

China's Evolving Security Alignment with Russia – Content, Motivations and Future Prospects

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IN RECENT YEARS, Sino-Russian defense and military cooperation has reached unprecedented levels, with high-end arms sales and technological exchanges, joint exercises, and policy coordination on a variety of issues. The deepening collaboration between these two world powers will inevitably have major long-term implications for international politics and security.

This FOI brief provides context to the evolving Sino-Russian security alignment, with an emphasis on Beijing's engagement for enhancing its defense partnership with Moscow. The brief argues that two interrelated motivations have shaped China's approach.

First, Beijing strives to maintain a stable and amicable long-term relationship with Russia, as this ensures China's own security. Beijing recognizes that its past antagonistic relationship with Russia, especially during the latter part of the Cold War, was very costly. Specifically, Beijing has sought to alleviate Russian threat perceptions over China's rise, aiming to prevent Moscow from turning confrontational as it increasingly finds itself playing the junior role in the bilateral relationship.

Second, Russia functions as a suitable ally in China's efforts to counter-balance Western and in particular U.S. global influence. China's security alignment with Russia helps to compensate for certain military weaknesses, augments its power projection capabilities, and helps challenge Washington's military presence and power especially in the Asia-Pacific region.

Paying attention to these two basic motivations in China's approach to Russia allows for valuable starting points when assessing the nature of Sino-Russian security cooperation but also the broader strategic partnership and its future outlook, including potential impact on Europe.

A COMPREHENSIVE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

China and Russia established a strategic partnership in 1996 and have since then "upgraded" their relations several times. Today, Beijing and Moscow officially define their bilateral relationship as "a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era" and view each other as their most important international partner.¹

At the 17th Annual Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in October 2020, President Vladimir Putin suggested the possibility of a military alliance with China. During a telephone conversation in December the same year, Chinese President Xi Jinping told Putin that the bilateral relationship between the two countries is in "a league of its own."² While such official rhetoric should not be taken at face value, it nonetheless illustrates the current state of the strategic partnership.

In fact, China's relationship with Russia has never been as robust and comprehensive as it is now, spanning across virtually all dimensions of bilateral cooperation. Intensified U.S. pressure both against Russia, in response to Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and against China, during the Donald Trump administration, has arguably facilitated closer collaboration. The two sides maintain close and regular top-level political exchanges, have developed their trade and economic links (especially on energy), and are increasingly aligned on global affairs, coordinating their respective policies in regions such as East Asia, Central Asia, and the Arctic.

Military and security cooperation has long constituted a backbone in the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship and continues to be promoted as a key pillar in present and future cooperation. China officially avoids terming its relationship with Russia an alliance. This is unlikely to change.

1 China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo he Eluosi lianbang guanyu fazhan xin shidai quanmian zhanlue xiezuo huoban guanxi de lianhe shengming" [Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation in the new era], 6 June 2019, at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679110/1207_679122/t1670118.shtml.

2 Yu Bin, "Light at the End of the Tunnel?" *Comparative Connections*, Volume. 22, Issue 3, (January 2021), at: <http://cc.pacforum.org/2021/01/light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel/>.

Beijing cherishes its strategic independence too much. An alliance with Moscow would bind Beijing to a formal commitment it does not want to make, in essence to aid Russia militarily in a conflict with a third party. Moreover, despite growing China-West tensions, China still depends on cordial relations with the West for exchanges of trade, technology, and human resources.

MAIN COMPONENTS OF THE DEFENSE PARTNERSHIP

That said, the content and behavior of interactions increasingly point to a robust security and defense alignment. Broadly speaking, Chinese-Russian collaboration in the security domain has long been characterized by three main components: a burgeoning arms trade, joint military exercises, and policy coordination.

Arms trade: China has developed an extensive arms trade relationship with Russia and the two countries engage in increasingly complex forms of military-technical cooperation.

Over the years, Russia has become China's largest supplier of weapons and military technology. Conversely, China is a significant arms buyer for Russia. From 1991 to 2010 Russia provided China with some 90 percent of its major conventional weapons, particularly air and naval platforms such as Su-27 and Su-30 fighter jets, Sovremenny-class destroyers, Kilo-class diesel submarines, and anti-ship cruise missiles.³

While the arms trade declined in absolute terms in the mid-2000s, the qualitative level of military-technical cooperation has increased. Russia has proven itself willing to export more advanced systems to China in the wake of the Ukraine conflict, as exemplified by a 2015 sale of Su-35 combat aircraft and S-400 air defense systems. Moreover, what was traditionally a one-sided supplier-consumer relationship is now turning into a more dynamic two-way exchange, as a consequence of the Western sanctions imposed on Russia after 2014 and in part also due to a more capable Chinese defense industry. China has provided electronic parts for Russia's aerospace program and

equipped the Russian navy with marine diesel engines. Co-production schemes are also increasing, with an often-cited example being the joint development of heavy-lift helicopters.⁴

In addition, security cooperation now enters more sensitive fields. For example, in 2019 Putin announced that Russia will assist China with developing an early warning missile attack system. Currently, only the United States and Russia possess such systems and Russian help will advance Chinese deterrent capabilities further.⁵ There are growing signs of cooperation in new technologies with potential military applications, such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and robotics.⁶

In these exchanges, China hopes to make use of Russia's military combat experience, while Russia seeks to benefit from Chinese industrial capacity. A concrete example is China's interest in Russia's utilization of artificial intelligence in its Syrian operations. The emergence of deeper Sino-Russian collaboration in strategic and sensitive domains marks a substantial upgrade of the military relationship.

Military exercises: China and Russia have regularly carried out military exercises together since 2005. Initially, these mainly took the form of bilateral land-based exercises, though Central Asian states would also sometimes be included under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Many such drills were labeled anti-terror exercises and focused on combating what is in Chinese policy jargon known as the "three evils," namely terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.

In 2012 China and Russia began to stage annual naval exercises together, which have emerged as an important feature of Sino-Russian military cooperation. While not large in scale, these exercises increasingly include higher levels of platform and unit integration, along with offensive scenarios such as anti-submarine and amphibious warfare, which points to greater interoperability and sophistication. Moreover, several exercises have been conducted in politically sensitive areas, such as the South China Sea in 2016 and the Baltic Sea in 2017.⁷ In 2019, China and Russia

3 Data obtained from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), see "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database", at: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

4 Richard Weitz, "The Expanding China-Russia Defense Partnership", *Report*, (Washington D.C: Hudson Institute, May 2019).

5 Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "Missile defense and early warning missile attack system cooperation: Enhancing the Sino-Russian defense partnership", *IFS Insight*, No. 7 (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies, 2020).

6 Vasily Kashin, "Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level", *The Moscow Times*, 23 October, 2019, at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/23/russia-and-china-take-military-partnership-to-new-level-a67852>.

7 Ethan Meick, "China-Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving Toward a Higher Level of Cooperation", *Staff Research Report*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (March 2017).

conducted their first-ever joint airborne patrol in the East China Sea, as well as a naval exercise with Iran in the Gulf of Oman.

China and Russia have also, since 2016, begun to conduct joint missile defense simulations and anti-terrorist and local law enforcement security exercises.

In 2018 Russia invited China to participate its large Vostok (East) strategic exercise. This was remarkable, considering that Russia had in the past supposedly simulated China as a potential adversary in such exercises.⁸ Russia, it seems, also intends on inviting China to the 2021 Zapad (West) exercise, marking a first Chinese participation in Russian strategic exercises on European ground.

Policy coordination: China and Russia increasingly coordinate on issues of international security and global governance, and their top leaders and military officials meet regularly, including through the high-level annual Strategic Dialogue mechanism and the China-Russia Northeast Asia Security Dialogue.

At the most basic level, both nations are staunch defenders of the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference, and neither country will criticize the other's domestic affairs or foreign policy conduct – at least not officially. Both Russia and China oppose the U.S.-led liberal international order and aim to reshape that order to better suit their own interests.

This is manifested through the adoption of similar positions and, indeed, by growing cooperation in international bodies, including the United Nations. Notably, Beijing and Moscow share a common voting behavior in the UN Security Council on issues regarding interventions and interference in other nations' domestic affairs. Regional venues and international groupings, including the SCO and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), offer additional platforms to strengthen cooperation and align common positions.⁹

Finally, Beijing and Moscow also increasingly align on issues pertaining to global security governance. For instance, both states share similar views on cyberspace and

promote the notion of “internet sovereignty,” which grants nation-states exclusive control over cyberspace content and infrastructure.¹⁰

BASIC MOTIVATIONS UNDERPINNING CHINA'S APPROACH

The growing security alignment with Russia benefits China in many ways. The arms trade relationship allows Beijing to obtain weapons and technology it cannot acquire elsewhere, whether due to the Western arms embargo implemented after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown or because its own defense industry falls short of military demands, as is the case in aviation. Joint military exercises with Russia offer operational and tactical training opportunities, which are especially valuable for China as it lacks present-day real combat experience, while training and education programs help Chinese servicemen improve their military skills. Policy coordination on security issues and global affairs lets Beijing enlist the support of Russia in the UN and other international forums.

However, two more fundamental motivations underpin China's security engagement with Russia: Beijing's desire to maintain positive relations with its large neighbor, and its opposition to the U.S.-dominated international order.

Positive bilateral relations: Beijing's security engagement with Moscow facilitates a stable and amicable long-term relationship, thus ensuring China's own security.

Beijing recognizes the costly consequences of a poorly managed bilateral relationship with Moscow and has identified several potential sources of bilateral tension. These include geographical proximity, a lingering mistrust due to Cold War era ideological and strategic competition, and the combination of Russia's military capabilities (especially its large nuclear arsenal) and its penchant for “realist thinking.”¹¹ Crucially, Beijing is aware that such pre-existing sources of tension may be exacerbated by its own growing power, which has heightened concerns in Russia about China as a potential long-term security threat.¹²

8 Brian G. Carlson, “Vostok-2018: Another Sign of Strengthening Russia-China Ties”, *SWP Comment* 2018/C 47, (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, November 2018).

9 Marcin Kaczmarek, “China and Russia in global governance: Long-term obstacles to cooperation”, *FIIA Briefing Paper 244* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, August 2018).

10 Dennis Broeders, Liisi Adamson, and Rogier Creemers, “Coalition of the unwilling? Chinese and Russian perspectives on cyberspace”, *Policy Brief* (Hague: The Hague Program for Cyber Norms, November 2019).

11 Fu Ying, Zhong'E guanxi: shi mengyou haishi huoban? [Sino-Russian relations: alliance or partners?], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], vol. 4 (2016), pp. 1-10.

12 Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, *Too Big to Fail: China's Russia Policy in the post-Cold War Period* (Oslo: Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oslo, 2019).

Since the end of the Cold War, the Sino-Russian balance of power has shifted decidedly in China's favor. The Chinese economy is now ten times larger than Russia's and China has emerged as the only credible peer competitor to the United States on the international stage, while Russia plays the role of junior partner in the Sino-Russian relationship. This is a stark contrast to Cold War times when the Soviet Union was the stronger party. Beijing's growing military power and its ability to project strategic influence have caused concerns in Russian elite circles and inside the military establishment, although they are rarely communicated in public.¹³

For instance, Russia is wary of any sign of Chinese interest in reclaiming "lost territories" in the present-day Russian Far East and Siberia, where Tsarist Russia obtained vast areas from the Qing dynasty through a number of "unequal treaties". Moscow is also concerned that China may aim to replace Russia as the premier player in Central Asia or even challenge Russian security interests in the Arctic.¹⁴

In Chinese thinking, unmanaged Russian threat perceptions could lead Moscow to change its cooperative approach to China and instead adopt a more confrontational stance. A Russia that turns hostile or inclines toward balancing or containing China would be highly detrimental to China's own security. Beijing's drive to enhance security cooperation with Russia should therefore be understood in part as an attempt to manage the broader relationship.

Most notably, China has sought to ensure stable and secure border relations with Russia.¹⁵ Territorial disputes historically caused significant friction between China and the Soviet Union and triggered a brief border clash in 1969. Demarcation negotiations were initiated already in the 1980s but only finalized in the mid-2000s, ending the border disputes and helping to demilitarize border regions that had been heavily fortified following the Cold War clash.

This has been paralleled by several confidence-building measures such as mutual de-targeting of strategic weapons

and pledges of non-first use of nuclear force, alongside broader efforts to strengthen border stability and mutual trust. For instance, China responded to Russian concerns over Chinese illegal migration, uncontrolled border trade, and more broadly Chinese economic and social encroachment into the Russian Far East by implementing tougher visa, trade, and border control policies.

In many ways, Chinese attempts to manage and uphold stable and secure border relations with Russia have functioned as a basis for the development of other elements in the Sino-Russian security partnership and, indeed, of the overall bilateral relationship as such.

Balancing the United States: The second basic motivation for Beijing's cultivation of a security partnership with Moscow is Russia's willingness and ability to support Chinese efforts to counter-balance the U.S.-led international order and the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

China shares with Russia a deep-rooted sense of regime insecurity and a perception that the international system is unwelcoming and potentially hostile. Both states promote a multipolar world and view the United States as the principal and most immediate external threat to their national security. Beijing has long seen parallels with NATO expansion in Europe and Washington's efforts at consolidating and strengthening security partnerships in Asia as U.S. containment strategies aimed at China and Russia.¹⁶ Indeed, the initial establishment of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in 1996 was greatly informed by the first round of NATO's eastward expansion in the 1990s, the renewal of the U.S.-Japanese security treaty, and the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits crisis.

In addition, China and Russia view U.S. efforts at spreading liberal values and norms, strengthening civil society movements, and promoting democracy as being designed to instigate internal political change and ultimately to bring about regime change in authoritarian states. In the view of both Beijing and Moscow, examples include the Eastern European and Central Asian "color

13 Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Strategic Calculus: Threat Perceptions and Military Doctrine", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 448* (Washington D.C.: Eliot School of International Affairs, November 2016).

14 Elizabeth Wishnick, "Sino-Russian Consolidation at a Time of Geopolitical Rivalry", *China Leadership Monitor*, (Issue 63, Spring 2020), at: <https://www.prcleader.org/elizabeth-wishnick>.

15 Xing Guangcheng, "Eluosi de ouya xuanze yu Zhong'E bianjiang quyu hezu" [The Choice of Russia and Co-operation in the border areas between China and Russia], *Zhongguo bianjiang shidai yanjiu* [China's Borderland History and Geographical Studies], Vol. 20, No. 4 (December 2010), pp. 1-13.

16 Tao Wenzhao and Xu Shengwei, "The US factor in post-cold war China-Russia relations", *International Politics* (2020), at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00211-1>.

revolutions,” the 2011 Arab Spring, and, more recently, the protests in Hong Kong.¹⁷

More concretely, security cooperation with Russia serves to augment China’s military ability to fend off U.S. military power in the Asia-Pacific region. Russian arms sales have enhanced Beijing’s military capabilities and helped create a more favorable military balance vis-à-vis the United States – in particular on maritime issues, such as the South China Sea and on Taiwan. For instance, China’s ability to deter Taiwanese independence has been strengthened by its possession of advanced Russian-origin weapons systems such as the S-400 or Su-35 fighter jets, the latter already patrolling near Taiwan.¹⁸

Cooperation on missile defense-related issues, notably Russian assistance to help China develop an early missile attack warning system, will benefit China’s deterrent capabilities. It forms part of broader Chinese efforts at counter-balancing U.S. nuclear strategy and missile capabilities.

Joint military exercises signal to the United States that Beijing and Moscow support each other in regional disputes and, at the same time, it lets China and Russia project themselves as great powers outside their own home regions.

Finally, the emerging technological partnership could assist Chinese efforts to further innovate and, not least, help Beijing withstand U.S. sanctions and export controls. China is still in need of certain niche technologies that Russia possesses, particularly in areas deemed important for balancing the United States, such as the air, space, and maritime domains.¹⁹ Cooperation in global security governance on cyberspace and outer space will also help thwart U.S. global leadership in these strategically important sectors.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The growing Sino-Russian security alignment notwithstanding, challenges and underlying tensions persist. Deep-rooted mutual mistrust and cultural

differences have proven difficult to overcome. The partnership is constrained by highly protectionist and nationalistic defense sectors, as well as by poorly matched economic strengths. Russia continues to be concerned over alleged Chinese intellectual property thefts, not least related to military-technology. Finally, as China’s own military-industrial development makes it less dependent on Russian weapons and technology, Chinese-Russian competition on the international arms market can be expected to intensify.

More broadly, the future trajectory of China heading toward global superpower status while Russia is in relative decline to China may spur irreconcilable long-term regional and global ambitions. It will be increasingly difficult for Beijing and Moscow to find common ground.²⁰

Nonetheless, China and Russia will continue to enhance their security cooperation. Russia seems to have reconciled with its position as junior in the relationship, at least for the short to medium term future.²¹ For China, the defense relationship with Russia benefits Beijing materially, commercially, and strategically. As argued in this brief, a stable and amicable bilateral relationship is important in its own right, as this ensures Beijing’s security. Moreover, it also allows Beijing to collaborate with Moscow, which happens to share similar threat perceptions of the United States, on the broader geostrategic objective of counter-balancing U.S. influence. From Beijing’s perspective, China’s strategic rivalry with the United States will only intensify (also under the new Biden administration),²² offering a clear rationale for maintaining and deepening the relationship with Russia.

THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION

As Chinese-Russian security cooperation grows closer, it will inevitably affect Europe.

Chinese and Russian values and norms concerning political systems and global governance differ from those of Europe. Beijing and Moscow have not formed

17 John M. Owen, “Sino-Russian cooperation against liberal hegemony” *International Politics*, 57 (2020), 809–833.

18 Lyle L. Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev, “China–Russia Military Cooperation and the Emergent U.S. – China Rivalry: Implications and Recommendations for U.S. National Security”, *Journal of Peace and War Studies*, (October 2020), pp. 24–48.

19 Sergey Luzyanin and Zhao Huasheng, eds., *Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2020 Model* (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2020).

20 Bobo Lo, “The Sino-Russian partnership and global order”, *China International Strategy Review*, 2 (2020), pp. 306–324.

21 Alexander Gabuev, “Unwanted but inevitable: Russia’s Deepening Partnership with Russia post-Ukraine”, in Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo eds. *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), pp. 41–66.

22 Oscar Almén, Johan Englund Björn Ottosson, *Great Power Perceptions. How China and the U.S. view each other on political, economic and security issues*, FOI-R (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2021).

an “international authoritarian coalition” to export their political systems abroad, but they do intend to reshape the current global order to better reflect and safeguard their political governance models, ultimately aiming to enhance their own regime security.²³ As China’s global clout in international institutions and affairs grows, Europe and the United States will come under increased pressure as they seek to uphold the Western-led liberal international order that has guaranteed European security and prosperity for decades.

Europe currently faces a number of significant internal challenges, among them the European Union’s crisis of political legitimacy and leadership. Neither China nor Russia wishes to see a collapse of the union, but it is certainly to their advantage that Brussels stays preoccupied with internal issues. There is no evidence of direct Sino-Russian cooperation to intervene in or influence European domestic affairs. But Russia and China have separately – and differently in terms of style and extent – engaged in disinformation, influence campaigns, and cyberspace operations. Such incidents have increasingly prompted calls for stronger and more coordinated European policy responses.²⁴ Considering the growing closeness between China and Russia, it is, however, likely that cooperation in these areas could develop.²⁵

Growing Chinese-Russian economic and technological cooperation may also bring new challenges for Europe. China is already Russia’s largest trading partner. It is now also Russia’s biggest source of machine tool equipment and technology-related products, surpassing Germany. The Chinese telecommunications company Huawei is

more successful in Russia than in the West, and a future Chinese-Russian telecommunications partnership would have consequences for European businesses in Russia, not to mention political and security implications.²⁶

In the Arctic, China’s advancement of its interests and its collaboration with Russia are already changing regional security dynamics, as the United States has begun to call for closer cooperation among Western states in the Arctic to counter Chinese geoeconomic ambitions and Russia’s military build-up.²⁷

In the end, Sino-Russian security cooperation allow both states to “keep their backs free”. This means that neither Beijing nor Moscow needs to worry strategically about the other and can instead focus on contesting the West, especially the United States, in their respective spheres of interest. For China, this means replacing the United States as the premier power in the Asia-Pacific region. For Russia, it is about reviving itself as a regional power in Europe. While it is unlikely that either China or Russia would intervene militarily in each other’s regional conflicts, they may offer support to their partner in other ways or, at a minimum, take advantage of a crisis in one region to advance opportunities in their own neighborhood. Simply put, without the support from the other, such strategic maneuvering space would undoubtedly have been more difficult to achieve and constitutes perhaps the most consequential dividend both states gain from their by now well-established security and defense partnership. ■

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23 Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracy? China’s Rise and the Future of Global Politics”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August (2019).

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25 Adam Segal, “Peering into the future of Sino-Russian cyber security cooperation”, *War on the Rocks*, 10 August, 2020, at: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/peering-into-the-future-of-sino-russian-cyber-security-cooperation/>.

26 Dimitri Siemens, “Huawei plays star role in new China-Russia AI partnership”, *Nikkei Asia*, 4 February 2020, at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Huawei-plays-star-role-in-new-China-Russia-AI-partnership>.

27 Niklas Granholm, *Utvecklingen i Arktis – påverkan på och implikationer för Sverige*, FOI Memo, (2019).