

The Russo-Chinese Alliance: What Are Its Limits?

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Introduction: The Sino-Russian Alliance: Its Nature And Evidence Of Its Existence

Every observer of Russo-Chinese relations can attest to these states' growing intimacy, especially since Russia invaded Crimea in 2014.¹ However, whereas most analysts and officials like Former Secretary of Defense Mattis deny the existence of a Sino-Russian alliance, I believe that this exactly what has come to be. Moreover, in this alliance, to use Bismarck's metaphor, China is the rider and Russia the horse.² And it goes without saying that this alliance is explicitly anti-American targeting U.S. policy and values that both sides see as representing a threat to the continuation of their governing system and their great power ambitions. Similarly, Russian commentators have also long believed this relationship to have evolved into an alliance some time ago.³ In this connection, Yuri Ushakov, Putin's advisor on foreign policy, has said that, Strategic interaction with China is one of the top priorities of our foreign policy. The relations have reached quite a high level and to some degree serve as an example of how two major states can and should build an inter-state dialogue."⁴

Vasily Kashin, Senior Research Fellow at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of the Far East, claims that the 2001 Russo-Chinese treaty enshrined at the very least strategic military and political coordination between both governments. Specifically, he observes that,

Chapter 9 of the treaty stipulated that "in case there emerges a situation which, by [the] opinion of one of the Participants, can create threats to the peace, violate the peace, or affect the interests of the security of the Participant, and also in case when there is a threat of aggression against one of the Participants, the Participants immediately contact each other and start consultations in order to remove the emerging threat."⁵

Kashin further notes that, "While the treaty did not create any obligations for mutual defense, it clearly required both sides to consider some sort of joint action in the case of a threat from a third party."⁶

Not to be undone Chinese sources speak in analogous terms. In 2017 China's White Paper on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation declared that "Russia was a priority in its diplomacy."⁷ By the end of 2017 China's ambassador to Russia, Li Hui, stated that,

The comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia occupies a special position in the major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics and is an important manifestation of practicing Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism With Chinese Characteristics for a new era.⁸

Thus when China and Russia introduced their double freeze proposal for Korea (freezing nuclear missile tests and U.S.-ROK exercises) in 2017 China and Russia announced that they would strengthen their coordination on Korea despite the lackluster foreign response to this proposal. This joint statement with Russia was the first such statement offered under the name of both foreign ministries in ten years.⁹

Scholars and experts, including this author, have long recognized that a Sino-Russian alliance constitutes a profound threat to both U.S. interests and values and to our allies.¹⁰ Therefore to delineate the limits of this alliance it is first necessary to persuade observers that the alliance really exists. Despite the majority view that no alliance or no formal alliance between Russia and China exists notwithstanding their visibly growing intimacy; this author and some other writers dispute that finding.¹¹ Russian officials also freely employ the term, the most recent example

being Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov's remark that an "energy alliance" exists between Russia and China.¹² In 2014 Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that,

I can't fail to mention Russia's comprehensive partnership with China. Important bilateral decisions have been taken, paving the way to an energy alliance between Russia and China. But there's more to it. We can now even talk about the emerging technology alliance between the two countries.¹³

Lavrov immediately followed by observing that "Russia's tandem with Beijing is a crucial factor for ensuring international stability and at least some balance in international affairs."¹⁴ Today, prominent Western observers like Graham Allison similarly assert that,

What has emerged is what a former senior Russian national security official described to me as a "functional military alliance." Russian and Chinese General Staffs now have candid, detailed discussions about the threat U.S. nuclear modernization and missile defenses pose to each of their strategic deterrents.¹⁵ It therefore stands to reason that these militaries also conduct equally probing discussions concerning conventional warfare and Korean issues.¹⁶ Indeed, as shown below, an extensive infrastructure of bilateral consultation and exchange has developed over the last generation.¹⁷

Meanwhile, in keeping with both sides' high esteem for deception strategies Moscow continually invents euphemisms to disguise this alliance's consolidation. First it was called a comprehensive strategic partnership.¹⁸ More recently in November 2018 President Putin called it a 'privileged strategic partnership.'¹⁹ Both these formulations sound like attempts to deceive foreign observers as to the alliance's real nature especially as in October 2014 Putin told Chinese Premier Li Keqiang that Russia and China were "natural partners and natural allies."²⁰

Thus in 2016 Putin described comprehensive strategic partnership as follows,

As we had never reached this level of relations before, our experts have had trouble defining today's general state of our common affairs. It turns out that to say we have strategic cooperation is not enough anymore. This is why we have started talking about a comprehensive partnership and strategic collaboration. "Comprehensive" means that we work virtually on all major avenues; "strategic" means that we attach enormous inter-governmental importance to this work.²¹

Similarly Foreign Minister Lavrov has stated that,

As regards international issues, we feel – and our Chinese friends share this view – that our cooperation and coordination in the international arena are one of the most important stabilizing factors in the world system. We regularly coordinate our approaches to various conflicts, whether it is in the Middle East, North Africa, or the Korean peninsula. We have regular and frank and confidential consultations.²²

China's Defense Minister, General Wei Fenghe likewise told the 2018 Moscow International Security Conference that,

I am visiting Russia as a new defense minister of China to show the world a high level of development of our bilateral relations and firm determination of our Armed Forces to strengthen strategic cooperation, --- Second, to support the Russian side in organizing the Moscow International Security Conference the Chinese side has come to show

Americans the close ties between the Armed Forces of China and Russia, especially in this situation. We've come to support you, --- The Chinese side is ready to express with the Russian side our common concerns and common position on important international problems at international venues as well." ²³

Therefore it is hard to know how a privileged partnership expands upon a comprehensive one. Moreover, this alliance is not merely a political relationship but one involving economics and active military collaboration. In addition, leading officials in both countries expect this relationship to deepen, including in its military dimensions, during 2019.²⁴ Indeed, President Xi Jinping told Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu that not only can both militaries deal with "common security threats" but also they should increase cooperation and unswervingly deepen their strategic coordination.²⁵ Thus the evidence for the existence of an alliance, albeit informal, is strong and arguably growing stronger.²⁶

A recent joint Russo-Chinese expert dialogue argued that the parties have attained a level of interaction exceeding a strategic partnership and surpassing an alliance. Both sides retain full freedom in relations with third countries "except in circumstances where such relations might violate certain obligations of the existing partnership". Meanwhile in the bilateral relationship's intensiveness, level of trust, depth, and effectiveness Sino-Russian ties supposedly are superior to an alliance.²⁷ Furthermore this partnership allegedly has more potential to act "as an independent geopolitical power and deter political adversaries." Finally, both parties have successfully adapted their cooperation "to resolve any global or regional task" while preserving their swift decision-making, tactical flexibility, and strategic stability.²⁸ Thus this relationship, whatever its true nature, is intended to preserve both sides' flexibility of maneuver. And accordingly manifestations of that flexibility do not, as many have suggested, negate the reality of an alliance.

Indeed, Russia's option of moving closer to China preceded the invasion of Crimea and the ensuing deterioration of East-West relations that have precipitated sanctions and Russia's increasing isolation from Europe, not to mention highly charged U.S.-Russian relations. As Aleksandr Gabuev of the Carnegie Endowment in Moscow has written, Putin's post-2012 presidency already heralded pro-Chinese policies as Russia sought to "catch the wind of China's growth in its sails."²⁹ Putin, since 2012, accelerated the alliance trend, making it a lodestar in his agenda. Putin, if not his colleagues, deny a potential China threat and deride that theory. They and China constantly reiterate that Russo-Chinese relations are immune to changes in world affairs and have never been better.³⁰ This post-2012 policy replaced or supplanted the previous partnership where Russia maintained a certain independence from many Chinese policies in Asia and may have been hedging its bets to some degree regarding China, and making moves that sought to display a certain independence from Beijing.³¹ But after 2012 this changed. Indeed,

Before rushing into China's arms in 2014 in the wake of the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin for the first time in history conducted an inter-agency study of potential risks of partnership with Beijing. The results have dispelled many of Moscow's worries. As it turns out, Moscow needn't be afraid of creeping Chinese colonization of Siberia. The Chinese population there doesn't exceed 300,000, and it has been decreasing following the sharp ruble devaluation.³²

Likewise this inter-agency review led to the conclusion that the Chinese military would not be a threat to Russia through at least 2030. Neither is there an immigration time bomb of Chinese migrants flooding into the Russian Far East a likely threat. The invitation to China to participate in the recent Vostok-2018 exercises that culminated the annual schedule of official Russian drills, confirms those perceptions.³³ Moreover, a narrow window of opportunity existed as the PLA

acquired more capability to sell its weapons and form lasting relationships with it before it became self-sufficient. Thus policy has proceeded accordingly and major arms deals have been concluded e.g. the sale of S-400 air defenses and Su-35 Fighters.³⁴

Since then Russia, and especially its Ministry of Defense, has frequently solicited China for a formal de facto alliance. And China's practical response conforms to alliance dynamics even if it formally eschews alliances. In October 2014 Putin said both states were natural allies.³⁵ In November 2014 Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu contended that Russia and China confront not only U.S. threats in the Asia-Pacific but also U.S.-orchestrated "color revolutions" and Islamic terrorism. Therefore, "The issue of stepping up this cooperation [between Russia and China] has never been as relevant as it is today."³⁶ Specifically, he advocated enhanced but unspecified bilateral Sino-Russian security cooperation and within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.³⁷ Shoigu included not only Central Asia but also East Asia, as did Deputy Minister Anatoly Antonov. Both men decried U.S. policies that allegedly fomented color revolutions and support for Islamic terrorism in Southeast and Central Asia. Shoigu further stated that,

In the context of an unstable international situation the strengthening of good-neighborly relations between our countries acquires particular significance. This is not only a significant factor in the states' security but also a contribution to ensuring peace throughout the Eurasian continent and beyond.³⁸

This overture fundamentally reversed past Russian policy to exclude the PLA from Central Asia and retain the option of military intervention exclusively for itself. And as seen below, China has not hesitated in practice to begin deploying military forces and bases there.³⁹ This overture also displays Russia's growing dependence on China in Central Asia and elsewhere under mounting Western and economic pressure. Shoigu even went further than Central Asia in his quest for an alliance. In these same meetings he stated that, "During talks with Comrade Chang Wanquan, we discussed the state and prospects of the Russian-Chinese relations in the military field, exchanged opinions on the military-political situation in general and the APR in particular." --- "We also expressed concern over US attempts to strengthen its military and political clout in the APR," he said. "We believe that the main goal of pooling our effort is to shape a collective regional security system." If this is not an offer for an alliance then we need to redefine the term.

Neither was it the only example of solicitation of an alliance with China. Putin subsequently noted that:

As we had never reached this level of relations before, our experts have had trouble defining today's general state of our common affairs. It turns out that to say we have strategic cooperation is not enough anymore. This is why we have started talking about a comprehensive partnership and strategic collaboration. "Comprehensive" means that we work virtually on all major avenues; "strategic" means that we attach enormous inter-governmental importance to this work.⁴⁰

These statements are too close for advocacy of an alliance to be coincidental. But the alliance Moscow seeks need not be formally codified like NATO or pre-World War I alliances. Rather this alliance, as described above by the team of bilateral experts, can remain a de facto flexible alignment with room for separate, parallel, or convergent, initiatives or even occasional disagreements in keeping with Russian views on the contemporary world order.⁴¹ This conforms to Kashin, Allison, Putin, and Lavrov's observations on the bilateral relationship's tendencies.⁴² Michael Yahuda also observes that Russian elites very much favor enhanced collaboration.

Moscow believes that bolstering China's military position in East Asia is very much in Russian interests. As the official in charge of Russian arms exports stated in April 2015, "if we work in China's interests, that means we also work in our interests." In other words, the U.S.-led economic sanctions on Russia have made Sino-Russian strategic interests more congruent.⁴³

More recently Shoigu remarked that,

Russia's strategic partner is the People's Republic of China. Bilateral military cooperation is developing actively. Primarily it is focused on the fight against international terrorism. Joint actions are regularly practiced during the military exercises Naval Interaction and Peaceful Mission. The Russian Federation continues to prepare specialists for the People's Liberation Army of China. In total more than 3,600 Chinese servicemen have been trained in the universities of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.⁴⁴

This solution meets China's refusal to join formal alliances and Chinese leaders' repeated calls upon Moscow to forge ever closer ties and cooperation regarding Asian and international security, support China's vital national interests, and even build a new world order based on "global strategic stability."⁴⁵ It also allows Putin (and Xi Jinping) to pretend that there is not an alliance and that Russia is expanding its ties in Asia. Yet "Russia and China stick to points of view which are very close to each other or are almost the same in the international arena," Putin said, in 2016.⁴⁶

Although sometimes Russia and China both sides may find bilateral and/or regional cooperation difficult; the key point is their steadfast and long-standing resolution to find common ground, not their differences. And the institutional means for resolving differences are well established. In 2008 Marcin Kaczmarski observed that,

The scale of cooperation between Russia and China is reflected in the extensive infrastructure of dialogue between the two states. Regular contacts are maintained at nearly all levels of central Authority. Political dialogue takes place within an extensive framework for bilateral consultations, including meetings of Heads of State held several times a year (at least once a year on a bilateral basis, and also during several multilateral meetings); meetings of prime ministers and foreign ministers; consultations on strategic stability (at the level of deputy foreign ministers); consultations on military cooperation (at the level of defense ministers); and consultations on security issues (between national security advisors since 2005).⁴⁷

These institutional ties have grown subsequently with regular ministerial exchanges and summits so that since 2013 Putin and Xi Jinping have met 22 times. And, as Lavrov stated,

As regards international issues, we feel – and our Chinese friends share this view – that our cooperation and coordination in the international arena are one of the most important stabilizing factors in the world system. We regularly coordinate our approaches to various conflicts, whether it is in the Middle East, North Africa, or the Korean peninsula. We have regular and frank and confidential consultations.⁴⁸

But beyond these examples of inter-governmental coordination statements like Shoigu's on the Chinese students studying in Russian military establishments attest to the long-standing character of institutionalized bilateral defense cooperation and coordination. In fact, more Chinese are going to Russia for defense training, in hits case, 100 PLA personnel are going to Russia for

training on the S-400 air defense system. So it seems quite clear that this aspect of the relationship whereby Chinese military personnel learn Russian technology, tactics, etc. causes no problems for Russia and is continuing without letup.⁴⁹

Nonetheless many analysts invoke Putin and Xi Jinping's statements against alliances.⁵⁰ Many also flatly deny any ideological congruence between China and Russia despite the solid evidence of congruent modes of self-presentation and of portraying contemporary international relations.⁵¹ Nevertheless, analysts like Artem Lukin, Rens Lee, Gilbert Rozman, Mark Katz, and this author believe the evidence clearly shows an evolving alliance along with bilateral ideological and strategic congruence.⁵² Moreover, the actual evidence shows all the signs of an alliance. Indeed, Trenin admits China gets most if not all that it wants from China without a formal alliance.⁵³ At the same time the two sides have arguably reached a division of labor between them. Thus according to Guo Xuetang, Director of the state-run Institute Of International Strategy and Policy analysis in Shanghai, "We share a strategic understanding on how to prevent U.S. influence on this continent," China doesn't want a two-front war, and neither does Russia. So China defends the East, and Russia, defends the West."⁵⁴

Meanwhile the scant published evidence of Sino-Russian military dialogue, apart from publicized ministerial conferences suggests that high-level conferences have been relatively shallow on military strategies, their substances, and the thinking behind them. "Considerably more food for thought is passed through semi-official or informal debates, conferences, lectures, and other similar channels, as well as through other publications."⁵⁵ Available sources suggest that Chinese experts prefer to interact with retired or non-governmental experts who are closely tied to the Russian government or Ministry of Defense in the belief that they would speak more freely than serving officers or officials. Moreover, Chinese officials are evidently mainly interested in exploring the rationales behind official Russian strategies. Rather than applying those strategies they are looking at the underlying "algorithms" of addressing challenges thus dialogue is about the transfer of strategic culture rather than of ready-made strategies.⁵⁶ Nevertheless scholars have shown that a very substantial and long-running program of institutional coordination has been set up and is functioning as intended, as described below.⁵⁷ And this network of institutional defense coordination is a classic sign of alliance dynamics and behavior.⁵⁸

The hallmarks of this alliance dynamic are the reversals of Russian policies to China's benefit, support for China on Asian regional issues, and Russia's asymmetrical dependence upon Chinese economic, political, and military support. Despite difficulties in economic issues and particularly in Central Asia the evidence for all three hallmarks even in these domains is quite strong. Thus, to use Bismarck's metaphor, China is the rider and Russia the horse in this alliance. Indeed, by 2009 economic weakness forced Moscow had to reverse past policy and admit China into its plans for developing Russia's Far East.⁵⁹ And by 2012 analysts noticed China's ability to impose its agenda on Russia and gain disproportionate benefits from Russia while avoiding any lasting commitment to Russia's calls for an alliance.⁶⁰ This is even truer today.⁶¹

This de facto if not formal Sino-Russian alliance derives from geopolitically and ideologically congruent perspectives aiming squarely at America's values, interests, and the world order it largely created. It is not a binding wartime alliance like NATO or pre- World War I alliances but today's concept of alliances is much more elastic and therefore suitable to both sides. Admittedly these are contentious claims for many, possibly most, analysts deny that an alliance is occurring or is sustainable.⁶² Vasily Kashin recently wrote that both sides may avoid the term alliance but the relationship already far exceeds "neighborliness" or even "strategic partnership" even though China's lasting gains in Asia are arguably at Moscow's, not Washington's, expense, most

obviously in Central Asia.⁶³ Therefore we must understand what is meant by such an alliance. As Lavrov stated in 2014,

If we talk about alliances, not in the old sense of the word, not in the sense of tough bloc discipline when NATO was against the Warsaw Pact and everyone knew that this part of the negotiating table would raise their hands and this part would vote against it. Today such baculine discipline looks humiliating to states that preach democracy, pluralism of thought, and so on. --- Other types of alliances – flexible network alliances – are much more in demand today.⁶⁴

Signs of a functioning military alliance as suggested by Allison above also abound. This is not only a question of arms sales that are discussed below but also of exercises and extensive inter-military and inter-governmental coordination. For example, a 2017 report by Russian and Chinese experts openly stated that, although Moscow's strategic nuclear forces are outside the range of the U.S. THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense) missiles placed in South Korea at Seoul's request, both governments viewed this deployment as signifying a "changing strategic balance of power in this region," as a clear threat to China, and implicitly to Russia not just North Korea.⁶⁵ There are also reports of growing bilateral cooperation on nuclear weapon strategies, since Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Rybakov stated that the two sides would focus on coordination on issues of nuclear strategy as they have done previously with reference to strategic stability.⁶⁶ In addition there are reports that the two states are working together on "an alternate internet" i.e. a system of root servers operating independently of those controlled by the U.S.⁶⁷

Similarly, there are reasons to believe that in its original planning the Vostok-2018 exercise in Russia that also involved Chinese forces reflected apprehension about a U.S. strike on North Korea that could easily oblige them to respond.⁶⁸ Likewise, there is good reason to believe that the Sino-Russian military exercises of 2017-18 were conceived of and implemented with the idea of joint action to thwart a U.S.-led invasion of North Korea in mind.⁶⁹ Substantial evidence from Sino-Russian naval exercises in the Sea of Japan in 2017 tends to confirm the intention to prevent U.S. Navy forces concentrated near Korea from attaining total dominance in the theater.⁷⁰ These exercises also included joint air and missile defense exercises to make a similar impression on U.S. air forces. These exercises also displayed growing defense intimacy, in view of the nature of the information that had to be shared in such exercises. Therefore they suggest an alliance because in such exercises both sides must put their cards on the table and display their C4ISR.⁷¹ As Kashin notes, this exercise took the form of a computer simulation where both sides constructed a joint air/missile defense area using long-range SAM systems like the Chinese HQ-9 and the Russian S-300/400 series.⁷²

These exercises, along with the Vostok-2018 exercises where Chinese troops took part alongside Russian forces as part of Moscow's annual schedule of exercises also point to coordination, not just against alleged terrorist attacks as earlier exercises involving Central Asia or naval forces in the Baltic, and Mediterranean have claimed. Vostok-2018 was clearly a rehearsal for large-scale theater, if not global war and Chinese participation suggests continuing bilateral concern about potential Far Eastern contingencies like Korea.⁷³ Indeed, there is also evidence of bilateral coordination vis-à-vis Japan. In 2017 Russian planes periodically supported Chinese overflights over the Senkaku Islands and this came after their 2014 joint naval exercise targeting Japan. These moves certainly complicate the already difficult Russo-Japanese relationship as well as China's confrontational stance towards Japan.⁷⁴ Equally importantly, these exercises build on a wide-ranging decades-long program not only of inter-military discussions about strategy, theory of war, and operations, but also an even more extensive regular program of bilateral ministerial

and high-level coordination as Kaczmarek noted above and which is more systematically discussed below.⁷⁵

To be sure, the arguments against this relationship being an alliance invariably contend that neither government wants to be bound by permanent alliances that tie them down, that they have diverging outlooks on major issues of international affairs, and that ultimately Russia will bridle at Chinese encroachments on Russia's great power pretensions even though nobody believes that this has happened up till now. Even writers who compose scathing analyses about this alliance or partnership admit that China has the upper hand and Russia is falling further into dependence on China but concede that Russian state policy tenaciously strives to use this relationship to prove it is a great power and thus Russia's aggressive global policies are, at least in part, an effort to prove to China that it is (to use the German word) "Bundnisfähig" (worthy of being an ally).⁷⁶ Moreover, the expert consensus cited above shows that both sides have been and remain very careful to avoid just that predicament as they continue to move forward together.⁷⁷ In addition, we know that every alliance has its points of friction and that in past history every alliance has come to an end due to changes in world politics and power relationships. Therefore a series of major questions having great power relevance can be posed here.

What Are the Signs Of An Alliance? The Limits to Bilateral Defense Cooperation

Specifically we need to ask and policymakers need to know 1) What are the limits of China-Russia defense cooperation? Are the two sides unwilling to cooperate in certain sensitive areas such as contingency planning or transfers of advanced military capabilities and technologies? 2) To what extent does Moscow fear the People's Liberation Army becoming a future adversary and how, if at all, has this affected its defense cooperation with Beijing? 3) How do Russian concerns over China's reverse engineering of Russian weapons systems affect their defense cooperation? To what extent have Russian sensitivities regarding sharing advanced technologies with China changed over time? 4) How might the United States leverage areas of tension between China and Russia to protect U.S. interests? Finally, in keeping with this Commission's mandate we need to recommend actions that Congress can take relating to the threat posed by this alliance to the U.S., its allies, and its interests.

At present we cannot know what those limits are for in fact that relationship has not been tested militarily. Moreover if there is friction nobody is discussing it. Indeed, on the Russian side there has been a virtual blackout of anything but the most anodyne commentary concerning Chinese military power. For example a recent article criticizing China's economic policies was removed from publication immediately after appearing precisely because it criticized China. It turns out that the Chinese embassy apparently felt it had license to threaten the reporter with blacklisting. As the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, that broke the story wrote, "Among Chinese officials, there are those who consider it permissible to push the Russians, threaten us, and openly demonstrate disrespect for Russian laws."⁷⁸ Clearly there can be no public discussion of Chinese defense policy under these circumstances. Moreover, this episode shows Russia's growing dependency and thus even signs of subservience to China. Moreover, President Putin has made it quite public that he dismisses the China threat. Instead in 2012 he memorably said that Russia "should catch the wind from China's sails."⁷⁹ More recently he told the press after the 2017 APEC summit that,

Concerning foreign policy, our position, as diplomats are known to say, are very close or coincide on many issues, and they certainly do on the key ones. One such key issue today is the North Korean problem. Our views completely overlap here.⁸⁰

As a result no public official will publicly even hint that China could be a threat and that therefore Russia should limit cooperation with it, military or otherwise. For example, Lavrov has ruled out that China's missile deployments represent any kind of threat to Russia, saying in 2017,

Every country has a right to deploy armaments on its territory. China does not deploy armaments against the Russian Federation; we do not have such information. We have very strong ties with the People's Republic of China, including in the military field.⁸¹

More recently, Russia's ambassador to China dismissed talk that China is ousting or forcing Russia out of Central Asia as "groundless". Instead he stated that both states have their niches in Central Asia and common interests in Eurasia and professed to be unaware of any case where China might "encroach on those areas in which Russia has established mutually beneficial cooperation with the countries of the region."⁸² And the remarks presented above, by Shoigu, Lavrov, Putin etc. all indicate a firm commitment to intimacy if not alliance with China. Finally the 2013-14 inter-agency study cited by Gabuev concluded that China is not and will not be a military threat to Russia for at least a decade and the policy decision to sell high-performance conventional weapons, solicit an alliance, upgrade coordination, and invite China to Vostok-2018 all confirm that for now the Russian government refuses to see the POLA as a threat.⁸³

Although sometimes Russia and China may find bilateral and/or regional cooperation difficult; the key point is their steadfast and long-standing resolution to find common ground, not their differences. And the institutional means for resolving differences are well established as noted above.⁸⁴

Arguably, and in the light of current trends, Moscow's growing collaboration and dependence upon showing Chinese military force in the Baltic and Mediterranean, increasing cooperation on large-scale investment projects, including the reconstruction of Syria, and enormous investment projects in Eurasia that Russian power in Europe and Eurasia and its ability to concentrate its power resources there depend crucially on Chinese support. At the same time the confidence that China does not and will not pose a military threat frees Russia to behave aggressively globally, i.e. in Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and even Africa.⁸⁵ Therefore it is likely that one source of Russian aggressiveness in world politics is the deeply felt need to prove its bona fides as a great power, not only to itself but also to China in order to keep receiving Chinese support. More crudely stated, Russia's ability to pose as a great power is to some degree dependent on Chinese sufferance of such behavior.

Thus, as Ivan Krastev has written,

In my recent discussions with Russian foreign policy experts, they have made clear that if Moscow wants to be a world power, on an equal footing with Washington, it should be able and willing to match the United States. Russian leaders believe that Washington interferes in their domestic politics and that the United States intends to orchestrate a regime change in Moscow. So if they take that as given, the Kremlin should be able to similarly meddle and to show the world that it has the capabilities and will to do so. Reciprocal action is, after all, how you gain the respect of your enemies and the loyalty of your allies. The common sense in Moscow foreign policy circles today is that Russia can regain its great power Moreover, only by confronting the United States, not by cooperating with it.⁸⁶

And beyond these factors the geopolitical presence of China also drives Russia to confront the U.S to secure recognition as a great power.⁸⁷ As Krastev also observes,

And contrary to conventional wisdom, Russia's craving for global power status is not simply about nostalgia or psychological trauma. It is a geopolitical imperative. Only by proving its capacity to be a 21st century great power can Russia hope to be a real, equal partner with countries like China, which it needs to take it seriously. Believe it or not, from the Russian perspective, interfering in the American presidential election was a performance organized mostly for the benefit of non-American publics.⁸⁸

Moreover, "If Russia does not gain recognition internationally, this would have repercussions in terms of identity problems and raise questions about the ability of the state to guarantee order and society."⁸⁹ Therefore we should expect more probes, including nuclear ones or conventional threats backed up by nuclear saber rattling.

Dmitri Simes confirms this noting that, for Russia, "The very sense in Moscow that they may have a Chinese option provides them with a kind of encouragement to be tougher, bolder, and more optimistic about their ability to survive without a meaningful cooperation with the United States."⁹⁰ Thus Russia does not fear China. Instead it relies on Chinese support to adopt a belligerent posture vis-à-vis the West and the U.S.

Furthermore, Russia's anti-American probes will redound to China's benefit since they epitomize a profound application of the Chinese strategic tradition of fighting with "borrowed swords" or having barbarians fight barbarians for China's benefit.⁹¹ Therefore whether we call this an alliance or something else, the name is irrelevant for policy purposes but the reality is one of a working alliance. But it is and will likely become ever more of an alliance based on Russia's status as a junior partner and this has come to be seen abroad ultimately as a sign of weakness and of the hollowness behind Russia's great power claims. But at home China functions to cover up that weakness. Therefore it is something of a narcotic for the Russian leadership and China treats Russia much as a pusher treats an addict, giving it enough support to stay dependent on China but not so much as to act truly independently across the board.

Lastly we need to grasp that on the Russian side strong institutional support for this alliance persists in the government and among the "Silovye Struktury," (structures of force). Beyond that, although this cannot be proven, it is likely, given the high degree of corruption on both sides, that substantial hidden "side payments" or more accurately kickbacks and bribes are flowing to Russia in order to keep its elite linked to China. If one adds strategic congruence to ideological-normative congruence of perception and material interest, especially as Western avenues of enrichment are being closed, Russian and Chinese elites have strong reasons for perpetuating this relationship despite the existence of visible tensions. And as noted above they have carefully established mechanisms to prevent those frictions from getting out of hand, undermining the bilateral relationship and bringing them both back to a status equivalent that of the 1970s, which they both believe was a tragic mistake that hurt them both.

Finally many analysts claim that Russia cannot accept China's growing hegemony in Eurasia and the ensuing threats to its status and interests. Thus we constantly hear reports about tensions, differences, resentments, etc., mainly about economic issues and Central Asia. Nevertheless, not only do both sides go out of their way to overcome critical differences, Vladimir Putin, who directs the policy, has apparently come to terms with China's rising position having said that, "the main struggle, which is now underway, is that for global leadership and we are not going to contest China on this."⁹² So, for now, while Putin will vigilantly defend what he believes are Russian interests, this alliance enjoys powerful political and institutional support.

More to the point, and as the statements of China's Defense Minister should make clear, the Russian armed forces are among the strongest supporters of the alliance and indeed have openly called for an alliance beginning in Beijing in November 2014, an act that would be unthinkable without Putin's authorization. In October 2014 Putin said both states were natural allies.⁹³ In November 2014 Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu contended that Russia and China confront not only U.S. threats in the Asia-Pacific but also U.S.-orchestrated "color revolutions" and Islamic terrorism. Therefore, "The issue of stepping up this cooperation [between Russia and China] has never been as relevant as it is today."⁹⁴ Specifically, he advocated enhanced but unspecified bilateral Sino-Russian security cooperation and within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.⁹⁵ Shoigu included not only Central Asia but also East Asia, as did Deputy Minister Anatoly Antonov. Both men decried U.S. policies that allegedly fomented color revolutions and support for Islamic terrorism in Southeast and Central Asia. Shoigu further stated that,

In the context of an unstable international situation the strengthening of good-neighboring relations between our countries acquires particular significance. This is not only a significant factor in the states' security but also a contribution to ensuring peace throughout the Eurasian continent and beyond.⁹⁶

More recently Shoigu remarked that,

Russia's strategic partner is the People's Republic of China. Bilateral military cooperation is developing actively. Primarily it is focused on the fight against international terrorism. Joint actions are regularly practiced during the military exercises Naval interaction and Peaceful Mission. The Russian Federation continues to prepare specialists for the People's Liberation Army of China. In total more than 3,600 Chinese servicemen have been trained in the universities of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.⁹⁷

And if we take into account the growing number and scope of Sino-Russian military exercises, culminating in Vostok-2018 (East-2018) where 3200 Chinese soldiers joined the regular autumn field exercises of the Russian army we will see that these ties have, if anything have grown, and will grow. Moreover, it is clear that there are powerful lobbies and interest groups who fully support the alliance with China against the West and who probably benefit from it in ways both material and political.

Dissenters

Nevertheless there are some civilian analysts who express real concern about China. And this continues in journalistic circles. Recent articles argued that Russia has become China's raw materials storeroom or appendage, an outcome that Russian experts and officials warned about a decade or more ago.⁹⁸ Similarly the veteran independent defense commentator Pavel Felgengauer reported that Russian dependence upon China grows with every passing day.⁹⁹ Indeed, Felgengauer's reporting that the Russian military deliberately damaged a shipment of S-400 missiles to China because they were defective and claimed they were damaged at sea in a storm to hide their own shame and incompetence was so incendiary that it was immediately censored.¹⁰⁰ But, as this example shows, they are marginalized if not dismissed (or worse) by the military community. Still their views are of interest because they reflect what could, under changed circumstances become the Russian view and what a perception of a Chinese threat would look like.

Two critics who have previously openly warned about the Chinese military threat are Aleksandr⁷ Khramchikhin and Alexei Arbatov. Khramchikhin, who heads the Analytical Department of the

Institute of Political and Military Analysis, has long argued that, “China will unavoidably expand and China will occupy Siberia and the Far East. China’s occupation of the region will not be achieved by peaceful means like immigration and economic expansion, but rather by force.”¹⁰¹ He further wrote that,

There is no other state that would so openly declare its right to military aggression due to the lack of resources and territory. The underpinning idea of this concept is that due to the growing population and the limited resources China is facing natural need to expand its living space in order to support further economic activities and broadening its sphere of survival. It is assumed that territorial and space frontiers only delimit the area where the state can commit military force to effectively protect its interests. Strategic frontiers of the living space should be extended as China’s comprehensive power increases. This concept envisages moving hostilities from border areas closer to—strategic frontiers or even beyond them, as the armed conflicts can be brought about by difficulties in—ensuring legitimate rights and interests of China in [the] Asia-Pacific. China believes that the frontiers of the great powers’ living space lie far beyond their national borders, while the spheres of influence of smaller nations are less than their national territories.¹⁰²

More recently Khranchikhin has argued that China is on the offensive, seeking to squeeze Russia and India out of Central Asia and that the dumbest and most inexcusable mistake Moscow has made is to sell China S-400 air defenses and Su-35 fighters that will be used against its forces.¹⁰³

Meanwhile Arbatov argued that,

Without going into unnecessary military and technical detail, according to some most competent Russian experts, China has up to 800-900 nuclear warheads available for operational deployment (440 air bombs to be carried by aircraft of different types, 360 warheads for ICBMs, MRBMs, and operational-tactical missiles, and 45 warheads for SLBMs 19). All of them can be deployed so as to reach Russia (and more than 80 weapons are within reach of the US). China may have a total of 40 tons [of] weapon-grade uranium and 10 tons of plutonium. This would be enough to produce 3,600 nuclear warheads, although a large part of the weapon-grade nuclear materials and nuclear warheads maybe kept at storage sites in reserve.¹⁰⁴

Retired General Viktor Yesin, another nuclear expert, concurs with Arbatov’s figures.¹⁰⁵

A still more recent discussion by Sergei Trush of the potential Russian and Chinese response to the demise of the INF treaty makes the point that China’s missiles (particularly the IRBMs which are the issue in the INF Treaty) can threaten Russia.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless the burden of this article is that the U.S. position threatens Sino-Russian partnership and while he inclines to support a tripartite negotiation of a new arms control treaty to replace the INF, he certainly does not view China as a threat.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, given the importance of Russo-Chinese relations for their bilateral relations, regional security in East, South, and Central Asia; every participant in this discussion knows that failure to keep pace with China signifies Russia’s decline and will also transform any “alliance” with China into an unequal relationship where, pace Bismarck, China is the rider and Russia the horse. Already in 2000 Vladimir Putin warned that if the Russian Far East (RFE) did not develop, its residents would be speaking Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.¹⁰⁸ Subsequently the prominent

Sinologist, Alexander Lukin, who defends the close Sino-Russian relationship, nevertheless warned that,

Although China's strategic planning continues to be restricted by the country's 'key interests', the range of these interests keeps expanding. Under Deng Xiaoping, these focused only on the issues of Taiwan and control over Tibet and Xinjiang. Today, however, they have been broadened to include the protection of China's positions in territorial disputes with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and in the conflict in the South China Sea. Some Chinese experts also insist that the country's key interests should include the need to secure a worthy place for China in the world more generally.¹⁰⁹

Thus everyone understands or at least should grasp that continuing Chinese aggrandizement inevitably entails Russia's failure to attain its primary strategic objectives, becoming "a major independent center of power --- positioning itself as the linchpin of Eurasian integration" and ensuing decline.¹¹⁰

From Wariness to Defense Alliance

Therefore the policy review of 2013-14 clearly marks a turning point in Russian policy towards China and the fact of its coincidence with the Ukraine war only reinforces its conclusions that Russia has no choice but fears no serious strategic losses from turning to China. This marked a turning point for previous to that review there were occasional signs of overtly expressed defense concerns about China. Nonetheless the military was also previously concerned about China's rising interest in the Arctic and growing military capability, including the possibility of a mass ground attack on the Russian Far East based on the Chinese 2009 Stride Exercise.¹¹¹ Thus in 2010 the Russian government undertook the Vostok-2010 exercise that culminated in a nuclear strike on the stand-in for the PLA. As Jacob Kipp observed in 2010,

A year ago, informed Russian defense journalists still spoke of the PLA as a mass industrial army seeking niche advanced conventional capabilities. Looking at the threat environment that was assumed to exist under Zapad 2009, the defense journalist Dmitri Litovkin spoke of Russian forces confronting three distinct types of military threats: "an opponent armed to NATO standards in the Georgian-Russian confrontation over South Ossetia last year. In the eastern strategic direction Russian forces would likely face a multi-million-man army with a traditional approach to the conduct of combat: linear deployments with large concentrations of manpower and firepower on different axis. In the southern strategic direction Russian forces expect to confront irregular forces and sabotage groups fighting a partisan war against "the organs of Federal authority," i.e., Internal troops, the border patrol, and the FSB.¹¹² By spring of this year, a number of those involved in bringing about the "new look" were speaking of a PLA that was moving rapidly towards a high-tech conventional force with its own understanding of network-centric warfare.¹¹³ Moreover, the People's Liberation Army conducted a major exercise "Stride-2009" which looked like a rehearsal for military intervention against Central Asia and/or Russia to some Russian observers.¹¹⁴

Beginning in 2009 overt discussions of the potential Chinese military threat began to surface in the military press to call attention to Chinese military prowess.¹¹⁵ And they all pointed to the threat of an invasion, not just by a large, multi-million man army, but also to the example derived from China's military modernization that has led China to an informatizing, if not informatized, high-tech capable military in just over a decade.¹¹⁶ In Russia's Far East, a dilapidated and

remote theater that is an economy of force theater with vast distances inadequate infrastructure, and a declining industrial and manpower base,

In the first instance, in any military conflict the Russian VVS cannot guarantee air superiority against the Chinese. Moreover, they do not possess sensor-fused cluster munitions, though in theory their surface-to-surface missiles (SSM's) could deliver cluster munitions depending on whether the missile troops remained intact long enough. Faced with an advancing PLA division or divisions' early use of TNW would present a viable option.¹¹⁷

Nevertheless by 2014 Shoigu and Antonov were advocating an alliance, Moscow was selling China crown jewels of Russian defense production like the S-400 air defense system and discussing sales of the SU-34 Fighter plane and the Amur-class submarine. Moreover, since 2014 regular joint naval exercises have taken place, not only in the Far East but also in the Mediterranean, signifying Russian acceptance of China's interests there and desire to lean on Chinese power in the Levant. Indeed, as a result of these exercises, including "Aerospace Security-2016" Russia may now sell China the nuclear capable Kalibr' cruise missile for use on Russian made Kilo class diesel-electric submarines even as Russia for its own purposes continues the ongoing combined arms build up of it Far Eastern Military District (FEMD) and overall military buildup.¹¹⁸

The Russian Pacific Fleet also joined with the PLAN recently to sail into the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands provoking a significant Japanese response, an action that appears senseless unless the military and the government are trying to intimidate Japan into an agreement with Russia.¹¹⁹ Yet Russia backed out for now of selling highly capable rocket engines to China, something that had hitherto not been the case. So there may be some second thoughts in Russia about this aspect of the alliance.¹²⁰ Nevertheless the 2017 Russo-Chinese aerospace simulation of a joint response to a ballistic missile attack drill clearly intended against the U.S. indicated "a new level of trust" between these governments by sharing highly sensitive information as missile launch warning systems and ballistic missile defense that "indicates something beyond simple cooperation" according to Vasily Kashin.¹²¹ And certainly the discussion of the Kalibr merits serious scrutiny. In other words, while open suspicions of Chinese motives and capabilities in the Far East existed about a decade ago they have been driven underground and defense policy firmly supports alliance with China there and is manifested in practical activities like the exercises through Vostok-2018.

We see a similar trend in the Arctic. Once Moscow proclaimed its intentions in the Arctic, China was not far behind. Linda Jakobson and Neil Melvin have argued that Russia's 2007 deployment of a submarine to the North Pole and noisy filing of its claim to UNCLOS triggered Chinese interest in the Arctic by signifying that it was about to become an important area in world affairs. Since then, they argue, China has taken increasing appropriate steps to protect Beijing's perceived key Arctic interests: strengthening Chinese capabilities to prepare for the impact of climate change on food production and extreme weather, ensuring reasonable cost in access to Arctic shipping routes, and enhancing its ability as a non-Arctic state to access resources and fishing waters.¹²²

As part of this buildup of interest and capability regarding the Arctic, in 2010 China challenged Russia's assertions of sovereignty over large parts of the Arctic much as Vietnam challenges China's similar assertions in the South China Sea and now the East China Sea.¹²³ Russia reacted predictably against China to challenge its claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea much as China has reacted against Vietnam. In 2009-10 China disputed Russian claims to the Arctic,

publicly stated its interests there, and demanded that it be taken into account there. Hu Zhengyue, Chinese Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, outlined China's overall Arctic agenda while attending an Arctic forum organized by the Norwegian Government on Svalbard in June 2009. Hu said,

When determining the delimitation of outer continental shelves, the Arctic states need to not only properly handle relationships among themselves, but must also consider the relationship between the outer continental shelf and the international submarine area that is the common human heritage, to ensure a balance of coastal countries' interests and the common interests of the international community.¹²⁴

Professor Guo Peiqing put it more directly: "Circumpolar nations have to understand that Arctic affairs are not only regional issues but also international ones." Guo has estimated that about 88 per cent of the seabed of the Arctic Ocean would be under the control of the Arctic littoral states if the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf were to approve all the existing or expected claims to the Arctic Ocean continental shelf.¹²⁵

Essentially this meant that China, though not yet a member of the Arctic Council, disputed any claims of sovereignty in the Arctic waters beyond littoral countries' twelve-mile limit or EEZ if they signed the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Furthermore although China lacks an Arctic coast, it stated: "The Arctic belongs to all the people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it."¹²⁶ This statement directly challenged Russia's assertion over Arctic waters beyond its territorial limits, a cornerstone of Russian policy and its "vital interests" in the Arctic. Beyond these challenges to Russia there was also clearly some military interest among the Chinese Navy. Thus PLAN Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo reiterated this position that the Arctic belongs to all the people of the world and no nation has sovereignty over it according to UNCLOS.¹²⁷ He believed that there is a scramble for the Arctic underway that encroaches on China's interests and that China and other nations "should find their own voices" regarding the Arctic. In particular China should become an indispensable player in Arctic exploration, especially as the exploitation of the Arctic "will become a future mission of the navy."¹²⁸

While such sentiments have not become policy and indeed, China had to accept the legitimacy of other states' claims to their Arctic EEZ's as a condition of membership in the Council, they are not isolated. There are notable exponents in China's navy and expert community of an aggressive policy to get foreign bases and to conduct missions beyond China's immediate coasts.¹²⁹ Moreover, Chinese strategy documents, e.g. *The Science of Military Strategy*, published in 2013, clearly take an expansive view of Chinese interests and capabilities in the world ocean including the Arctic.¹³⁰ But these statements also could serve then as probes that could be retracted (and in this case were retracted) if the reaction was too unfavorable. Indeed, once China affirmed that it would respect the Council's rulings and status, and not make contrary claims and accepted the restrictions on observers agreed to at an Arctic Council meeting in Nuuk in 2011 the way was clear to accept it as an observer.¹³¹

Beyond the expressions of such sentiments, even if China's navy still cannot compete with the US navy in projecting power abroad, it is vigorously building a capability to project naval and air power well beyond China's shores.¹³² And these capabilities do not only threaten U.S. allies and interests, as Russian planners well know. Likewise these expansive objectives that could conceivably injure Russian interests were already in play a decade ago. While Arctic problems and issues, as China knows and admits, have hitherto been resolved by peaceful means like the 2010 Russo-Norwegian treaty, China at this time was suspicious of Russian and Western policy.

China appears to be particularly wary of Russia's intentions in the Arctic. Chinese observers have made note of Russia's decision in August 2007 to resume long-distance bomber flights over the Arctic and the planting of a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed that same month. Peiqing has said that the disputes in the Arctic are in fact 'Russia and some other states' challenge to the international order and international law after the end of the cold war'. China and the rest of the world would be at a disadvantage if Russia's claims over the underwater terrain between the Lomonosov and Mendeleev ridges are legitimized because, in that case, Russia alone would have rights to the resources in that area. Even if that claim is unsuccessful, some Chinese Arctic specialists have expressed concern that the commercial advantage of the Arctic routes would substantially decrease if Russia were to unilaterally charge exorbitant service fees for ships passing through its EEZ waters.¹³³

In reply, Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, then CINC of the Russian Fleet, presumably speaking with authorization from above, singled out China as a threat in 2010. Vysotsky said that,

There are a lot of people who wish to get into the Arctic and Antarctic from an economic point of view. --- We have already been observing how a number of states, which are not members of the Arctic Council, are setting out their interests quite intensively and in various ways. In particular, China has already signed agreements with Norway to explore the Arctic zone. We know about the economy and infrastructure that exist in China today, which is becoming our serious partner from both positive and problematical sides. --- Therefore Russia needs to form its rational position and, at the same time, not give up any of its interests. – There are not long-standing relationships, overt opponents, or overt allies in the Arctic yet. But I believe the most problematic relations will be with those countries, which are not traditional members of the Arctic Council.¹³⁴

These belligerent remarks and tough-minded policies as well as the continuing concern discussed below suggest that there was considerable anxiety then about China's economic and military ambitions. Indeed, during Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's November 2010 visit to Moscow it was clear that the two sides discussed prospects for ensuring security in the "world ocean" and Wen Jiabao was taken for a visit to the Northern Fleet.¹³⁵ Also at that time, Japanese analysts, who are prone to heightened sensitivity to anything that can be interpreted as Sino-Russian tension, observed that the true Russian aim was to contain the rapidly growing Chinese Navy because of concerns for Chinese ambitions in the Arctic, Russia's treasure chest. Indeed, precisely because the Sea of Japan, and sea routes through the Soya and Tsugaru Straits provided maritime routes of direct access to the Pacific they warned that Japan could become "a key potential flashpoint for a battle between China and Russia over marine access to Arctic resources." Thus Russia sought to bar Chinese inroads into the Sea of Okhotsk as well.¹³⁶ And once the UNCLOS granted Russia sovereign rights over the Sea of Okhotsk Moscow essentially closed off those waters to foreign navies.¹³⁷ Likewise Russia's snap inspection of the Far East Military District in 2013 was widely interpreted as a riposte to China to remind it that Russia had vital interests there. This is because that inspection occurred immediately after the PLAN circumnavigated Japan and traversed the Sea of Japan that Russia tends to regard as a Russo-Japanese lake.¹³⁸ By doing so the PLAN not only hinted at its capabilities against Japan and the Russian Far East but also at their larger capabilities or ambitions regarding the Arctic.

Here again we see a reversal of policy as the severe sanctions that have been imposed since 2014 forced Moscow to backtrack and welcome Chinese equity investment in Arctic and other energy projects, culminating in the Yamal project that opened in 2018. Moreover, there are no longer any open discussions about Chinese naval threats to the Arctic or in Northeast Asia generally,

another sign of the policy blackout and alliance with China. If anything the recent exercises alluded to above suggest convergence and alliance not suspicion.

Central Asia is another region where many scholars have invoked the specter of Sino-Russian defense tensions although for the most part the rivalry here appears to be economic and political, having to do with China's financial and investment clout in these states and the new Belt and Road Initiative. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that China's military presence in Central Asia has steadily grown to the point of a base in the Wakhan corridor in Tajikistan neighboring Afghanistan, no signs of Russian overt suspicion have emerged. The reasons given for this reveal a larger aspect of Chinese behavior to prevent such suspicions from disrupting the alliance and probably apply as well to Northeast Asia and the Arctic. Scholars like Jeanne Wilson and Nadege Rolland have noted China's "scrupulous respect" that goes far to assuage Russia's permanently wounded ego.¹³⁹ As Rolland writes,

Chinese strategists are clear-eyed about Russia's regional ambitions and pursuit of prestige, its concerns about China's strategic intent, and its uneasiness with the growing power imbalance. At the same time they are aware that Beijing's own regional supremacy cannot be achieved if Russia is antagonized and stands in the way. Chinese strategists thus advocate a low-friction path, prudently working on ways to assuage Moscow's fears while taking advantage of its current isolation and lack of alternative options. They hope that a concerted effort might enable the two strategic partners to avoid the rise of bilateral tensions and discord, while helping both achieve their regional objectives. As one top Chinese diplomat put it, Eurasia is the main region where China must work hand in hand with Russia to seek 'convergence and a balance of interests' and align both countries' Eurasian grand strategies. Visible between the lines of Chinese assessments, however, is the expectation that the accommodation of Russia's needs and fears will only be a transitional phase during which China needs to bide its time; in the long run Russia will have become a toothless former superpower, surrendering the stage for Beijing to fully assert its influence over Eurasia.¹⁴⁰

Evidently this is what happened in regard to the newly confirmed Chinese base in Tajikistan. China has long been making military moves here, upgrading support for and exercises with Central Asian militaries and creating the base to protect its huge Belt and Road investments, and suppress Islamic terrorism at the source as well as in Xinjiang.¹⁴¹

In 2017 a Chinese think tank, the Development Research Center, invited a handful of Russian researchers to its Beijing office. In a private seminar Chinese officials explained why China had a security presence in Tajikistan that extended into Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor. They took pains to describe this outpost as built for training and logistical purposes, not a military occupation. They also sought to gauge Russia's reaction by inquiring how Moscow would view China's move into a traditional Russian sphere of influence and would it be more palatable if China deployed mercenaries rather than uniformed soldiers. As Alexander Gabuev said "they didn't want Russia blindsided."¹⁴²

It therefore appears that this procedure or others that resemble it are being used in regard to defense consultations in places like the Arctic and Northeast (possibly Southeast too) Asia to solidify the alliance until China, as it expects, will, by a natural process of its growth and Russian decline, be able to fully reveal its hegemony over Eurasia. For now that process has succeeded brilliantly and there is little reason to see it failing in the immediate or short-term future, especially as Russian isolation continues due to its war on the West and domestic stagnation, policies that leave no option but dependence on China.

In other words in Sino-Russian relations Beijing as the stronger and rising power has taken to heart the point made by Brantley Womack concerning the necessity for a truly “win-win” regional strategy to be successful.

The problem with win-win as a regional strategy is that it is not sufficiently sensitive to the greater exposure to risk of smaller states in asymmetric relationships. The caution of smaller states is not a matter of resenting the gain of the larger – indeed; in proportional terms the smaller side benefits more. But risk is a more vivid concern than gain, especially since 2008. Greater asymmetry means greater exposure, and smaller states will be alert to the ambiguities of the intentions of the larger state as well as to the degree of isolation. Thus the key to a sustainable regional order beyond (but of course including) win-win is a formal commitment of the regional power to acknowledgement of other regional interests, to forms of interaction that preclude domination, and to regional openness.¹⁴³

Inter-Military Coordination

Bilateral military coordination began in 1993 when Chinese Defense Minister Qin Jiwei visited Moscow in 1993 and established official relations with Russia’s military.¹⁴⁴ Since then they have launched a new consultation mechanism or enhanced the existing mechanism every 3-4 years, either through treaty, agreement, or by institutionalizing regular practices. Concurrently they were expanding the frequency of contacts of existing mechanisms.¹⁴⁵ Thus by 2009 the Russian National Security Council and the China’s equivalent were meeting four times annually. As a result by 2018 high-level security consultations were occurring 20-30 times a year, not to mention regional consultations. Both sides also hold consultations “on the sidelines” of meetings of organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.¹⁴⁶ The upshot of this process or spillover also leads to regional consultations between different types of troops and army units that address issues of border protection, topogeodesic, meteorological, and combat support in the Russian Far East and Chinese Northeast. Meanwhile new for a like the China-Russia Northeast Asia Security Dialogue have subsequently been created, starting in 2015. Similarly the Consultation on the National Security Issues format is the first case of China crating an interstate consultative mechanism on national security issues with a foreign state. Thus it “indicates the convergence of Russian and Chinese positions on major global and regional security issues” and “the transition of the bilateral security cooperation into a new quality.”¹⁴⁷ Thus Korolev duly identifies five regular high-level for a dating back to 1993 for high-level systematic consultation and, presumably coordination dating back to 1993.¹⁴⁸

Examining bilateral military cooperation, Meick finds numerous institutional venues of cooperation. The China-Russia Intergovernmental Joint Commission on Military Technology Cooperation formed in 1992 is the most important bilateral annual meeting on military-technical cooperation, particularly arms sales. It normally meets annually reviews the past year’s cooperation, and decides on the coming year’s priorities. Similarly the two militaries hold bilateral visits at the level of head of service and between commanders of certain units within their respective services.¹⁴⁹ Since 1997 they have also held annual Staff meetings to improve coordination and global and regional security concerns. Multilateral defense meetings serve as another venue for regular dialogue, e.g. the SCO annual meeting, the Chinese Xiangshan Forum, the Moscow Security conference, ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the annual Shangri-La Dialogue. Moreover the number of such meetings of high-level figures appears to be increasing.¹⁵⁰ Finally, as Shoigu noted above, the presence of 3600 Chinese military students in Russia over the last twenty years, inasmuch as the Chinese government instituted the program of military-educational exchanges in 1996 clearly betokens a long-term program of military

interaction and coordination that will continue into the future.¹⁵¹ Indeed, China does not have any such exchange program with any other state.¹⁵² Moreover, the examples of bilateral military coordination are growing. For instance, according to Russian sources China and Russia will merge their global positioning systems (GPS). This entails a merger of the GLONASS and BEIDOU systems with powerful military ramifications.¹⁵³ In addition we see China increasingly influencing Russia's domestic internet legislation and policy.¹⁵⁴

Exercises

Planning for joint exercises began in 2003-04 when Russian Chief of Staff General Yuri Baluyevsky indicated to China that strategic partnership with China was a Russian priority and has grown ever since. Drills began, ostensibly as anti-terrorist exercises, but in reality as showcases for Russian military equipment it wanted to sell and as rehearsals for large-scale contingencies either against Taiwan or in defense of North Korea or as rehearsals for intended contingencies in Eurasia in 2005.¹⁵⁵ These so called "peace mission" exercises became a regular feature until about 2012 when naval exercises that have since then occurred in the Baltic, Mediterranean, the Yellow Sea, and South China Sea began. And now in 2018 we saw as a culmination of efforts to date, Vostok-2018. These exercises send clear political signals about the relationship to the rest of the world and provide extensive training to thousands of troops and commanders, as their sophistication appears to grow annually.¹⁵⁶

Thus in Peace Mission 2005 a new system of command codes allowing for transmission of orders and communication between Russian and Chinese pilots was introduced. Ever more elements of interoperability and integrated command were observed in Peace Mission exercises in 2009-10 when Chinese H-6 and Russian MiG-29 bombers were merged into a single squadron and given joint tasks to validate their effectiveness and interoperability in Russian.¹⁵⁷ Alexander Korolev duly asserts that as a result of such experiments,

These observations make it possible to say that China-Russia military relations have been moving into the initial stages of deep institutionalization, as is conceived in the present framework. The current state of military interoperability and episodic joint command may not guarantee the consolidation of deep institutionalization or the emergence of joint defense policies. However, it shows that the bilateral military interactions are highly functional and that there is a strong basis for a further enhancement that can be utilized in a time of need.¹⁵⁸

For China there are added benefits beyond learning Russian technology, tactics, and procedures. Chinese land and naval forces get to operate in otherwise inaccessible but potentially important theaters. They also allow China to showcase weapons systems that it wants to market to Russia, because the arms trade is a bilateral rather than one-way affair, indicating China's military-technological progress. In the 2016 South China Sea exercise Russian participation in an exercise devoted largely to seizing islands displayed Moscow's support for China's dismissal of the findings of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague against its claims in that sea.¹⁵⁹ Finally the move towards naval, combined arms, and missile defense exercises after 2012 demonstrates a greater realism in choice of contingencies, sophistication, quality of weapons being used, interoperability, and capability in undertaking ever more serious missions. For example, the 2016 missile defense exercise in Moscow, like the subsequent one in 2017 cited above, involved "defending territory against accidental and provocative ballistic and cruise missile strikes and increasing interoperability. It led to "a new level of trust" and to sharing information in sensitive areas like missile launch, warning systems, and ballistic missile defense (BMD).¹⁶⁰ Here too, as in bilateral coordination and straining of Chinese students we see an

ascending curve and one moving up the ladder of military contingencies, weaponry, and striving for interoperability and joint command and control.

Arms Sales and Threat Assessments

The trajectory of bilateral arms sales (because China is now also selling systems to Russia) parallels this upwards or ascending curve in bilateral military communications, education, dialogue, and interaction. In the 1990s sales to China helped Russian defense industry survive the collapse of the Soviet Union and its defense system. But by 2007, despite the Russo-Chinese treaty of 2001 sales were declining from their peak of about \$2 billion annually. There were many reasons for this. As this author observed in 2007,

China and India both have sought to enhance their own indigenous production capability and even to diversify among customers. Moreover, they are also increasingly compelling Russia to sell them technology and know-how to enable them to take such steps. As this author and others have noted, this trend was foreseeable since the global market has been for some time a buyer's market to which sellers must adapt to compete. Therefore, ROE (Rosoboroneksport) and the Russian government, rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, must be flexible, offering new creative ways of making deals, e.g., debt for deals, offset packages, barter, or access to energy fields in return for arms.¹⁶¹

Korolev also gives three reasons for this slowdown attributing it to Russia's own economic recovery after 2000 that allowed defense industry to produce for a domestic market that could actually pay for new weapons, China's own growing capability and China's habitual "indigenization" of Russian weapons (or to call it by its real name piracy) that allowed China to reverse-engineer the weapons, palm them off as Chinese eversions and sell them in Asia, Africa, and Latin America at cheaper prices thus driving Russia or threatening to drive Russia out of those markets.¹⁶²

But in China's case there was great bitterness among arms sellers for this reason. Russian experts clearly understood this deep-rooted Chinese practice, but acknowledged that even if they impose restrictions on arms and technology transfers to China, future sales would depend on political decisions from above and beyond the arms sellers' discretion.¹⁶³ They also believed that Russia has successfully diversified its range of customers so that it can reduce its dependence upon the Chinese market as key new markets emerge: India, Algeria, Venezuela, and in particular, Vietnam. Indeed, in 2011 Russia disclosed that China got only 10 percent of its arms sales.¹⁶⁴ Therefore it looked like it might become more difficult for China to buy weapons and technologies it wants from Russia unless the political leadership approves such purchases.¹⁶⁵ Anatoly Isaikin, the head of Rosoboroneksport, said that arms sales to China could go from 40 percent of Russia's arms sales to 10 percent, because arms sales to other customers amounted to \$8 billion in 2008 and by 2011 this had provento be the case.¹⁶⁶ Skepticism concerning China's "good faith" promises to desist from intellecutal piracy may be another reason why Russia downgraded China's relative prominence among its trading partners. And this clearly affected bilateral relations.

Indeed, it was in 2008-10 that Moscow allowed the most overt representations of the Chinese military threat to be published. The conditions revealed then have not changed as both sides capabilities' have grown so Chinese capabilities to strike at Russia are greater than before as are Russian defense capabilities but the basic threat still holds. However open discussion is strictly forbidden and the military clearly sees only the U.S. as a threat due to the policy instituted after the inter-agency review of 2013-14. Nevertheless it is worth presenting those assessments to get

a sense of what some key figures may be privately thinking and saying.

As part of the Russian defense reforms of 2008-11 Russia reorganized its entire command control system to realign the military into four combined arms districts to increase its capability of all-arms or combined arms operations. The Far Eastern Military District (FEMD) is the largest of these structures and that is no accident. On this basis it was probably to receive the largest proportion of the massive conventional rearmament program through 2020.

Still Russia cannot compete with its potential enemies in the Far East, not least China. Therefore the continuing priority of nuclear weapons continues here. Russia must, rhetoric aside, take account of the growing pressure on China to abandon its no first use policy and China's increased nuclear and apparent second-strike capability, even as it must reduce its nuclear forces.¹⁶⁷ This downward pressure on the Far East's regional arsenal was already apparent in 2004-05, making it more likely that the Northern Fleet's nuclear forces and Russia's Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons (Tactical nuclear weapons) will become more important for consideration of deterrence or first strike in the Asian as well as European theater. As of 2004

Currently, about 20% of the deployed Russian strategic nuclear forces remain in the Eastern part of Russia. As strategic forces shrink, the pace of reductions in the region is the fastest. In particular, three of the four divisions of the Russian Strategic Forces that have been disbanded since 2000 were located here. And the reductions will continue. Most likely, the SS-18 base at Uzhur will be closed down after 2010. The future of the SS-25 mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) is also uncertain, as they are getting older. The submarine base on the Kamchatka peninsula will likely no longer host strategic submarines once the last Delta-III nuclear submarines will be retired. Thus, perhaps, the only place where strategic forces will remain in this part of Russia is Ukrainka, the home of strategic bombers. As deployment of strategic nuclear forces in the Eastern part of Russia is curtailed, non-strategic nuclear weapons in the region may be assigned a stronger role. According to the author's assessment, nearly one third of the 3,300 Russian non-strategic weapons are assigned for deployment with general-purpose forces in the Siberian and Far Eastern military districts. All of these weapons are currently kept at central storage facilities of the 12th Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces. In case of hostilities they can be deployed with surface-to-surface, surface-to-air, air-to-surface, anti-ship, antisubmarine missiles, and other dual-use means of the Ground, Air, and Naval Forces.¹⁶⁸

The renovation of Russia's nuclear forces, 80 percent of which are intended to be new by 2016 is important here as is the continuing interest in exploring the use of NSNW (Or tactical nuclear weapons TNW) in Asian contingencies. If anything the role of nuclear weapons probably grew in Russia's calculations of its Asian defense program as suggested by the program to place tactical nuclear weapons on board submarines. This is because events in 2009 heightened Russian threat perceptions in this theater. The People's Liberation Army conducted a major exercise "Stride-2009" which looked like a rehearsal for military intervention against Central Asia and/or Russia to some Russian observers.¹⁶⁹ As Jacob Kipp wrote then,

Speaking of the deployment of two newly-organized brigades along the Russian-Chinese border on the Irkutsk-Chita Axis, Lieutenant-General Vladimir Valentinovich Chirkin, the recently appointed commander of the Siberian Military District, stated that the brigades were deployed there to counter the presence of 5 PLA combined arms armies across the border. From 2003 to 2007 Chirkin commanded an army in the Siberian military district. On the rationale for the deployment, Chirkin stated: "We are obligated to

keep troops there because on the other side of the border are five Chinese armies and we cannot ignore that operational direction." He added that the Ministry of Defense intended to develop an army headquarters for command and control of the brigades.¹⁷⁰ In a related report Chirkin described the PLA forces across the border as composed of three divisions and 10 tank, mechanized, and infantry brigades, which he described as not little but also "not a strike force." As to the role of the new brigades, Chirkin put them as part of a deterrent force aimed as friendly reminder to the PRC: ". . . despite the friendly relations with China our army command understands that friendship is possible only with strong countries, that is whose (sic) who can quiet a friend down with a conventional or nuclear club."¹⁷¹

China's 2009 Great Stride exercises triggered the first open discussion in the Russian military press of the potential threat and no doubt inspired some of the planning for Vostok-2010.¹⁷² According to Russian observers these Chinese exercises involved, "approximately 50,000 Ground Force and Air Force servicemen participated in the exercises, which were conducted on the territory of four military districts, and the latest arms systems and the national satellite navigation system were tested. The depth of the combined-arms divisions' push was increased from 1,000 km (in 2006) to 2,000 km."¹⁷³ Thus, soon afterwards Lieutenant General Sergey Skokov, Chief of the Ground Forces Main Staff, for the first time publicly stated that threats in the East could be described as follows. "...If we speak about the East, this can be a millions-strong army with traditional approaches to conducting combat operations-straightforwardly, with great concentration of manpower and firepower in individual areas."¹⁷⁴ Similarly Chief of Staff, General Nikolai Makarov gave a briefing in 2009 where one of the slides "show(ed) that it is, after all, NATO and China that are the most dangerous of our geopolitical rivals."¹⁷⁵

Neither has China refrained from developing its missile and nuclear capabilities targeted against Russia. Yuri Solomonov, the general designer of the Moscow Institute of Thermal Technology claims that while China lags behind Russia in missile technologies by 10-15 years it will make up that difference in 5-10 years.¹⁷⁶ While Taiwan, the US, and Japan remain the priority focus of Chinese military developments,

Within the jurisdiction of No. 51 military base, the 810th Brigade (96113 Unit) stationed at Jinzhou District of Dalian and Ji An City is at a very high level of combat readiness. An instruction unit of this brigade is located at the Dalijiazhuang Township of Dalian. Among all the intermediate range ballistic units of the PLA Second Artillery Force, the 810th Brigade is the only one that has the capability to strike the whole of the Far East region of Russia and the Pacific Fleet nuclear submarine base on the Kamchatka Peninsula. This also indicates how serious the PLA Second Artillery Force looks at nuclear deterrence upon Russia. 96113 Unit was originally armed with DF-3 intermediate range ballistic missiles. It deserves further observation whether it has started to deploy DF 21c Missiles.¹⁷⁷

Similarly, China's new DH-10 cruise missile represented at the time a significant advance in China's own TNW capability, as did the operationalization of several cruise missile brigades. Even if Taiwan remains the focus of Chinese military planning, that planning still identifies Russia and the US (as well as India) as potential enemies thereby envisaging possible nuclear scenarios against them.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore all the capabilities that evoke alarm in the US. Anti-Ship ballistic missiles, the development of Chinese air, ship and anti-air and ship capabilities, and missiles, are all usable as well against the RFE.

In this context a study of Russia's demographic crisis observed then that,

It has been hypothesized that military reductions might in turn reduce populations in peripheral regions below recoverable levels. As the armed forces reduce their size, the likelihood that populations in peripheral communities will migrate to European Russia increases. This in turn increases the necessity for the state to deploy troops to defend these peripheral and further depopulated regions whilst at the same time rendering this task more difficult. One analyst, aware of the population differentials on the Russo-Chinese border (1:15-20) has even suggested, “perceptions of low Russian population densities in the Russian Far East could lead to low-level Chinese probes and low intensity conflict in the next 10-20 years, but the continued existence of a substantial Russian nuclear arsenal will probably prevent the Chinese from seriously considering the option of launching a conventional military campaign to seize large parts of Russian territory as a result of demographic factors.”¹⁷⁹

So, actual attacks are probably unlikely only if Russia can maintain nuclear deterrence, a posture that presupposes considerable suspicion if not hostility towards an ever stronger and probably economically superior China. As Kipp further observes

By spring of this year (2010), a number of those involved in bringing about the "new look" were speaking of a PLA that was moving rapidly towards a high-tech conventional force with its own understanding of network-centric warfare.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, the People's Liberation Army conducted a major exercise "Stride-2009" which looked like a rehearsal for military intervention against Central Asia and/or Russia to some Russian observers.¹⁸¹

Beginning in 2009 overt discussions of the potential Chinese military threat began to surface in the military press. These statements were deliberately planned to call attention to Chinese military prowess.¹⁸² And they all pointed to the threat of an invasion, not just by a large, multi-million man army, but also, as Roger McDermott observes, to the example derived from China's military modernization that has led China to an informatizing, if not informatized, high-tech capable military in just over a decade.¹⁸³ In a dilapidated and remote theater that is an economy of force theater with vast distances inadequate infrastructure, and a declining industrial and manpower base,

In the first instance, in any military conflict the Russian VVS cannot guarantee air superiority against the Chinese. Moreover, they do not possess sensor-fused cluster munitions, though in theory their surface-to-surface missiles (SSM's) could deliver cluster munitions depending on whether the missile troops remained intact long enough. Faced with an advancing PLA division or divisions' early use of TNW would present a viable option.¹⁸⁴

By the time Moscow published its 2010 defense doctrine it had begun to consider the rise of China, as both an example to emulate and as a potential threat to the RFE. This doctrine reiterated the long-standing invocation of a NATO threat but also added new threats that appear to be focused, albeit implicitly, on China. Specifically the 2010 doctrine cites a “show of military force with provocative objectives in the course of exercises on the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation or its allies” and “stepping up the activities of the armed forces of individual states (groups of states) involving partial or complete mobilization and the transitioning of these states' organs and military command and control to wartime operating conditions.”¹⁸⁵ Domestic and foreign commentators interpreted this language as underscoring Russian perceptions of an increased potential Chinese threat based on the modernization of the

Chinese armed forces and on the 2009 exercises that seemed to presage operations targeting the RFE.¹⁸⁶

In response Russian military plans since 2009 betrayed increasing emphasis on meeting the Chinese threat even if it remains officially an unstated one. President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov had already previously announced a planned strategic upgrade for the Pacific Fleet specifically aiming to address this problem and make the Fleet Russia's primary naval strategic component.¹⁸⁷ This policy reversed the prior naval policy that made Russia's Northern Fleet the strategic bastion for anti-American scenarios in the 1990s, testifying to an enhanced threat perception in Asia despite the recent Russian show of force in the Arctic and calls to incorporate Arctic scenarios into Russia's armed forces' training and doctrine.¹⁸⁸

We have already mentioned the concept of the Northern and Pacific Fleets as 'swing fleets' where either the Fleet, or air forces in one theater moves to support the fleet or air forces in the other. Russia has carried out exercises whereby one fleet moves to the aid of the other under such a concept.¹⁸⁹ Likewise Russia has rehearsed scenarios for airlifting ground forces from the North to the Pacific in order to overcome the "tyranny of distance" that makes it very difficult for Russia to sustain forces in Northeast Asia. And the revival of regular air patrols over the oceans have clearly involved the Pacific-based units of the Long Range Aviation forces as well as some of the Air Forces based in the North and Arctic who fly in the areas around Alaska.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, nuclear exercises moving forces or targeting weapons from the North to the Pacific or vice versa also occurred.¹⁹¹ To the degree that Arctic missions become part of the regular repertoire of the Russian armed forces they will also to some degree spill over into the North Pacific. And this all preceded Vostok-2010, an exercise that culminated with simulated nuclear strikes on the PLA or China.

Since that exercise new signs of mounting Russian concerns about Chinese naval potency and potential claims as far as the Arctic led to further naval plans. Many of these concerns relate to the defense of energy platforms in Europe, Asia, and the Arctic. Those missions have become a central mission of the armed forces, particularly the Navy. Since the Vostok-2010 exercise one high-ranking Russian naval officer openly said that, "in order to maintain a power balance with China in the far eastern ocean area, it has become urgent that we reinstate nuclear ships that enable long-range area navigation and are equipped with advanced attack capabilities."¹⁹² Other Defense Ministry spokesmen, who briefed the press on Vostok-2010 similarly observed that while the multi-million-man size of China's army generates concern, "we have the most convincing trump, nuclear forces."¹⁹³

In upgrading the status of and funding allotted to the Pacific Fleet Russia's leaders were clearly reacting to the same phenomena: the overall regional dynamism, unresolved political issues, and rise of China that had at the same time caught the attention of military commentators who argued for making the Pacific Fleet the main Russian fleet and a primarily nuclear one at that.¹⁹⁴ All these activities are part of a broader buildup of military power comprising air, naval, nuclear and combined army, MVD, FSB, and Border Guards forces in the Arctic since 2007.¹⁹⁵ And Admiral Vysotsky's sharp retorts about the Arctic above (clearly with official sanction) also occurred at this time that appears to be the nadir of the arms sales relationship.

But at the end of 2008 both sides signed an agreement on intellectual property and resumed meetings of the Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation (MICMTC) that began in 1992 and oversaw the arms sales process. This new agreement apparently has alleviated Russian concerns about piracy and intellectual property and the arms-sales relationship is now ascending again. The first joint production program began in 2011 with

regard to servicing Russian-made helicopters in China. By 2016 it had evolved into a joint production program for heavy-lift helicopters.¹⁹⁶ Since then joint production has grown to encompass not only the Lada-Class submarine but also several R&D agreements on aero-engine technology (where China has been way behind Russia), production of space components, and satellite navigation systems.¹⁹⁷ Beginning at this time it also has evolved to a relationship of interdependency not solely based on Russian arms sales, but one comprising joint design and production of arms and components. And since the inter-agency review mentioned above and the deterioration of ties with the West it has clearly intensified.¹⁹⁸

Today Russia's deepest defense relationships are with China, India and Vietnam, which together account for 58 percent of Russian exports. China has received top-of-the-line Russian equipment of late, including the S-400 air defense system and Su-35 aircraft, while India and Vietnam have been purchasing and using Russian equipment since Soviet times. However there apparently is a possibility that Moscow could cave in to Beijing's demand to stop supplies to Vietnam in times of a Sino-Vietnamese conflict, but that the PLA could possibly be already familiar with and thus able to devise a counter against VPA's [People's Army of Vietnam's] Russian equipment.¹⁹⁹

The imposition of sanctions and the withholding of exports of technologies involved in many components of weapons has forced Russia both to look to other parties like China for its imports but also, especially in the wake of trends discussed above since 2009 and the 2013-14 inter-agency review to sell more and better weapons to China. Moscow evidently decided to overlook its reservations about selling arms to China in order to achieve this improvement in relations. Consequently, Russia altered many of its military export practices with China to more fully exploit the Western arms embargo on China. First, Russia recently began selling some of its most advanced military technologies to China, Su-35 fighters, the S-400 air defense system, and began joint development of the Amur class submarines with China, three of the most cutting-edge platforms in the Russian arsenal. These platforms were supposed to be exclusively for Russian arsenals until the next generation designs were produced.²⁰⁰ These decisions were made by the Russian Government despite the widespread concerns in the Russian Military and defense establishment that China is major arms export competitor and a potential future threat to its eastern Siberian territories. Moreover, Moscow has broken from its traditional practice of only setting up major contracts in which whole platforms were sold to establishing contracts with China to sell just aircraft engines, as evidenced by the fact that Russia contracts to sell China AL-41F jet engines as independent items.²⁰¹ This decision exemplifies the trend by which China can secure from Russia specific niche technologies or systems (aircraft engines) but refrain from buying large numbers of systems that Russia wants to sell. In other words, the buyer, in this case, China has the upper hand.

Second, Russia reversed its traditional practice of selling India more advanced weapons than China. In the past, Russia sold India, historically one of Russia's closest allies, more advanced weaponry systems than it did China. For decades, whenever the Soviet Union/Russia sold weaponry systems to China it would sell more technologically advanced platforms of the same category to India. This was done in order to ensure that India had a favorable technological balance against China, and to thus maintain a militarily strong ally on China's southern border. Rosoboronekспорт sold China the Su-35, which is the most advanced version of the Russian Su-27, and considerably more advanced than the Su-30MKIs fighters that Russia sold to India.²⁰² While it is true that Russia has developed a fifth generation fighter with India (the FGFA, a derivative of the Russian PAK FA T-50) the aircraft is still only in the prototype phase and appears to be stalled.²⁰³ The negotiations for that plane had stalled before they were suddenly resumed in February 2016.

Furthermore, as previously stated, Russia is jointly producing Lada-class attack submarines with China, which is a more advanced and silent version of the 8 Kilo class submarines that the Indian Navy possessed at the time.²⁰⁴ Additionally, Russia sells more advanced, high performing jet engines to China than it does India.

These decisions have created displeasure in Indian circles because aggravate Indian security dilemmas. India is the loser in the growing China-Russia energy and arms sales ties. India is only now getting the S-400. Although India has held the technological edge in terms of the quality of its fighter aircraft; the SU-35 will begin to tilt the balance against it unless India, unless pays for the expensive upgrade of the SU-30MKI or begins receiving significant numbers of Russian fifth generation fighters. The Chinese-Russian entente could also mean that there could be an agreement for the supply of Russian engines for Chinese-designed and built fighters, which would make them much more capable than they are at present.²⁰⁵

Beyond these considerations, Russian arms sales also affect the East Asian security landscape in harmful ways. For instance, naval arms sales to China have clearly aimed to enhance China's ability to threaten the U.S. and its allies in the Asia-Pacific region (APR). We see this with particular clarity in the case of Russian policy towards Japan. Russian elites clearly believe Japan can be intimidated and that intimidation will duly lead to more concessions, hence the increasing number of over flights from 2010, well before the war against Ukraine. During 2014-15 these over-flights, naval probes, and references to Russian nuclear threats have increased greatly in Russia's efforts to unnerve and threaten Japan.²⁰⁶ By 2016-17, they were occurring at record numbers.²⁰⁷

As commentators observe, China's naval strategy is moving from a sea denial strategy against the United States and Japan to a strategy aiming beyond the first island chain to a second island chain strategy where China can project power that places Japan Sea.²⁰⁸ The former sea-denial strategy entails denying the use of the Yellow and East China seas to foreign offensive strike platforms. Russia's continuing military transfers to China are vital to upgrading China's capability for realizing this strategy.²⁰⁹ As one recent analysis of Moscow's naval transfers to China observes,

The kinds of weapons that Russia was providing were geared much more toward fighting a maritime conflict with the West than a future land campaign against Russia. In fact, Moscow hoped that the buildup of China's maritime forces might intensify the growing competition between China and the United States in the Western Pacific, leaving the two strategically focused more on each other and away from Russia.²¹⁰

In the naval sphere alone, Russian help has been critical in improving Chinese ship design, cruise and ballistic anti-ship and anti-air missiles, the ability to detect and track moving ships and airplanes at sea and strike them from a distance, and the naval air defense umbrella to prevent both the US and Japanese fleets from operating in the Western Pacific.²¹¹ Cooperation is increasing due to the intensification of Sino-Russian relations and Russian economic distress. Russia is reportedly developing a naval version of the S-400 air defense that will be sold to China, doubling the effective range of Chinese naval-based air defenses.²¹² The S-400 will cover the Senkaku Islands and increase the pressures on US and Japanese air capabilities given hardened Chinese air defenses and soft US air bases.

The 400-kilometer-range system will allow China to strike any aerial target on the island of Taiwan, in addition to reaching air targets as far as Calcutta, Hanoi, and Seoul. The Yellow Sea and China's new air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea will also be

protected. The system will permit China, if need be, to strike any air target within North Korea. Acquiring the S-400 strikes a major blow against Taiwan's defense and gives China uncontested air superiority over all of Taiwan's territory and into Japanese waters.²¹³ When these improved capabilities are taken in tandem with Chinese statements, exercises, and fleet deployments, we see that these capabilities have materially facilitated and are continuing to facilitate the ever-increasing use and bolder deployments of the PLAN and PLAAF to threaten Japan. The YJ-12 and YJ-18 cruise missiles derived from Russian sources also represent a qualitative leap forward in Chinese cruise missile projection capabilities even without the added capabilities of the Lada-Class Submarine.²¹⁴ Finally Russia has also agreed to sell China a consignment of IL-76 transport aircraft from Ulyanovsk, bringing the volume of annual arms sales to China back to the level of \$2 billion per annum that we saw a decade or so ago.²¹⁵

Thanks to these sales Russo-Chinese maritime collaboration has grown to a very considerable degree. The trajectory of recent maritime exercises suggests that partnership has exceeded the original template of military cooperation. The naval drills are significant not only for the size of the contingents involved, but also for the quality of interaction, which now seems as structured as the U.S. Navy's many structured drills with its Asian-Pacific partners. --- The symbolism of growing Sino-Russian maritime synergy is both notionally relevant and functionally instructive. The military exercises have helped bolster the Sino-Russian strategic relationship, while reinforcing deterrence against perceived adversaries. By conducting the interactions in spaces dominated by America and its allies, Russia and China have sought to defy the U.S.-led maritime order. ---The maritime exercises have provided a framework by which Russian and China can develop their individual and collective defensive capabilities. Intensive combat-oriented operations also serve to signal a shift in the strategic balance of Asia. While the U.S. is still the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific, growing Chinese and Russian nautical interaction heralds the beginning of a multi-polar or possibly bipolar maritime order in Asia.²¹⁶ Finally Russian elites may hope that sales to China like that of the SU-35 will lead to further sales of the same systems in other parts of Asia, e.g. Southeast Asia.²¹⁷

The preceding evidence shows quite conclusively that we have far to go to reach any limits on the military side. In arms sales China is now not only jointly producing weapons with Russia but even in some cases exporting weapons to Russia.²¹⁸ It is also increasingly able to obtain high-performance conventional systems that it needs like the S-400 and Su-35, and the joint production of the Amur-Class submarine. Meanwhile it has not paid a serious price for its piracy of Russian weapons that may have stopped but that enabled a great leap forward in Chinese defense technology. Although no new major sales are currently on the horizon; it might be premature to conclude that this mutually beneficial aspect of the relationship is played out.²¹⁹ Thus it remains to be seen whether the cooperation will continue with the next generation of weapons to include 3-D printing, hypersonics, artificial intelligence, robotics etc. But for now the arms sales aspect of the alliance remains on an ascending curve.

The same can be said for all the other military aspects of the relationship, exercises, inter-governmental fora for military dialogue, alignment on key issues like Korea, and the increasing ability of China to gain entrée into key Russian sectors like energy, not least in the Arctic. Indeed, their partnership serves as a force multiplier for both states against the U.S. and thus presents a challenge greater than the sum of their individual capabilities. As we have suggested, it emboldens each one of them to challenge U.S. interests and be secure in the knowledge that the other has their support and forces the U.S. to divert energy and resources to meeting the other partner's concurrent challenges. And, as we have noted, the military dimension of their relationship has ramifications that affect Asian security from India to Korea. To be sure, the tensions are there, e.g. the mass protest against Chinese presence around Lake Baikal.²²⁰

Nevertheless this alliance appears to be durable as long as the present regimes stay in power in both countries for it is based on and structured to realize the domestic policy and perpetuation in power of both regimes. So in both countries the alliance is simultaneously a domestic and foreign policy project and dismantling it would threaten the foundations of both states' systems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The foregoing assessment allows us to answer the questions posed earlier. The evidence to date tells us that both sides are engaging in contingency planning as shown in their exercises and for a of defense cooperation. This appears to be particularly true in Korea where both sides have vital interests but elsewhere it is not necessary. Neither is there any sign of an unwillingness to transfer key technologies, indeed quite the opposite seems to be the case. Here we must remember that China's technological capability is sufficiently robust that it no longer needs many of the systems it once did. Nonetheless it is getting what it does require without any real problems as shown above. Likewise there is no sign that Moscow fears the PLA as an adversary for the next decade. As noted above, a major inter-agency review concluded that this would not be the case for at least a decade, i.e. till 2030. And the parallel deterioration of ties with the West have clearly accelerated and deepened Russia's need to rely on Chinese cooperation and support. As we have shown the reverse-engineering and piracy issues of a decade ago have also been overcome and China is acquiring whatever it might need – and those needs have narrowed considerably due to China's own growth. And thus today Russian perceptions have shifted to accepting the idea of sharing technologies as the pattern of arms sales since 2012 and the advent of joint production ventures shows quite conclusively.

These conclusions impel the United States to take corresponding and decisive strategic action and policy reviews now because policymakers, though fully aware of individual threats from both Russia and China have dismissed the idea of an alliance.²²¹ First, we must grasp that this is a strategic alliance against U.S. power, interests, allies, policy, and values. Moreover, it is not solely a military alliance but one of concerted actions and an apparent division of labor in economics and politics (Energy and the Belt and Road Initiative, global governance, etc.) on a global scale. We are not being challenged solely in Europe, Northeast Asia or the Middle East but in all these regions and Latin America, and Africa. And the challenges encompass the whole of government and utilize non-military instruments like cyber-warfare or what China calls the three warfares (“(1) the coordinated use of strategic psychological operations; (2) overt and covert media manipulation; and (3) legal warfare designed to manipulate strategies, defense policies, and perceptions of target audiences abroad) on a grand scale.²²²

Consequently the U.S. response must be strategic, multi-dimensional if not whole of government-oriented, and must rely strongly on our economic and strategic alliances that offer us a huge comparative advantage, and strengthen them. Unfortunately that is precisely what is currently lacking in U.S. policy. For example, it is a matter of the utmost strategic urgency to create a cyber and internet capability capable not only of deterring Russian intervention in elections but also of bringing the cyber war to Russia and doing the same with China. Likewise, instead of inducing allies to contribute more to their own defense jointly with us the Administration has launched trade wars against South Korea and India – whose support is vital to containing Chinese threats – and demanding from allies that they pay the cost of stationing U.S. forces plus 50%.²²³ Such threats of economic warfare not only undermine confidence in U.S. leadership and thus allied cohesion in Asia and Europe they also demonstrate a White House that is simultaneously economically illiterate and strategically incoherent. Evidently it did not occur to anyone that imposing such costs would infuriate domestic politics in these countries and deprive those countries of the means of contributing to their own defense. Certainly there would be little

political will to support contributing to U.S. forces under such circumstances.²²⁴ In addition the only beneficiaries of such policies would be Russia and China. Thus there appears to be little awareness in the White House that U.S. troops deployed abroad are defending not only allied but American interests, something Beijing and Moscow know well if our current administration does not appreciate. Sadly such defective policies are the norm and must be reversed if U.S. interests and values are to be defended.

What is needed, therefore, is a series of measures across the spectrum of government to meet the multi-dimensional threats we face.

1. It is necessary to upgrade conventional deterrence in Europe. This is not merely a matter of U.S. forces and capabilities, e.g. as requested by SACEUR General Scaparotti in his recent testimony.²²⁵ Rather it means continuing pressure on European allies to beef up their defenses and enhance their capabilities since they too are at risk for the Russo-Chinese alliance and Moscow's ongoing warfare against Europe. Enhanced conventional capabilities will deter both Moscow and Beijing at the lowest rung of the escalation ladder and compel them to renounce the option of provoking what they think will be a small and rapid fait accompli against an ally because that deterrence, especially linked to forward presence and our alliances will preclude that alternative in their calculations. Threatening our allies will not accomplish the goals we need to reach this outcome but steady pressure plus encouragement for reform will and that combination must be reinforced by political measures discussed below.

2. It is equally necessary that we modernize and upgrade our nuclear capabilities to maintain deterrence and this is already happening along with the move to establish U.S. superiority in space. But we also must make sure we come out ahead in the race for new technologies, robotics, hypersonics, AI, 3-D printing, etc.

3. In Asia we must not only build capabilities to counter China's intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles but also to deprive them of the means of threatening control of the sea to the U.S. This clearly means strengthening alliances across the board. Even if the notion of a "quad" does not work it means strengthening ties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and India.²²⁶ We do not need a military alliance with India and Vietnam nor would they accept one. But their independence and ability to deter China and impose costs on it are vital elements of this strategy.

4. There is an urgent need for a new organization of U.S. cyber forces and capabilities to work with the private sector to defend vital infrastructure and information while also countering not only Russian and Chinese threats but also those by lesser adversaries e.g. Iran and North Korea. This reorganized agency must be able to both defend against attacks, counterattack enemies, and disseminate the truth about the U.S. while harmonizing with overall government strategy.

5. Sanctions on Russia are working but they should be extended to maximize the burden on the Putin regime whose popular support is visibly eroding and to maximize the cost to China, whose own growth is slowing, of supporting a Russia whose economy is and will remain stagnant yet insists on taking risks that may become more uncomfortable to China.

6. At the same time we need to counter Chinese economic power. This entails several steps that go beyond the trade negotiations currently underway. We need to enforce stricter controls on technology transfer to China. This probably means reducing the number of Chinese students in U.S. universities who are there because China can pay for them. They then go home and take our technology with them. Instead we should increase visas for students for other countries, and yes

this means reversing the counter-productive and divisive immigration policies of this administration. But it also means building up a global technological alliance among pro-American constituencies.

7. As part of the strategy to impose costs on China and counter its economic power we need a stronger policy towards Central Asia that not only opposes the Belt and Road Initiative but also takes visible and successful steps to upgrade our economic and political cooperation with Central Asian states that gives them economic and political alternatives to cooperation with Russia and China. This also means stronger and more overt support for local and regional initiatives of cooperation and integration among Central Asian states. The Administration has already begun this policy with some success.²²⁷

8. In Northeast Asia it is vital that the negotiation process with North Korea along with the inter-Korean process continue. However we need to see the Korean problem in a regional rather than purely nuclear perspective. We need to have an endgame in sight that denuclearizes North Korea, preserves and guarantees its security, maintains the U.S. alliance network with the ROK and Japan, and allows North Korea to take the option, if it wants, of economic modernization and cooperation with us and other countries rather than doing so exclusively with China. An independent, secure, and non-nuclear North Korea is the best we can hope for now and we must make efforts to bring that about. Doing so not only reduces tensions in Northeast Asia, it also will introduce strains into the Sino-Russian relationship. This is because North Korea will then likely eschew the huge economic dominance that China now has there and this opens up opportunities for Sino-Russian rivalry and for U.S. cooperation with a different Russia to provide North Korea with energy. This author has previously outlined such an endgame but the difficulty lies in getting there.²²⁸ Nevertheless the effort is intrinsically worthwhile and the potential rewards of doing so are great therefore this course of action must be recommended.

9. In order to provide constant monitoring of this relationship and of the inter-relationships among other U.S. adversaries, e.g. North Korea and Iran with these governments, and also in light of Russia's importance, it might be well worth it to set up an analogue of this commission with regard to Russia. This would provide an independent though in-house, permanent organization to keep policymakers and experts abreast of current developments in Russia, to include its relationships with these states as well as its internal developments. Once Putin leaves, whenever that occurs, Russia is likely to become a rather different place even if we cannot predict what will happen and who comes next. The value of such an organization is that it gives everyone a public, independent look at the range of developments in domestic and foreign policy, including, not least, relations with the U.S. and China, and its military policy and capabilities.

10. Finally, the U.S. is and remains the exemplar and source of democratic inspiration and aspiration in this world. It is shameful, if not worse that this administration remains silent about China's Orwellian efforts at repression of its Muslim minority and Russia's revival of the Gulag and steady relapse into totalitarianism. To the extent that we are silent these states are emboldened and their allies or emulators abroad, e.g. Hungary, North Korea, Iran, or Venezuela are strengthened.²²⁹ In other words, robust defense of our values correlates to a large degree with an equally robust defense of our interests. A robust championing of the democratic values that made the U.S. what it is today will not only soothe tensions in NATO it will also put enormous pressure on Moscow and Beijing, especially if conducted in tandem with the economic, informational, and military measures outlined here and in other writers' recommendations for U.S. strategy.

The recommendations offered here comprise all the dimensions of the sources of power summed up in the U.S. military's acronym DIME. Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic. They all go together in Asia and Europe though the strategy must be adapted to the particular conditions of each theater. But if we act strategically vis-à-vis China and Russia, given our capabilities and the fact of our alliances we can not only prevail but also help move the world to a more peaceful and democratic world order over time. Even if one takes a tragic view of world politics and recognizes the moral risks inherent in U.S. leadership of the world there is no better alternative than democracy on offer today nor is it likely there will be a better alternative soon. That does not mean that we have to be the only center of power in the world system but it does mean that as the strongest power in the world we cannot shirk our responsibilities or misplay our hand without attaining disastrous results that we have already seen before and that threaten to appear again. It also means that abdicating our role and withdrawing in a fit compounded of pique and fatigue, leaves the stage to powers who can only preserve their own domestic not to mention regional order by means of war and repression and the constant threat of more of those phenomena.

An effective strategy to preserve our interests, alliances, and shared values begins with recognizing reality. And that reality is the Sino-Russian alliance. But that alliance also has rickety foundations, not least in Russia's stagnant economy and inherently unstable political system as well as the mounting signs of unrest and economic slowdown in China. It also suffers from an ever grater disparity of power between Russia and China that may, in time, allow the U.S. and its allies to exploit Russian feelings of resentment and resistance to subordination. This resentment may become greater – although China has generally behaved very carefully as seen above – because there are increasing signs of a general global arrogance in Chinese diplomacy. Such signs may boomerang on Beijing in its relations with Moscow.²³⁰ Those trends underscore the equally if not even more compelling reality that in fact U.S. alliances are an even more powerful reality and U.S. capabilities are still unmatched especially when our allies are added to the equation. Therefore to prevail in this contest means recognizing the latent and manifest capabilities that we possess to meet this challenge, develop, and then apply them. For if we fail to grasp the reality confronting us the effort to restore peace, security, freedom, and human dignity will require an effort even greater than that we have expended since 1933. And the bitterness involved in paying that price to restore a truly shattered world once again will be further enhanced by the realization that things did not have to go this way and that by our neglect and failure to grasp reality we brought the intervening cataclysm upon ourselves.

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