions have received 140 technological requests from the company in various areas of scientific cooperation. The involvement of Huawei can be considered by far the most significant demonstration of the technological cooperation declared between the two countries in the fields of artificial intelligence, robotics and big data processing. The most significant dimension of Huawei’s Russia collaboration is related to the potential implementation of the Russian Aurora operating system as a replacement for Android (Bendett & Kania, 2019).¹

The Internet and its governance present another potential area for further cooperation. Internet regulation has been a subject of debate between private actors and states. Most governments agree that the current model of Internet governance is far from ideal, as it is largely based on self-regulation of American companies. In 2012, at the Dubai World Conference on International Telecommunications convened by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the Western countries lost out to authoritarian and developing countries that posited that regulation should be grounded in state-based politics at the UN specialized agency ITU rather than in

¹See also <https://career.huawei.ru/ri/en/>.

the more private Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) (Nye, 2014, p. 7; Creutz et al., 2019, p. 54).² China and Russia predictably supported the ITU leadership. More broadly, they also support the sovereignty principle in Internet governance, which they have promoted through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and at the United Nations (UN). Their jointly drafted International Code of Conduct for Information Security was circulated at the UN General Assembly in 2015. China became the second largest contributor to the UN general budget for the 2019–2021 period, which increases its power within the UN subagencies dealing with Internet regulation.

China's approach to Internet governance has gradually changed from a defensive position concentrating on its domestic Internet control into a more assertive strategy, in which China openly advocates others follow its lead. At a 2019 ITU meeting, China made a proposal for a new Internet infrastructure called New IP, which according to China would allow faster communication and larger data flows. Huawei was planning to oversee the building of the new infrastructure, which received little support among Western countries (Madhumita & Gross, 2020, March 27).

Overall, despite the cooperation, the asymmetry of the technological partnership in China's favour is causing increasing concern in Russia. Dependence on China in the high-tech sector does not serve Russia's efforts to develop its own digital technologies. There is already mounting concern in Russia that it will lose key talent to Chinese players. There is also a fear—common in Western countries—that China has the ability to steal foreign innovations and integrate them into its own production. In this context, there are plans to oblige Russian telecom operators to use domestic technology in the construction of the 5G network which, however, is not currently available (Bendett & Kania, 2020, August 12; Kiniakina et al., 2020, September 20).

Sino-Russian cooperation is based on shared interests rather than ideology or shared values. Sometimes authoritarian countries have shared interests that lead to cooperation. In discussions in the West, the Sino-Russian relationship is often seen only from a negative perspective as an authoritarian alliance and as an opportunistic response to deteriorating relations between the West and the two countries. Kaczmarek (2020, p. 200) argues that Western observers tend to exaggerate the negative implications of China-Russia cooperation for the West 'as well as the West's ability to weaken this relationship or reverse its course'. Similar to the authors of this paper, Kaczmarek points out that diverging standpoints in different issues limit the level of coordination across issues. Wishnick (2020, March 1, p. 2) notes that many forms of Sino-Russian cooperation have formed gradually during the past decade, demonstrating that the rapprochement is not a mere reaction to external factors. All in all, Sino-Russian cooperation covers areas that do not fit into the frame of geopolitical considerations, and some forms of cooperation are neutral with regard to Europe and the US, such as parts of their cooperation in the agricultural and energy sectors (Kaczmarek, 2020; Wishnick, 2020, March 1).

²ICANN allows participation by non-state actors.

While there is an overall trend towards increased cooperation in Sino-Russian relations, Russia's struggle to avoid becoming overly dependent on China creates barriers for further development.

6 Conclusion

Technology plays an important role in authoritarian resilience and great power competition. Moreover, the ways in which technological development changes relationships between economic and military power are in a constant state of flux. It can be argued that the diffusion of strictly military-relevant technologies has become more difficult in recent years (Gilli & Gilli, 2019). The more commercial application a technology has, the more diffusive it is. AI, robotics and quantum computing have multiple applications both in private and military sectors, making it easier for China to benefit from innovation in these areas. If key military technologies of the future belong to the family of dual-use technologies, it is easier for China to catch up with the United States (Horowitz et al., 2019). This broader context also frames the future of Sino-Russian cooperation.

It is difficult to find clear long-term synergistic outcomes for Sino-Russian cooperation due to the asymmetry in the relationship in China's favour. China's de facto economic power underpinning its superpower status poses a key challenge to Russia's role in the potential technological decoupling between China and the West. Russia's own technology programs and knowledge base are aimed at developing credible national solutions, whereas China is export-oriented in striving to acquire know-how, conquer the market and set standards for Russia as well. In this respect, for Russia, China has begun to look more like a threat than an opportunity.

At the same time, due to the widespread usage and popularity of Western technology in Russia and the lack of national technology in the market, the country's vulnerability is mainly related to tensions between China and the United States. In a situation where Russia still lacks credible national solutions, while technological decoupling is deepening between China and the United States, the rift between Russia and the West will inevitably drive Russia to adopt Chinese technology. Under these circumstances, Western tech companies only have bad options. If they stay out of China and Russia, they lose these markets. On the other hand, staying in China and Russia requires adaptation to authoritarian practices, as examples of Google's project Dragonfly and the censorship of smart voting apps in Russia showcase.

When it comes to problematic behaviour in the tech sector and surveillance, Russia and China are not alone. Western countries sometimes sell surveillance equipment to authoritarian states, and Western advertising companies help to build country brands for authoritarian countries. In most countries, new technologies are largely developed by private firms, making those with dual-use potential a grey zone in terms of regulation. The private surveillance industry sells surveillance technologies to governments who use them against private citizens. The non-binding

Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies added network communications' surveillance systems and 'intrusion software' to the list of dual-use technologies in 2013, but this has not significantly limited the sales of surveillance technologies for repressive purposes ('A/HRC/41/35 Surveillance and Human Rights', 2019, June 25). With new technologies acquired from Western markets, authoritarian states have committed human rights abuses against opposition members. Furthermore, the European Court of Human Rights has cases pending related to Western states' mass surveillance.

This is not to deny Chinese and Russian human rights abuses or other kinds of nefarious intrusions but to point out that projecting fears about new technologies solely onto authoritarian states creates a distorted picture of current realities. From the EU's perspective, technological decoupling and trade wars are also threatening. It is somewhat debatable whether the Trump administration's confrontational strategy in its relations with China was beneficial for US interests, as anti-China rhetoric does not resonate equally among all allies, not to mention the rest of the world. Some experts find that many US security interests in the tech sector could be achieved through negotiating global-level tech standards and making sure tech transfer policies are up to date in allied countries (Kuo, 2021, March 1). Confrontation has divided the West even further, opening more space for China to march forward with its expansionist industrial policy. Public discourse on great power competition and technological development should integrate all of these elements and avoid painting a black and white picture, which could serve to deepen existing grievances even further.

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Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space



Frank Jüris

1 Discourse Power and People-to-People Diplomacy

China and Russia have been actively cooperating in Arctic science, which to a large extent has been a neglected topic. Collaboration in this area is important to China for generating discourse power (*huayu quan*) that supports its economic engagement and capacity building, which beyond the realms of science and the economy, also has impact on defence and security (Lulu, 2018).¹

“People-to-people diplomacy” (*minjian waijiao*) activities are meant to influence foreign societies’ outside state-to-state channels. The most active institutions in the Chinese foreign affairs system which carry out non-governmental diplomacy are the International Liaison Department (ILD, *Duiwai lianluo bu*) and the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, *Zhonguo renmin duiwai youhao xiehui*) (Goh et al., 2021).²

The Shanghai PAFFC (local level CPAFFC) explains the difference between governmental and non-governmental diplomacy by stating that the former involves only official channels of communication, while the latter is more complex and originates in Chinese history, when China had to use unofficial channels of communications to receive international recognition. Non-governmental diplomacy consists of public diplomacy (*gonggong waijiao*), which is practised by many governments, and people-to-people diplomacy, which is unique to China.

This paper is the author’s modified version of the chapter “Chinese Security Interests in the Arctic: From Sea Lanes to Scientific Cooperation” in Gaens et al. (2021, pp. 126–147).

¹For additional reading please see Brady (2003).

²To find out more about ILD and CPAFFC, see Jüris (2020b) and Lulu (2019).

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People-to-people diplomacy by “watering down the government’s role” (*danhua zhengfu secai*) in the foreign exchanges of Chinese citizens and friendship groups aims to achieve a long-term impact on a foreign society’s public opinion that is not dependent on the changing nature of party politics (Shanghai PAFFC, 2020).

In fact, PAFFCs are party-state entities functioning as Foreign Affairs Offices (FAOs, *waishi bangongshi*), which coordinate foreign affairs work at the central and subnational levels. The central level CPAFFC is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). At the subnational level, FAOs serve as offices of the Central Foreign Affairs Work Commission (the FAWC, *waishi gongzuo weiyuanhui*, is the highest body overseeing the Chinese foreign affairs system) under the local party committees. PAFFCs are managed as units or nameplates/aliases of their respective local FAOs (Goh et al., 2021, pp. 1–5).

Qiu Yongcai 丘勇才, the Xiamen PAFFC vice chairman, explained in an interview that people-to-people diplomacy’s role in China’s foreign policy is to expand the “circle of friends” (*pengyou quan*) by establishing friendship cities, ports and schools. The focus is on the central government’s proposed strategies of “community of shared destiny”, BRICS, and BRI that the city’s foreign exchanges help to develop in advance (Xiamen FAO, 2019).

The guiding ideology of Chinese non-governmental diplomacy is people’s diplomacy (*renmin waijiao*), which is meant to “preserve party leadership” (*jianshi dang de lingdao*) through “simultaneously developing governmental and non-governmental diplomacy” (*guan min bing ju*) by forging friendships “to lay the foundation for (favourable) public opinion” (*hangshi minyi jichu*) that transcends national boundaries, time, space and civilisations (Shanghai PAFFC, 2020).

China has been active in building people-to-people connections through academic exchanges and interactions with leaders at the local level. Polar scientists and leaders at the local level with limited Chinese language skills, poor knowledge of the Chinese political system and its operating mechanisms are easy and valuable targets for creating positive sentiment towards Chinese interests in the region through their high standing in society. In addition, neither target group is accustomed nor compelled to think in terms of national security.

The Ocean University of China (OUC) has since 2012 co-organised with St. Petersburg State University an annual China-Russia Arctic Forum (*Zhong E beiji luntan*), which the organisers claim to be the only academic exchange platform dedicated to the Arctic between the two countries. The OUC has close cooperation with the Navy Submarine Academy, PLA Navy, and is involved in research applicable to the military (“Ocean University of China”, 2021). The founder of the event is OUC political science professor Guo Peiqing 郭培清, a leading Chinese expert on polar politics and law (“Guo Peiqing”, 2018). Guo Peiqing is also a member of the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center (CNARC was established in 2013 with a secretariat at the Polar Research Institute of China) Executive Committee, which the organisers claim to be the only Chinese platform for academic exchanges between polar researchers of China and the Nordic countries. CNARC, like the

China-Russia Arctic Forum, holds annual symposiums with Nordic partners (“Guo Peiqing”, 2018; China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre, n.d.).³

In 2009, Guo, together with Li Zhenfu 李振福, wrote that to withstand the “China threat rhetoric” that hinders China’s participation in polar affairs, the Chinese government needs to create a self-image of a peaceful and cooperative state (Brady, 2017, p. 39). According to Dalian Maritime University scholars Li Zhenfu and Li Shiyue 李诗悦, the concept of a “near-Arctic state” serves this purpose and it is the responsibility and duty of Chinese Arctic research to make the concept internationally acknowledged, as acceptance of it is the pre-condition for dialogue on equal footing (Li & Li, 2020). Since 2018, Dalian Maritime University has been supervised by the State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense, China’s governing body for the defence industry, and is involved in defence research (“Dalian Maritime University”, 2021). They find it necessary to declare that China is a “near-Arctic state”, because China as a great power has responsibility over the Arctic’s worsening “geopolitical security” (*diyuan anquan*) situation comprised of environmental, military, energy, transportation, economic and trade security (Li & Li, 2020).

According to Professor Sun Kai 孙凯 of the School of International Affairs and Public Administration of the Ocean University of China, China’s participation in Arctic governance is divided and decentralised, comprised of relevant government bodies, local governments, companies, non-governmental organisations, and related academic groups, each with their unique role to play. On official occasions it is important to promote Chinese discourse to countermand “threat theory” or “panic theory” by clearly explaining Chinese positions and principles on Arctic affairs. Sun finds that China has been successful in constructing the image of a responsible stakeholder and international discourse of itself as a “near-Arctic country” and a “contributor to Arctic affairs,” which he believes has helped China to become an observer of the Arctic Council and has created good international public opinion in relation to China’s participation in Arctic governance. In addition, eight Chinese academic institutions have become members of the Arctic University Alliance (*beiji daxue lianmeng*), which enables China, in addition to capacity building, to also build a presence in the region and generate soft power (Sun, 2014). The Nordic Baltic region, at least on a governmental level, already knows that Chinese soft power has sharp edges. Previously, China has punished Norway, which gave the Nobel peace prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, with economic sanctions, and likewise Estonia and Lithuania for hosting the Dalai Lama (Andrulevičiūtė, 2015; Roonemaa et al., 2019; Storey, 2020).

The positive image creation process is also visible in the China-Russia Arctic Forum, which has been held annually since 2012 and targets Russian Arctic scholars, government officials, local level leaders, international organisations, etc. At the ninth online forum in 2020, which attracted more than 100 participants from China, Russia and France, four major themes were discussed: science and education,

³For additional reading on the impact of the format, see Yang (2017).

medicine, environmental protection, and economic development in the form of constructing the “Polar Silk Road”. In his concluding remarks, the founder of the forum Guo Peiqing said that by jointly developing the Arctic, China and Russia can meet their internal needs. The deepening of Arctic cooperation between the two countries can achieve complementary advantages and become another growth point for Sino-Russian bilateral cooperation (Polar and Ocean Portal, 2020).

This is an excellent example of people-to-people diplomacy at work promoting BRI and win-win solutions to a target audience that is not accustomed of thinking in national security terms. At the Far Eastern Forum held in Vladivostok in September 2021, the Minister of Development of the Far East and the Arctic, Aleksey Chekunkov, was frank in answering why China has not spent any money in developing Russian infrastructure: “*To attract Chinese money, do you think Russia should allow China [to] gain ownership of infrastructure facilities, similar to how Greece sold its main port, Piraeus, to China?*” (Lukin, 2021).

At the seventh forum in 2018, in addition to the usual participants, representatives from the Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO, the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, and the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic visited the event held in Qingdao. Professor Sun Kai found that increased Sino-Russian economic cooperation in the Arctic should be supported by more “cultural connections and people-to-people diplomacy” (*wenhua goutong he minjian waijiao*). According to him, this was in line with China’s Arctic Policy white paper that emphasised the promotion of Sino-Russian cultural exchanges in the Arctic. The holding of forums, summer camps and other (forms of) “second-track diplomacy” (*er guidao waijiao*) was expected to help promote “soft relations” between China and Russia in the Arctic, and better serve both sides in economic cooperation (Zhang, 2018).

With the help of people-to-people diplomacy endeavours, the Chinese side has been interested in developing the Irtysh River in the framework of the BRI. The Irtysh River starts in Northern Xinjiang in China and flows through landlocked Kazakhstan and Russia, and at Khanty-Mansiysk in Western Siberia, merges with the Ob River, which flows into the Arctic Ocean. The Ob-Irtysh River system encompasses most of Western Siberia and the Altai Mountains and forms the main drainage basin in Asia. At the fifth China-Russia Arctic Forum, OUC professor Guo Peiqing 郭培清 said that in addition to the horizontal trade routes connecting the Eurasian land mass, a vertical route along the Ob-Irtysh River system should be developed for the benefit of Russia, China and India (Tan & Chang, 2016).

For almost a decade, the China-Russia Arctic Forum has facilitated exchanges between Chinese and Russian scholars and local leaders from Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Via the forum, China has aimed to generate the necessary discourse power for economic cooperation. However, the prospects for such cooperation might not be perceived as favourably by the Kremlin. Two of the preferred ports (Sabetta and Tiksi) for the construction of the Polar Silk Road lie within the aforementioned administrative regions and are highly valued for their access to the Ob-Irtysh and Lena rivers, which have the potential to become cargo distribution hubs spreading development deeper into

Russia's heartland, and with it inevitably also Chinese influence (Academy of Ocean of China, 2019; Wang et al., 2018; Zhang, 2018).

2 Russian Scientific Cooperation with Chinese Defence Universities

Sino-Russian academic cooperation in the Arctic extends beyond the above-named forums and has borne fruit with visible results. In 2016, the Russian Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU) and the Chinese Harbin Polytechnic University / Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT) founded the Russian-Chinese Polar Engineering and Research Center with the aim of promoting the industrial development of the Arctic by finding technical solutions to extreme weather and ice conditions ("Far Eastern Federal University", 2016). In 1995, Harbin Polytechnic University merged with the Harbin Institute of Technology, which is run by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. Harbin Institute of Technology is known as one of the "Seven Sons of National Defence" (*guofang qi zi*) due to its close connection with the Chinese military and defence industry ("Harbin Institute of Technology", 2021).

In April 2018, Harbin Engineering University (HEU) and the Northern (Arctic) Federal University established the Arctic Blue Economy Research Center (ABERC) with the aim of establishing, in collaboration with Nordic countries, the Arctic Blue Economic Corridor and cooperating in the fields of sustainable development, marine engineering and navigation along the Northern Sea Route ("Arctic Blue Economy Research Center has been established", 2018). Harbin Engineering University is one of China's top defence research universities, which is subordinate to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and another of the "Seven Sons of National Defence." The university is a leading centre of research and training on shipbuilding, naval armaments, maritime technology, and nuclear power. In 2007, the PLA Navy became the supervising agency of the university.⁴

2.1 Collaboration in Undersea Surveillance and Hydroacoustics

Some aspects of Sino-Russian academic collaboration in the Arctic have potentially decisive military applications. In February 2018, HEU's College of Underwater Acoustic Engineering and FEFU's School of Engineering conducted joint research on sea ice acoustics in Vladivostok. The two sides conducted research on the polar shallow water under-ice acoustic environment and under-ice underwater communication. HEU has an advantage over its peers in the latter. Vladimir Korotchentsev

⁴For more information see "Harbin Engineering University" (2020).

from the FEFU said that to gain a foothold in exploiting Arctic resources, research on the shallow water acoustic environment is necessary, and suggested that Russian and Chinese researchers can achieve breakthroughs by combining their relevant strengths in data collection and data analysis (Jin & Zhang, 2018; Ocean Circle, 2018).

In April 2019, the Chinese Qingdao National Laboratory for Marine Science and Technology (QNLN) and the Shirshov Institute of Oceanology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IOARAS) signed an agreement to create the Russian-Chinese Arctic Research Center in Moscow, with a branch in Qingdao for joint expeditions in the Arctic, exploring resources and monitoring changes in the ecosystem (“Russian Academy of Sciences”, 2019). The Ocean University of China is one of the governing units of the QNLN (“Ocean University of China”, 2021). The Chinese side hopes to support the construction of the Polar Silk Road through joint research, expeditions and training, and the sharing of research equipment and data (“Zhong E haiyang yanjiu”, 2019).⁵ In August 2019, the centre conducted its first joint expedition to the Laptev Sea to study the Siberian Arctic Shelf, conducting research in marine geology, topography, physical oceanography and marine chemistry (“-Russian, Chinese Scientists to Study”, 2019). The previous year, QNLN and IOARAS organised a joint expedition to the Barents Sea, and their cooperation dates back to at least 2015, when both sides signed an MOU (Laboratory of Marine Mineral Resources, 2018; Sun, 2018). In April 2019, shortly after establishing a joint research centre with IOARAS, QNLN made a military-civil fusion procurement bid to purchase underwater acoustic communication machinery (“Ocean University of China”, 2021; “Qingdao haiyang kexue yu jishu guojia shiyanshi”, 2019).

On its website, under the achievements section, QNLN highlights its research on fibre-optic hydrophones (FOH) and stresses their importance for national defence, as FOH-based systems can be used for target detection at strategic locations like ports, straits, and the seabed (“Guangxian shuitingqi”, n.d.). FOHs are underwater acoustic sensors which use fibre-optic cables as the medium for signal transmission and sensing. Due to its high sensitivity, large dynamic range, small size, light weight, immunity to electromagnetic interference etc., FOHs have applications in civilian and military fields: underwater target detection, prospecting, earthquake inspection, etc. (Meng et al., 2021). QNLN scientific cooperation with IOARAS is significant, because both China and Russia have stakes in the Finnish-led Arctic Connect data cable project that would enable their jointly built capacities in underwater sensing to be put into use for the detection of adversaries’ submarines in the strategically important Arctic region (Jüris, 2020a).

⁵More information about the signatories: Qingdao haiyang kexue yu jishu shidian guojia shiyanshi (n.d.); Official website of the Shirshov Institute of Oceanology of Russian Academy of Sciences at Retrieved August 18, 2021, from <https://ocean.ru/en/>.

2.2 Jointly Building an Underwater Great Wall

The Finnish-led Arctic Connect project is an example of how improved connectivity may increase security risks. The project, which is based on Chinese technology, is meant to link internet users in Europe, Russia and Asia by constructing an undersea fibre optic cable system along the Northern Silk Road (NSR). At the same time, the project would improve both Chinese and Russian intelligence gathering and cyber defence capabilities. The Chinese company Huawei Marine, which is providing the technological solution for the project, is compelled by China's National Security Law to collaborate with Chinese intelligence services. Russia, on the other hand, could collect intelligence by tapping, exploiting optical overflow, or hacking into the control systems in its territory or territorial waters (Jüris, 2020a; Lehto et al., 2019, p. 20).

Both countries' cyber defence capabilities would also improve due to having control over the backbone of the internet infrastructure connecting them with Europe, which enables China and Russia to better shield their data transfer from the USA and its allies. In addition, the construction of Arctic Connect would enable China to implement the underwater surveillance capabilities it has been developing domestically through military-civilian fusion in the strategically important Arctic Ocean for the acoustic detection of adversary submarines (Jüris, 2020a). With the help of distributed acoustic sensing (DAS) technology developed by the British company QinetiQ for anti-submarine warfare, the fibre-optic cables along the NSR could be used for underwater surveillance and target detection without hampering their data transfer capabilities (Jüris, 2020a).

The project is currently on hold, because the only publicly known financier, the Japanese Sojitz Corporation, has failed to provide co-financing (Staalesen, 2021). Even if the Arctic Connect project remains stalled, NATO has every reason to closely monitor Sino-Russian capacity building in this field, as it has ramifications for nuclear deterrence and the defence of NATO's northern flank (see also chapter "China-Russia Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence" by Brian G. Carlson).

2.3 Space Cooperation and Implications for Security

At the end of 2019, the Chinese scholars Guo Peiqing and Yang Nan 杨楠 of the OUC welcomed the news that Russia was helping China to build a missile defence system and hoped that by combining both countries' early warning systems, China would also have access to information from Russian Arctic satellite ground stations (Guo & Yang, 2020).

In December 2021, Roscosmos head Dmitry Rogozin and China Satellite Navigation Committee (Zhongguo weixing daohang xitong weiyuanhui) head He Yubin 何玉彬 signed the Russian-Chinese Roadmap for cooperation in the field of satellite navigation for 2021–2025 that envisions the integrated and innovative development

of GLONASS and Beidou systems and building of ground stations in China and Russia (Nie, 2021; Roscosmos, 2021; “Rossija i Kitaj”, 2021). Hu Yubin previously had a prolific career in the military, where he attained the rank of major general and served as the vice head of the People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force Equipment Department (Yue, 2018). According to earlier statements, Russian stations are planned to be built in Shanghai, Urumqi and Changchun, while Chinese stations are planned for Obninsk, Irkutsk and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (RIA Novosti, 2021).

China already has access to ground stations in Kiruna (Sweden), Kárhóll (Iceland), Ny-Ålesund (Svalbard), Longyearbyen (Svalbard), Sodankylä (Finland) and plans to develop Nuuk (Greenland). Space ground stations are dual-use facilities, because they enable command and control of satellites and facilitate data transfer related to mission, intelligence, etc. (“China, Finland to Enhance”, 2018; Robinson, 2020). Data collected at foreign ground stations is likely to be subject to the National Cybersecurity Law, according to which personal or important information must be stored within China (Stokes et al., 2020, p. 93).

In 2019, the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) expressed concern that data collected in China’s Kiruna ground station in Sweden could be used for military purposes (“Swedish Security Experts: We’re Too Naive”, 2019). In 2020, the Swedish Space Corporation said it will not continue cooperation agreements with China over its ground stations in Australia, Chile and Sweden due to a changed geopolitical environment (Barrett & Ahlander, 2020). According to a 2020 Norwegian intelligence report, Chinese intelligence has shown interest in its dual-use space technology, underwater and deep sea technologies, which China has been able to have access to on several occasions. From a counterintelligence viewpoint, a US Congress report associated 2007 and 2008 hacking incidents that involved the Svalsat ground station in Svalbard and cut communications with the US satellites Terra AM-1 and Landsat-7 with China (Wolf, 2011; Wormdal, 2020).

2.4 Military-Civil Fusion in Arctic Underwater Acoustics

In July 2019, the first China-Russia Polar Acoustic Symposium was co-organised by HEU and FEFU at HEU to exchange knowledge on under-ice acoustic research and technology to facilitate the construction of the Polar Silk Road (Jin, 2019). The symposium brought together more than 100 experts from over 30 Chinese and Russian academic institutions and companies with 23 presentations on polar acoustic research. The event from the HEU side was co-hosted by the Chinese National Key Laboratory of Underwater Acoustic Science and Technology UAST (*Shuisheng jishu zhongdian shiyanshi*) and the Key Laboratory of Marine Information Acquisition and Security Industry and Information Technology MIASIIT (*Haiyang xinxi huoquan yu anquan gongye he xinxihua bu zhongdian shiyanshi*) (Meng, 2019).

In November 2020, the second China-Russia Polar Acoustic and Information Technology Symposium was organised by HEU and FEFU, but besides UAST and

MIASIT, the co-organisers list also included the Heilongjiang Province Key Laboratory of Maritime Information Technology (*Heilongjiang sheng haiyang xinxi jishu zhongdian shiyanshi*) and the Sino-Russian Maritime Technology Innovation Centre (*Zhong E haiyang jishu chuangxin zhongxin*).⁶ The provincial level lab was established within HEU in 2017, while the Sino-Russian Maritime Technology Innovation Centre was established by the Russian MARINET Industry Association, Harbin Engineering University and the Yantai Steering Committee of the Techno-Economic Development Zone/Yantai Steering Committee of the Pilot Free Trade Zone (Shandong, China) in September 2020 (“MARINET opens joint center”, n.d.; *Zhongdian shiyanshi*, n.d.). The cooperation agreement for the construction of the innovation centre was signed in November 2019 by the Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, by HEU and the Yantai Steering Committee of the Techno-Economic Development Zone with the aim of promoting “technology transfer, talent cooperation and introduction, training between China and Russia” in advanced applied optics (*xianjin guangxue yingyong*), marine information and detection technology (*haiyang xinxi yu jiance*), applied acoustics (*haiyang shengxue yingyong*), underwater robots (*shuixia zhineng jiqiren*), etc. (Yantai kaifaqu, 2019). The Russian MARINET Industry Association was established in December 2017 by leading Russian maritime enterprises and universities. It grew out of the Marinet National Technology Initiative Working Group that convened in 2015 to ensure Russian companies’ leadership in high tech maritime industry over the next 15–20 years, and combined 200 experts from more than 60 companies, research centres and universities.⁷

UAST is one of HEU’s two national defence science and technology key laboratories (*guofang keji zhongdian shiyanshi*), the other being the National Defense Key Laboratory of Underwater Vehicles Science and Technology (*shuixia jiqiren jishu zhongdian shiyanshi*). National defence science and technology key laboratories are quite often not transparent about their military links, and UAST’s name seldom appears listed as National Defence Science and Technology Key Laboratory of Underwater Acoustics (*Shuisheng jishu guofang keji zhongdian shiyanshi*) (*Zhongdian shiyanshi*, n.d.; Di er jie Zhong E jidi shengxue yu xinxi jishu luntan yaoqinghan, 2020a).

The UAST Academic Committee’s chairman is HEU professor Yang Desen 杨德森, and the vice chairs are professor Song Junqiang 宋君强 (宋军强 as on the website seems to be a common typo) from the National University of Defence Technology (NUDT), with the rank of major general, and researcher Ling Qing 凌

⁶See “Di er jie Zhong E jidi shengxue yu xinxi jishu luntan” (2020) and Di er jie Zhong E jidi shengxue yu xinxi jishu luntan yaoqinghan (2020).

⁷See the archived versions of the Russian-language Marinet webpage’s “About us” and “Industry Association Marinet” sections as of August 10, 2021 at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210810185301/https://marinet.org/ru/about/> and <https://web.archive.org/web/2021081014858/https://marinet.org/ru/about/industry-association-marinet/>

青 from the Naval Research Academy.⁸ According to ASPI's Defence Universities Tracker, NUDT is the PLA's main research and officer training university and directly subordinate to the Central Military Commission. NUDT's subordinate is the Institute of International Relations in Nanjing, which is a key training centre for intelligence officers. Besides being famous for research in supercomputers, autonomous vehicles, hypersonic missiles, and China's BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, NUDT is well known for its international interactions for capacity building ("National University of Defense Technology", 2019).⁹ Similar to NUDT, the Naval Research Academy is a "high risk" university due to its research in sensitive naval technology. It is supervised by the PLA Navy, belongs to China's military-civil fusion program and actively collaborates with civilian universities ("Naval Research Academy", 2019). In April 2019, Ling Qing, as deputy director of the Science and Technology Committee of the Naval Research Academy, visited Zhenjiang (in Jiangsu province) and attended the Zhenjiang Military Locality Industry Cooperation Symposium (*Zhenjiangshi jun di hezuo yingye zuotanhui*) to inspect local companies and meet with local officials to promote military-civil fusion cooperation (Meilong hangkong, 2019).

The UAST has conducted research on underwater acoustic technology for naval weapons development. UAST has four main research areas: underwater acoustic physics, target detection and localisation, underwater acoustic transducer technology and communication technology. Currently, it is undertaking 202 projects with a total value of 222.64 million yuan (29.0 million euros).¹⁰ In the past 5 years, it has received 23 scientific research awards at the provincial and ministerial level. It has also won the prize of Innovation Team of National Defence Science and Technology (*guofang keji chuangxin tuandui jiang*). As of 2020, UAST's total research assets were worth 28.6 million euros ("Shiyanshi jianjie", n.d.).

In February 2018, at the inaugural meeting of the MIASIT, the importance of military-civil fusion and building China into a great maritime power (*haiyang daguo*) were highlighted by several members of the academic committee. MIASIT's academic committee chairman is Yang Desen, the vice chairs are aviation expert Liu Yongcai 刘永才 (who has worked on missile designs) and marine geology expert Li Jiabiao 李家彪—all members of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, which is the highest professional honour in the field of engineering and technological science in China ("Liu Yongcai", n.d.; "Li Jiabiao", n.d.; "[Mingdan] 9 wei yuanshi lingxian!", 2018). Yang Desen was a representative at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and is head of HEU's Maritime Physics Institute ("Yang Desen jianjie", n.d.). Professor Yang is a

⁸See: Xueshu weiyuanhui, (2021); Zhongshan daxue xiaoyouhui (2020); "National University of Defense Technology" (2019); Quanguo yingcai shuju ku (2020); "Naval Research Academy" (2019) and Meilong hangkong (2019).

⁹To find our more, see Joske (2018).

¹⁰See: Shuisheng jishu guofang zhongdian shiyanshi (2017); Shuisheng jishu zhongdian shiyanshi (n.d.); Shuisheng jishu zhongdian shiyanshi 2020 niandu (2020).

distinguished expert in underwater acoustics with contributions to PLA Navy submarine design, both in shielding from and in detecting adversarial submarines (“Yang Desen”, n.d.).

MIASIT is China’s most advanced platform for the research and development of marine information technology, with four main research directions: information transmission, big data and its application, sensors, and data protection. The development level of these research fields can support the transformation of China’s Navy into a blue water navy and China into a maritime power. Since its establishment in 2017, MIASIT has undertaken 130 projects from the navy, provinces, and ministries with a total value of 150 million yuan (19.6 million euros) (“Haiyang xinxi huoqu yu anquan gongye”, n.d.).

It is evident from the above examples that China and Russia have been engaged for years in militarily highly sensitive research collaboration in dual-use fields including hydroacoustics and space that have direct relevance for nuclear deterrence and NATO’s northern flank defence.

3 Conclusion

To sum up, the espionage case of the Russian Professor Valery Mitko¹¹ can serve as a perfect example of the potential risks that academic cooperation with China entails for Russians engaged in Arctic research. Professor Valery Mitko was arrested in February 2020 by the Russian authorities and accused of having collected sensitive information about hydroacoustics, submarine design and submarine detection methods for Chinese intelligence since the spring of 2017 and handing it over during one of his bi-annual visits to China in the spring of 2018. The case was supposed to go to court in September 2021, but no new information has emerged. Valery Mitko, a leading Russian Arctic expert with decades-long military experience and an academic career in hydroacoustics, taught at Dalian Maritime University in China from 2016 onward as a visiting professor.¹²

Scientific expertise and academic credentials are not necessarily transferrable to expertise on China, which the Chinese side is eager to exploit for knowledge transfer and discourse management. Foreign scholars are valuable targets for capacity building that is necessary for the economic and military betterment of China, and for generating the positive sentiment that supports it by using foreign academic

¹¹ See also chapter “Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor” by Sarah Kirchberger and chapter “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix.

¹² On the Mitko case, see Merzlikin (2020); “Prezidenta Arkticheskoy akademii” (2020); Kuznetsova (2020); Ampelonskaya (2021). More information about Dalian Maritime University and its links to the PLA can be found at “Dalian Maritime University” (2021); DMU is also member of the China-Nordic Arctic Research Centre (“Dalian Maritime University”, n.d.).

advocates with high social standing and an image of neutrality for promoting Chinese interests.

In 2017, Valery Mitko, then president of the Arctic Academy of Sciences, had explained in a co-authored article with Chinese colleagues from Dalian Maritime University that the Northern Sea Route is not only important for China to escape a Western siege, but also to Russia, as it is its only direct access point to blue water. The article suggested that China and Russia, united in their advocacy of multipolarity in international relations, should work together to counterbalance US maritime hegemony and resist its pressures from the sea to protect both countries' core maritime rights and interests from infringement. Russia and China should increase cooperation on the subnational level between local level leaders and between ports (Li et al., 2017).

People-to-people diplomacy's efficiency is explicit in Mitko's co-authored article, where he as a co-opted scholar advocates for personal relations on a subnational level, bypassing the central authorities who are more experienced in thinking in national security terms. This creates a vicious circle that represents Chinese interests in a way that is not always to the benefit of Russia, as was presented in this paper.

In the West, analysing Sino-Russian relations solely from a trust/distrust perspective threatens to misguide understanding of the extent and depth of the actual cooperation between the two main opponents of the rules-based world order that should be monitored closely due to its ramifications on the EU's and NATO's defence, especially in a geo-strategically important region like the Arctic.

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Partnership Without Substance: Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe



Edward Lucas and Bobo Lo

1 Introduction¹

In recent years, the Sino-Russian partnership has emerged in Western eyes as the principal threat to the post-Cold War, rules-based international order (The White House, 2017). According to this narrative, the challenge is no longer simply one of China's rise or Russia's resurgence, but a growing strategic convergence: a mutually reinforcing "axis of authoritarians" (Ellings & Sutter, 2018). Talk of an alliance has become commonplace (President of Russia, 2019). In leading Western capitals, the Sino-Russian "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era" ("Joint Statement", 2019) has become the existential menace of our time. This sense of alarm has been heightened by a feverish international context, dominated by great-power rivalry and the devastating consequences of the covid-19 pandemic.

¹An earlier version of this report was published in April 2021. It is part of a broader CEPA effort aimed at tracking and evaluating the evolving Sino-Russian partnership and expanding Chinese influence across the transatlantic space. This work benefitted from feedback from a workshop with experts and practitioners convened by CEPA including Mathieu Boulègue, Mathieu Duchâtel, Alexander Gabuev, Martin Hála, Jakub Janda, Marcin Kaczmarek, Leigh Sarty, and Elizabeth Wishnick. The authors are also grateful for research and project management support from Ladislav Charouz, Mallie Kermiet, Jake Morris, and Iryna Solomko; Charles Mann provided further statistical research for this chapter. That publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command, Stuttgart, Germany. Opinions, arguments, viewpoints, and conclusions expressed in this work do not represent those of RSI, U.S. EUCOM, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This publication is cleared for public release.

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One region, however, has been largely exempt from such speculation. Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) remains a backwater of Sino-Russian engagement and Western reactions have been correspondingly muted. Nevertheless, the region provides a useful window through which to assess the dynamics of the relationship.

1. It highlights the extent to which Beijing and Moscow pursue their own foreign policy agendas. The usual self-serving rhetoric about partnership is absent. Here, more than anywhere else, it is all about *individual* national interests.
2. In the longer term, greater Chinese activity in Central and Eastern Europe could expose latent tensions in the partnership, given Russia's perception of the region as a sphere of special interests.

So far, though, there is little sign of trouble between them. Russia and China have achieved an implicit *modus vivendi*. Their relationship is defined neither by cooperation nor competition, but by compartmentalization and distancing. It helps that the region is of peripheral importance to Beijing, while Moscow feels unthreatened by the level of Chinese activity. For both sides, success is judged principally by the avoidance of negative outcomes.

2 The Strategic Context

The Sino-Russian partnership is one of the most remarkable stories of the post-Cold War era. Beijing and Moscow have transcended centuries of mistrust, imperial hangovers, national humiliations, major cultural differences, and achieved an unprecedented level and breadth of cooperation.² Their multidimensional partnership encompasses close political and institutional ties,³ expanding defense and security cooperation, like-mindedness on many international issues, and economic complementarity.

Yet the partnership is also a classic relationship between autonomous great powers, with their own perspectives, priorities, and interests. It is not based on affection, values, or even trust, but on results. The two sides identify significant political, security, strategic, economic, and technological dividends from

²The so-called “unbreakable friendship” established by Stalin and Mao in 1950 lasted only a decade, before dissolving in mutual recriminations. In 1960, Khrushchev withdrew all Soviet advisors from China. The next 30 years saw a protracted cold, and occasionally hot, war. Although there were some tentative moves toward a rapprochement in the 1980s, it was not until Boris Yeltsin became Russian president in 1991 that the relationship started to improve noticeably. Since then, it has been on a consistently upward trajectory, boosted at key moments by catalytic events, such as the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea.

³The public love-in between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin is a feature of the contemporary Sino-Russian partnership. In remarks to the 2020 Valdai Club annual conference, Putin claimed that the two presidents “continuously consult each other on what and how things need to be done . . .” (President of Russia, 2020b).

cooperation. This realism enables them to maximize the gains, moderate expectations, and glide over differences.

Russia and China converge on core principles: the unacceptability of U.S. “unilateralism,” the privileged role of great powers, the United Nations (Security Council) as the primary decision-making body in world affairs, and the abiding importance of state sovereignty. They agree on a “sovereign internet,” reject Western “interference” in their domestic affairs, and oppose sanctions. They have neutralized potential disagreements between them, notably over the expansion of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into Central Asia, and growing Chinese interest in the Arctic. There is also a new convergence in their public messaging.

Many Western policymakers assume, therefore, that Russia and China have a common—and malign—purpose, compounding the threats they pose individually to Western interests and values (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2021). But the reality is more complicated. We underestimate what divides them, and how jealously they guard their strategic independence and freedom of maneuver. We also overestimate the extent to which their relationship revolves around the West.

China is a *system-player*. It is a revisionist power, but its revisionism is incremental rather than revolutionary, with an approach that is often less strategic than opportunistic. Far from seeking to establish a new authoritarian world, it games the advantages and weaknesses of the existing order, profiting from global and regional trade, investment, norms, and institutions. Beijing recognizes that a stable external environment is critical to China’s prosperity and the regime’s security.⁴

Russia is a *system-disruptor*. Viewed from the Kremlin, the U.S.-led post-Cold War order wrecked Russia’s economy in the 1990s while riding roughshod over its geopolitical interests. Today, President Vladimir Putin not only believes that liberalism is obsolete (Barker et al., 2019) but also that the demise of the liberal international order should be expedited in favor of a twenty-first-century Concert of Great Powers (President of Russia, 2020a). In the meantime, he has shown a readiness to use force in support of Russian interests. For Moscow, international instability is helpful. The messier the environment, the more possibilities for Russia to influence events.

These differences in worldview between Beijing and Moscow are manageable. But they limit their capacity for strategic coordination (Lo, 2020a; Kaczmarek, 2020). Tellingly, every major Chinese or Russian foreign policy venture of recent times has been unilateral. Putin did not inform, much less consult, the Chinese before launching military interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), or Syria (2015). Equally, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy’s activities in the South China Sea, Beijing’s increasingly aggressive stance toward Taiwan, and “foreign influence” operations are deemed the sole business of China. Xi launched the BRI in 2013 in Astana, Kazakhstan, without so much as a by-your-leave from Moscow. It was only later that Beijing saw fit to massage Russian sensitivities—with the 2015

⁴For a fuller discussion of Chinese and Russian attitudes toward global order, see Lo (2020b).

agreement between the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Gabuev, 2015). Even today, Russia's practical involvement in the BRI remains modest (Luzyanin & Zhao, 2020, p. 86).⁵ Beijing promotes Chinese interests, not those of some mythical conjoined entity.

2.1 *The CEE Region in Russian and Chinese Foreign Policy*

Central and Eastern Europe is not a unitary geographical or political space. It encompasses diverse subregions: Central Europe, the Baltic states, the Eastern Partnership countries, and the Balkans. Neither Russia nor China has an overarching approach toward the region. The importance of the countries varies, as does the policy attention they receive.

Yet abiding realities shape Russian and Chinese policy. Chiefly, the CEE region matters more to Moscow. Some countries, such as Ukraine and Belarus, are of first-order geopolitical, security, and cultural-emotional significance. Others, such as the Baltic states and Poland, are direct neighbors. Russia also has longstanding historical, linguistic, and religious ties with the Balkans. More broadly, the Kremlin views much of the region as the front line in its ongoing confrontation with the West.

None of this applies to China. Beijing has no compelling reason to invest heavily in economic, political, or security cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. The countries of the region matter mainly as a (secondary) conduit for goods and services to China's primary export markets in *Western* Europe (Umarov & Samorukov, 2021).⁶ They possess few significant natural resources—unlike Central Asia, Indochina, Africa, and Latin America. Even if the BRI (overcoming manifold disappointments so far) spread across the region, China would still be an outsider in all but the economic dimension. For all the furor it has caused, Beijing's 17+1 framework (see below) has had negligible practical impact. Indeed, by inflating expectations and delivering disappointment it has proved counterproductive for Chinese interests (Brînză, 2021; Stec, 2020).

The marginal relevance of the region for China means that Beijing is disinclined to risk damage to the Sino-Russian partnership, especially at a time when it faces mounting pressure on multiple fronts. Moreover, Russia's sensitivities are more acute here than in Central Asia, which at least lies in their common neighborhood. Such considerations dictate a cautious approach. For the Chinese leadership, not offending the Kremlin far outweighs tapping into minor commercial opportunities (Nizhnikau & Kaczmarek, 2020, pp. 7–8).

⁵The latest casualty of Sino-Russian cooperation within the joint BRI/EAEU framework is the Moscow-Kazan railway, which was finally cancelled in March 2020 after years of delay.

⁶For example, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova rank near the bottom of the top 100 countries in direct investment from China (Umarov & Samorukov, 2021). Although the volume of goods carried by rail has increased substantially in recent years, it is still a fraction of the volume of sea freight from China to Europe.

Sino-Russian interaction in the region is, therefore, minimal. Nowhere else is their strategic partnership more formalistic. Each side does their own (unimpressive) thing, with virtually no reference to the other. Chinese ships participated in military exercises with the Russian navy in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 and the Baltic Sea in 2017. But otherwise defense cooperation has centered overwhelmingly on Asia.⁷ It is telling that Beijing did not support Moscow's annexation of Crimea and de facto occupation of the Donbass, and has generally refrained from attacking the EU and NATO. Maintaining a discreet neutrality preserves China's options with the West, while keeping Russia onside (Trenin, 2020).

3 The Awkward Squad: Serbia, Hungary, Belarus, and Ukraine

For Serbia, Hungary, Belarus, and Ukraine, two points stand out. First is asymmetry. Their relationship with China is far more important for them than it is for Beijing. Second, events, and Russian and Chinese media coverage, show little or no sign of friction between the two outside powers.

The most striking example of Chinese influence in the CEE region is in **Serbia** (Velebit, 2020; Vuksanovic, 2020a, July 10). The global financial crisis in 2008 increased the country's need for external support while denting the credibility of the European economic model. It also prompted "enlargement fatigue" in which possible future membership of the EU receded into the distance. Whereas Western countries tend to treat the Western Balkans as a backwater, China sees possibilities for logistics development in this neglected and vulnerable region.

Diplomatic ties are strong, Xi visited in 2016; China backs Serbia over nonrecognition of Kosovo, its most important priority in international relations. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić describes ties with Beijing as "iron" and Xi as his "brother." Billboards in Belgrade marking the arrival of Chinese aid at the start of the pandemic in 2020 stated: "Thank you, brother Xi" (Gotev, 2020a, April 2). The close relationship is manifest in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement⁸ (though this should not be overstated: Italy, for example, has one with China as well) (Dimitrijević, 2019). Outward signs of close cooperation abound: Confucius Institutes in Belgrade and Novi Sad, and a media collaboration agreement which enables numerous exchanges and content sharing. This leads to a highly positive picture of China in state-approved media (Shopov, 2020).

⁷For example, the massive Vostok-2018 exercise took place across Siberia and the Russian Far East. Most Sino-Russian naval exercises ("Joint Sea") have been in the Western Pacific. And two controversial joint bomber patrols in July 2019 and December 2020 flew in the vicinity of the Dokdo/Takeshima islands in the Sea of Japan.

⁸For an explanation of the significance of the terminology, see David Cowhig (2021).

The most conspicuous recent signs of cooperation are in vaccine diplomacy. Hard-hit by the pandemic, Serbia was the first European country to approve Beijing-based biopharmaceutical company Sinovac's coronavirus vaccine; it has obtained one million doses and has the second-fastest vaccine rollout in Europe (Vuksanovic, 2021b; Pantovic, 2020). But technology and industry have been success stories too. Serbia has signed up for the "Digital Silk Road." There are two deals with Chinese telecommunications company Huawei—one on "smart cities" in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, the other on high-speed broadband and a regional data center (the third in Europe after the Netherlands and Germany) (Vasovic, 2020; "Police Director", 2019). Serbia is a European bridgehead for Chinese surveillance technology.

Other notable projects in Serbia that involve Chinese investments include:

- The Smederevo steelworks (sold back to the Serbian government for a symbolic \$1 by its previous owner, US Steel, in 2012), was purchased by China's state-run HBIS Group, or Hesteel Group, in 2016 for €46 million. It is now Serbia's largest exporter (Liebermann, 2019; "Serbian Govt", 2016);
- At least €800 million of planned investment in the Zrenjanin tire factory, €486 million in the Kostolac coal-fired power plant, and a €730 million investment in the Zijin Bor copper mine (Ralev, 2020a; "Chinese Company Starts", 2017; Anthony, 2020); and
- The Pupin Bridge over the Danube River in Belgrade, which was constructed by China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) with a €145 million loan and completed in 2014 (Hartwell & Sidlo, 2017, p. 23).

China's arms sales to Serbia are significant as well. China's first European export of military aviation equipment (CH-92A combat drones) transferred not only new weaponry but also more fundamental knowledge and technology, testing the waters for future attempts to enter the European defense market. For its part, Serbia has become the largest drone operator in the Balkans (Vuksanovic, 2021a, January 5). In August 2020, Serbia also agreed to purchase the Chinese anti-aircraft FK-3 missile system instead of the Russian S-300 system ("Russian Media Suggest", 2020).

Yet China's \$4 billion in investments plus \$5 billion in loans and infrastructural projects puts it at only 6.6% of total foreign direct investment (FDI), behind the EU (72.3%) and Russia (11.2%) (Vasovic, 2019). Under the surface, developments are less promising.

- The Budapest-to-Belgrade high-speed rail line, announced in November 2013, is the flagship of the 17+1 and the BRI in Europe. But the €2.89 billion (original budget, now €4 billion), 350 km (220 mi) project is behind schedule and over budget (Brînză, 2020).
- Under US pressure, Serbia apparently excluded Huawei from its 5G rollout (Ruge & Vladisavljev, 2020).
- Chinese workers at the copper mine in Bor complain of slavery-like conditions (Dragojlo, 2021); locals there, in Smederevo, and elsewhere complain about environmental damage (Prelec & Chrzova, 2021; Prelec, 2021).

- For all the fanfare over Chinese weapons sales, between 2008 and 2018 the United States was the largest provider of military hardware to Serbia (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, 2021).

Serbian ties with Russia strengthened after Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008. The Kremlin blocks international recognition of Kosovo and also backs the Republika Srpska, the ethnic-Serbian entity in Bosnia (Samsó, 2020; Đorđević, 2021). The humanitarian emergencies facility in Niš, believed by Western intelligence to be a base for espionage and special operations, exemplifies the relationship. It is Russia's only quasi-military facility in Europe (outside the former Soviet Union) (Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center, 2019; Phillips, 2021). Russia has supplied MiG-29 fighter jets, T-72 tanks, Mi-35 helicopter gunships, combat patrol vehicles, and the Pantsir air defense system to Serbia ("More Russian Weapons", 2020). Delivering these shipments across the territory of NATO members causes diplomatic tension ("Romania Says It Blocked", 2019; "Russia 'Used Bulgarian Airspace'", 2020).

The most substantial Russian engagement with Serbia is in energy. In 2008, Gazprom Neft, a subsidiary of the Russian energy major Gazprom, took a controlling stake in Serbia's Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) oil and gas company, a deal worth more than \$450 million, and committed to invest at least \$600 million more in the company. The Turkstream gas pipeline, inaugurated in January 2020, entrenches Serbia's energy dependence on Russia, which supplies two-thirds of the country's gas and oil (Gotev, 2021).

In terms of infrastructure, Russian Railways (RZD International) is part-constructing the Stara Pazova-Novi Sad section of the Budapest-Belgrade line (Raley, 2020b, December 28).

As in other countries of the Western Balkans, however, Serbia's ties to Russia are more performative and pragmatic than reflecting deep loyalties or ideological sympathy. Irritants and hiccups in the relationship abound; the Serbian leadership does not want to burn its bridges with Brussels or Washington. Relations with the Kremlin cooled notably after Vučić visited the White House in September 2020, during the Trump administration's unsuccessful attempt to broker a deal between Serbia and Kosovo. A crude personal jibe by the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova caught the headlines, but was just the latest twist in a decline that began 3 years before (Vuksanovic, 2020c). Earlier in 2020, Serbian authorities used the state propaganda apparatus to blame Russian provocateurs for political unrest (the nationalist opposition is ardently pro-Kremlin) (Vuksanovic, 2020b; Hopkins, 2018). They also cancelled participation in the annual Russo-Belarus-Serbian "Slavic Brotherhood" military exercises ("Serbia Withdraws from Belarus", 2020).

For its part, Serbia does not have to choose between Moscow and Beijing, but uses both to balance pressure from Brussels and Washington. Of the two, China is more useful to Belgrade.

The second main example of Chinese influence in the CEE region is **Hungary**.

Since Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán returned to power in the 2010 parliamentary election, Hungary's ties with the West have deteriorated. The government is under pressure from the European Commission for curbs on media freedom, civil society, political competition, and the rule of law. In response, Hungary has boosted its economic and political ties with Russia and China, to the point that it is seen as China's main supporter within the EU. Hungary's "Opening to the East" policy was launched in 2011 and a comprehensive strategic partnership signed with China in May 2017. In 2015, Hungary was the first European country to sign up to what was then called the "One Belt, One Road" (now the BRI).

This has brought some results, especially in vaccine diplomacy: supplies of Chinese state-owned pharmaceutical firm Sinopharm's jab may boost Orbán's chances in elections next year (Shimov, 2020). In 2017, Hungary vetoed an EU statement criticizing Chinese human rights abuses (Denyer & Rauhala, 2017). In February 2021, it was the only EU country not to sign a Canadian declaration denouncing the incarceration of foreign nationals as a bargaining tactic in international disputes (which was implicitly aimed at China). It did not, however, seek to block the EU from signing the declaration (Government of Canada, 2021).

Symbolic ties include China's Fudan University opening a controversial campus in Budapest (Hopkins, 2021). The Hungarian capital is home to China's first think tank in Europe, the China-CEE Institute ("China Launches 'China-CEE Institute'", 2017). And Budapest has a large Chinese community, with the region's only Chinese-Hungarian bilingual elementary school.

Business ties are beneficial, particularly for Hungary, which hosts by far the largest amount of Chinese direct investments among the EU member states in the CEE region—\$5 billion (2020) (Duan, 2020; Bu, 2016; Gotev, 2020b). Orbán's close friend Lőrinc Mészáros is constructing the 150 km (93 mi) Hungarian section of the Budapest-Belgrade railway, which is expected to be completed by 2025. Terms of the \$2.1 billion project are classified for the next 10 years ("Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Proxy", 2021). China is Hungary's biggest non-EU trading partner. Rail freight is booming, up tenfold year-on-year in 2020 ("Rail Cargo Hungary", 2021). A Chinese-built 100 MW solar power plant is coming on stream in 2021 ("Hungary's Kaposvar Photovoltaic", 2020). Chinese and Hungarian central banks signed a currency swap deal in 2013, renewed in 2016 and 2020: this is part of China's attempt to internationalize the renminbi and dent dollar hegemony ("The Currency Swap", 2020). Budapest is the CEE headquarters of the Bank of China (Matura, 2018). Huawei's biggest supply center outside China is in Hungary and it also has an R&D facility in Budapest ("Huawei's Economic Influence", 2020).

However, the relationship with China is stronger on show than substance. No major investments have been made since 2010, with the exception of the financing deal for the railway (Than & Komuves, 2020). It is unclear if Hungary will allow Huawei to play a role in its 5G network when other EU countries ban it.

Despite the fervent anti-communism of his youth, Orbán has shunned Western criticism of the Putin regime. He invited Putin to Budapest in 2015, at a time when the Russian leader was treated as a pariah in other Western capitals following the

attack on Ukraine (“Hungarians Protest”, 2015). Hungary was the first EU state to trial the Russian Sputnik V covid-19 vaccine (Foy, 2020).

Notable controversies include:

- **Energy:** In 2014, Hungary picked the Russian atomic energy corporation Rosatom (without a tender) in a €12.5 billion deal to build two 1200 MW reactors at the Paks nuclear power plant. Russia is financing 80% of the cost. Hungary has signed up to the Turkstream natural gas pipeline and will begin receiving supplies in late 2021 (“Hungary to Join”, 2020; Szilagyi, 2020). Cheap gas underpins Orbán’s popularity.
- **Espionage:** Hungary controversially agreed that a Soviet-era financial relic, the International Investment Bank, should open its headquarters in Budapest, and granted the staff of the institution wide-ranging diplomatic privileges. Western intelligence agencies believe the bank is a cover for clandestine operations (Hopkins, 2019).

Nevertheless, Hungary remains a member of the EU and NATO. It has not blocked either institution’s decision-making on issues such as sanctions against Russia or military planning to protect frontline states.

As in the case of Serbia, Hungary’s relationships with Russia and China are pragmatic. They bring political and economic dividends, which help entrench the authorities’ grip on power. Diplomatic flirtation and spoiler tactics help underline the importance of Hungary to decision-makers in Berlin, Brussels, and Washington. Hungary may sometimes relay Russian and Chinese talking points (mostly with counterproductive results). But neither outsider (nor indeed any foreign power) exerts serious influence in the country. That is Orbán’s prerogative.

In **Belarus**, Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime has enthusiastically cultivated ties with China, partly to bolster the economy (which is heavily dependent on subsidized Russian energy), and partly to balance the Kremlin’s overbearing political and diplomatic influence. For China, Belarus was, after 2014, an attractive alternative to crisis-stricken Ukraine (“Sivitskiy: Kitay ukhodit ot Belarussi”, 2020).

Outward signs of friendship in previous years have been conspicuous. Xi visited Belarus in 2010 to open the Great Stone industrial park, which he has since called the “pearl” of the BRI, and again in 2015. China is building a new embassy in Minsk (Republic of Belarus, 2018). Belarus has five Confucius Institutes (Belarusian National Technical University, 2021; “Confucius Institute Opens” 2020). China finances aid projects such as a new soccer stadium, international-standard swimming pool, and social housing (Sharshukov, 2021; “Belarus’ i Kitay obsudili”, 2020). Minsk international airport has Chinese-language signage. But the results of the relationship are mainly disappointing (Yeliseyeu, 2020). The trade imbalance is striking: \$675.5 million in exports (mainly fertilizer) from Belarus to China and \$3.8 billion in imports to Belarus from China (Artemenko, 2020). Chinese investments and technology transfers have been insignificant. Belarus is not interested in selling its industrial “crown jewels,” such as its potash (Belaruskali) and nitrogen fertilizer (Grodno Azot) companies. Several investment projects have flopped. For example, production of Geely cars (assembled for the Russian market) halted in

2020. Lukashenka blamed “sloppy” work by Chinese investors and said he would raise the issue with Xi (Boguslavskaya, 2019). Construction of a battery plant in Brest was suspended following environmental protests (Istrate, 2019).

Belarus’s international isolation, the regime’s threats to block transit of German exports, and the possible suspension of Polish-Belarusian rail traffic, have dented its appeal (Zhang & Yin, 2021). Talk of an “iron brotherhood” and an “all-weather partnership” are not matched by deeds (Niva, 2021).

Perhaps most gallingly for Lukashenka, though Xi congratulated him after his rigged election victory, China has not given the regime in Minsk diplomatic or other support against the pro-democracy protesters (Umarov, 2020).

China has made it clear that it has no interest in being a geopolitical counterweight to Russia in Belarus. Its interests are logistical—chiefly to develop overland freight to Europe. In future, Ukraine may be a more interesting prospect for China because its relations with the West are better (“Sivitskiy: Kitay ukhodit ot Belarussi”, 2020). Russia does not object to China’s role in Belarus. In fact, Russia favors it because it would prefer east-west freight routes to take a northern route (through Russia and Belarus). Lukashenka’s dreams of geopolitical balancing are just that: dreams, indulged by China and ignored by the Kremlin. Russia decides what happens in Belarus.

China’s relationship with **Ukraine** is superficially more promising. The authorities in Kyiv seek all kinds of counterweights to Russia, their sole adversary (Bugriy, 2021). The authorities in Beijing are allergic to border changes and separatism. They did not like Russia’s annexation of Crimea or its backing for separatist forces in the Donbass. Ukraine is the largest country in the CEE region and an important link in east-west transit. Notable features of the relationship include:

- **Trade.** China was, by the end of 2020, Ukraine’s largest trading partner, accounting for 15% of foreign trade (Kalashnik, 2021; Kornilov, 2021). Key Ukrainian exports are iron ore, grain, sunflower oil, arms (air-to-air missiles, aircraft, and tank engines).
- **Technology.** Huawei has had a presence in Ukraine since 2000. In 2017, it set up an R&D center in Kyiv. The company provides scholarships and supports Ukraine’s flagship e-government program (“20 Years of Huawei”, 2020).
- **Vaccines.** Ukraine signed up for Sinopharm’s Covid-19 vaccine after expressing disappointment with its Western partners, the EU and the United States, for failing to provide help during the pandemic (“Ukraine Signs up”, 2020).

Nevertheless, Ukraine’s political orientation remains pro-Western. Under US pressure, the government in Kyiv imposed sanctions on three Chinese individuals and four legal entities involved in the (80% Chinese-owned) Motor Sich company (Teise, 2021). As the pro-Kremlin Regnum news agency noted gleefully, “thunder” from China resulted, with a halt to purchases of agricultural goods and metal products (Ganzha, 2021). Motor Sich is also an irritant between Moscow and Beijing, as the Chinese acquisition cut out Russia’s lucrative intermediary role in sales to China. In 2021 the Ukrainian government sanctioned four Chinese enterprises and three Chinese citizens who participated in a deal involving Ukrainian

aerospace company Motor Sich, which is one of the largest producers of engines for helicopters, jets and missiles (Security Service of Ukraine, 2021). Under US pressure Ukraine is also moving away from Huawei, replacing it with Cisco in the “smart city” digitalization program for Kyiv (Antoniuk, 2020). China recently became Ukraine’s leading trade partner, with exports reaching a record \$7.1 billion; Chinese imports reached \$8.3 billion (Musafirova, 2021). Ukraine’s previously unquestioned pro-Western stance has come under strain. Ukraine abandoned a coalition of countries backing a US-led motion criticizing China at the June 2021 UN Human Rights meeting in Geneva. Since then it has signed a trade and investment deal with China, while President Volodymyr Zelensky had a notably friendly phone call with Xi Jinping (De Luce & Melkozerova, 2021).

4 17+1 = Trouble. The Rise and Fall of China-Led Multilateralism

Launched in 2012, the 17+1 framework is the flagship venture for Chinese cooperation with the countries of the CEE region. Its members are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece (since 2019), Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania (until 2021), Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia (“Cooperation Between China”, 2021).

From the start, the project has attracted controversy. As well as the seemingly uncontroversial mission of boosting trade and cultural ties, it was seen in Brussels and Washington as an attempt to divide the EU between East and West, and also to divide the CEE countries by offering preferential terms for those prepared to adopt Chinese positions on other issues (Brînză, 2021). Some commentators rebut this view, saying that the aim from the outset has been economic and that Chinese investment in the region has been minimal and plagued by setbacks (Matura, 2019; Allen-Ebrahimian & Tamkin, 2018). In 2019, the combined stock of Chinese investment in the 11 EU countries of the 17+1 was a mere €7.1 billion, one-third of the amount invested in Germany (Kratz et al., 2020). Chinese projects have been plagued by delays, rows over funding, and other obstacles.

Enthusiasm for the 17+1 has diminished markedly as a result of disgust at human rights abuses in China, concerns about Beijing’s foreign policy, and a desire in some countries to follow the United States’ lead in global politics. The 2019 summit in Croatia was a flop (Brînză, 2019). In the summer of 2020, all members, apart from Hungary, Greece, and Serbia, stayed away from a BRI conference convened by China. A hurriedly convened virtual summit in February 2021 was a debacle, thanks to a rebellion led by Lithuania’s new Atlanticist government, with the support of Estonia and other countries (Lucas, 2021). Further:

- Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia rejected the summit invitation to send prime ministers or presidents;

- Attempts by China to insert political talking points into the communiqué prompted a boycott of the drafting process; and
- No announcement was made of the location or date of the next summit.
- Lithuania left the 17+1; Estonia has said it will reduce cooperation and has made no decision about future participation (“Liimets: no decision made”, 2021).

The episode highlighted some fundamental weaknesses in China’s approach, particularly in dealing with distant, small countries in a multilateral context. Treating them like European versions of Laos and Cambodia was a nonstarter. The idea that fervently Atlanticist countries with determined anti-communist views and deep sympathies for Tibet and other human rights causes would fit neatly into the same framework as those with anti-Western and mercantilist outlooks was flawed from the start. Bland talking points are no substitute for a strategy. For their part, Chinese commentators blame the stalled relationship with the CEE region on ideological differences, pushback from the EU and the United States (the latter resulting in “distrustful” thinking), tougher regulatory scrutiny, and the uncompetitiveness of the region’s agricultural products (Liu, 2020).

It is worth noting that China’s approach is long-term, and that much of the 17+1 activity happens outside the high-profile annual summits and through bilateral relationships. The annex to the communiqué issued after the Dubrovnik summit in 2019, for example, lists 71 subsidiary events and organizations, ranging from central bankers’ meetings to the “China-CEEC Veterinary Research Center” opened in Sarajevo in December 2018 (Li, 2019). China prizes the creation of bureaucratic and personal relationships that such initiatives enable, believing them to have long-term value (Matura, 2019).

For now, the real role of the 17+1 is that it allows Eurosceptic leaders such as Orbán and Czech President Miloš Zeman to demonstrate their diplomatic independence, shunning US and other pressure to boycott the forum or downgrade involvement (Rühlig et al., 2018). Photo-ops with Xi and other Chinese leaders are also political currency at home, countering perceptions of diplomatic isolation. But this does little to promote China’s interests in the region.

5 The Scorecard

Sino-Russian engagement in the CEE region is unimpressive. However, results should be measured against intentions and capabilities. What do Moscow and Beijing want from their relationship in Central and Eastern Europe? Is either side unhappy about the outcomes so far, or worried about the future of their interaction in the region?

In this case, less is more. Sino-Russian cooperation may be practically nonexistent, but more relevant is the lack of mutual tensions. What could have been a troublesome area for their relationship has turned out to be anything but. Both sides appear content with the state of play.

Unlike in Central Asia, where Beijing is pursuing an ambitious, multifaceted, and well-resourced agenda, the Kremlin can be confident that the Chinese have no intention, let alone capability, of displacing Russian influence in the CEE region anytime soon. Paradoxically, China's modest CEE profile gives it scope to pursue some BRI-related projects. Since these are not seen to threaten Russian interests, Moscow is not obstructive; strategic comfort breeds benignity.

5.1 Looking Ahead . . .

The widening asymmetry of the overall Sino-Russian partnership raises questions about its longevity. Will Russian decision-makers reconcile themselves to a lasting strategic inferiority or instead become increasingly allergic and resentful? Will the Chinese leadership overplay its hand, and stop giving Moscow the great-power respect it demands by right? The answers to these questions will remain unclear for some time. But it is already evident that Sino-Russian interaction in the CEE region will have little bearing on how the overall relationship evolves. The real tests lie elsewhere—Northeast Asia, Central Asia, the Arctic, Antarctica, and the future of global order. If there is a change in the nature of Sino-Russian interaction in Central and Eastern Europe, it will be a by-product of a larger structural shift.

It is far-fetched to imagine that Moscow would run interference on Beijing's behalf in the event of Sino-US confrontation in the Asia-Pacific—for example, through disruptive behavior in Ukraine, the Baltic states, and the Western Balkans (Gorenburg, 2020). For one thing, serving as Beijing's proxy in Central and Eastern Europe would jeopardize Russia's security and economic interests to no discernible advantage. It would also contradict the central goal of Putin's foreign policy over the past two decades: to position Russia as an *independent* center of regional and global power (Trenin, 2019a, July 18). Putin has no intention of seeing Russia become a "mere sidekick" (Trenin, 2019b) to China. In the last 2 years, he has diversified Russia's relations in the Asia-Pacific, reinforced political and security ties with the ex-Soviet republics, flirted with mainstream European leaders such as French President Emmanuel Macron (Stratievski, 2021), and stepped up efforts to promote Russia as a good international citizen (President of Russia, 2021). In a Sino-US confrontation, his first priority will be to avoid damage to Russian interests. Beyond that, he may be tempted to position Russia as the global "swing power"—gaining leverage with both China *and* the United States (Karaganov, 2020).

It is even more implausible that China would become involved in a conflict in Europe. Not only does it lack the means, but the Kremlin might also interpret any such move as an attempt to expand Chinese geopolitical influence at Russia's expense. Beijing would scarcely embark on an enterprise so far from home that could simultaneously alienate Moscow, Washington, and Brussels.

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Cooperation Between Russia and China in Multilateral Organizations: A Tactical or a Strategic Alliance?



Olaf Wientzek

1 Introduction

The question of a strategic alliance between Russia and China has been discussed by various authors for several years, some referring to this emerging cooperation as the “dragon bear” (Tchakarova, 2015). This alliance exists in various regional forums covering security, but also more and more economic cooperation. It can also increasingly be seen on a global level. One aspect that merits more attention is cooperation in multilateral forums and international organizations.

When the effects of Russia-China relations in multilateral organizations are discussed, the analyses often focus on their role in the UN Security Council. However, it is worth taking a closer look at other multilateral forums, particularly in Geneva, which allow one to observe the development of several interesting trends over the past years. This article will look at the cooperation between both countries, particularly in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and Geneva-based Standard Development Organizations (SDOs) such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Its analysis will neither trace the history of Russia and China’s cooperation throughout UN history, nor will it look at their voting behavior and positioning in the UN Security Council, which would likely merit an article on its own.¹ Instead, this analysis will examine current interests and influencing strategies of both actors in some of the main multilateral forums in Geneva, and highlight the commonalities and differences of both countries. Afterward, it will focus on some key areas of cooperation, addressing the question of the extent to which

¹ See, for example, Ferdinand (2013). See also Feltman (2020) and Fung (2019).

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Russia-China cooperation in these forums is more tactical (defensive) cooperation, or whether and to what extent it is a strategic alliance to (re)define the norms of multilateral cooperation. Finally, this chapter will formulate suggestions for how the West can respond to the challenge.

2 Priorities, Commonalities and Differences

2.1 *The Priorities of Russia and China in Geneva-Based Forums*

Needless to say, Russia and China are heavyweights in the Geneva-based multilateral bodies merely by being permanent members of the UN Security Council. Moreover, multilateral organizations are considered as useful forums to increase one's status on an international level. It is an equally important platform to receive (positive) "social markers" in order to increase domestic legitimacy or status (Johnston, 2007). The objective is thus to receive affirmation for one's domestic practices and international policy actions and avoid criticism. Both Russia and China may use similar instruments in order to achieve this objective, but when focusing on Geneva-based forums, they have shown differences regarding their priorities.

For Russia, organizations with security policy relevance remain crucial forums. Also, the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) is considered important and prestigious: securing the post of director general of UNOG for a Russian national in 2019, Tatiana Valovaya, was considered important by Moscow. From a Russian perspective, Geneva is equally considered to be an important mediation hub where a number of background talks are held on conflict situations in which Russia is a major player: Russia's engagement in the Syrian Constitutional Committee is one example even though the process has failed to deliver any results. This security lens also applies to other multilateral forums: Russia is an important player in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), as it considers the topic of cyber security to be within the ITU mandate.

China's priorities are strongly shaped by its geopolitical and economic interests, and can often be analyzed through the lens of the Belt and Road Initiative (Merkle, 2020): this explains the strong Chinese attention toward SDOs in Geneva, whether they include the ITU, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) or other forums (Teleanu, 2021). Having a strong say in shaping technical and digital standards and norms is considered a crucial element for laying the groundwork for future global economic leadership. This is equally true for organizations responsible for infrastructure, and other economic forums such as the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

While both countries are latecomers to the WTO (China acceded in 2001, while Russia joined the WTO in 2012), their respective weight in the WTO differs. China is a key player in the organization (see also Mavroidis & Sapir, 2016). It has been a

more active user of the WTO's dispute settlement system² and has also joined (unlike Russia) the interim arbitration arrangement of 18 other WTO members (i.e. the EU, Australia and Brazil; see WTO, 2020). Unlike China, Russia is only present in two WTO negotiation groups. In contrast to Russia, China's instruments of global influence are to a greater extent economic, which may explain its stronger engagement in multilateral economic forums. Neither country is a full market economy, but relies on a state-capitalist model that would make them natural allies whenever the calls for new and stricter rules on state subsidies arise. While many disagreements in the WTO are not linked to US-China antagonism, China has in many ways been perceived as an antipole to the US and to the West.³ The importance of the WTO for China is reflected in terms of personnel policy: maintaining the position of one of the deputy director generals is considered of key importance for China.⁴

Aside from its engagement in organizations relevant to economic development and trade, China has in past years increased its engagement in global health, particularly in the WHO, where China is considered a key player and where it has increased its influence substantially.⁵

An organization that is of key importance for both countries is without a doubt the UN Human Rights Council, where both attempt to dismiss criticism of their human rights records. An indication of the importance attributed to the UNHRC is the regularity of membership of both countries. In the 15 years since the creation of the HRC, China was one of the 47 members for 12 years, and Russia for 9 years (no more than two consecutive 3-year terms are permitted).

Across several organizations, China is attempting to consolidate the international isolation of Taiwan. While this is not possible in all Geneva-based bodies (Taiwan is a member of the WTO, where it is referred to as the Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu [Chinese Taipei]), it has over the past several years successfully blocked any attempt for Taiwan to join the World Health Assembly even as an observer.

Interestingly, migration and humanitarian questions receive comparatively less attention. For example, neither the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) nor the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) seem to be

²While Russia was involved in eight cases as a complainant and nine as a respondent, China has been a complainant in 21 cases and a respondent in four. See World Trade Organization (n.d.).

³In another Geneva-based organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), China is also often on the side of the G77.

⁴Effectively, one of the four deputy director generals of the new Director General (DG) of the WTO is also from China, Ambassador Xiangchen Zhang, as was the case under the previous mandate. Some Geneva observers consider that one of the weaknesses of the most important competitor for the DG post in the WTO was the fact that she was a South Korean and might—due to reasons of geographical balance—limit the prospects for China in obtaining the post for one of its nationals.

⁵One indicator for this is the high-level attendance at the yearly World Health Assembly, the highest decision-making organ of the WHO. In 2020, during the virtual World Health Assembly, President Xi Jinping was the first head of state to address the assembly.

a priority for China or Russia, which is reflected in their very limited financial engagement in both organizations: UNHCR funding from the US was approximately 900 times higher than from China. Neither country was among the top ten donors for UNOCHA (2021).⁶ The same is true for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), where neither Russia nor China appear in the top 23 funders (for example ICRC, 2019).

While the differences in financial engagement are particularly strong when it comes to humanitarian or migration policy issues, in many other international organizations, neither Russia's nor China's financial input even comes close to the impact major Western countries, particularly the US, Germany, the UK or the EU as a whole, have on specific organizations. While China has substantially increased its contributions in past years to the UN as a whole,⁷ along with some other selected international organizations, in many UN agencies, it is still very far from the above-mentioned countries.

2.2 *Challenging the Narrative*

Both sides are keen to establish a counter-narrative on questions of democracy, human rights, and international law, as can be seen in the joint statement issued by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi (Ministry of External Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021): the objective is to change the “hegemony” of the Western interpretation of human rights and democracy, as well as the role of international organizations. Both sides also state: “We noted the growing importance of the joint activities of Russia, China and a wide range of other countries to preserve the current system of international law in the context of the increasing Western attempts to promote its concept of a rules-based international order.”

Particularly China—emboldened by the departure of the US from some multilateral forums, i.e. the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC)—has in past years strongly intensified its attempts to change the narrative in certain organizations, particularly in the UNHRC, that the notion of human rights should be less concentrated on individual but on collective rights. Another feature of this new discourse is an emphasis on a state-centric human rights dialogue and the respect of state sovereignty. Finally, the discourse emphasizes the right to development and the fight against poverty as key pillars of human rights. All three elements are considered attempts to weaken the traditional UN discourse on human rights. In order to achieve this objective, China has in past years regularly brought forward a resolution on “mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights” (see for example

⁶Russia's contribution (one million euros) for 2021 has so far been lower than that of Luxembourg, and only slightly higher than that of Estonia.

⁷Its contribution in 2019 surpassed the 10% threshold.

UN Human Rights Council, 2020). The seemingly harmless title of a resolution hides elements that would change the common understanding of human rights. While the resolution enjoyed broad support the first time it was introduced in 2018, views have become more polarized without hindering the adoption of the resolution. China thus has been much more proactive in shaping and promoting a different discourse in international organizations rather than merely attacking unwelcome procedures or norms.

Russian attempts to change the narrative and the normative discourse have been less visible compared to China, though its discourse in the ITU is attempting to receive global approval for highly controversial practices by “disguising” them with innocuous terms such as “information security.” Referring to the importance of rules “in the field of information security” is often interpreted as an attempt to target all measures that may have a destabilizing effect on states, including free speech.

2.3 Strategic Personnel Policy

Russia and China use personnel policy as a key instrument in their engagement in multilateral organizations. Overall personnel policy can be conducted at three levels: promoting the placement of junior staff in the UN organizations, securing crucial positions in the organizations, and finally, ensuring the rotation of diplomatic personnel between major UN locations. China has increasingly used the Junior Professional Office (JPO) program of the UN in these last several years to encourage young professionals to join UN organizations. Both countries have—as have other big players—demonstrated an eagerness to place their nationals in key UN positions: for Russia it was, i.e., the successful candidature of Tatiana Valovaya for the UNOG, but in 2021 Russia also put forward a candidate for the successor of the current secretary general of the ITU. China currently occupies four out of 15 secretary general or director general posts in specialized UN agencies,⁸ and has attempted to acquire the position of the director general of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in 2020. Finally, particularly compared to other countries, China and Russia tend to employ staff for UN posts at their mission who specialize in UN affairs and who circulate exclusively between UN locations (and the relevant ministerial unit at home). The effect of this should not be underestimated: it takes time to adapt to the often highly technical debates in the UN and its relevant agencies. By the time the diplomatic staff not only gets a grasp of the discussions and is also able to provide strong input, half of the posting has already passed. Having experienced staff that are highly knowledgeable about procedural rules can

⁸The four organizations are: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDP), and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

be a very strong asset, not only in technical UN bodies, but also in the UN Human Rights Council.

Experts and first-hand observers of international Geneva regularly emphasize that China has substantially increased its influence within the UN. Some have even argued that with all their engagement in the past few decades, Russia has never enjoyed the same degree of political influence in Geneva that China does now. While Russia is considered by diplomats as having a relatively confrontational and at the same time relatively defensive approach in some of the UN forums, China has attempted to go further and tried more actively to change narratives in certain policy fields. Russia's partial isolation in several forums (including its departure from the UN Human Rights Council in 2022) will further contribute to strengthen China's leadership role in the autocratic alliance.

3 Cooperation of Russia and China in Geneva—A Tactical or a Strategic Alliance?

An extensive analysis of the cooperation of Russia and China in each of the Geneva-based UN agencies would go beyond the scope of this analysis. However, four dimensions can be identified: as mentioned earlier, both sides regularly cooperate when dismissing criticism of their policies in UN forums. China can mostly be identified as the driving force in attempts to shape a different narrative in UN organizations, while Russia is supportive of these proposals. Both sides jointly attempt to block the reform of international bodies. Last but not least, Russia and China have acted as authoritarian gravity centers in multilateral bodies, forming the core of countries that shield other authoritarian regimes from criticism and arguing in favor of a state-centric “dog does not eat dog” approach.

3.1 Dismiss Criticism of Domestic and Foreign Policies

Russia and China cooperate regularly in dismissing criticism toward their domestic and foreign policies. In Geneva, this can be seen most clearly in the UNHRC. Both Russia and China were elected to the Council for 2021 until 2023, and the first session of the Human Rights Council in 2021 already indicates close cooperation: out of 30 resolutions passed under the various items in the Human Rights Council session from February/March 2021, 15 were contentious votes and in all cases Russia and China voted in the same manner. Both countries successfully pushed for a resolution criticizing the effects of sanctions, which was adopted by a vote of 30 (including the support of all African countries) to 15 with two abstentions.⁹ In

⁹Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on March 23, 2021 (UN Human Rights Council, 2021).

turn, China was also one of the very few countries that supported Russia's motion to adjourn the Human Rights Council session following the failure of one special rapporteur to provide his report on time, see Fig. 1.

Both have also usually stood on the same sides during joint statement initiatives. For example, in July 2020 and in 2021, Russia supported joint statements launched by Belarus that strongly dismissed criticism toward China's policies in Xinjiang. The overall support for the initiative can be seen in Fig. 2. When Russia was criticized due to its aggression against Ukraine, China's stance alternated between support of Russia and abstention.

3.2 Shaping a Different Narrative—Through Policies and Personnel

Cooperation does not apply merely as a defense mechanism to dismiss international criticism, but in some cases also results in the promotion of a joint agenda and narratives. In 2021 Russia supported the Chinese stance on “mutually beneficial cooperation” on the UN Human Rights Council, thus a resolution that promotes a different, more state-centric and collective interpretation of human rights (UN Human Rights Council, 2021) (see Fig. 3).

With the return of the US to the UN Human Rights Council, both have joined forces in attacking not only the US, but also other Western countries in general for undue interference in domestic affairs and of double-standards referring to alleged human rights deficits in Western countries (Wientzek et al., 2021). The most recent example was China launching a joint statement criticizing Canada for “serious human rights violations against the indigenous people in Canada”—right after Canada had initiated a joint statement criticizing China's policies in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet.¹⁰ Another instrument to blur the discourse on human rights utilized by both has been the promotion of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) into forums reserved for NGOs. According to several observers in the Geneva ecosystem, this has contributed to diminishing the voices of truly independent human rights NGOs.

Both Russia and China also seem aligned when it comes to discussions about shaping standards for digital technologies. As a result, cooperation in international standardization organizations is increasingly emerging. This applies to highly sensitive issues such as the necessity to establish global standards for facial recognition. Supported by Russia, China is pushing for global standards in this area, something which—i.e. for ethical reasons—is strongly opposed by the EU and Western countries: global standards for facial recognition and surveillance technology—most recently in the ITU in 2020—in order to receive global approval for certain practices

¹⁰The full statement made within the framework of the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council can be found in: Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China (2021).

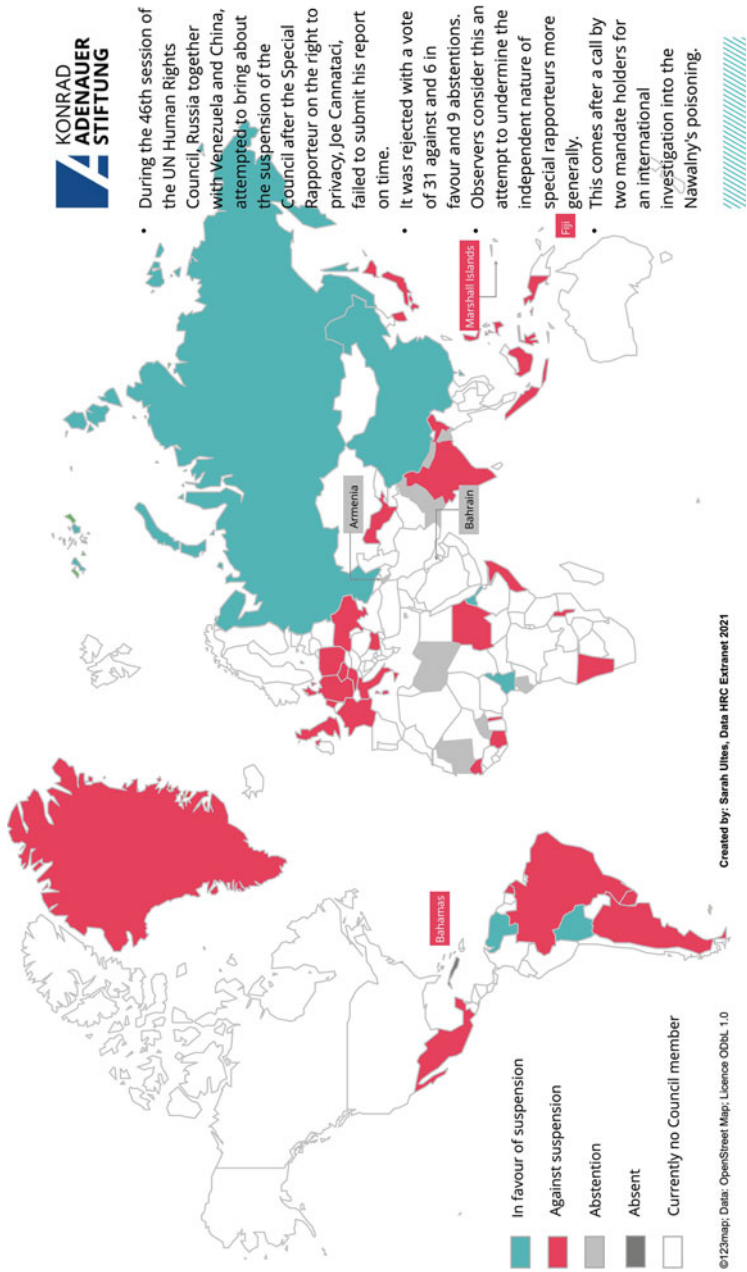


Fig. 1 Voting behavior regarding the proposed suspension of the UNHRC by Russia, Venezuela and China during the 46th UNHRC session, February/March 2021

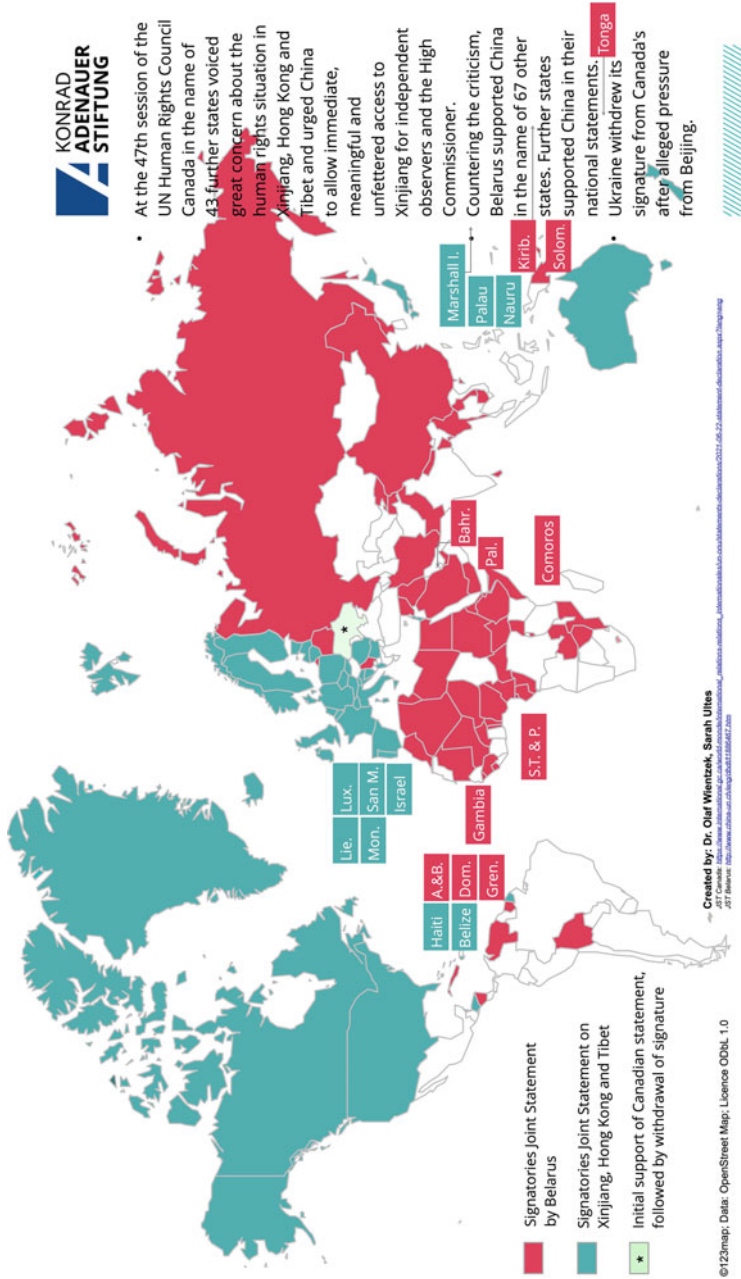


Fig. 2 Support within the UNHRC for Canadian and Belarusian joint statements exercising and dismissing criticism of Chinese human rights abuses, June/July 2021

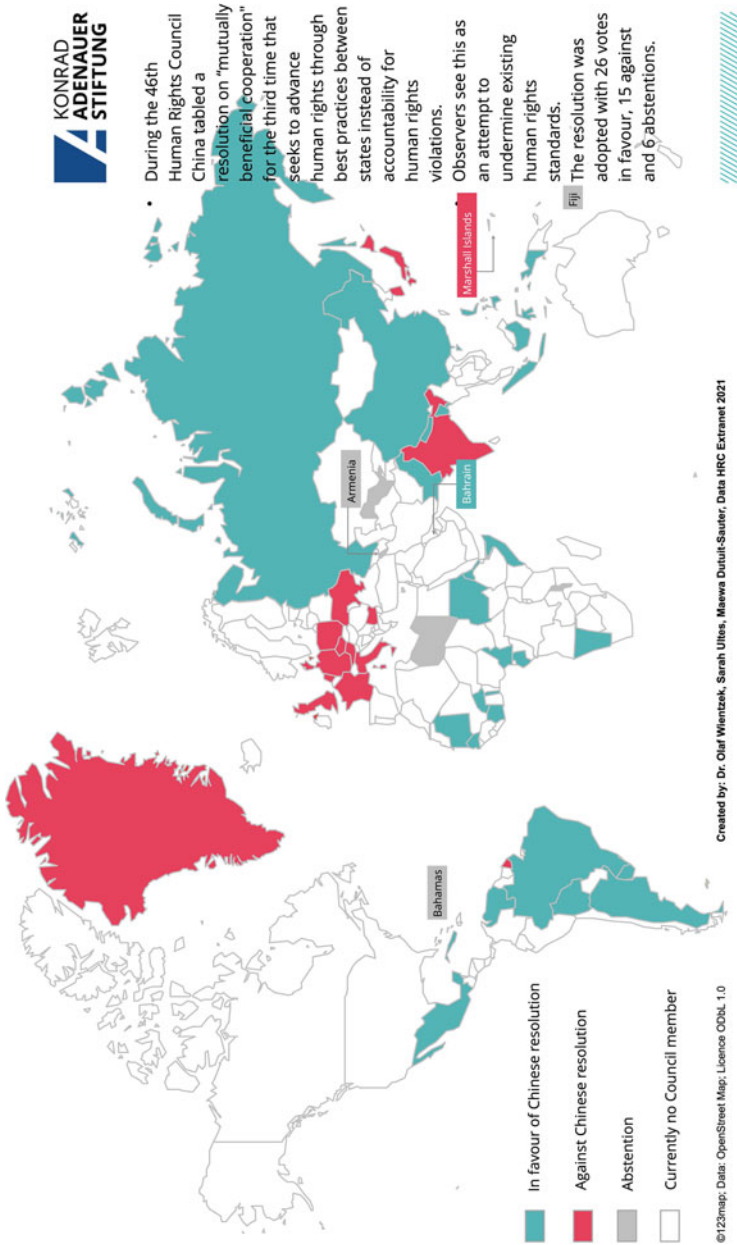


Fig. 3 Voting behavior in the UNHRC on a Chinese resolution on the role of human rights in the UN system, February/March 2021

that are hardly compatible with the right to privacy, and that can contribute to discriminatory practices. On the other hand, Russia is pushing to discuss questions of cyber security within the ITU mandate that critics consider an instrument to limit freedom of speech in digital forums. In general, China is supportive of the Russian stances in the ITU, though it is hard to speak of a fully-fledged strategic alliance in this context. While Russian diplomats focus strongly on cybersecurity, Chinese experts in these forums prefer to focus on artificial intelligence and new intellectual property rights.

Russia and China cooperate when it comes to personnel policy. One example is the emerging discussion of the successor for the post of the director general in the ITU. Russian candidate Rashid Ismaylov succeeding Houlin Zhao (Chinese national) can presumably count on the support of China, even though the prospects of his election have deteriorated significantly since the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Observers consider the choice of the future candidate as crucial for the future orientation of the standard setting organization.

However, as a recent example has demonstrated, cooperation does not always succeed: in 2021, both opposed the nomination of the Ambassador of Fiji, Nazhat Shameem Khan, as the new chair for the UN Human Rights Council, given that she was known as having a strong and outspoken stance on human rights violations. Similarly, the fact that China lost the race for the post of director general of the WIPO against a candidate from Singapore with a relatively clear vote in the last round in 2020 shows the limits of the Chinese-Russian alliance on personnel policy. Open support by China or Russia may even be considered toxic in some cases, which may be one of the reasons China was very cautious not to reveal its preferences during the search for successors to the director general positions of the WTO and the ILO. While China's support for WHO Director General Dr. Tedros was important for his election in 2017, this support has become a burden in the COVID crisis, as some countries have accused him of being too lenient with China following the COVID-19 outbreak. The limits of the cooperation became visible in spring 2022: Resolutions condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine were not only passed in the UNGA, but also in the UNHRC. Against Russia and China's will, the UNGA voted to suspend Russia from the UNHRC. Equally, the ILO decided to reduce cooperation with Russia.

3.3 Defensive Stance on Reform—A State-Centric Vision of Multilateralism

Both countries defend similar positions regarding the reform of UN organizations, defending an approach that emphasizes state sovereignty and is wary of the introduction of monitoring, let alone sanctioning mechanisms. This can be observed in the ongoing discussions about the reform of the WHO: both countries have jointly resisted demands by other countries to increase the political independence of the

WHO or reform the International Health Regulations (Fletcher, 2020), and neither is in favor of stronger external scrutiny in cases of outbreaks as suggested by some reform proposals, let alone of mandatory and immediate access for external observers or sanctioning mechanisms in case of non-compliance. Observers also fear that attempts to reform the UN Human Rights Council might lead to a coordinated attempt by Russia and China to weaken established standards in the process.

3.4 Russia and China as Beacons of the Autocratic Alliance in Multilateral Bodies

Russia and particularly China have also acted as authoritarian gravity centers¹¹ in multilateral bodies. Overall, China has been the primary gravity center and has been far more active in rallying supporters. This can be observed in various forums, be it in the Human Rights Council or in other forums such as WHO and Geneva-based SDOs. One of its key allies in several forums has been Pakistan—a country with which China has very deep economic (China-Pakistan economic corridor), political (joint containment of India) and military relations¹²: Islamabad’s support has been of key importance in avoiding resolutions critical of China’s policies in Xinjiang in the UNHRC.

Russia and China have equally served as staunch allies for autocracies such as Cuba and Venezuela, but also Eritrea, or other authoritarian states such as Egypt, Cameroon or Belarus. Several votes in the last session of the UN Human Rights Council show that China and Russia form the core group of the “autocratic alliance” in the UNHRC. Figure 4 shows which countries have demonstrated the strongest voting alignment with China in the UNHRC in 2019.

A recent example of this mutual autocratic solidarity could be witnessed at an urgent debate on Belarus that featured a virtual intervention of opposition leader and presidential candidate Svjlana Tsikhanouskaya. The representatives from China and Russia tried to derail the debate with repetitive interventions.

China and Russia also defend the abysmal human rights records of authoritarian states, i.e. regularly dismissing criticism directed toward Syria, Saudi Arabia, Belarus. Similarly, during debates on resolutions on Belarus, Russia, but also China, regularly put forward numerous amendments in order to water down the language. Several examples have shown that shielding other autocratic or semi-democratic states from criticism leads to an “unvirtuous cycle,” i.e. stronger loyalty from the countries concerned toward Russia or particularly China. In return, the countries concerned initiate joint statements that dismiss criticism toward China. It is often Cuba, Venezuela, Belarus or Cameroon that table statements or resolutions on

¹¹More on the concept of authoritarian gravity centers can be found in Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2020).

¹²A Chinese diplomat once even argued: Pakistan is our Israel (cf. Deen, 2010).

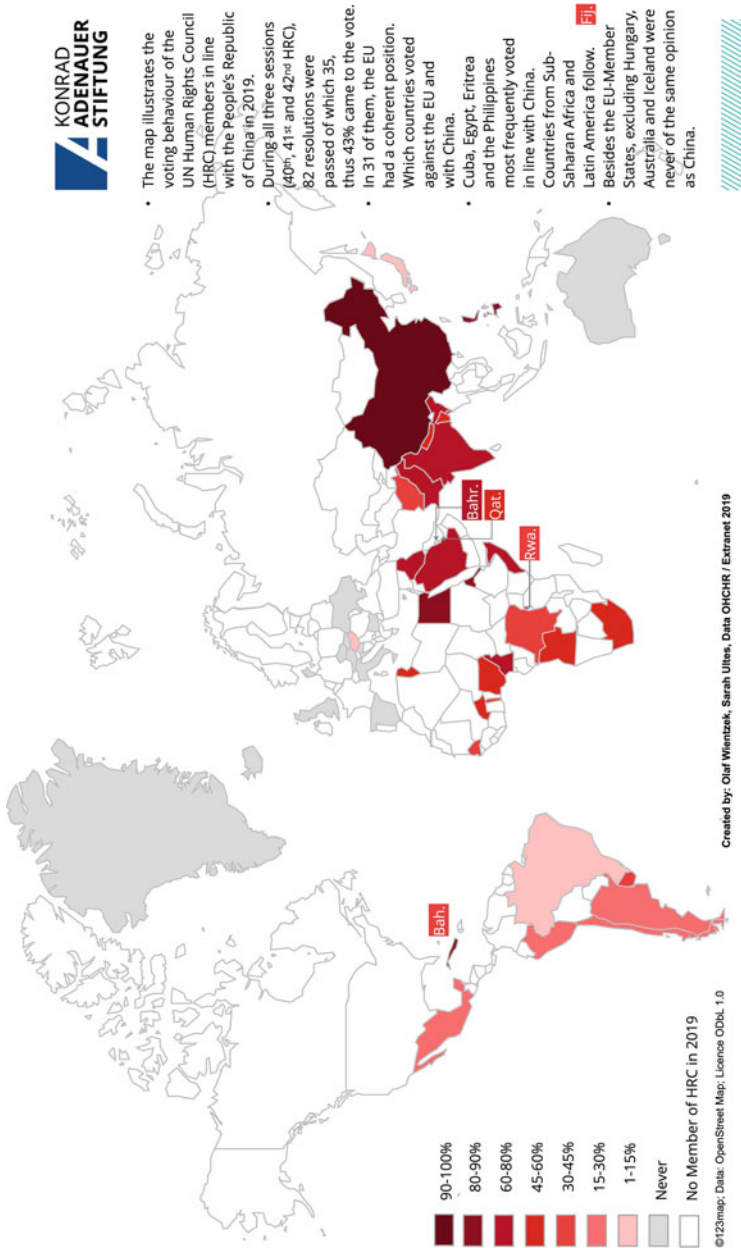


Fig. 4 Percentage of alignment with Chinese voting behavior in disputed resolutions in the UNHRC during 2019

China's behalf. Equally, China manages to leverage the support of countries with which it has close economic ties in order to influence voting behavior, thus sometimes even weakening the camp of—in principle—like-minded Western countries. The support, or lack thereof, in joint statements on the UN Human Rights Council paints a clear picture. Many Central and Eastern European countries that are included in the 17+1 initiative preferred not to join a critical joint statement—initiated by the UK—toward China's policy in Xinjiang and Hong Kong in 2020.

Despite some noteworthy successes, the “autocratic alliance” on the UN Human Rights Council often finds itself on the losing side and cannot take support for its own initiatives for granted. In order to avoid its resolution being voted down at the last Human Rights Council session of 2020, China pulled back a resolution on the interpretation and definition of human rights when it could not be certain it had the necessary votes.

While China, supported by Russia, has attempted to re-shape narratives, particularly in the area of human rights, it is remarkable that both sides rarely come forward with concrete multilateral initiatives. It is thus striking that, for example, in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, both actors have strongly used vaccine diplomacy but are playing only a secondary (China) or no role (Russia) in the ACT Accelerator or the COVAX initiative, which are important examples of ad-hoc multilateral instruments. While particularly China has regularly highlighted the importance of multilateral solutions in speeches, both have demonstrated their preference for bilateral support, which allows them to target and reward “reliable allies.”

Cooperation between Russia and China is not a sufficient condition for either side to grant success in international forums, however. Overall, the results are mixed.

But a number of reasons favor the effect of the Chinese-Russian cooperation.

1. West fatigue: among many (particularly developing) countries, one can sometimes detect a certain “West fatigue” and the perception of a disproportionate role Western countries play in multilateral forums not only financially, but also in shaping narratives. China—with partial success, particularly in the WTO, but also in the WHO and in the UN Human Rights Council—has managed to portray itself as an advocate for developing countries and has at times successfully managed to rally the African group or the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to its side. This is facilitated somewhat by the membership of China in the G77. Russia seems to benefit from this effect to a lesser extent, although in some cases the G77 have supported Russian candidacies in multilateral forums.
2. A slow West: in several cases—be it on personnel questions or on substance—Western countries were either not united, managed to unite too late or did not manage to build alliances quickly enough beyond their own camp. The election of the director general to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), during which Western disunity resulted in the election of a candidate from China, is just one example. Similarly, complaints about the lengthy internal EU coordination process—which leaves little time to acquire further allies aside from the “usual suspects”—can be heard in Geneva.

3. A lack of willingness of many states to challenge China or Russia for fear of repercussions. The relatively timid (and regularly unsuccessful) support for Taiwan's participation at the World Health Assembly seems to simply be a recognition of the fact that crossing blades with China in multilateral forums is simply not worth the fight. Even EU countries prefer not to position themselves too clearly on the side of Taiwan. Usually only the US, sometimes Canada and Australia as well as a dozen countries that recognize Taiwan, argue decisively for the inclusion of Taiwan in the WHA.

The influence of Russia's and China's cooperation has, however, also shown its limits for several reasons:

1. Good knowledge of procedures and instruments, the ability to build alliances and leveraging economic and political influence are important, but the (still) relatively small financial footprint in multilateral arenas in Geneva somewhat limits the impact and—this should not be underestimated—the credibility of the commitment of Moscow and Beijing to multilateral organizations. There continues to be a stark discrepancy between strongly-worded commitments to multilateral solutions and the absence of financial support for truly global initiatives.
2. In most cases, the cooperation had a primarily defensive character: dismissing criticism, and avoiding reform of multilateral organizations. However, only in a few cases did China and/or Russia manage to bring forward constructive proposals or initiatives to address global challenges. For example, during the COVID-19 crisis, most of the initiatives to combat the pandemic on a multilateral level were initiated by Western or Latin American countries—and not by China or Russia. The joint attempts to redefine narratives, particularly on human rights, are notable and should not be underestimated, but are not part of a strategy that covers all organizations.
3. While a sizable number of countries may sympathize with Russia or China, both countries fail to gather majorities for their positions among the countries that may not belong to the Western camp but are not autocracies either.
4. Disillusionment: Among at least some states, there is a certain disillusionment as to China's intentions. The pressure China exerted on Ukraine following its support for a critical joint statement on China's policy in Xinjiang and Hong Kong during the UN Human Rights Council in June 2021¹³ served as another eye-opener that help from China does not usually come without a price tag. This was also mirrored by the weakening support for China's candidacy for the UN Human Rights Council.¹⁴ This is even more true for Russia since February 2022: Several states from Africa, Asia or Latin America that usually tend to abstain on

¹³China urged Ukraine to withdraw its support for the joint statement by threatening to withhold Chinese COVID-19 vaccines for Ukraine, see Keaten (2021).

¹⁴In 2020, China received only 139 votes for its place in the UNHRC (thus 41 places less than in the last elections in 2016).

country resolutions or controversial issues, strongly condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Overall, the cooperation between Russia and China does not yet seem to be a fully-fledged, coordinated strategic alliance with a consolidated vision applied across multilateral bodies, but rather functions as an (increasingly regular) tactical alliance.

4 Options for the West

Chinese-Russian cooperation in UN forums is a challenge for the West. While both countries are needed as important partners to address global challenges such as climate change or disarmament, they share a very different approach to multilateralism, which is in clear opposition to a Western understanding. This does not only concern the UN Human Rights Council, but also the role multilateral organizations are supposed to play. By breaking the normative hegemony of the West on the values and rules of multilateralism, China and Russia are attempting to reduce Western influence in general and in countries they consider as zones of influence in particular.

This should be a key concern for the West: if China and Russia determine values and standards, this will affect the political and economic influence of the West. Two examples: if IT standards are shaped not by the West but by China, this will have a detrimental effect for businesses, as rules will be adopted that are closer to the needs of Chinese businesses and not a non-market economy model. Also, being able to refer to an "ITU standard" is already an important ticket for market entry in third countries. If the global interpretation of human rights shifts to an understanding shaped by China and Russia, this might in the long term also lead to the questioning of certain values at home. Liberal democracies however do have options to counter this:

4.1 *Stronger Engagement in Multilateral Forums*

Due to the frustration with their seeming inability to reform and to address the challenges of a changed global environment, there are increasingly discussions in the US and some Western think tanks about alternative forums to the UN Human Rights Council, or to the WHO or the WTO (Reinsch & Caporal, 2021). These considerations are somewhat understandable in the current situation but they still do not seem realistic. Even the departure by the US from the Human Rights Council in 2018 did not delegitimize the organization for a vast majority of states—in particular, it merely led to a bolder stance from China. Thus, in order to limit the influence of China and Russia, Germany, European countries and Western countries in general

need to engage more strongly in these organizations despite all their flaws and biases.

Stronger engagement should also be understood in financial terms. China and Russia may not be adequate contributors to some of the Geneva-based organizations, but especially China's contributions have been increasing. If, on the other hand, Western countries decide to decrease their contributions, it will not only further damage the ability of these organizations to fulfill their mandate, but also make them more vulnerable to authoritarian influence. The EU's and particularly Germany's increasing financial engagement and push for an increase in assessed contributions (thus increasing the organizations political independence), as set out in the Franco-German WHO reform paper in August 2020, are a step in the right direction. The recent reductions in the UK's contributions is a more worrying sign, as the UK is one of the pillar countries in various policy fields of the UN.

Increased financial engagement does not mean turning a blind eye to flaws inside these organizations. What would be needed instead is a "tough love" approach, assuring political and financial engagement but coupled with a stronger push for reform. In this context it will be important to agree on common proposals: there are numerous initiatives to reform the WHO, for example, but the push for reform will have a better chance of success if like-minded countries achieve a consensus on a common proposal.

Initiatives such as the "Alliance for Multilateralism" (initiated by France and Germany) or a future "Alliance of Democracies" (as suggested by US president Joe Biden) can help in this endeavor if they succeed at rallying like-minded countries and complement these forums, or are drivers of reform in these UN organizations. In order to fulfill higher ambitions (joint general statements), these initiatives would need to have a clear set of criteria as to who can be a member (and who cannot) and develop a common vision on rules and values of multilateral cooperation in the future.

Viable multilateral bodies and initiatives that are capable of delivering may also help to counterbalance attempts by Russia's and China's preference for bilateral support, which creates not only economic but also political dependencies.

4.2 A More Strategic Personnel Policy

As some painful examples of the past several years have demonstrated, Europe and the West as a whole will need to act more quickly, be more strategic and coordinate better when it comes to personnel policies. There should be a clearer joint strategy, not only among the EU countries, but also with key like-minded allies such as the UK, Canada, Australia, Japan, Ukraine, New Zealand and the US on which positions are considered of key importance. More importantly, alliance building with other groups (such as the African Group, countries from Latin America and Southeast Asia) is crucial in order to avoid key positions in which norms are shaped to be held by representatives of states, such as Russia or China, that aim to redefine policy and

discourse the way they do. The successful rallying of like-minded allies (including but not limited to Western countries) in the campaign in the context of the WIPO Secretary General election in 2020 should serve as a positive example. The next challenge will be the elections at the ITU in which a candidate from the US has entered the race against a candidate from Russia. Aside from the top positions, it will be important to facilitate and encourage one's own diplomatic staff to acquire positions in international organizations. It might also be important to consider a change in deployment policy for the permanent missions, favoring staff who have already acquired relevant previous experience in multilateral or regional forums.

4.3 *Building Alliances*

Given that most organizations are based on “one country—one vote” logic, it is crucial to forge alliances even beyond one's own comfort zone or like-minded group. Neither the authoritarian alliance nor like-minded Western countries have—on their own—a majority in multilateral organizations. This is particularly true of the African Group, which on many questions is remarkably well-coordinated, is often pivotal in order to create majorities or at least increase pressure on blocking countries. Intensifying outreach toward the African Group, or other relatively like-minded countries from Asia or Latin America, can play a crucial role in containing the influence of authoritarian actors. This will, however, also mean compromising on some long-held positions. These compromises will at times be hurtful, but winning the “neutral middle” will be crucial in order to not push them into the arms of Russia and China. Even thorny issues such as discussions on agriculture or controversial global health questions should not be taboo in this context, as that would prevent China or Russia from styling themselves as the defender of the developing countries. While a sizable number of African countries supported the suspension of Russia from the UNHRC, one should not take this support for granted. The reproach by some African diplomats that Western countries are applying double standards should not be taken lightly.

4.4 *Leading by Example*

Personnel policies and building alliances are important pillars, but the most important issue will be to not only talk the talk, but also walk the walk in the respective institutions. Supporting initiatives to address the global public good, such as the COVAX initiative, humanitarian initiatives, but also practical steps to increase the ability of developing countries to participate in global trade, will be important to (re-) gain credibility and in many cases support. Russia and China—as could be seen in the framework of the last UN Human Rights Council—like to cite the West's own shortcomings and limited solidarity, whether that means referring to racist incidents

in the United States or alleged serious human rights violations against the indigenous people in Canada¹⁵: While many if not most of these accusations can and should be seen as (sometimes rather vulgar) attempts of “whataboutism,” this does not mean that the West should not try to abide by the highest standards and cooperate with the various representatives and instruments of the UN Human Rights Council as closely as possible.

If the West is not united and misses the opportunity to strategically construct alliances beyond the “usual allies,” the effects of Chinese-Russian cooperation in multilateral forums will increase and may over the long-term change the paradigms of multilateralism. Aside from this normative shift, this would seriously affect the core interests of Germany, the EU and the West as a whole.

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Part IV
The Way Forward: How Could the West
Cope with Russia and China?

What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO



Rainer Meyer zum Felde

1 Introduction

Is there a deepened strategic cooperation between Russia and China pointing to an actual military alliance (in form if not in name)? And why is it of high importance to clarify whether Russia and China are eternal rivals or working on building an alliance? The participants of an international workshop of think tank experts conducted in Berlin in mid-January 2020 that this author attended came to a clear assessment—there was broad consensus that what we face is an emerging alliance between Russia and China—in form, if not in name.¹ In particular, the experts agreed that:

1. Russia and China are united in their strategic aim to turn the current international order, which they perceive as dominated by the West and led by the US, into a multipolar world with zones of interests linked to the greatest powers.
2. They are clearly backing each other while ganging up against the West and are increasingly coordinating their work, including through military exercises (which are key for developing trust, increasing military interoperability, and for sending strategic messages).
3. While they are like-minded and similar in many regards, they are also complementary in the designs of their military-strategic postures:

¹The workshop entitled “Russia-China: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?” was hosted by the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University, the Foundation for Science and Democracy and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation on January 13–14, 2020 in Berlin. The basic argument of this article goes back to the author’s presentation at the workshop (Meyer zum Felde, 2020a) and the text was finalized in late November 2021, with minor revisions made in April 2022.

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- (a) China is focusing on the maritime dimension with a long-term and strategic perspective, its aspiration being to become the world's leading great power by 2049 (the 100th anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China).
- (b) Putin's Russia is a continental land power and one of only two nuclear superpowers. It acts opportunistically and takes risks if there is a promising opportunity to restore some of its lost imperial greatness.

It is this combination of unity, resolve, like-mindedness and similarities on the one hand and of complementarity in their postures on the other that makes an emerging Russian-Chinese Alliance highly dangerous for the West.

Further, both countries have strong leaders who have no need to find multilateral consensus. This allows for hybrid campaigns creating ambiguity, as well as for high-intensity military offensive campaigns on short notice, prepared by "snap-exercises." Both lead patriotic and heroic people who are fully behind them, with high levels of confidence to fight and win a patriotic war, if necessary. Both have felt humiliated by the West during their history, and still feel humiliated at the present time. Both are revisionists—Russia is looking back 30 years to the former greatness of the Soviet Union and to Imperial Russia, while China is looking back hundreds of years to the time when it was the center of the civilized world.² Both are increasingly gaining ground with their more assertive, self-confident behavior: Russia has been successful in Syria, Libya, and the wider Middle East, filling the growing power vacuum left there by the USA; China has been successfully pushing its expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Both generate the preconditions and prerequisites for achieving their revisionist aims and ambitions—in geopolitical, geo-economical, and geostrategic terms. They may consider themselves to be overall strategically defensive—but they are both capable of acting aggressively, including with offensive military operations at the regional level in their respective "near abroad": Russia in the Black Sea and Baltic Sea regions; China around Taiwan and in the South China Sea. They can adopt a "division of labor" approach together: China acting in the Indo-Pacific; Russia in Northeastern and Southeastern Europe; and Russia, with Iran, Syria, Libya in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

²See chapter "Putin's Russia: Global Strategic Outlook and Policies—What Role for China?" by Hannes Adomeit.

2 What an Emerging Military Alliance Between Russia and China Could Look Like

2.1 *Examples from History and the Lessons the West Can Learn from Them*

Historic examples such as the Soviet-German Rapallo agreement after World War I and the German-Japanese-Italian alliance during World War II show that interest-driven, purpose-oriented military alliances can be of a very different nature, duration and intensity.

There is a wide spectrum of possible manifestations—on one end, highly integrated joint and combined planning within the framework of a formal alliance already in peacetime, and coordinated military operations across different theaters in a great war (as was the case between imperial Germany and Austria in World War I, or the USA and UK in World War II). On the other end of the spectrum, it is possible that even if an ad-hoc military alliance is formally declared, no concrete military cooperation actually happens, neither in broad terms based on common aims nor in the coordinated planning of operations across respective theaters.

When asking what an opportunistic de-facto military alliance between Russia and China could mean for Europe's security, the answer must therefore differentiate from the outset between several possibilities:

- (a) Is it only limited cooperation in some fields that both partners are interested in (like in the German-USSR Rapallo model of the 1920s)?
- (b) Is it a de facto alliance with a geopolitically regional division of labor, but lacking in-depth coordination or orchestrated joint action (like the German-Japanese example in World War II)?
- (c) Or, do we see an emerging military alliance that is based on a strategic concept with highly integrated planning and commonly coordinated execution on a global scale—like the British-American model during World War II, which later gave rise to NATO?

These three different types of potential alliances would require different responses and would have different consequences for NATO allies on both sides of the Atlantic and their like-minded partners around the globe. In principle, therefore, the following three hypothetical “models” deserve attention and proper analysis:

- (a) *Limited military cooperation* between Russia and China in select fields of mutual interest.
- (b) *A de facto (rather than formal) military alliance* of global reach against Western institutions and US-led alliances that is, however, not underpinned by strategic coordination.
- (c) *A formal political and military alliance* between Russian and China (possibly joined by other regional powers such as Iran) based on a strategic framework

with integrated planning and capable of coordinated, large scale and high-intensity operations simultaneously in two or more theaters of war (i.e. both in Europe, its periphery and in the Indo-Pacific region).

2.2 *Implications and Consequences of a “Model B” Alliance—Dangerous and Not Unlikely*

Even the most limited case of a “Model A” type cooperation, and certainly the moderate “Model B” version of a Russian-Chinese de facto military alliance would have far-reaching consequences for Europe’s security. Conversely, “Model C” seems as yet unlikely (though not entirely impossible). Therefore, this analysis focuses on Model B as a worst-case scenario that cannot be ruled out nor deemed highly unlikely, and discusses its possible consequences for Europe’s security. Model B supposes an *opportunistic* rather than a strategic alliance between Russia and China. This means a de-facto military alliance where both Russia and China are united in their geopolitical intent to change the international rules-based order according to their interests; jointly undermine the unity and resolve within Western institutions and US-led alliances; and follow a “division of labor” principle, taking separate approaches in their respective regions without strictly coordinating their plans and activities. The framework of such a non-formalized, purpose-driven de facto alliance would *not* be based on a coordinated geostrategic approach and would *not* be underpinned by integrated operational planning, and would therefore also *not* include pre-planned mutual support in case of a conflict with military land, air or naval forces. However, even such a moderate kind of de facto military alliance between Russia and China would have far-reaching negative consequences for NATO in Europe, both at the geopolitical and strategic-operational level, and could become a nightmare scenario for Europe’s security. What could this look like, and how can it be prevented from happening?

2.3 *A “Nightmare Scenario” Based on “Model B”: War Between China and the USA in the Indo-Pacific Creates an Opportunity for Russia to Achieve Revisionist Aims in Europe*

In this scenario, an opportunistic, audacious Russian leader uses the opportunity of an escalating major confrontation between China and the USA in the Indo-Pacific region to simultaneously test NATO in Europe with the aim of achieving as many of his revisionist territorial and geopolitical goals as possible. Such an opportunistic large-scale attack against NATO in Europe, conducted by Russia while the USA is fully engaged in a major war with China in the Indo-Pacific, becomes more likely the

more some particular *prerequisites* would occur. The following list contains such elements that could change the risk calculus in Moscow.

Russian willingness to accept the risk of launching a large, military campaign of high intensity with regular forces (i.e. a regional war) in Europe would rise,

- (a) if the USA got engaged in a major conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific region and both sides escalated the conflict to high intensity military campaigns rather than keeping their power struggle limited to political, diplomatic, economic or other non-military instruments;
- (b) if in such a conflict with China, the USA were forced to commit all available air, land, maritime and other forces and capabilities to this theater of war in order to gain the upper hand;
- (c) if the USA's focus on major military confrontation with China created significant gaps in NATO's deterrence and defense posture in Europe and the Europeans were unwilling or unable to fill those gaps³;
- (d) and if Germany, as the key NATO ally in Europe's center, or a group of allies around Germany, could be discouraged by hybrid activities or nuclear coercion from fulfilling their NATO commitments in peacetime, during the transition from peacetime to crisis and conflict, or during the course of war. This would be the case, e.g., if the political and military decision-making process were delayed, the transfer of authority regarding in-place formations was not timely transferred, reinforcements were not rapidly deployed, or if Germany did not fully play its critical role in the Supreme Allied Commander Europe's (SACEUR) rear area of operations.

Russia's leadership would be even more encouraged to take risks if they could plausibly rely on the following assumptions regarding their ally China:

- (a) Firstly, as a result of China's military buildup in terms of quantity and quality, especially in the maritime, air, space, cyber and also nuclear dimensions over recent years, China would be capable and willing to engage the US in a full-blown war, and China would no longer be forced to avoid confrontation due to military weakness. As of this writing, there is no reason any more for China to

³Of specific relevance would be areas critical for denying Russia large-scale offensive operations. In Moscow's risk calculus, the primary factor is the extent to which the US remains present and capable of fighting and winning a war in the European theater; however, European NATO allies' ability to deliver their own share and fill gaps is another major factor. In terms of military forces and capabilities, key for operational success are rapidly available larger formations with high combat effectiveness as reinforcements (armoured brigades and divisions), enablers for joint multi-domain operations, sufficient air power to achieve air superiority as the indispensable prerequisite for successful operations in the land and maritime domains, and sufficient naval power to maintain a firm grip on NATO's sea lines of communication across the North Atlantic and including the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. If NATO's defense posture became obviously hollow particularly in these critical areas, be it due to shifting US priorities or an unwillingness of key European force providers (Germany, Great Britain, France) to step in, this would certainly change the risk calculus in Russia.

fear rapid defeat right from the outset of hostilities, while unlike in the past, US military planners now need to take significant US losses into account.⁴

- (b) Secondly, a military conflict between the US and China would be large-scale and long-lasting, so that in the USA, not much attention, political energy, military forces and capabilities would be left for a crisis provoked by Russia in other regions of secondary priority, e.g. in Europe's Baltic Sea region. It would be helpful for Russia if China's assertiveness created the perception in the USA that a military confrontation is unavoidable sooner or later. This would imply that the USA would re-allocate the bulk of its air and naval forces as well as its force-multiplying enablers to the Indo-Pacific region and also make these services their budgetary priority at the expense of the US army. For deterrence and defense in Europe, this would mean that in the land domain only, a minimum of reinforcements could be expected, and that the key prerequisite for any success on the ground—a favorable air situation—would have to be achieved by European air forces.⁵ *As of late 2021, none of the European nations had any comparable capacity nor the plans or budgets to compensate for such a strategic re-allocation of US forces and capabilities.*
- (c) Thirdly, Russia would have a free hand and perhaps could count on Chinese support with covert or open hybrid activities against all critical elements of NATO's and the EU's posture.
- (d) Fourthly, with regard to China, no precautionary measures would be needed in the Far East (Siberia, Arctic) to protect Russia's territorial integrity and strategic interests from China.

Needless to say, the Russian calculus would be most encouraged to take on high risks:

- (a) if China *contributed pro-actively* with substantial forces and capabilities (including disruptive technologies and future force multiplying enablers) to coordinated conventional military operations beyond covert hybrid support. This could be done at Europe's southern flank with a "second front," e.g. through a deployment of Chinese naval forces and land-based missile systems for additional A2/AD bubbles for sea denial in the Mediterranean and along Europe's sea lines of communication to its partners in the Indo-Pacific;
- (b) if China closely cooperated with Russia vis-à-vis Europe in coercive *nuclear messaging* and in their strategic missile activities (and vice versa Russia with China in the Indo-Pacific theater).⁶

These points are important for answering the question of what Europeans can and should do to prevent their nightmare scenario from becoming reality. Point by point,

⁴For reflections on the military power balance between the USA and China, see Department of Defense (2021) and Colby (2021a).

⁵For a reflection on the implications of a military conflict between China and the US for European security see Colby (2021b).

⁶See chapter "China-Russia Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence" by Brian G. Carlson.

they indicate exactly what European NATO nations can and in their own best interest must do to discourage or deny every single prerequisite. Overall, they must strive to prevent any constellation in which these prerequisites all apply together.

3 The Impact of a Russian-Chinese De Facto Alliance on Europe's Security

What would the negative consequences of a military alliance between Russia and China be in detail? And how would the political and military situation be affected?

The emergence of a Russian-Chinese-led military alliance would have a series of consequences at the level of security, defense and alliance policy, as well as at the military-operational level. These consequences also need a detailed analysis with a view to peacetime relationships during international crisis management and regarding defense in case of crisis and conflict.

3.1 Consequences of a Russian-Chinese Military Alliance for Peacetime Relationships

NATO as a whole and its member states need to review their entire policy toward and their relationships not just with Russia, but also with China fundamentally.

As for *Russia*, a military alliance with China will make the Russian relationship with NATO neither better nor worse, as there was not much left from the previous “strategic partnership” between NATO and Russia, neither from the NATO-Russia Founding Act (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1997), nor from the wider “Partnership for Peace” framework even before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁷ As a consequence of Russia’s aggressive behavior toward Ukraine in 2014, including the illegal annexation of Crimea and the first change of territorial borders in Europe by military force since World War II, and the subsequent large-scale 2022 invasion, NATO’s relationship with Russia remains bad. There is little hope of moving toward meaningful dialogue as of this writing.

Regarding *China*, the situation is different and more fluid. Although NATO language with regard to China has intensified in recent months, China has so far been perceived by NATO as a whole only as a challenge, not as a threat (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021).⁸ However, the more China’s military cooperation activities with Russia provide evidence of a de facto military alliance, the more

⁷For reflections on the deteriorating relations between NATO and Russia, see Meyer zum Felde (2018) and Brauss (2021).

⁸For a reflection on NATO’s relations to China, see Kaim and Stanzel (2021).

NATO and all its member states have reason to perceive not only Russia, but also China as a threat to their security and in military terms, as an adversary in times of military conflict. They all would need to change their relations with China accordingly, with far-reaching consequences across all fields from diplomatic relations to financial, trade, economic, and military relations. It can be expected that China will react—the challenge will then be to manage the deteriorating relationship with China in a way that does not lead to all sides finding themselves caught in a downward spiral that does not allow any more for cooperation in other essential policy fields, such as climate change and global trade.

3.2 Consequences of a Russian-Chinese Military Alliance for International Crisis Management

Regarding crisis management and stabilization in Europe (Ukraine, Balkans) and at Europe's southern and southeastern periphery (Libya, Sahel zone, ISIS, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Yemen), it will become more difficult, complex and complicated to achieve a common view among actors and parties involved. In several crises within Europe and on Europe's periphery, Russia has expanded its influence and quite often acts as a spoiler rather than a responsible actor.⁹ Part of the geopolitical reality is that where the USA has withdrawn and left vacuums, China, with its expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including its military dimension, has meanwhile also stepped in and has become a European power.¹⁰

For practical crisis management around the globe and specifically across Africa and the Middle East, a military alliance between Russia and China would mean that the role of the United Nations and its Security Council (UNSCR) would become even more limited due to vetoes by Russia and China. Crisis management missions of the IFOR, SFOR, and KFOR type without an UNSCR Chapter VII mandate ("enforce compliance") would then become difficult. Furthermore, Russia and China will constantly present a coordinated counter-narrative to de-legitimize Western crisis management missions, and to defend their own flagrant violations of international law (e.g. Russia on Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and China on territorial claims in the South China Sea or possibly Taiwan).¹¹

⁹For Russia's role in Europe and Europe's periphery, see Bechev (2019); Stronski and Himes (2019) and "Syria, Ukraine, Libya, Yemen" (2020)).

¹⁰For China's expanding global influence, see McDonald and Burgoyne (2019); for China's influence in Europe, see Zeneli (2019); Bhadrakumar (2019) and "China's Expanding Influence in Europe and Eurasia" (2019).

¹¹For China's approach to interventions, see Fung (2019).

3.3 *Consequences of a Russian-Chinese Military Alliance for Deterrence and Defense in Crisis and Conflict*

Deterrence and defense is, of course, the field with the most significant and the most serious impact and consequences for NATO, both at the level of defense policy and at the military-operational level.

3.3.1 Political Aspects

On *Russia's* side, when pitted against NATO as the adversary in a conflict, the backing of a military alliance with China would have hugely positive effects that cannot be overestimated.

First and foremost, there would no longer be a need for precautionary measures against an “eternal rival” with incalculable interests along a long, shared border in the Far East, which for decades and centuries had required a lot of military attention, effort, and permanent stationing of military forces and capabilities.¹² With China as an ally on its side, Russia in its military planning can make all its military resources available and concentrate them for a high-intensity, large-scale military operation against NATO if it wished to launch a regional invasion in Northeastern or Southeastern Europe.

Russia could also count on political support from China as a great power with permanent member status on the UNSCR, which in times of tension and crisis is an important source of legitimacy.¹³ It will become more difficult for the West and within NATO to condemn Russia's behavior as aggressive, illegitimate and not in line with international law if China and possibly other nations around the globe opposed this view and prevented the UNSCR from making respective resolutions.

Depending on how close the cooperation in their military alliance would be, Russia could also count on the influence China has across Europe through its BRI. In particular, the state-owned Chinese enterprises across Europe could play a helpful role to the advantage of Russia and the disadvantage of NATO's European member states and the EU, if so directed by Beijing—especially during the transition from peacetime routine business to crises and conflict. This creates a huge resilience problem for NATO and the EU as well as for each single member state that is relevant in NATO's responsiveness concept and during crisis and conflict that is vulnerable in its critical civil-military infrastructure (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland).

¹²See chapter “Imperialist, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China's Changing Views of Russia” by Jo Inge Bekkevold.

¹³See chapter “Cooperation Between Russia and China in Multilateral Organizations—A Tactical or a Strategic Alliance?” by Olaf Wientzek.

Technological cooperation across the civil-military complexes of both powers¹⁴ could help both Russia and China to further modernize and improve the quality of their assets toward modern, digitalized warfare including “joint-all-domain” operations also on their side. The effect will be that the West can no longer be sure to effectively compensate for the larger quantity of Russian or Chinese forces and capabilities through the higher technical complexity and quality of Western systems. As a long-term result, NATO would face a counter-alliance led by two great powers, both of them indeed then *peer* actors.

Russian energy resources and dominance due to Europe’s dependence on energy supplies on the one hand, and China’s growing technological leadership in new technologies which are “dual use” for both civilian and military applications on the other are difficult to assess factors and may have far-reaching consequences for security and defense.¹⁵ If properly managed bilaterally between China and Russia to their advantage and used as weapons against NATO, it will be a complex challenge for NATO allies to develop effective political, economic and technological counter-activities.

Another field where both powers can benefit from their complementarity to their advantage (and to America’s and Europe’s disadvantage) would be their approach to the land and maritime domains. NATO already has difficulties coping with Russia as Europe’s predominant land power and its operational implications for defense. China is systematically expanding its role as Asia’s predominant maritime power (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2018), with nevertheless also the potential for creating an unprecedentedly large army for land warfare, as well as for high-tech/digital-based air and space power.

On the US side, a military alliance between China and Russia including a strategic “division of labor” with a Russian focus on Europe and a Chinese focus on the Indo-Pacific would most likely be a further incentive for the USA (with a bipartisan consensus) to give priority to the Indo-Pacific as the most dynamic region, focus on the primary challenger China, and concentrate forces and capabilities in this region (Colby, 2021b). A military alliance between Russia and China would not only mean a “Russia supported by China” and hence, a more serious Russian threat against NATO in Europe—which would require more US support for Europe, but also, and the USA may see it this other way round, a “China supported by Russia” (which remains a nuclear superpower on the same footing as the USA), and hence a more serious Chinese threat for the Indo-Pacific region! This implies that Europe as a region with lower priority could be left with the problem of deterring and defending against the threat posed by Russia with significantly less attention, awareness,

¹⁴See chapters “Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor” by Sarah Kirchberger and “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix.

¹⁵See chapters “Digital Authoritarianism and Technological Cooperation in Sino-Russian Relations: Common Goals and Diverging Standpoints” by Elina Sinkkonen & Jussi Lassila and “Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution” by Richard A. Bitzinger & Michael Raska.

interest, political energy, military presence and also military reinforcements from the other side of the Atlantic.

This consequence would hit *Europe* hard. For many decades, Europeans have developed an understanding that their mission during conflict is in essence to contribute their forces as junior partners alongside very substantial US in-place formations of highest fighting quality, with air supremacy provided by overwhelming US air power and under the umbrella of unique extended nuclear deterrence. Primarily, US naval forces would maintain a firm grip on the North Atlantic, and after the arrival of masses of US REFORGER¹⁶ reinforcements, NATO allies would then collectively stop any Soviet/Russian invasion with counterattacks against all enemy echelons (follow-on forces attack), or by escalating the conflict vertically (nuclear political messaging) or horizontally (Russia's soft underbelly). All of this was based on the fundamental assumption that the main force provider for Europe across all domains, both in the conventional and the nuclear role, would always be the USA, and that it would perform this main role deliberately. This view now seems to be overtaken by the US strategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific, the changed US priorities, a fatigue with the burdens of being the leading world power, and of course the fundamentally changed geopolitical situation. To what extent the 2022 invasion of Ukraine will reverse this trend is as yet uncertain.

As US defense officials have stated since 2014 time and again, Europe can still trust that the USA remains reliable in their security guarantees for Europe and will continue to be the most relevant NATO ally. But Europeans also must realize that this will no longer include a massive American peacetime presence in Europe, nor overwhelming air power from day one of a high intensity war, and for sure not a deployment of masses of heavy reinforcements for Europe across the Atlantic. Since the Obama administration, the message has been made clear: "The cavalry will be there, but not the entire US cavalry any more."¹⁷ Such expectations would be even more unrealistic if and when it came to a major war between "the West" and a Russia-China Alliance, simultaneously in both the Indo-Pacific and the European region.

Even if a major crisis between the USA and China in the Indo-Pacific region did *not* escalate into open war, and it were only Russia which escalated a crisis into a military conflict with NATO in Europe, the USA could not simply return to the old pattern and engage fully within Europe to protect and defend its European allies against Russian aggression "with the entire US cavalry." As long as the USA has reason to expect that China could attack in Asia simultaneously with a Russian aggression in Europe, it has no other choice but to put its center of emphasis on the higher prioritized Indo-Pacific region. This means "China first," and leaves it to the

¹⁶Until 1989, REFORGER ("Return of Forces to Germany") was the periodically exercised concept for large scale reinforcement of Europe in times of tension with masses of continental US (CONUS) land and air forces.

¹⁷Jim Townsend, the Pentagon's Defense Director for Europe, brought it to this well understandable point, in a NATO meeting in 2016 that this author attended.

Europeans to defend themselves against Russia with limited US support only (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2021, pp. 95–96). Compared with the former American priority in World War II, “Germany first,” Europe has to face the reversal of that order and recognize the consequences from now on.

3.3.2 Military-Operational Aspects

The military-operational aspects that are relevant for the planning and conduct of wartime operations in Europe are just as far-reaching as the political implications of a Sino-Russian de facto alliance. They include, in telegram style:

1. A higher likelihood that a crisis could be escalated to open conflict.
2. A significantly changed constellation of time, space, and forces, i.e. of all fundamental operational categories, to the advantage of an aggressor, would be the most important impact of a military alliance between Russia and China.
3. Initial operations: Faster success for the aggressor that will also be easier to achieve through a de facto alliance with China.
 - (a) On *Russia's* side, this changed time-space-forces constellation where Russia as the aggressor has the advantage of initiative and is able to determine where, when, and how the attack takes place anyway would mean that Russia could conduct its initial offensive operations with increased effectiveness. It could concentrate more forces and capabilities in its chosen theater of war, attack in echelons, and achieve early breakthroughs against even a sustained defense, without any need to keep other large forces as reserves in other (eastern) military districts.
 - (b) On *NATO's* side, the opposite effect would become clear: reduced effectiveness of defense operations (due to fewer US land forces and lack of rapid reinforcements), questionable air superiority (due to reduced US air power), and questionable access to and maritime dominance over the Baltic and Black Seas (due to Russian dominance with A2/AD).
4. Follow-on operations: It will be easier to discourage and deter the launch of NATO counterattacks to reoccupy lost territory.
 - (a) On the *Russian* side, overwhelming forces would be available to counter a NATO counterattack due to activated and re-deployed armies and army corps from all military districts, including reserves from the Far East.
 - (b) On *NATO's* side, a defeat in its initial operations could lead to insufficient political will, unity and resolve to restore the *status quo ante* through large counterattack operations after several weeks or months. For such a joint all domains follow-on operation, not enough forces may be available due to a lack of large reinforcements across the Atlantic and insufficient European reinforcements. Furthermore, some European nations might become victims of hybrid campaigns and nuclear coercion.

5. Rear area civil-military total defense operations:

- (a) On *Russia's* side, a war-capable, well-functioning and systematically trained civil military “whole of government, whole of society” total defense structure is in place, based on which both the transition from peacetime to conflict and war, as well as initial offensive operations and later on, defense against large-scale NATO counterattacks can in theory be supported with high effect and according to required timelines (Geiles, 2017). Even though Russian forces have performed far worse than assumed during the 2022 attack on Ukraine, which may in the short term reduce the military threat posed by Russia to NATO, learning effects and more targeted rearmament in the medium term cannot be ruled out.
- (b) On *NATO's* side: member states are already highly vulnerable through Russian hybrid means, but can be far more easily undermined through additional Chinese hidden or open hybrid support across the full transition process from peace to crisis and conflict. This has a huge impact on NATO's ability to lead (with reduced and questionable command, control, communication functions), to have situational awareness (reduced and questionable intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance functions), to rapidly move NATO's response forces and heavy reinforcements into the theater of war (reduced mobility and effectiveness of sea ports, airports, railway systems, roads) and to maintain the functioning of governments, economies and societies under wartime conditions (due to reduced effectiveness of critical civilian infrastructures) (Savolainen, 2019).

3.4 *The Possible Impact on Russia's Risk Calculus*

Three main developments together—(1) the long-standing ignorance and unwillingness of key European NATO allies to accept a major burden shift on defense; (2) a shifting US military focus to the Indo-Pacific and preparation for a military confrontation with China, and (3) an emerging de facto military alliance between China and Russia—may have a significant impact on Russia's risk calculus whether or not to take an opportunity to test NATO with open military aggression. That may be in a regional war in the Baltic and/or Black Sea Region, or in an even broader approach also involving the stronger Russian positions and those of its possible anti-Western allies across the wider Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Iran, perhaps Libya, perhaps even NATO member Turkey). Many allies, who are not themselves exposed and do not feel directly threatened by Russia, have long been downplaying the Russian threat and did not take implementation of the agreed NATO concepts seriously enough. However, in the context of an emerging Russian-Chinese alliance, there is a higher probability that Russia may take higher risks in testing NATO's resolve to defend its member states.

3.5 *The Impact on NATO's Risk Calculus and Most Vulnerable Point*

A Russian-Chinese military alliance would also change NATO's risk calculus and have an impact on NATO's current political and military "Achilles heel": how to maintain unity and resolve after defeat in initial operations?

With regard to Russia's possible intentions, the predominant view in NATO has so far been that a revisionist but isolated Russia could, provided an opportunity to do so would occur, try to test NATO to see how far it could go. But the fundamental assumption has been that once confronted with NATO's demonstrated unity and resolve—based on rapid political and military decision-making and underpinned by NATO's multinational forward presence formations and rapidly deployed reinforcements, especially the NATO Response Forces (NRF)—Russia would step back immediately. Accordingly, the enhanced forward presence for the most exposed allies in the Northeast was designed to counter not more but limited aggression, such as an incursion of non-attributable "little green men in little green tanks" against Ukraine in 2014, rather than to conduct high intensity delay and defense operations from day one. Also, the division-sized enhanced NRF was designed to rapidly reinforce, but not to win heavy defense battles against attacking Russian tank armies or army corps. Indeed, the fundamental principle to defend "one for all, all for one" is manifest in NATO's multinational Response Force, as well in its multinational enhanced forward presence battle groups on the soil of its most exposed allies. Although their operational effectiveness is rather weak and not designed to win a battle against heavily armored Russian divisions, their deterrent effect is high due to this multinational character. It denies Russia any military option to isolate a single NATO member state without being fully involved in a war with the entire Alliance, including three nuclear powers. At the same time, Russia does not have the slightest reason to argue that NATO would pose a military threat to Russia's own security by positioning substantial combat formations close to Russia's borders. Hence, for the situation since 2014, the current posture has been an acceptable compromise that works for the time being—and as long as in Russia's risk calculus a large military offensive against a NATO member makes no sense.

This is the context for why the NATO Wales summit in 2014 made the fundamental decision to go for "responsiveness and reinforcements" rather than for a new version of the Cold War "forward defense" posture, which worked so well for Western Germany. The reason for this was politically rather than operationally driven.¹⁸

¹⁸USA, UK and France did not want to be caught in a permanent, static forward deployment (because they wanted to maintain flexibility to move their forces also to other possible hotspots). Germany insisted on a fair treatment of Russia, despite of its unacceptable aggressive behavior against the Ukraine, and wanted the NATO Russia Founding Act be respected as the last remaining cornerstone of the broken security architecture in Europe (including its restrictions regarding permanent stationing of substantial allied combat forces).

However, the risk of this (for political reasons intentionally moderate) current NATO posture is the possibility that Russia could—counter to expectations—attack on a large scale with large conventional formations from day one, rather than in a hybrid manner with non-attributable “little green men” only. In this case, Russian troops, reportedly according to Putin, “could take Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw or Bucharest in two days.”¹⁹ This is what NATO’s in-place forces and reinforcements such as the VJTF and NRF could not deny, due to a lack of rapidly available and combat capable heavy larger formations for initial defensive operations. In case of a large-scale military invasion and occupation of Baltic states’ territory and parts of Poland, NATO would need to prepare over some weeks or even months for a large-scale, high intensity counterattack in order to reconquer lost territory and restore the *status quo ante*, i.e. territorial integrity of all its member states. This is NATO’s most vulnerable “Achilles heel.” The operational and political problem with NATO’s current responsiveness and reinforcement concept is that it can be undermined by Russia at this stage, both politically and operationally. *Politically*, consensus in NATO decision-making may be difficult to achieve once the territories of some allies have already been occupied and NATO’s initial operations to defend them have failed. In such a situation, some member states might prefer appeasement and could argue that “the problem can never be solved by military means” and that “only diplomacy, sanctions and dialogue could end the war.” In case of nuclear coercion by Russia, the argument will be made that “although the aggression and landgrab was terrible, illegal and will never be acceptable, an escalation toward nuclear war must be avoided under any circumstances.” Fertile ground for “opting out” must be taken into account particularly in member states whose political leaders are driven by a pacifist mainstream thinking within their societies and that do not want to suffer similar physical destruction as the media will report from the frontline states during wartime. Given the fact that political control by the North Atlantic Council over NATO military authorities also continues in wartime and does not end with the outbreak of hostilities, the possibility cannot be excluded that the North Atlantic Council might fail to agree when SACEUR requests authorization for preparing and launching a large-scale counter-attack operation. Once exposed allied countries were occupied, the risk of NATO losing its unity and resolve is higher, the longer it takes to assemble and deploy the bulk of its (i.e. in essence America’s) air, land and naval forces for a large-scale counterattack. At the *operational* level, a group of NATO nations led by the USA could still conduct a large counterattack operation to liberate e.g. the Baltic states or Poland from a Russian occupation. However, e.g., in case of an “opting out” by Germany and/or other allies in central Europe, it would be difficult for such a remaining “coalition of the willing” to successfully operate

¹⁹For a report on this non-public threat, see Brössler (2014); the then incoming NATO Military Committee Chairman General Petr Pavel voiced related concerns on May 27, 2015 (Bender, 2015). The credibility of this threat is underlined by the results of multiple US wargames indicating that it would take Russian troops at maximum 60 h to reach the outskirts of e.g. Tallinn or Riga (see Shlapak & Johnson, 2016, p. 1) and a Polish wargame that indicated a Polish defeat within 5 days (Kramper, 2021).

without freedom of movement in their rear area. It is to be hoped that the turnaround in Germany's defense policy announced by Chancellor Scholz in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will reduce the risk of such a scenario.

In the geopolitical situation since 2014, where NATO's possible adversary in wartime was assumed to be an isolated Russia, this political and operational risk of NATO's responsiveness concept has been assessed as manageable due to a rather low probability of the above-described worst case. However, in case Russia enjoys military and political backing by China and perhaps also substantial support through common hybrid activities against NATO across Europe, the risk of NATO being defeated in its initial defensive operations and consequently losing its political unity and resolve is significantly higher. The consequence of this political and operational vulnerability is that *an emerging military alliance between Russia and China would call for a different approach for the defense of Northeastern Europe*. With such a revised or alternative approach, NATO would need to avoid a situation in which NATO's initial defense operations on the ground would come to a preliminary end, followed over weeks or even months by a pause for building-up the forces for a large counterattack operation. Losing its "center of gravity," i.e. political unity and resolve among the 30 NATO allies and operational partners would then mean final victory for Russia in such a war, and probably also the end of NATO as an alliance.²⁰

3.6 Consequences for NATO's Defense Posture

In sum, the impact of a Sino-Russian military alliance on Russia's risk calculus and hence on Europe's security is evident: the geopolitical effect is that Europe may become a victim rather than an actor in this new age of geopolitical great power competition. On February 24, 2022 we saw a return of military conflict and war to Europe rather than a stable "Europe that is free and at peace" (Bush, 1989). This should give NATO reason enough for drawing three conclusions:

First: the Wales and Warsaw-strengthened defense posture must be fully and more quickly implemented.

In the context of an emerging Russian-Chinese alliance, which is currently still at an early stage, and especially in light of Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, there is significantly less time to reconstitute and adapt the national force postures as currently agreed among NATO allies in the NATO Defense Planning Process. NATO member states need to accelerate and intensify their implementation efforts. On a positive note, with the largely implemented Rapid Reaction Plan (Wales summit 2014), the enhanced NRF, the enhanced Forward

²⁰The notion of political will being the center of gravity within NATO had been put forward in 2010 by then-SACEUR Admiral Stavridis in relation to Afghanistan (see Benitez, 2010) and was pointedly put forward by SACEUR General Breedlove in 2015 during internal NATO discussions under the impression of the Ukraine crisis.

Presence and Tailored Forward Presence (Warsaw summit 2016) and the NATO Readiness Initiative (Brussels summit 2018) (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2014, 2016, 2018), the Alliance is well underway in building up rapidly usable but small numbers of forces and capabilities, which enables NATO to still cope successfully with hybrid warfare up to a limited incursion. However, NATO member states and the Alliance as a whole are too slow in reconstituting significant numbers of large combat formations (brigades, divisions, corps) for reinforcements (Brauss, 2021; Meyer zum Felde, 2020b). Also, efforts to re-establish a civil-military “total” or “comprehensive defense” posture both in the frontline states (like in Western Germany until 1989) and in rear-area Central Europe are still in an embryonic phase at best. However, all these elements would be indispensable prerequisites for any successful delay, defense and counterattack operation in a high-intensity regional war against a revisionist and aggressive Russia tacitly or actively supported by China, if a Russian leader decided to re-establish Russia’s former great power status with dominance in its near abroad through open war, rather than only testing NATO’s resolve and solidarity with a hybrid campaign. Hence, in the case of an emerging Russia-China alliance, an effective NATO defense posture that is fit for the purpose of deterring Russia needs to be in place by the mid-2020s rather than in the 2030s.

Second: upgrading, overhauling or even a full review of NATO’s Wales and Warsaw Defense Posture may become unavoidable.

If there is more evidence that a military alliance between Russia and China matures and intensifies, the current NATO defense posture as agreed at the recent NATO summits would have to be upgraded, overhauled or even fully reviewed, because the underlying fundamental assumption would no longer be valid. Russia may not be the only peer adversary who poses a threat to allies. So far, the consensus among NATO nations does not go further than to address China as a “challenge” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021). But in a fundamentally changed geopolitical situation, which a maturing Sino-Russian alliance would constitute, NATO allies must prepare for all the political, defense and operational implications of the new reality: Russia may be politically and militarily supported by a rapidly rising great power, China, and even worse, that both may be joined in their anti-Western military alliance by other partners, such as Iran (Russia, China, and Iran have already held joint naval drills in 2019; see Chamberlain, 2021).

Third: Europeans need to accept transatlantic burden shifting in order to “keep the Americans in”.

While significantly fewer US forces and capabilities will be available for fighting and winning a regional war in Europe, some European NATO allies, including Germany as a key member, have long hesitated to fully implement their current commitments and were not even considering further upgrades in response to the deteriorating geopolitical situation (Meyer zum Felde, 2020b). US representatives have been clear in recent years that the US military is no longer able to fight and win two major wars simultaneously in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, and that the primary US focus is shifting toward China (Russia is perceived as the near-term, but China as the long-term and more difficult, bigger challenge; see Colby, 2021b). It follows that

Europeans need to take on much more of the burden of deterring and defending NATO member states in Europe against Russia. Against this background, the NATO capstone documents for NATO defense planning agreed at Wales, Warsaw and Brussels have all been designed toward a fairer transatlantic burden-sharing and more European forces, capabilities and contributions. However, in terms of implementation, European member states—first and foremost Germany—have taken a steady but rather slow approach in their turnarounds and implementation efforts.²¹

What remains required in Europe vis-à-vis Russia is significant US military presence and power, particularly in critical capability areas—extended nuclear deterrence, critical enablers and force multipliers, air power, naval power, cyber. In return, Europeans need to accept the US request for burden shifting and take more responsibility for filling the gaps in NATO's deterrence and defense posture. This applies particularly to Germany, despite its obvious unwillingness to keep its pledges and again play its role as the conventional backbone for collective defense in Europe. Whether or not Europe will be able to maintain its security depends first and foremost on the USA, and next on Germany. Both need to take their responsibilities seriously, and consequently accept that in military burden sharing and shifting, they have to take their fair share according to their political and economic weight. Above all, it is essential for Europe's security that both give the Russian leadership no reason to change its risk calculus. The USA must not be perceived as disengaging from its commitments to Europe's security, and Germany must not be perceived as the weakest ally in NATO that under pressure might opt out, be it in peacetime, crisis, or conflict.

4 Concluding Recommendations

To conclude, China's potential support for Russia's revisionist agenda in Europe, possibly within the framework of a military alliance, has a deep impact on Russia's as well as on NATO nations' own risk calculus. Russia may be encouraged to opportunistically launch a large-scale offensive in the Baltic or Black Sea region and have success in its initial operations due to operational gaps on NATO's side to defend effectively. NATO member states, under the pressure of their citizens, may be discouraged to sustain a regional war until NATO gets the upper hand. With such perspectives, NATO's deterrence would become less credible, and Europe's

²¹In the case of Germany, there will be a first fully equipped and ready combat brigade no earlier than 2023, a first division with three combat brigades no earlier than 2027, and the pledged full size of three divisions with 8–10 combat brigades as late as the early 2030s. In terms of increased defense budgets, the figures correspond with that trend: in 2024 (10 years after the Defense Investment Pledge of Wales), not more than 1.5% of the German GDP is intended for defense (rather than 2% as agreed in 2014), and only weak commitments have been made recently to reach the 2% as late as in the early 2030s. With the new SPD-led coalition government in charge, even these recent pledges are now far from certain.

nightmare scenario of a simultaneous war in both the Indo-Pacific and the European theater, in which the USA's security umbrella for Europe would become insufficient, could become a possibility. All of this needs to be prevented.

From the results of this analysis, the following set of recommendations for NATO and NATO member states can be deduced:

1. Europe should maintain its indispensable transatlantic bond and accordingly, avoid any equidistancing between the USA on the one hand and China on the other.
2. The West as a whole should do its utmost to de-link China from Russia and prevent a Sino-Russian military counter-alliance from becoming a reality.
3. The Europeans should in their own interest help both the USA and China to solve their geopolitical great power competition with political, diplomatic, economic and other civilian means, rather than with military instruments. The heavy losses Russia sustained in the war against Ukraine may be a helpful argument to that end. Europeans also need to convince US public and political leaders that exclusively focusing on a major confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific region, with the effect of a hollow and less credible deterrence and defense posture in Europe, is not the appropriate response to the challenge of an emerging military alliance between Russia and China.
4. Europe should demonstrate solidarity with Western democracies around the globe and interest in other regions' security beyond Europe's direct periphery. Accordingly, NATO should not become a global alliance, but intensify its third core function, i.e. cooperative security, through partnerships on a global scale with like-minded nations. Europeans should also encourage the USA to neither retreat from regions critical for Europe's security (Middle East, North Africa) with the consequence of vacuum-filling by others, nor to step back from its role as the world's leading power. It is also in Europe's best interest that the USA remains capable of enforcing and protecting the international rules-based order and that the USA, if necessary, could conduct and win more than just one war.
5. NATO, the EU and member states should undertake all efforts for averting their worst-case scenario, i.e. simultaneous military confrontations both in the Indo-Pacific between the USA and China and in Europe between NATO and Russia.
6. For the time being, as long as Russia cannot rely on more than rather limited Chinese support, NATO's moderate strengthened deterrence and defense posture should be implemented fully, and faster. This is a long set of "more of the same," but beyond this list, there is also a need for fresh ideas to be developed.
7. Depending on how far and fast the Russian-Chinese emerging alliance will develop, a further significant upgrade of NATO's defense posture should be developed and the military implications of an emerging de facto military alliance between Russia and China be fully taken into account.

Most likely, this will mean for the Europeans:

- (a) even more defense spending beyond 2% of GDP;
- (b) more efforts on joint-all-domain operations, digitalization and cyber;
- (c) more investment in emerging and disruptive technologies;

- (d) more civilian-military preparation for total defense;
 - (e) more resilience building in NATO and EU vis-à-vis China and Russia;
 - (f) more European combat-capable formations, large reinforcements and sufficient logistic stockpiles for sustained high-intensity warfighting operations;
 - (g) further commitments for crisis management and stabilization in Europe's periphery.
8. Based on further NATO adaptation to the changing geopolitical realities, and from a respected position of strength without being provocative or posing a threat to others, NATO should engage in meaningful dialogue, confidence building and perhaps a revitalization of arms control with China (and eventually also Russia) once the time for this has arrived. Although both countries have to be seen as the West's systemic rivals for now, and in case of crisis and conflict perhaps both as potential adversaries, it is indispensable to at least find a way for peaceful coexistence. NATO's strategic community should not ignore the fact that in other essential fields of global politics beyond security and defense, close cooperation even with China and Russia remains essential, e.g. climate change and environmental protection, despite systemic rivalry and increasingly robust geopolitical great power competition.

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Options for Dealing with Russia and China: A US Perspective



Andrew A. Michta

1 The Problem Set

Thirty years since the end of the Cold War, the global security landscape reflects none of the early post-1990 optimism about the inevitable triumph of the liberal world order, with Fukuyama's prediction of the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992) or Friedman's thesis that the "world is flat" (Friedman, 2005) striking one as wishful thinking. Today, the United States is confronted by two near-peer military competitors: Putin's Russia that is intent on revising the post-Cold War settlement, and Xi's China that is determined to replace the system America has built with one centered around communist China's economic and political structures, to include a redefinition of the values that have undergirded the US global role. This challenge comes at a time when American power has been depleted by two decades of warfare in secondary theaters, while trillions have been spent on failed nation building projects in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The Global War on Terror has also reformatted the Joint Force away from peer-to-peer high intensity conflict to focus on counter-insurgency operations. It has also been restructured to fight one major theater war and one secondary campaign. A reorganization of the United States military is already underway, with the program "Army 2035" aimed at refitting the US military for cross-domain high intensity conflict with a near-peer competitor (Army Modernization Strategy, 2019).

The last three decades have also witnessed a series of misguided US economic decisions that, in the name of neoliberal economics and globalist ideology, have

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resulted in a massive transfer of US technology and manufacturing to communist China, with the attendant deindustrialization of America and a decline of its middle class. Today, the Chinese economy, although still nominally smaller than the US economy, in PPP terms is already bigger than America's. Decades of unfettered access granted to Chinese researchers and graduate students to US top research universities and laboratories, combined with the ongoing theft of intellectual property, have allowed the PRC to leapfrog past the United States in several fields of R&D critical to next generation weapon systems.

In the process and through mercantilist policies and state intervention, China has leveraged its expanding manufacturing base to establish a radically centralized global supply chain network that has created US and global dependence on the PRC in critical areas, from medicines to sophisticated electronics. At the same time, America's business elites' commitment to globalist ideology and to offshoring has eliminated redundancies in the US defense sector—reducing capacity and leaving the United States' military increasingly dependent on single-point-of-failure supply chains for its equipment. In short, because of our greed and geostrategic myopia encapsulated in fashionable post-Cold War shibboleths, China has emerged as the greatest threat to both the United States and to the global order America has created and maintained. In order to underscore the gravity of the situation, in January 2021, during his confirmation hearings in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, described China as a “pacing threat” for the US military (Shelbourne, 2021).

Russia poses a more straightforward challenge to the United States than China does: it rests primarily in the military domain and the country's ability to leverage its position as the dominant supplier of energy to Europe. Since the beginning of the Putin presidency, Russia has undergone two military modernization cycles, investing selectively in key technologies and intensifying regular exercises to increase the overall operational readiness of the force. New generations of Russian manned and unmanned armor, investments in command-and-control systems, air and naval power, cyber and space have tilted the balance along NATO's eastern flank in Russia's favor. The seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent invasion of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as Russian operations in Syria, showed Putin's willingness to leverage military power to change the security equation in Europe and the Middle East. This emphasis on the political utility of the military points to Putin's longer-term strategic design, i.e., his determination to leverage Russia's military modernization to pressure the post-Soviet near-abroad and to bring Russia fully back into the European political arena. Putin showed his hand in February 2022 when he ordered a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In order to underscore Moscow's military muscle, in September 2021, Russia and Belarus completed their joint Zapad 2021 military maneuvers, the largest such exercise along NATO's eastern flank since the end of the Cold War. Officially, two hundred thousand soldiers took part in multiple drills that covered the majority of the European portion of the Russian Federation, exercising an offensive scenario against NATO and showcasing new military technology. The exercise witnessed the first large scale deployment of the Uran-9 robot tank and the use of the newly

upgraded BMPT “Terminator” tank support fighting vehicle, among others. Russia also exercised its entire Baltic Fleet air force, deployed 290 tanks and 15 ships, tested command and control systems, drilled suppressing the enemy’s communications, and practiced scenarios for defending against drones. Most importantly during this Zapad 2021, Russia and Belarus exercised Joint Air Defense and Air Force Training and Combat Center, underscoring that Moscow has full control over the Belarusian armed forces, thereby further complicating NATO’s operational planning (Adomeit, 2021). In fact, in February 2022 Russia relied on Belarusian territory as a staging area for its attack on Kyiv and the northern region of Ukraine.

Zapad 2021 was an impressive show of force, and as such it was more than a military drill; it was a psychological operation aimed at sending an unequivocal message that Russia commands sufficient military power to credibly threaten the alliance’s eastern flank. It also delivered an internal message, communicating to Russian citizens that their country was once again a great power, and that the balance of forces in Europe had shifted in Russia’s favor. Not all of this was bluster and propaganda, although the subpar performance of the Russian military during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine surprised Western analysts. Still, two decades of selective investment in military modernization has allowed Russia to develop a range of new technologies, while most of European NATO has remained effectively disarmed. Today, Moscow has more room to leverage new Russian military capabilities for political gain than at any point since 1990. Putin’s tightening grip on Belarus has further undermined Ukraine’s security while increasing the threat posed by Russia to Poland, the Baltic States and the entire eastern flank of the alliance. Putin’s 2022 decision to invade Ukraine showed once again that he was determined to rely on military power to score geopolitical wins.

2 The Key Assumptions

In geostrategic terms, the core of the current security challenge Russia and China pose to the United States and the world’s democracies rests on their increased alignment when it comes to strategic objectives and deepening military cooperation, driven by their shared interest in breaking the United States’ global military dominance and fracturing the existing alliance system in Europe and Asia. This chapter approaches the problem of developing a workable strategy to counter this effort with four initial assumptions. First, though unequal in terms of their relative power and with different national interests, Russia and China have become *de facto* allies, brought together by their shared opposition to the United States and the order America has created and sustained. Hence, American grand strategy going forward must factor in the reality that any action taken against either of the two powers will likely trigger a reaction from both. Simply put, if the United States focuses on one theater—the Indo-Pacific, and one adversary—China, as has been increasingly the case in the last 5 years, this opens up opportunities for Russia in the other key theater, i.e., Europe, and possibly, though to a lesser degree, in the MENA

region. Conversely, the Russian 2022 invasion of Ukraine may be seen by Beijing as a near-term opportunity to pressure the United States in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, my analysis stipulates that the foundation of any successful strategy toward Russia must include restoring the military capabilities of European NATO allies, for if confronted in the Indo-Pacific, the United States—with its high-end enablers and the strategic nuclear deterrent remaining in Europe—must nonetheless be able to rely on its NATO allies for the preponderance of conventional military power required to ensure that deterrence on the Continent holds as US military assets are drawn into Asia. Hence, I argue that NATO needs to shift its internal conversation away from “burden sharing” to what I have called elsewhere “burden transferring” (Michta, 2021b).

Third, I stipulate that no strategy for dealing with Russia and the PRC will be successful until and unless the United States decouples its strategically vital supply chains from China, re-shores critical manufacturing back to the United States, and works to develop a diffuse supply chain network for non-critical supplies, with redundancies built-in to sustain us in case of war. This third stipulation is admittedly the most contentious and difficult to actuate not only because the American business community remains deeply invested in manufacturing in and selling to China, but also because of how differently the United States sees China compared to our European allies. The European Union, especially Germany, sees the PRC as a strategic challenge, but also as its principal trading partner and a key economic opportunity for future growth (“Germany and China: Bilateral Relations”, 2021). Getting to a transatlantic consensus on China is arguably the most difficult challenge confronting the United States and its allies going forward. I posit that the United States has no path forward to victory unless it decisively disaggregates the China-centric global supply network.

My fourth stipulation is that in order to overcome its relative power deficit after two decades of the global war on terrorism and three decades of globalization, the United States must leverage its alliances and partnerships worldwide in key theaters. An alternative approach that seeks to break up the Sino-Russian alliance, often referred to as “Kissinger in reverse,” posits that the United States should work with its Asian allies, especially Japan and South Korea, to bring about a reorientation of the Russian policy azimuth from West to East. This concept, recently articulated by Wess Mitchell, would encourage Japanese and South Korean investment in Russia’s Far East to create a counterweight to increasing Chinese economic domination in Asia (Mitchell, 2021). Mitchell argues persuasively that in order to avoid a two-front war, the United States should aim to assist in the alignment of Russia with other Asian states concerned about China’s rise. This is a compelling argument, but one predicated on the imperative that NATO would rebuild its defenses to a point where the likelihood of further Russian westward expansion would be effectively foreclosed. Absent this factor, I see any strategy that seeks to entice Russia to reorient itself toward the West as prohibitively risky, as its benefits in Asia would be nullified by Putin exploiting continued expansion opportunities in the West. Finally, in light of Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine and Washington’s

decision to support Kyiv across the board, both with weapons and economic assistance, any US-Russian rapprochement is impossible in the foreseeable future.

3 Building a Workable Strategy

The overall geostrategic problem confronting the United States in its strategic competition with Russia is relatively straightforward, i.e., one that requires revisiting containment from the previous era combined with “political area denial” when it comes to Russian influence behind NATO’s fence. For the military containment piece, our NATO allies will need to field real exercised military capabilities which, combined with the US strategic nuclear umbrella and high-end enablers, ensure deterrence in Europe holds even if America is pulled into a kinetic conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Here, the challenge is to get the politics on defense in Europe aligned with the requirements in the theater rather than incessantly debating whether/when individual NATO allies meet the Wales Pledge of spending 2% of their GDP on defense. I have argued for some time that the 2% pledge should be abandoned, as it has become a political fig leaf that has allowed governments to avoid making meaningful decisions on defense (Michta, 2021a). Simply put, the United States does not have a large enough military to increase its presence several folds on the Continent. For NATO to remain viable, Europe must rebuild its defenses and ensure those forces remain interoperable with US forces currently deployed there and those that would be brought in as reinforcement in a crisis.

Hence, the problem of whether the United States and its European NATO allies can deal effectively with the threat Russia poses to Europe is fundamentally political. Its resolution depends on which course of action the European political class will take in the coming years, with the decision window being small and shrinking. The choice Europe faces is straightforward: either reinvest in NATO or pursue the chimera of “strategic autonomy.” The former would be orders of magnitude more cost effective, as the United States would continue to provide strategic level nuclear deterrence and high-end strategic enablers. The latter would require key Europeans to spend 6–7% of their GDP on defense and would still lack at the high-end of nuclear and next generation capabilities. Case in point: despite much talk of “Permanent Structured Cooperation” (PESCO), a “Coordinated Annual Review on Defence” (CARD), and the European Defense Fund, Europe will not have its fifth-generation aircraft designed and built for at least another decade, nor could a French nuclear deterrent replace America’s. The key to America’s success will be how Germany sees its place in Europe, especially now that post-Brexit the European Union is much more continental than at any point since the 1970s. Indeed, Germany’s economic weight gives Berlin special prerogatives when it comes to EU foreign and security policy. The United States legacy military infrastructure in Europe is in Germany, and although Washington has been investing in countries along NATO’s eastern flank, including the new V Corps Headquarters in Poznan, Poland, rotational forward presence in Poland and tailored presence in Romania, if

Germany does not step up on its own defense, operational planning in Europe will suffer. The shock caused across Europe by Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 seems to have finally awakened the Continent to the Russian threat. Shortly after the invasion, Chancellor Scholz announced an additional 100 billion euro in emergency defense spending and the decision to buy the F-35 aircraft from the United States.

And yet, the idea that by recognizing Europe's strategic autonomy the US can get the Continent to rearm seems to be gaining ground. Recently Hans Binnendijk and Alexander Vershbow advocated for a transatlantic agreement of Europe's strategic autonomy, arguing that the United States should drop its objections to the project and treat it as a means to ensure "greater European strategic responsibility" (Binnendijk & Vershbow, 2021). The authors maintain that the criterion for European contributions under strategic autonomy would be one-half of NATO's currently agreed upon "level of ambition," translating into Europe's capabilities needed to conduct three near simultaneous small operations and one major operation on its own. They admit that considering Europe's lack of high-end enablers, low readiness rates, and its fragmented military industrial complex, this would take a considerable amount of time. While this argument might offer yet another inducement to the Europeans to modernize their military, the decision to rearm is fundamentally a political decision. No amount of US diplomatic concessions on strategic autonomy is likely to make them change their mind, for it reflects their larger political priorities going forward. In short, anything that takes away from the urgently needed focus on restoring NATO's defenses and readiness is in the final analysis going to be counterproductive and end in failure. The 2022 war in Ukraine underscored this point yet again.

The second key challenge besides rebuilding Europe's military capabilities to deter Russia that must be addressed by the European allies is infrastructure, both in terms of access and the requisite quality needed to move heavy equipment across the European theater. Here, China's growing presence on the Continent, including its acquisition of critical pieces of European infrastructure, especially ports, has raised questions about NATO's ability to receive American reinforcements and to move them across the theater in an all-out crisis. Furthermore, the failure for 30 years to factor in key defense requirements when developing and/or maintaining existing rail, roads and bridges means that it is no longer the case (as it was during the Cold War) that every overpass, road and bridge is rated to carry heavy armor. Meanwhile American and European tanks are heavier and trailers are bigger. In short, Europe needs to undertake major reinvestment in its infrastructure to ensure that NATO's militaries can exercise across the theater. Likewise, national security priorities need to be put at the top once again when governments make decisions on foreign investment in their countries, especially from China and Russia.

NATO remains hamstrung by infrastructure deficiencies not only in Western Europe, but also in Central Europe, where the legacy East-West imperial infrastructure continues to limit options available to military planners when it comes to military mobility. The corridor from the Baltic Sea, through Central Europe and into the Balkans up to and including the Adriatic has an estimated \$1.5 trillion deficit in infrastructure investments. The impact is felt the most when it comes to

infrastructure running North-South—something the Three Seas Initiative is seeking to address (Mosbacher, 2020). In 2020, the United States committed \$1 billion to the Three Seas project but raising funds for the initiative has been slow, with Germany (which holds an observer status) pushing to redirect it toward green energy projects. Investing in the Three Seas, especially in infrastructure projects that enhance military mobility, should be an important part of NATO's strategy going forward to ensure deterrence holds.

The “political area denial” component of this strategy puts at the center the direction of Europe's political evolution, especially when it comes to its relations with Russia, but also China. It is time to finally recognize that the emergence of Europe, “whole, free and at peace” to quote President George H. W. Bush (Hunter, 2008), was made possible not because our liberal values triumphed in the end, but because Russia could not keep up with the West in key indices of hard power and was effectively expelled from Central Europe, laying the ground for subsequent NATO and EU enlargements. The 2011 decision by Berlin to allow for the construction of the Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea to carry Russian gas directly to Germany, bypassing transit countries in Central and Eastern Europe, was symbolic of Russia's gradual return to Europe. The 2021 completion of Nord Stream 2, which made Russia the largest supplier of energy to Europe and by extension, Germany the largest distributor of Russian gas, marked a qualitative leap in Russia's economic and political influence on the Continent. Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 should serve as a wake up call for Berlin to change fundamentally its Russia policy.

Limiting Russia's and China's influence in Europe will require a strategic shift in how key European countries, especially Germany but also France, view not only the future of their relationship with Russia, but also the extent to which they will be willing to factor in the greater security concerns of countries along NATO's eastern flank. The ongoing fracturing of the intra-EU consensus on the key issue of European federalism in all its aspects is likely to make “area-denial” to Russian influence in Europe ever more difficult, deepening the inroads Putin has already made in a number of countries, especially when it comes to energy.

In contrast to Russia, where the problem set is rather straightforward, developing a workable strategy on China requires first and foremost a recognition that Beijing is now not only a challenge for the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies, but also that it will be a decisive factor shaping Europe's future—something that key European governments have consistently refused to acknowledge. And yet, if the democratic West is to succeed in its competition with China, any workable strategy must be based on the imperative of “hard decoupling,” i.e., the strategic decision taken across the transatlantic community to disentangle our supply chains from China.

Decoupling is the *sine qua non* of Western strategy going forward but only the first necessary step on the road to what is and will remain an enduring competition between the United States and China for years to come. This competition is not only over markets or technology; rather, it requires confronting what Michael Pillsbury has called China's “thoroughgoing revisionism” (Pillsbury, 2015) aimed at

reordering both the global distribution of power and the normative structures in place since 1945. The West must recognize that we are facing a communist state whose ideology has always been at its core totalitarian and whose power we have nurtured and enlarged through our misguided policy assumptions that rationalized simple corporate greed. The transatlantic community must recognize and agree that what has been underway since the end of the Cold War is the second, and possibly decisive stage of conflict between liberal democracy and communism, one that the West is entering with much greater handicaps than it did post-1945. Liberal democracies must recognize that they are in an existential struggle for the survival of our institutions and our way of life.

The imperative of decoupling from China and re-shoring our key industries goes beyond the question of supply chains. Over the past four decades we have given China practically unrestricted access to our social, corporate, government, and educational institutions. This has allowed Beijing both to train its weapons designers at the best American universities and research centers, and to develop sophisticated information campaigns and ever-more brazen industrial espionage operations to tap into our technology and know-how. As we have learned recently, Beijing has even contracted directly with our scientists and researchers for cutting-edge research to be transferred exclusively to China.

An effective strategy against Chinese surveillance state capitalism will also require shoring up the young generation's commitment to traditional democratic values and freedoms. China has effectively exploited to its advantage the current fissures within US society, with messaging that their political and economic models provide a superior alternative to democratic capitalism. We need to cut off this access and instead target Chinese society with messaging of our own, modelled on the successful media campaigns aimed at the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War decades. Last but not least, the mantras of "free trade" and "globalization" of the past three decades need to be discarded, as they can no longer serve as an excuse for the business class to pursue narrow corporate interest disconnected from national security considerations; American companies are free to maximize their wealth provided their decisions do not impair the nation's defenses.

4 Conclusions

Today, Russia is seen by the US as primarily a military problem set, while China is seen as both an economic and military problem set, as well as increasingly an ideological challenge whose system Beijing touts as superior to liberal democracy. The problem of developing a workable Russia-China strategy is fundamentally political because the United States and its key European allies come to the table with fundamentally different threat assessments. In the case of Russia, the divergence is caused by the progressive regionalization of European security optics. The countries along NATO's eastern flank see Russia as an urgent threat, while countries deeper within Europe, especially Germany and France, see Russia as a problem set

that can be managed primarily through political and economic means. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought Europe closer together, but it has not completely eradicated those divergent national priorities when it comes to the Continent's security and defense.

When it comes to China, the prospect of the West developing a workable strategy hinges on the fundamental question of whether consensus can be reached on the nature of the threat China poses to liberal democracies. China has managed to create real dependencies when it comes to the West's core supply chains, making the near-term consequences of hard decoupling potentially quite painful, with attendant political costs to Western governments. Likewise, the interpenetration of the Western and Chinese business communities has created arguably the most powerful lobbying machine to date, capable of warping our processes to bend them to their will. Any effort to develop a cohesive China strategy will require steely determination on the part of Western governments for it to succeed.

The Russian and Chinese challenge to the West is interrelated, as the two are in effect aligned in their opposition to the US-led international order. The West must come to terms with the scope of this threat, for unlike during the Cold War when the Soviet Union was the principal challenge while China remained a regional player, we are now confronting two near-peer competitors and two theaters of great power confrontation—one in Europe, the other in the Indo-Pacific. The United States military is overstretched and structured to fight in one major theater and one secondary smaller campaign. This means that the key to a successful Russia-China strategy lies in Europe, for as America refocuses on the Indo-Pacific, the European allies must assume the burden of ensuring that, in the event of a kinetic conflict in Asia that would pull most US resources there, deterrence in Europe will hold. In a poignant reversal of the situation the West confronted in 1945, when its freedom rested on America's guarantees to Europe, today the security of the transatlantic community depends on what Europe's leaders will do, i.e., whether they rearm, restoring NATO to its former status of a cohesive fighting alliance, or do nothing and allow the transatlantic link to atrophy and, ultimately, break in a crisis. Declarations by various European governments in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine to reinvest in defense show promise; however, the question remains: Will this commitment hold in years to come?

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The Way Forward: How Should Europe Deal with Russia and China?



Joachim Krause

1 Introduction

Many authors in this book agree that there is already a type of alliance between Russia and China or, at least, that an alliance relationship is emerging. This assessment is reflected in the international literature (Dibb, 2019; Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2021; Stent, 2020; a different assessment can be found with Kaczmariski, 2020/21). There are differences of opinion as to how deep this relationship is and how far both sides are prepared to go. However, in principle, the observations show a high degree of consensus.

This article addresses the following questions from a European standpoint: If Russia and China are forming a military alliance, (1) what does that entail for Europe, and (2) which political and military conclusions will Europe have to draw? Whilst the first question can be answered by looking at the European Union plus Great Britain, there is one problem with the second question: what is meant by ‘Europe’ as a political actor? Is it the European Union, whose desired common foreign policy is hampered by its many national interests? Or, is it the combined efforts of larger and leading European countries such as Germany, France, Italy and Great Britain—though the latter is no longer a member of the EU? The author tends towards the second position and wants this contribution to be understood as a collection of ideas on how the major European states should—in close cooperation with the institutions of the EU—respond to an emerging military alliance between China and Russia.

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S. Kirchberger et al. (eds.), *Russia-China Relations*, Global Power Shift,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97012-3_15

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2 The Relevance of History

In assessing the political relevance of a military alliance relationship between Russia and China, it is useful to look for historical examples, which might resemble today's situation. In both describing similarities and differences, one might find a better way to understand the consequences this existing or emerging alliance relationship might reveal. There are three cases, which come to mind: (1) the military alliance between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China during the late 1940s and early 1960s, (2) the Hitler-Stalin Pact from 23 August 1939, and (3) the German-Japanese-Italian Axis, which lasted from 1936 to 1945. Why should we consider these three cases? They were military alliances of different quality and scope, but they had one element in common: they were alliances between major military powers ruled by authoritarian regimes directed against the Western democracies. Their main intention was to fight or even destroy the world of free societies by pursuing brutal policies of subjugation, exploitation and domination.

These three alliances did not last long, however. The Chinese-Soviet alliance was the longest lasting one, at more than 15 years. It ended because China no longer wanted to be the junior partner. The German-Japanese-Italian Axis lasted for just 9 years and ended because all were eventually defeated by the Western allies and by the Red Army. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was very short-lived. It was pushed aside during Operation Barbarossa, during which Germany invaded Russia on 22 June 1941.

All three cases have one feature in common: all of these alliances brought about major wars and, for the same reason, caused major policy changes on the side of major Western powers, in particular the United States:

- The Soviet-Chinese alliance led to the outbreak of the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953 and left four million dead (Stueck, 2002; Weathersby, 1993, 2002). The Korean War led to fears in the West that an invasion similar to that initiated by the North Koreans and instigated by Stalin and Mao might also take place in Europe. Hence, it set off a debate among Western leaders, in particular in the US, about the difficulty of fighting two regional wars at a time on their own. Consequently, the North Atlantic Alliance gained in importance and even an effort towards German rearmament was initiated, since without a German military contribution to NATO's military posture in the centre of the Alliance's forward defence posture at that time, the defence of Europe was thought to be unrealistic.
- The Hitler-Stalin Pact led to both the German war of aggression against Poland and the Soviet wars of aggression against Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland, as well as to the annexation of the rest of Poland by the Red Army in October 1939. The Western response was the declaration of war against Germany by France and Britain and, later on, the issuing of the Atlantic Declaration as a signal for the need that something profound would have to change after the end of World War II. The United States' ultimate entry into the war against the Third Reich included a major effort by Washington to reset the international system both in Europe and globally after the eventual victory.

- The German-Japanese-Italian Axis paved the way for the Japanese aggression against the USA (first the attack on Pearl Harbor) and ended a long period of little interest in Pacific affairs by Washington. The alliance with Japan was of no use for the Third Reich, since Japan did not join Germany's war against the Soviet Union. On the contrary, Japan's attack against Pearl Harbor sped up the entry of the United States into the war against Germany in the European theatre. Again, as with the case of the war in Europe, the US remained the leading power in Asia-Pacific after World War II and started to reset the international framework in the region in conjunction with similar efforts in Europe.

In conclusion, there are three lessons to be learned from these historical examples: (1) a Russian-Chinese alliance might not last too long, (2) but such an alliance might pave the way—either directly or indirectly—for wars of a dimension we would not have seen since the Korean War or World War II. The Russian invasion of Ukraine starting in February 2022 seems to corroborate this assumption. Another lesson (3) is that it is up to the Western democracies to draw their conclusions from the past and to try to prevent it from repeating itself by anticipating what kinds of contingencies might result from a Russian-Chinese Axis.

In following this line of argumentation, three pertinent questions arise: (1) What can Western democracies do to keep the Russian-Chinese alliance as short-lived as possible? (2) What kind of war contingencies do we have to reckon with in the event that the Russian-Chinese Axis persists? and, (3) what can Europe do together with the United States and other allies to prevent the worst from happening?

3 Can the Russian-Chinese Alliance be Broken?

There are many who argue these days that an alliance relationship between Russia and China would not last for long, since the interests of both sides will eventually diverge. The main fault line is seen in the presumably junior partner status of Russia, which is greatly outnumbered by China in almost all indicator of power categories—except in the field of strategic nuclear arms. China has 1.4 billion people while Russia has only 140 million. China is the second largest economy in the world behind the US and in 2020 had a GNP of 14.9 trillion USD measured in dollar parity. In 2020, Russia had—measured in dollar parity—a GNP of 1.6 trillion USD and ranked as the 12th largest economy. In purchasing power parity, the picture would look somewhat different: China would be the largest world economy; Russia would rank as the fifth largest economy close behind Germany. China's conventional armed forces outnumber Russia by far in terms of quantity, and increasingly in terms of quality, too. While China is becoming a leading actor in terms of modern technologies and is considered one of the most competitive industrial nations, Russia is lagging behind in most technologies (except military technologies) and is generally considered a power in decline. Besides that, Russia holds vast territory in North Asia, which China considers to be lost territories. On top of that, both China and

Russia have different plans and conceptions with regard to economic development and cooperation in Central Asia. As chapter “Partnership Without Substance: Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe” by Lucas and Lo in this volume notes, there also seems to be little coordination or cooperation between Russia and China in Central and Eastern Europe.

Both French President Emmanuel Macron and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel have tried in the past to convince the Russian President Vladimir Putin that it was in the enlightened interest of Russia to join forces with Europe and to refrain from making itself dependent on China. Other political leaders might have made similar attempts. These efforts, however, have thus far been in vain. Within the academic community, most experts today agree that the imperative of regime stability in Russia is so strong that there is no room for alternative options. During the tenure of Dmitri Medvedev (2008–2012), things looked different, however. Medvedev had a strong interest in cooperation with the West in order to further the economic and industrial modernization of Russia. Since 2012, when Putin again became the Russian President and huge numbers of Russians took to the streets to demonstrate against him, the tide has changed. Regime survival has become the paramount priority of Putin’s policy, both domestically and internationally. As a couple of expert analyses have shown, Russia is ruled by a kleptocratic and corrupt power vertical, whose leading members have enriched themselves beyond comparison (Dawisha, 2014). Loosening political power would be a personal disaster for all of them. Hence, the more domestic resistance has grown within Russia, the tighter the regime has restricted the limits of political freedom. Consequently, the Russian government has been persecuting—and sometimes killing—leading opposition figures. Russian authorities are intimidating everyone who dares to voice opposing views. Russia has become a full-fledged authoritarian state (Omelicheva, 2021).

The Russian leadership holds that any democratic opposition has been instigated by Western democracies and that the domestic opposition has been by definition an instrument of the West to destabilize Russia.¹ This narrative can be found everywhere in the Russian political class, and has even made it into the military doctrine of the Russian armed forces. In this document, any domestic opposition in Russia is being depicted as premediated efforts by the Western alliance towards destabilizing Russia comparable to an armed invasion. Consequently, Russia sees itself empowered to react in kind and to launch its own destabilizing actions directed against Western democracies.

Under such conditions, it is hard to imagine that the current Russian elite would heed the well-meaning advice by Western leaders to disentangle themselves from their close relationship with China.² China is an even more authoritarian state than Russia and it shows symptoms of what famous writers in the 1940s and 1950s

¹ See also chapter “Putin’s Russia: Global Strategic Outlook and Policies—What Role for China?” by Hannes Adomeit.

² See also chapter “Domestic Politics: A Forgotten Factor in the Russian-Chinese Relationship” by Marcin Kaczmarek.

described as totalitarian rule (Arendt, 1951; Borkenau, 1940; Friedrich & Brzeziński, 1956; Neumann, 1942). As long as Russia's main priority is the stability of the kleptocratic and autocratic regime, it will be futile to expect that Russia might switch alliances. Russia is externalizing its domestic legitimacy deficit by taking a hostile stand against the West—and China is somehow doing the same, since the Communist Party of China is also facing serious domestic problems (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). This keeps both states together and will prevent either of them from contemplating suspending their alliance relationship. This might change once Putin has left office, but this might take many years to happen. Instead of hoping that Russia can be convinced to renounce its alliance with China, Europeans should rather look at the political and military risks that are associated with Russia's increased hostility towards the West and the concomitant danger that this alliance might lure Russia into risky military operations against Western states. This leads to the second question.

4 What Kinds of War Contingencies Do we Have to Reckon with in the Event that the Russian-Chinese Axis Persists?

As previously mentioned, the military alliance between Russia and China might increase the risk of war. However, what kind of wars would we have to expect? There are many variations of war, from small and regionally limited military conflicts to major wars of high intensity among leading industrial nations (Krause, 2019). There is reason to assume that we will see wars that start in a regional context with hostile activities below the threshold of kinetic actions, but which might become violent after a short period and might proliferate considerably and could end as major wars involving high-intensity warfare among powerful industrialized nations in various theatres in both the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific region.

Within the academic community, there is a growing sense that any major war dynamic might start with a regional war. As Brad Roberts has outlined, both the militaries in China and in Russia have studied regional wars with intense scrutiny with a view towards achieving military victory. Their aim would be to push back Western powers or to destroy US-led alliances around their regional perimeters (Roberts, 2020). In the Russian military doctrine, regional wars, which are expected to take place on Russia's periphery, are supposed to be won, even by using nuclear weapons as a means to de-escalate the war in favour of Russia's objectives.

Regional wars have a special role in Russian strategic military thinking. The Russian military is aware of the fact that it would not be able to win a long-running conventional war with the West and a strategic confrontation with NATO, and in particular the US. However, the Russian leadership assumes that a regionally limited armed conflict could occur in Europe, which would provide Russia with the

opportunity to undermine NATO's cohesion as an alliance, in particular its willingness to defend itself.³ Russia's military doctrine stipulates that regional wars assume an important role of 'pre-emptive neutralisation of threats' as part of the Russian 'strategy of active defence' (Johnson, 2019). Unlike Western military thinking, the Russian approach to using military force in a conflict is not characterised by the primacy of avoiding or rapidly terminating such a conflict and limiting the associated damage. Rather, Moscow looks to win it—by exploiting the weaknesses of the adversary while preventing the opponent from exploiting Russian weaknesses.

Regional wars, however, can be considered as the upper end of the spectrum of Russia's options to manage the persistent confrontation with the West. Moscow's approach to this effect is known to the West as 'hybrid warfare'. Already in what the West would identify as peacetime, Moscow's hostile activities encompass a broad spectrum of military and non-military instruments ranging from disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and subversive actions as well as interfering in national elections, weaponising energy supplies, and supporting extremist political movements. It also contains intimidating military actions, such as large-scale military exercises, a military build-up in critical regions involving even nuclear means, both in peacetime and in crises. Such activities remain below the threshold of direct military conflict, but aim to destabilise neighbours and opponents, intimidate NATO and the EU, compromise NATO's decision-making and deny it effective military options (Adamsky, 2015; Brauss et al., 2020; Covington, 2016; Johnson, 2018). If a crisis escalates into a military conflict, the hybrid spectrum would nevertheless continue to be applied: disinformation, propaganda, malicious cyber activities and so forth would all be integral elements of a comprehensive military campaign. In the event of such a conflict, Russia's objective would be to gain a decisive military advantage, wage a short war and achieve strategic success. In this context, Russia's efforts also have to be seen against the backdrop of two decades of systematic military reform and armaments efforts (Baev, 2020; Hackett, 2020; Stoner, 2021).

Where could such regional wars occur? They could happen in areas where Russia believes it needs to re-establish its influence or where it sees an opportunity to radically alter the strategic *status quo* in Europe by weakening NATO decisively. Such a situation could arise if the economic situation in Russia further deteriorates and the population's support for the regime decreases—even more so if the strategic developments on a global scale would be favourable, such as the United States being occupied militarily in the Indo-Pacific region. Putin could be tempted to consolidate his rule with a decisive military operation and the associated mobilisation of nationalistic emotions. Such a scenario is consistent with Russia's strategic and military doctrine.

Currently, essentially two regional theatres come into consideration: first, the expansion of military operations in Ukraine with the aim of either further destabilising it or even destroying its viability as an independent state; or second,

³See chapter "What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO" by Rainer Meyer zum Felde.

a limited attack against one or more of the Baltic States and parts of Poland with the aim of undermining NATO's credibility as a security provider. In both cases, Russia would try to create military *faits accomplis* using quick assaults before the West, that is the United States, or NATO as a whole could intervene militarily. In both cases, Russia's dual-capability (i.e., conventional or nuclear armed) intermediate-range missiles threatening or striking European capitals as well as critical military and civilian infrastructure that would be crucial for NATO's effective response and collective defence would play a significant role (Brauss & Krause, 2021).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which was still going on while this article was finalised, has demonstrated the way Russia is pursuing a regional war. Moscow has tried to achieve two aims: (1) to decapitate the Ukrainian leadership and substitute it by a puppet regime, and (2) to conquer and eventually annex major parts of Ukraine, in particular the Southern and Eastern areas. While the first goal could not have been achieved, Russia was quite successful in conquering most of the Donbass, the Southern parts of Ukraine and is still trying to take the Southern harbour city of Odessa. The Russian way of warfare in Ukraine has a very traditional character. Russia used the army, the air force and the navy to destroy Ukrainian military forces in all three dimensions. When it turned out that the Ukrainian defence was better than expected, the Russian campaign degenerated into brutal war against civilians and a war of total destruction against Ukrainian infrastructure and industry. The hybrid element – cyber war, information war etc. – remained relatively small.

If Russia were to succeed, the entire strategic situation in South-eastern Europe and across the entire Black Sea region, including Turkey, and the disposition of military forces in the region, would fundamentally change. Romania would face a direct military threat and NATO's entire deterrence and defence posture would have to be adjusted. The setup of a strong, permanent military alliance presence along its entire eastern flank would be the order of the day.

An analogous course of action in the Baltic Sea region by the Russian leadership would be much riskier but could not be ruled out, in particular after the issuing of Russia's ultimatum of December 2021. The Baltic States, Poland, Germany and Denmark are NATO members, and for them, the collective defence guarantee of the Washington Treaty would apply. Sweden and Finland are NATO partners and are closely linked to NATO, *inter alia*, by co-ordinated exercises and operational planning. The United States has strong ground, air, and naval forces stationed in Europe, above all in Germany and Poland. They are also regularly involved in exercises of ground, air, and naval forces in the Baltic States and the Baltic Sea region.

If the Russian leadership, however, concluded that the overall strategic situation would permit or even favour a military attack with limited objectives, it could decide to launch a rapid push with conventional armed forces into the Baltic States and parts of Poland. With far-reaching conventional strikes, Moscow could attempt to eliminate targets essential for the deployment of NATO forces in Europe and across the Atlantic to reinforce allies. Threatening the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear weapons equipped with conventional or even nuclear warheads would aim to discourage European governments from living up to their collective defence

commitments and deploying their forces to reinforce their Eastern Allies for fear of nuclear escalation. If Russian armed forces succeeded in occupying the Baltic States or parts thereof before NATO reinforcements could intervene decisively, Moscow could pause and confront NATO with the choice of either running the risk of a major war with incalculable risks of escalation or standing down and agreeing that the Baltic States—in the best case scenario—should leave NATO and become ‘neutral’. The political consequences for NATO and the security of Europe would be dramatic. It could herald the end of the alliance (see Brauss & Krause, 2021).

China, too, has plans for regional wars that would mainly take aim at the United States and its allies. For China, three different theatres of war seem to be the focus:

1. the occupation of the island of Taiwan (which was a colonial domain of the Chinese Empire for just 200 years, ending in 1895, but is claimed by Beijing as an integral part of China);
2. the South China Sea and the East China Sea, where Beijing wants to put huge maritime areas under its exclusive control; and
3. the possibility of a war on the Korean Peninsula.

In all three cases, China’s war planners have to deal with the United States or with states allied with the United States. Due to the different geography of Asia-Pacific, regional war planning by China is mainly directed towards maritime contingencies or combined maritime, air and land theatres. Whilst the aim of Russia’s regional war planning is a rapid land grab to confront the North Atlantic Alliance with a strategic dilemma, the Chinese armaments efforts and activities point towards more ambitious goals. At their core are strategies to deny US forces access to the whole area in a systematic way by using a range of multi-layered weapon systems. In military-technical terms, such an approach is called *anti-access/area denial*, or *A2/AD*. In looking at the Chinese armament efforts over the past 20 years, there is one dominant feature: China intends to put the whole US military posture in East Asia—be it on land or at sea—under the threat of a massive annihilation strike. It is what the Chinese call *active strategic counterattack on exterior lines* (ASCEL). The A2/AD threat is mainly brought about by the Chinese deployment of reconnaissance-strike complexes to threaten the US fixed military installations in the region (and also US naval ships, in particular carrier groups). China has acquired these capabilities by investing in modern satellite as well as anti-satellite and missile technology, and by improving its submarine technology. China is meanwhile able to threaten US naval bases and ships within a range of more than 2000 km from the Chinese coastline with quite effective kinetic strikes. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was able to acquire these capabilities by making huge investments in modern technology (Friedberg, 2011, 2014; Heginbotham et al., 2015; Jones, 2019; Kagan, 2018; Krepinevich et al., 2003; Mearsheimer, 2010; Montgomery, 2014; Wright, 2017).

In the not-too-distant future, the Chinese A2/AD capabilities might allow for a decisive blow against the US military presence in East Asia, or at least they could make the Chinese leadership assume that this would be a real option available to them. Some observers see the possibility that within the next decade the PLA might be able to inflict significant damage on all fixed installations that the US is using to

sustain its military forces in the region. It might, by the same token, be in a position to blind the main instruments of strategic intelligence and reconnaissance in the area and sink US naval ships, including aircraft carriers within 2000 km of the Chinese coast.

The Chinese armament efforts are of such a huge dimension that they are going to shake up US defence planning to a considerable degree. Some observers see similarities with Japan's efforts to push the US out of the Pacific in 1941 (van Tol et al., 2010, pp. 20 f.). China's armaments efforts and strategic intentions are forming the backdrop against which a fundamental change in US defence policy and military strategy has to be considered. The US government in Washington, DC is anticipating the possibility of a major war of high intensity in the West Pacific started by a Chinese leadership who wants to assert its dominance over the Western Pacific region. Moreover, there is no certainty that this war will be easily won by the US and its allies in the region. Consequently, the US has actually begun shifting its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific. For Europe, this change in US strategic orientation will entail that the number and quality of US forces earmarked for European contingencies will decrease to a considerable degree.

This leads to the most dangerous contingency resulting from a Russian-Chinese military alliance: the possibility that China may start a regional war in the West Pacific by attacking and invading Taiwan with Russia following suit with an invasion of the Ukraine or an occupation of the Baltic States. In this case, the US President will have to decide where to send US forces stationed in the continental United States: either to help NATO in deterring or, in the worst case, fighting off a Russian invasion, or to support US forces in the West Pacific involved in a heavy fight against China. Most observers today agree that the priority will be the defence of US positions and allies in East Asia or the West Pacific (Colby & Grygiel, 2021), since Washington considers China the US's main strategic competitor, and China's regional and global aspirations are the most demanding risk to the US as well as to the Western democracies as a whole.⁴

The salient fact is that the US is no longer prepared to intervene simultaneously in two different theatres of war. The notion of being ready to successfully fight two different wars at the same time was valid in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, due to the immense growth of the Chinese military and technology, as well as the quite effective military reform and rearmament of Russia, and in light of the drawdown of US military capabilities during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the situation has changed fundamentally. This fact is well known both in Russia and in China. If both governments agreed on simultaneously launching a 'regional war' in their respective neighbourhoods, this could spell the military defeat of the Western alliances in both theatres—perhaps ultimately leading to a new international order in which Russia would dominate large parts of continental Europe, China would rule Asia and the US might rule the Western hemisphere

⁴See also chapter "Options for Dealing with Russia and China—A US Perspective" by Andrew A. Michta.

consisting of North America only. This would be a world with an international ‘order’ as it was sketched out at the onset of World War II by the German jurist, political theorist, and member of the National-Socialist Party, Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 1939), and which by and large was in conformity with plans established and pursued by Adolf Hitler—of course with Greater Germany in lieu of Russia.

5 What Is the Role of ‘Europe’?

It is too early to present a list of concrete policy options for coping with the risks and threats posed by the emerging Chinese-Russian strategic partnership. However, it is necessary for the European governments—in particular in London, Paris, and Berlin as well as in Brussels—to review their policies vis-à-vis Russia and China with a view towards adapting to the changed regional and global strategic circumstances. This involves three important steps.

5.1 *Acknowledging the Existence and Relevance of a Russian Military Threat*

First of all, it is high time for European political leaders to publicly acknowledge that the military threat posed by Russia is a political reality and reason for concern that can no longer be put aside. This is, in particular, true for the German government. Under former Chancellor Angela Merkel there was a significant discrepancy between what she signed off on as a participant in NATO Summit meetings on the one hand, and what she stated about Russia on the other. While the NATO communiqués were devoid of references to the military threat Russia poses to its allies, at home she never spoke about anything that resembled the language of the NATO documents she, too, had approved in Brussels. Talking about and addressing military threats was not part of former Chancellor Merkel’s political agenda. She never held important institutions in the field of security and defence policy in high esteem. She used to mistrust the German Intelligence Agency (BND) and she remained unfamiliar with the *Bundeswehr* and Germany’s defence policy at large. In her 16-year tenure, she never gave a programmatic speech on Germany’s security and defence policy. Whenever she talked about these issues, her statements remained vague and were open to different interpretations. She had no affinity for and no sense of strategic thinking about, in particular, whether military instruments were involved. One of her famous sentences was: ‘You cannot solve political problems by military means’.

For the same reason, her coalition’s Russia policy remained ambivalent at best. She was definitely no ‘Putin whisperer’, as some have suggested. She knows Putin

very well and she had many unfriendly encounters with him, in particular during the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Putin flatly lied to her time and again. Nevertheless, former Chancellor Merkel deeply believed in the possibility of keeping the peace through direct dialogue with Putin. Keeping the peace through deterrence or defence seemed to be alien to her. Many representatives and observers from Central and Eastern European states, in particular from the Baltic States, criticized her for this policy of benign neglect. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline became a focal point of frustration both in Central and Eastern European States as well as in Washington regarding the ambivalent German policy towards Russia in particular and its negligent defence policy. The outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, however, changed everything in Germany. Despite the fact that the Social Democrats and the Greens were in charge of foreign and defence policy, they overcame their pacifist illusions and decided to not only increase Germany's regular defence budget by more than 50 percent, but also to launch an additional financial effort at the size of 100 billion Euro to re-build the German armed forces after they had been neglected for 20 years. Chancellor Olaf Scholz has called it a "Zeitenwende", a turn in history. In addition, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project was scuttled and the German Government began with a historic effort to redirect its energy imports away from Russia. In contrast to former assertions not to fuel the conflict, Germany has also delivered weapons to the Ukraine.

Nevertheless, Germany was not alone in her illusionary policy towards Russia. A similar attitude could be found in France, where President Emanuel Macron for many years held the opinion that relations with Russia could be improved through sustained high-level diplomacy. Understanding what the Russian concerns are and trying to carve a way out of the conundrum was his policy. Yet, after the outbreak of the Russian war against Ukraine, a more sober assessment is gaining traction in Paris. In London, the Russian problem, however, has always been viewed somewhat more realistically.

This discrepancy between what politicians like Merkel and Macron have signed off on in NATO documents and their respective national Russia policy has led to the slowing down of those armaments efforts that the NATO heads of state and government have decided upon since 2014. In particular, Germany is still far from implementing its obligations and commitments (see chapter "What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO" by Rainer Meyer zum Felde in this book).

5.2 Rethinking: What Might be the Worst Case?

At least until recently, in German government circles, the Russian military threat against the Baltic States and Poland was conceived as a politically highly unlikely contingency. The offensive Russian military posture was understood as being guided

by Moscow's defensive strategic concerns and its desire to re-establish a buffer zone in its 'near abroad'. Regime survival being pivotal would imply that the regime was rather risk-averse. Hence, if the West continued to pursue a policy towards Russia guided by composure and dialogue, the worst could be avoided. This reasoning had its merits under normal conditions. It was based on the (silent) assumption that in view of existing mutual interests and interdependencies, a major catalytic event was needed to alter this calculation.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine was such a catalytic event. It might have come worse if China had initiated a full-fledged military invasion of Taiwan at the same time. This would have put Russia in a position where it had a realistic chance to fundamentally change the political landscape in Europe. The similarities with 1939, by the way, are striking: when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was concluded in August 1939, it gave Hitler the opportunity to continue his revisionist agenda and invade Poland. It provided Stalin with an opportunity to regain former parts of the Russian Empire: Finland and the Baltic States as well as the eastern parts of Poland. Taiwan is for China today what Czechoslovakia and Poland were for Nazi Germany in the 1930s: the main target of a nationalistic and revisionist policy driven by military annexation. Fortunately, the Chinese did not attack Taiwan. Given the many difficulties the Russian armed forces have met with the highly motivated defenders and in light of the considerable problems inside (failing logistics, lack of coordination and strategic leadership, losses of tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, poor performance of the Air Force etc.), the Chinese armed forces must have started a rethinking of their invasion plans for Taiwan, since they might meet the same problems Russia had in invading Ukraine. This, hopefully, gives the Western community and the Taiwanese some more breathing space in the near future.

5.3 Rethinking Europe's Relationship with China

Currently, the European Union heads of state and government have agreed that China is at the same time a partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival. This formula will have to be the subject of a critical review, if reports on China's military armaments efforts and its huge build-up against the US and its allies in the West-Pacific turn out to be correct. In particular, an overall policy change would be needed if the existence of a military alliance with Russia was established. Under such circumstances, China would be a strategic threat to Europe, too. The threat would be rather of an indirect nature, but such an alliance would definitely increase the danger of war in Europe and entail a higher probability of a war that might involve an East Asian and a European theatre.

Changing the attitudes of political leaders in Berlin or Paris with regard to their China policy seems to be a much harder effort in comparison to acknowledging that a military threat from Russia has existed since 2014. Over the past decade, the

German government has been one of the most arduous supporters of China. Due to her positive experience with China during her handling of the international financial crisis, Chancellor Merkel always displayed a benign view of China. During her chancellorship, the economies of Germany and China have become tightly intertwined. The volume of trade between China and Germany today almost equals the volume of Germany's trade with the US and France. Consequently, former Chancellor Merkel repeatedly stated that Germany does not want to be drawn into any major power competition between China and the USA. Again, these statements demonstrate that she refuses to think in terms of geopolitical strategy and strategic military competition. However, China is building up a formidable military presence against the US and its democratic allies in the Indo-Pacific region, and this fundamentally changes the coordinates of German and European security, too. The USA is Europe's and Germany's main security provider. If the US is being militarily challenged by China, this cannot leave European democracies unimpressed.

Hopefully, this uncritical, pro-Chinese attitude might end. The new coalition Government has not yet made up its mind, but a change might come. In this regard, it is incumbent upon other European powers to permanently call into question the German position and to urge a reframing of Germany's China policy. In any case, it would be imperative to have a transatlantic dialogue over policies towards China (Binnendijk & Kirchberger, 2021; Huotari et al., 2020; Kramer, 2020; Kroenig & Cimmino, 2020; Laskowski, 2020). In this regard, the implementation of NATO's 2030 agenda approved by the Alliance's leader at their Summit in Brussels in June 2021 as well as the development of NATO's Strategic Concept 2022 offer the opportunity to establish a common realistic position vis-a-vis both Russia and China. This is an opportunity that must be seized.

6 Conclusions

To conclude, it is imperative for Europeans, in particular for Berlin, London, Paris and Brussels, to re-learn the business of strategic thinking and to develop a European sense of what is actually threatening both the transatlantic community and the European Union, and under which conditions such a threat might become a reality. This necessity is particularly huge for Germany, which has indulged in an 'end-of-history mode' for more than 20 years (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2020). The strategic documents published by the EU External Action Service have been instrumental in sharpening the awareness of strategic challenges and even threats, but given the fact that a Russian-Chinese alliance relationship has emerged or is emerging, many of these assessments have to be reviewed. The challenge this alliance is posing to Europe is of a fundamental nature and it could spell the difference between war and peace.

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Conclusion: Connecting the Dots and Defining the Challenge



Barry Pavel, Sarah Kirchberger, and Svenja Sinjen

The contributions to this volume in sum paint a multifaceted picture of the complex and evolving Russian-Chinese strategic partnership. It seems clear that depending on the particular issue area studied and the methods adopted for studying it, a number of varying diagnoses can be made regarding the current state and future prospects of this “strategic partnership.” Capturing such complexity was expressly one of our goals; we consider it dangerous to approach the reality of Russian-Chinese cooperation with ready-made interpretations and thus risk falling victim to confirmation bias. That said, a few clear patterns *do* emerge from our material when it comes to answering the key questions that this research project set out to study and that were listed in the introduction:

- What is the *potential* for increased Sino-Russian cooperation based on their existing synergies?
- What *obstacles* stand in the way of fully exploiting these synergies?
- What is the impact of *structural incentives and constraints* on their cooperation?
- What is the likely broad *trajectory* of the bilateral relationship in light of all of the above?
- What *problems* could ensue for NATO, and how could Western countries deal with them?

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The following concluding thoughts will offer a brief summary of what can be learned from this volume's expert contributions in regard to those questions.

1 Structural Incentives for Further Russian-Chinese Cooperation

Our contributors overall agree that the year 2014, when Russia occupied and illegally annexed Crimea, marked a watershed moment that seems to have set the stage for much closer Russian cooperation with China. Several also point out, however, that 2014 was not the initial starting point of this development. Rather, Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, which coincided with a border agreement with China, seems to already have set Russia and China on this path, and the Russian-Western tensions after 2014 only exacerbated this trend.

On the question of what are the key factors driving Russia and China closer together, our authors broadly agree that systemic factors play a key role. At least under their current leaderships, Beijing and Moscow aim first and foremost to preserve their autocratic political systems and make the world far more advantageous to their survival, and they also both expressly reserve the right to settle territorial disputes and advance their own perceived national interests on their periphery by military force (Stent, 2020, p. 3). In contrast, Western countries actively promote a rules-based international order, democracy, and human rights. They see multilateralism and international law as the primary means to resolve territorial disputes and reject as illegitimate the violation of international borders and attempts to change borders through war. While the record of Western countries regarding these norms is certainly imperfect, the preponderance of their international actions and their domestic politics and identities reflect these values. These differing perceptions between the West and the leading autocratic regimes regarding the rules of the global system seem to be the key driver of the Russian-Chinese alignment. While most authors in this volume who have commented on that issue—in particular Hannes Adomeit in chapter “Putin's Russia: Global Strategic Outlook and Policies—What Role for China?”, Andrew A. Michta in chapter “Options for Dealing with Russia and China—A US Perspective”, Rainer Meyer zum Felde in chapter “What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO” and Joachim Krause in chapter “The Way Forward: How should Europe Deal with Russia and China?”—place the blame for the widening rift between Western democracies and Russia/China squarely at the feet of Putin's and Xi's ever more aggressive outward behaviors, Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix in chapter “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” takes a different stand and points to Western pressure, and in particular NATO enlargement and shared concerns over US military interventions, as being the primary drivers of Sino-Russian rapprochement. The latter perspective downplays the degree to which this is rooted in Putin's and Xi's shared regime survival concerns.

The above disagreement represented a recurring theme in Western policy discussions about whether it would be possible to “woo” Russia into the Western camp through concessions and gain its help for dealing with China. The Russian February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine with its extremes of brutality and deception, and in particular the genocidal atrocities inflicted on Ukrainian civilians have rendered such ideas obsolete, as Andrew Michta points out. The immediate Western backlash suggests that any putative cooperation with Russia is for the foreseeable future off the table, at least while Putin remains in power. Western efforts at coaxing China into intervening on behalf of Ukraine meanwhile were unsuccessful during the first eight weeks of the war, with a clear positioning of Beijing still pending as of late April 2022. We have no doubt that regime security concerns bordering on paranoia due to a perceived threat of “color revolutions” exist among the inner circle of the autocratic leaders in Beijing and in Moscow alike; that both leaderships fear and reject Western military interventionism; and also, that these fears shape both governments’ strategic thinking and outlook on the world to some degree. Numerous writings by Russian and Chinese strategists bear eloquent witness to that (Stent, 2020, p. 3). Whether such threat perceptions are rooted in a realistic assessment or whether they are rather conjured up as a tool in information operations and as a justification for outward aggression is entirely another matter. After all, if both countries’ leaderships feel justified in demanding extensive security guarantees from their smaller neighbors and the West, it does not make logical sense for them to deny those same small neighbors—who have a history of being invaded by their larger neighbor—the same right to security guarantees and self-defense that their large (and nuclear-armed) neighboring country invokes for itself. Therefore, we do not share the position that outward structural factors such as NATO enlargement and US support for Taiwan alone are sufficient to explain the trend toward a stronger Russian-Chinese partnership, and we certainly reject the narrative that NATO enlargement has somehow “caused” Russia to invade Ukraine in 2022. Conversely, it is the unprovoked Russian war of aggression against Ukraine that will soon in all likelihood give rise to even further rounds of NATO enlargement, as it proved that Russian neighbors such as Finland and even Sweden have reason to feel under threat.

As several authors outline, internal dynamics within Russia and China may be much more foundational drivers for their rapprochement. Both Hannes Adomeit in chapter “Putin’s Russia: Global Strategic Outlook and Policies—What Role for China?” and Marcin Kaczmarek in chapter “Domestic Politics: A Forgotten Factor in the Russian-Chinese Relationship” discuss the shared fears of regime survival as a key incentive that brings Beijing and Moscow closer together. As Adomeit notes, united by their shared anti-Western grievances, Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China can be seen as cyclists “traveling in parallel on separate bikes but on the same bumpy road of Via Antiamericana.” Kaczmarek points out how various constituencies within Russia that have a stake in the continued existence of the current regime have turned into ardent supporters of rapprochement with China for this very reason. In addition to domestic factors, Jo Inge Bekkevold in chapter “Imperialist, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China’s Changing Views of Russia” points to another

impactful driver: the evolving great-power competition between the US and China that has strengthened the incentives for China to cooperate with Russia. Having its “strategic rear” to Russia safe while competing with the US for dominance in the Western Pacific has immeasurable strategic benefit to Beijing as it contends with the threat of maritime containment through US alliances in the region. For Russia, having China’s backing in its competition with NATO is likewise a valuable asset. Geography, in this respect, should not be underrated; for two Eurasian giants that share the world’s longest land border (at 4133 km) between them, peace and cooperation along that border not only makes large troop deployments there unnecessary, it also frees up military resources that can be alternatively deployed to higher-priority theaters (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2021). In light of the conflict-fraught history between them, having each other’s back can easily be seen by Russia and China as far more attractive than constantly being at each other’s throat.

2 Evidence Pointing to Differences and Lack of Cooperation: An Uneven Picture

What indications did our authors find that would seem to stall a further rapprochement between China and Russia? One factor that is often cited in this regard is their history of mutual strategic distrust—as laid out in detail by Jo Inge Bekkevold in chapter “Imperialist, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China’s Changing Views of Russia”. The question is to what extent such a legacy of betrayals, which resulted in a lack of mutual affinity and empathy, may still be at work, undermining trust and inhibiting meaningful cooperation between constituencies within both countries even today.

Indeed, some of our contributors have come away with the diagnosis that there is still a lot of ground to cover before Russia and China could be considered true allies and partners. Chapter “Partnership Without Substance: Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe” by Edward Lucas and Bobo Lo in particular notes a striking lack of cooperation between Russia and China in their activities in the Central and Eastern European arena. Based on this, they deem it highly unlikely that China would come to Russia’s aid in a crisis in Europe, or Russia to China’s in Asia; however, they also acknowledge that other geographic areas may offer better indications of their overall cooperation than this particular field. But several other chapters likewise note significant divergences in both countries’ approaches to various issues, or point out a lack of coordination despite the objective existence of potential synergies. Some authors point to Russian-Chinese coordination in a field under scrutiny—where it does occur—as being seemingly “ad hoc” and opportunistic rather than strategic and well thought through. Examples of such takes are the study by Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska on cooperation in emerging military technologies in chapter “Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution”; the analysis by Elina Sinkkonen and Jussi Lassila

on cyberspace governance approaches in chapter “Digital Authoritarianism and Technological Cooperation in Sino-Russian Relations: Common Goals and Diverging Standpoints”; and Olaf Wientzek’s discussion of Russian-Chinese behavior in multilateral organizations in chapter “Cooperation Between Russia and China in Multilateral Organizations—A Tactical or a Strategic Alliance?”. Overall, from these contributions, a picture emerges of Russian-Chinese coordination often being imperfect rather than full-fledged, and opportunistic rather than well-planned or integrated into a coherent, structured bilateral strategic partnership.

The question remains, however, of whether that might simply be a transient phenomenon. After all, the watershed moment of 2014 happened only 8 years ago, and many of the studied fields of cooperation may still be in their beginning stages after having started from a low level, with Russian-Chinese cooperation potentially turning into a more mature and stable state after initial interactions have returned positive results—or the reverse might be the case, as it may be. In that sense, we feel that the available evidence is as yet ambiguous, and that the fields of “unclear” cooperation that were analyzed in this volume should continue to be revisited, and the studies updated after a few more years to try and clarify the trend based on new evidence on the actual quality and quantity of Sino-Russian cooperation.

Furthermore, with the exception of emerging technologies, all of the above-named studies concern fields of cooperation that do not have military implications *per se*. Military forms of cooperation, however, could be seen as *the* most reliable indicators of strategic trust. Therefore, the development of post-2014 military and defense-industrial cooperation activities is particularly interesting and meaningful for evaluating the future trajectory of the relationship from which trust may eventually trickle down into non-military and less “strategic” fields.

Looking at the chapters that comprise Part II of this volume, and in particular the contributions by Sarah Kirchberger in chapter “Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor” and Alexandre Sheldon-Duplax in chapter “Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance” about the arms trade, and Brian G. Carlson in chapter “China-Russia Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence” about cooperation in nuclear deterrence, signs of an unprecedented degree of strategic trust that seems to have overridden previous concerns emerged in the period following 2014. In the arms trade, massive transgressions by China from the reverse-engineering of Russian systems on an industrial scale had long disincentivized the Russian arms industry from sharing its state-of-the-art secrets with this customer. But during the past few years, the relationship has not only overcome these issues, but seemingly moved towards shared development of sensitive arms systems. In that context, chapter “Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space” by Frank Jüris on dual-use scientific research cooperation in the Arctic is of special interest. Jüris describes a pattern of intense and institutionalized dual-use scientific collaboration in the highly sensitive field of hydroacoustic sensors that takes place in a particularly sensitive geographic area—certainly from Russia’s point of view at least. Hydroacoustics is a technology area with massive impact on submarine operations and anti-submarine warfare and as such is in most countries a closely guarded field. The Arctic

geographic context of this research collaboration in particular raises questions regarding Russian willingness to support ambitions that China reportedly harbors of ultimately basing parts of its strategic submarine fleet in Russian Arctic ports (“Pentagon Warns of Risk”, 2019). This would be a “game changer” due to its implications for nuclear deterrence.¹ Brian G. Carlson touches upon this problem and other potential synergies that Russia and China could be tempted to explore in the nuclear area in chapter “China-Russia Cooperation in Nuclear Deterrence”.

Given the Russian and Chinese territorial ambitions in their respective regions that are currently still frustrated by US-led alliances—NATO in Europe, and US bilateral alliances as well as potentially the newly-formed AUKUS pact in Asia—indications for cooperation in the field of nuclear deterrence need to be very closely watched. Russian help for China in the development of a ballistic missile early warning system; joint strategic bomber aircraft patrols near Japan and South Korea; a joint naval patrol encircling a main Japanese island; a steady series of bilateral military exercises, including naval maneuvers; and a mutual assurance of backing each other’s security concerns over Ukraine and Taiwan worryingly pointed in such a direction (Troianovski & Myers, 2021). Likewise, a joint statement ominously issued mere weeks before the 2022 Ukraine invasion openly challenged the existing international order (Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, 2022, February 4). Based on the above-named studies in our volume, the evidence pointing toward a full-fledged military alliance (in form if not in name), while not yet entirely compelling, is nonetheless hard to dismiss as completely unlikely. As a worst-case scenario, this is a worrisome development for NATO and the West, and indeed for the future of the rules-based international order that heretofore has led to unprecedented prosperity and security for hundreds of millions of people. Russian military shortcomings exposed during its Ukraine campaign may well reduce its attractiveness to China as a military ally somewhat. But simply hoping for the best without making needed preparations for hedging against the possibility of worst-case scenarios, as some European NATO members have been prone to doing, could have severe implications. The contributions in Part IV reflect this concern by dissecting the security implications for Europe and NATO that could ensue should Russia and China go down a path as military allies for achieving their mutual geopolitical goals.

3 Defining the Challenge to Europe, NATO and the US

The first part of the challenge posed by China-Russia cooperation to the West is to correctly assess the state, extent, and nature of this cooperation in the first place. Since information warfare and downright deception are key aspects of Russian and Chinese military doctrine (cf. Jensen, 2020; Lindley-French, 2015), the likelihood is

¹Personal communication of a NATO HQ official, Berlin, November 3, 2021.

strong that both countries could have an interest in either exaggerating or concealing the true extent of their cooperation, and to use signaling to manipulate Western fears about it. Furthermore, since this is an evolving relationship, assessments of the *status quo* cannot be expected to remain valid for very long, but should be regularly reviewed and updated; in doing so, cognitive bias in the researchers should be counteracted by actively looking for evidence that runs counter to expectations. The next part of the challenge is to assess in what ways a strengthened Sino-Russian military cooperation, whether short-lived and opportunistic or formalized and strategic, could pose a military threat to transatlantic allies.

The three contributions in Part IV—chapter “What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO” by Rainer Meyer zum Felde, chapter “Options for Dealing with Russia and China—A US Perspective” by Andrew A. Michta and chapter “The Way Forward: How should Europe Deal with Russia and China?” by Joachim Krause—all look into the potential military and geostrategic synergies that Russia and China could feel tempted to exploit, and answer the question of what NATO, the US and Europe should do to avert a “nightmare scenario” of strategic simultaneity where the capacity of the US-led alliances to respond would be overwhelmed by a simultaneous attack by Russia on an ally in Eastern Europe and China in the Western Pacific. They all share the concern that deterrence might fail if Russia and China came to the conclusion that their joint risk calculus allows for a testing of NATO and US security guarantees at both ends of Eurasia.² “Probing behavior” to gain an understanding of potential responses is already ongoing on both countries’ peripheries and further afield, and future Sino-Russian developments may depend to a large extent on NATO’s, Indo-Pacific US allies’, and American reactions to the war in Ukraine and further transgressions (cf. Grygiel & Mitchell, 2016, pp. 43–44). In chapter “What a Military Alliance Between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO”, Brigadier General (ret.) Meyer zum Felde dissects the flaws in current NATO assumptions that do not account for the eventuality of a war on a NATO member where Russia might have the opportunistic backing of China. His sobering conclusion is that NATO’s deterrence posture must be urgently amended, and timelines for agreed-upon initiatives to rearm Europe be brought forward in order not to present even further parts of Eastern Europe as a tempting target of military coercion and thereby making coordinated military aggression in tandem with China more attractive to Russia.

Reflecting on the same risk and writing from a US perspective, in chapter “Options for Dealing with Russia and China—A US Perspective” Andrew A. Michta sees a growing US consensus which to an extent may be enshrined in the forthcoming US National Defense Strategy (NDS) that treats China and Russia as *de facto* allies even if the formal structures of such an alliance are lacking. He calls for transatlantic “burden transferring” instead of just “burden sharing” and points to

²For a study on Russian strategic culture with regard to risk propensity, see Gorenburg (2019). For a discussion of managing military risk in the great power competition with China, see Kirchberger (2021).

a need by the US military to concentrate more fully on the Pacific theater, which means Europe will have to be able to provide significant core military capabilities to buttress the NATO deterrent—a situation that Europe is currently unprepared for politically and militarily. As it stands, the Russian war against Ukraine has highlighted the need for urgent improvements of military capabilities and readiness in Europe and led to an unprecedented degree of consensus among the NATO allies. Thus, in addition to burden transferring, it may be wise for the transatlantic allies to greatly increase the depth and breadth of their security cooperation and to break down and reform the still extant Cold War-era processes that constrain US cooperative efforts in a wide range of areas (e.g., operational planning, foreign military sales, etc.). For example, if the United States were to integrate close allies (those who would be expected to contribute meaningful capabilities) into relevant, detailed, operational military planning for top-priority contingencies, that could pay substantial dividends. Similarly, the benefits of US reforms to accelerate and enhance the agility of its military equipment sales processes to allies and partners could be manifold. This radical reform of US security cooperation is needed to enable the allies to handle the much greater total military capacity that the Russian and Chinese militaries can bring to bear than the allies have faced at any time in their history. Finally, this increased total military threat should also cause American defense planners to set much clearer priorities—with a very clear set of great-power top priorities (China and Russia), and a willingness to take additional risk regarding lower priorities (Iran and North Korea)—to a much greater degree than they have done in recent years. Unfortunately, early indications from the soon-to-be-concluded National Defense Strategy (NDS) process (Wasser & Pettyjohn, 2021) pointed to an incremental set of outcomes, which if manifested would leave the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific and Europe with a less capable deterrent posture both now and into the future.

Michta also points to the central importance for the United States to decouple critical supply chains from China's globe-spanning supply system, a move that is both foundational for winning the competition against China but also may be the most challenging in light of strong economic interests on both sides of the Atlantic favoring sustained economic interchange with and in China. Some analysis also suggests the wisdom of the transatlantic alliance leaning more heavily on the EU's regulatory superpower to help set technology standards that reflect democratic values as a way to out-compete China in that critically important domain for western societies and economies (Pavel & Cimmino 2022, January 11).

Joachim Krause in chapter "The Way Forward: How should Europe Deal with Russia and China?" echoes some of Michta's and Meyer zum Felde's points and makes an important observation when pointing out that the often-asked question "how durable could a potential Russian-Chinese alliance be?" most likely misses the point. By listing historical examples of opportunistic alliances or axes concluded by authoritarian governments that were united in their goal to achieve geopolitical gains through violence and stood in opposition to democratic countries, he shows that even short-lived arrangements of this type not only often resulted in war; they managed to wreak massive destruction within just a few short years. It may make more sense, in

other words, to focus on how likely a short-term opportunistic military collaboration between Russia and China could be, what forms it could take, and how it could be counteracted, rather than pondering the risk that Russia and China could be forming a treaty alliance, or how to label their exact type of strategic coordination (cf. Kashin, 2019; Lukin, 2021).

4 Areas for Future Research

During the course of this project, we noted a number of research areas that would likely yield highly interesting data on Russian-Chinese collaboration, but that we were unable to include within the scope of our project. It would, however, be desirable for all these sensitive or strategic fields to be analyzed as case studies to gather further insights into the trajectory of Sino-Russian cooperation in additional areas, especially following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Of particular interest would be Russian-Chinese space collaboration, both in civilian and military programs; deeper insights into Russian-Chinese cooperation on the future strategic forces balance including nuclear weapons, directed-energy, and hypersonics; analyses regarding cooperation on biotechnology and genetic engineering, which increasingly look likely to be critical drivers of the future global economy in the 2030s and beyond; studies on mutual learning processes connected to “hybrid warfare” (or “sharp power”) that Russia and China direct against neighboring states; on both countries' attempts to forge global narratives, e.g. on the pandemic origins or on vaccines³; on their vast and fast-evolving cooperation in Arctic LNG production and the related novel infrastructures that are being built up along the Arctic Silk Road; Sino-Russian cooperation on climate change and energy resources more broadly, which together will add further dynamism to geopolitical balances; as well as on mutual learning processes regarding methods and tools for suppressing domestic dissent and separatism inside their borders. This list of desirables is by no means exhaustive, but by mentioning just a few such areas, we aim to inspire future research agendas in the hope that gaps in our knowledge of Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation can be gradually reduced and a more comprehensive understanding gained.

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³Pioneering efforts in that regard are Dubow et al. (2021) and Kendall-Taylor (2021).

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