

SECTION 2: AN UNEASY ENTENTE: CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN A NEW ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION WITH THE UNITED STATES

Key Findings

- China and Russia both object to the current international order and the interests it promotes, including human rights, democracy, and a rules-based economic system that imposes on them obligations they wish to evade. Both countries see the values of that order as a threat to their authoritarian models and view the United States as the leader and primary defender, along with its alliance networks, of that order. Based on that common perception and their mutual interest in opposing the United States and its allies, an entente between China and Russia has emerged in recent years as the two have increased their diplomatic, military, and economic cooperation.
- China and Russia perceive threats to their regime security emanating from democracy movements—which they allege are “color revolutions” instigated by the United States—and from the free, open internet. Both countries seek to combat these challenges by interfering in democratic countries’ political processes and jointly championing the idea that the internet should be subject to sovereign states’ control. The two countries have also coordinated efforts to act as a counterweight to the United States by supporting rogue or authoritarian regimes and opposing U.S.-led votes in the UN Security Council. More broadly, China and Russia’s promotion of norms conducive to authoritarianism aims to subvert key elements of the international order.
- Beijing and Moscow’s view that the United States and its allies are in decline has emboldened both countries to take more assertive action in their regions in ways inimical to U.S. interests. These actions include military and paramilitary activities pursued separately by China and Russia that threaten the sovereignty of their neighbors as well as coordinated activity that creates new challenges for the United States and its allies in responding to combined Sino-Russian military operations.
- China and Russia’s trade in oil and gas is an important avenue by which both countries circumvent U.S. tariffs and international sanctions. Russia is China’s top source of imported oil, and is poised to become a major provider to China of natural gas over the next decade. Major energy deals and high-level contacts serve to soften the blow of sanctions and tariffs on both countries’ products, while signaling that China and Russia can rely on each other if alienated by the United States and other countries.

- Nonetheless, the China-Russia relationship remains scarred by historical enmity and constrained by Moscow's concerns over its increasingly subordinate role in the partnership. Divergence in key national interests, such as different stances on territorial disputes and support for regional rivals, further limits bilateral cooperation. Each country also harbors concerns over the potential military and geopolitical threat posed by the other. Moreover, China's growing influence in regions Russia perceives as its traditional sphere of influence—such as Central Asia and the Arctic—complicates the creation of a formal alliance.

Recommendations

The Commission recommends:

- Congress direct the Office of the Director for National Intelligence to prepare a National Intelligence Estimate of China's and Russia's approaches to competition with the United States and revision of the international order. The assessment would consider the influence of both countries' ideologies on their foreign policies, including areas both of overlap and divergence; potential "wedge issues" the United States might exploit; and the implications for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization of a two-front conflict involving both China and Russia.
- Members of Congress promote U.S. interests in the Arctic by participating in congressional delegations to Arctic Council member states and attending the biennial Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region to discuss economic and security concerns regarding China and Russia.

Introduction

China-Russia relations have strengthened considerably over the last decade in the face of what both countries perceive to be an increasingly threatening external environment. Beijing and Moscow view the United States as posing a threat to their regime survival and national security. They also believe the United States and other democracies are in decline and see an opportunity to expand their geopolitical influence at the expense of Washington and its allies. International sanctions and the isolation of Russia following its annexation of Crimea in 2014 have accelerated the closer alignment between the two, particularly in the defense domain, despite Moscow's reluctance to align itself too closely with an increasingly stronger Beijing.

Both countries currently portray their relationship as unprecedentedly close. A growing power asymmetry, divergent national interests, historic distrust, and lack of cultural symbiosis, however, fundamentally limit the potential for the two to deepen relations to the level of a formal alliance. Still, China and Russia's deep-seated resentment of the United States and key elements of the international order—combined with the possibility for the two countries to coordinate action to advance their national interests—poses significant challenges to the interests of the United States and its allies and partners.

This section examines key areas and drivers of Sino-Russian cooperation as well as the factors limiting that cooperation. It then explores the combination of cooperation and competition between

China and Russia in three key regions: Central Asia and Afghanistan, the Middle East, and the Arctic. The section concludes with an assessment of the implications of the China-Russia relationship for the United States and its allies and partners. It is based on findings from the Commission's March 2019 hearing on China-Russia relations, consultations with U.S. and foreign government officials and nongovernmental experts, and open source research and analysis.

A Deepening Entente

China and Russia are deepening bilateral ties across virtually every aspect of their relationship, including the geopolitical, military, and energy spheres. During their June 2019 summit in Moscow, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to upgrade the Sino-Russian relationship to what they termed a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.”¹ China's July 2019 defense white paper affirmed the importance of this relationship, framing China-Russia cooperation as crucial to “maintaining global strategic stability.”² Russian analysts Dmitri Trenin and Alexander Gabuev have characterized the Sino-Russian relationship as an “entente,” which Mr. Trenin specifically defines as a relationship marked by common interests and agreement over the organizing principles of a desired world order.³ In testimony before Congress in January 2019, then-U.S. Director of National Intelligence Daniel R. Coats highlighted this synergy in Sino-Russian ties, assessing that “China and Russia are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s.”⁴

Unlike the United States' relationships with its allies, China-Russia ties are not based on a formal treaty document with a collective self-defense provision. Sino-Russian relations are governed by the 2001 “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation,” a 20-year pact that contains provisions promising not to engage in military action against the other, requiring consultation in the face of emergent threats, and mandating increased cooperation in spheres such as military know-how.⁵ Russian analyst Alexander Korolev argues that the 2001 treaty falls “short of being a straightforward defense pact [but] squarely qualifies as a nonaggression pact and a consultation pact.”⁶ While the treaty technically expires in 2021, it contains language authorizing an automatic renewal every five years provided neither party objects.⁷ According to Richard Weitz, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, the treaty could eventually contain collective defense provisions.⁸

A Convergence of Geopolitical Interests

Similar Ideology and Views of World Order

Perhaps the strongest drivers of China and Russia's growing alignment are their similar governing philosophies and desire to revise the international order. Both countries are governed by authoritarian and aggressive regimes which exploit the global economy and use both hard and “sharp” power* to disrupt and oppress

*The term “sharp power” describes how authoritarian regimes like China seek to undermine democratic institutions in other countries. Many of these activities rely on neither coercive nor persuasive power—hard and soft power, respectively—because they aim not to influence the pol-

their neighbors. The two countries' leaders believe that Western countries—particularly the United States—unfairly stigmatize their political and economic systems, threatening their domestic stability and interests.⁹ China and Russia disdain an international order that promotes human rights, democracy, and good governance norms. Both desire to create a new world order in which they have greater influence and standing.¹⁰

Both countries view each other's support as advantageous. Russia views its partnership with China as an important enabler of its great power claims. According to prominent China-Russia relations scholar Bobo Lo, "It is only in tandem with China that Russia can hope to subvert the geopolitical primacy of the United States and normative dominance of the West, and advance its core aim of building a post-Western world order in which it stands as an independent and 'equal' power."¹¹ China also views cooperation with Russia as an effective way to reduce the United States' influence over the international system.¹² China welcomes Russia's pushback against the United States, while Russia views China's activities testing U.S. commitment in Asia as serving its interests.¹³

General Secretary Xi's rise to power and President Putin's return to office in 2012 have strengthened coordination between their countries because the two leaders see each other as ideologically compatible and have developed close personal ties. Before the June 2019 summit, General Secretary Xi remarked to Russian media that he had met with President Putin nearly 30 times since 2013, had closer interactions with him than any other foreign leader, and called him his "best and bosom friend." He went on to note that they "share similar views on the international landscape and approaches to national governance."¹⁴ For his part, during the summit President Putin called General Secretary Xi "a dear friend" and said China and Russia's "stances on key global issues are similar or coincide."¹⁵

Aggrieved by U.S. sanctions and scrutiny of Chinese technology companies, the two countries' leaders used the 2019 summit to send a clear signal of opposition to the United States. General Secretary Xi and President Putin signed an agreement pledging to move away from the U.S. dollar to the renminbi and ruble in bilateral trade, denounced "unilateral economic sanctions," and publicized Huawei's receipt of a 5G contract in Russia.¹⁶ A long statement released after the summit pledged to expand bilateral cooperation in various areas—including cybersecurity, finance, and technology—and to increase communication between General Secretary Xi and President Putin through a "unique channel" linking their offices.¹⁷ The apparent personal rapport between the top Chinese and Russian leaders allows for more direct coordination and management of differences, suggesting that the foundations of Sino-Russian cooperation may be sounder than is widely supposed.¹⁸

icies of states directly but rather to "pierce, penetrate, or perforate" their information environments. This differs from soft power, which focuses specifically on a country's "ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than through the hard power of coercion and payment." Some examples of the Chinese Communist Party using sharp power include encouraging self-censorship by Western academics, use of Chinese language media outlets abroad to shape narratives, and use of donations to gain political influence. For more on China's application of sharp power see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 3, Section 2, "China's Relations with U.S. Allies and Partners" in *2018 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2018, 315.

Furthermore, China and Russia have broadened their cooperation through international bodies, especially within the UN system, to reshape global norms and standards in pursuit of their shared interests.¹⁹ China and Russia frequently jointly oppose U.S.-supported measures at the UN, including actions aimed at unseating the Assad regime in Syria or censuring authoritarian regimes in Venezuela and North Korea.²⁰ Then-Director of National Intelligence Coats assessed that China and Russia likely “will use the UN as a platform to emphasize sovereignty narratives that reflect their interests and redirect discussions away from human rights, democracy, and good governance.”²¹

China and Russia work together in space and cyberspace in ways that run counter to stated U.S. interests. Recognizing the importance of space-based capabilities for U.S. joint military operations, both countries promote international norms that would restrict military activities in space even as they develop and test their own ground-based anti-satellite weapons and a range of other counter-space capabilities.²² Since its initial proposal in 2008, Beijing and Moscow have continued to endorse the “Treaty on Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects,” which does not cover many antisatellite weapons and lacks verification mechanisms (for more, see Chapter 4, Section 3, “China’s Ambitions in Space: Contesting the Final Frontier”).²³ In contrast to the vision of a free and open internet championed by the United States, China and Russia promote “internet sovereignty,” or the idea that the internet should be subject to sovereign states’ control.²⁴ Touted by Chinese officials as an approach that maximizes economic efficiency while minimizing social instability, the concept of internet sovereignty legitimizes state restrictions on the domestic use of the internet and freedom of expression.²⁵

China and Russia promote models of internet governance and censorship conducive to authoritarianism during visits to each other’s countries, at international fora like the UN General Assembly, and in third party countries.²⁶ The June 2019 joint statement released during General Secretary Xi’s visit to Russia noted measures to protect both countries’ critical information infrastructure and the joint aspiration to build a global order encompassing information and cyberspace governance.²⁷ The next month, officials from the Cyberspace Administration of China met with officials at Russia’s state communications watchdog to discuss future cooperation on cybersecurity and information issues.²⁸ Chinese officials also made stops at the offices of cybersecurity firm Kaspersky Labs and online search engine Yandex during the trip.²⁹ In addition to promoting authoritarianism, China and Russia export surveillance tools that facilitate the implementation of a controlled internet. Chinese firms have exported internet filtering technology to Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, while Russian companies have exported similar technologies to Central Asia.³⁰

Finally, China and Russia both employ influence and interference operations to alter the political processes of other countries in ways amenable to their interests. While differing in their targets and approaches, Chinese and Russian influence operations increasingly draw

upon similar tools (e.g., social media, state media, and co-opting media outlets in target countries) to induce instability in democratic societies.³¹ Russia, for example, aggressively promoted disinformation to undermine Ukraine's government after conflict broke out in 2014, and released stolen files to influence the result of the 2017 French presidential election.³² China has historically focused its efforts on Taiwan, where it has acquired local media outlets, spread disinformation, and sought to build grass-roots support for unification.³³ Recently, China's activities have spread to other democracies, such as Australia and New Zealand (for more on these operations, see Chapter 4, Section 4, "Changing Regional Dynamics: Oceania and Singapore").³⁴

Conclusive proof of formal Sino-Russian collaboration on influence operations has yet to emerge. However, media reports indicate that China and Russia have shared intelligence in recent years to uproot U.S. intelligence networks operating in their respective countries and manage threats emanating from the Islamic State.³⁵ The two countries' common desire to alter the U.S.-led liberal international order and growing willingness to cooperate raise the question of whether China and Russia could coordinate on influence operations in the future.

Shared Threat Perceptions and Vulnerabilities

China and Russia's alignment stems from a mutual belief that both countries' respective national interests are better served by closer cooperation in the face of what they perceive to be an increasingly threatening external environment. In particular, both countries believe that the United States poses a growing threat to their national security and regime survival, and therefore serves as the primary obstacle to each country's efforts to shape its own favorable security environment. This is due to what they describe as the United States' promotion of democracy and fomenting of "color revolutions," its alliance network, and inclination toward unilateralism.* As General Secretary Xi and President Putin took office, unrest in Tibet, Xinjiang, Russia, and the Arab world heightened fears of Western ideas and U.S.-instigated color revolutions.³⁶

China and Russia also perceive the U.S. global alliance network as a means to contain and limit their respective power.³⁷ Both countries feel threatened by the growing U.S.-allied missile defense network, which they claim limits their strategic deterrent capabilities. For example, China and Russia have repeatedly declared their joint opposition to the 2017 deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea, on the grounds that it supposedly diminishes their ability to respond to a U.S. missile attack.³⁸

*"Color revolutions" is a term referring to the series of peaceful uprisings by citizens against authoritarian leaders that occurred in countries of the former Soviet Union and the Balkans in the early- to mid-2000s. Among the most prominent examples of these were uprisings in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. According to Anthony Cordesman, a researcher at the Center for International and Strategic Studies, Russian officials often invoke the term "color revolution" in connection with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine to describe what they allege is a "new U.S. and European approach to warfare that focuses on creating destabilizing revolutions in other states as a means of serving their security interests at low cost and with minimal casualties." Chinese officials also use the term as a shorthand for destabilizing unrest supported by actors abroad. For more, see Anthony Cordesman, "Russia and the 'Color Revolution,'" *Center for International and Strategic Studies*, May 28, 2014; Jeanne Wilson, "Colored Revolutions: The View from Moscow and Beijing," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25:2-3 (2009): 369-395.

The 2008 global financial crisis created a strategic opportunity for China and Russia by exposing what they perceived to be the flaws of Western-led financial institutions, liberal democratic values, and U.S. power. The crisis fostered the conditions for increased bilateral economic cooperation, highlighting the complementarity between China's rising energy import requirements and Russia's need to secure new demand to supplement its primary European export markets.³⁹ Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese banks were willing to bail out major Russian energy firms in financial trouble.⁴⁰

However, it was not until Western sanctions on Russia in 2014 that the Beijing-Moscow entente clearly emerged. Prior to 2014, Russia was hesitant to embrace China due in part to Moscow's focus on the EU market, its desire to safeguard key strategic resources and defense technologies, and its determination not to become the junior partner in the relationship.⁴¹ According to Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the sanctions led Moscow to undertake an interagency review, which resulted in the revised perception of a rising threat from the United States and a reduced threat from China.⁴²

In the last several years, U.S. policy actions sanctioning China and Russia have reinforced their perceived common interests and pushed the two countries closer together. Robert Sutter, professor at George Washington University, testified to the Commission that this dynamic has resulted from "stronger pressures on [the two] associated with the [Trump Administration's] National Security and National Defense strategies, and the hardening of U.S. government security, economic, and political pressures on both countries."⁴³ Two of the most recent examples of U.S. actions the two countries perceived as hostile are U.S. sanctions in 2018 against Russia for its election interference campaign and sanctions against China's Central Military Commission Equipment Development Department—and its director, People's Liberation Army (PLA) Lieutenant General Li Shangfu—for buying advanced weapon systems from Russia.⁴⁴ China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson expressed this common grievance in a June 2019 press conference when he pointedly noted that "China and Russia both oppose unilateralism, protectionism and bullying practices."⁴⁵

Defense Ties Signal Washington and Improve Combat Abilities

Defense relations are perhaps the most strategically significant pillar of the Sino-Russian partnership.* Sino-Russian defense ties have strengthened markedly since 2014—the year that Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula—and military-to-military relations are now at their highest level since the 1950s.⁴⁶ A Russian government decree in July 2019 indicated that a new military cooper-

*The two countries established a framework for military cooperation in 1993 in a short agreement outlining mutual assistance in servicing weapons and military equipment, personnel training, information exchange, joint research, and commemorative military events. The 1993 agreement, which remains in effect, has since been complemented by additional agreements and the introduction of regular joint military exercises. For more on China-Russia defense ties, see TASS, "Russia and China Mull Military Cooperation Deal Renewal," December 20, 2017; Ethan Meick, "China-Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving toward a Higher Level of Cooperation," *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 20, 2017, 3; Paul Schwartz, "Russia-China Defense Cooperation: New Developments," *Asan Forum*, February 9, 2017.

ation agreement is being drafted, a plan some analysts believe will formalize existing aspects of military cooperation and even include new forms, such as strategic missile defense cooperation and aircraft patrol missions.⁴⁷

While it appears China gains more from defense cooperation through its purchase of advanced weapons systems and its opportunities to learn from Russia's recent combat experience, Russia also benefits from arms sales revenues and sending a political signal to the United States. Through high-level exchanges, arms sales, and military exercises, China and Russia are able to use their defense relationship to send a powerful deterrent signal to the United States and its allies and partners and improve their military capabilities.⁴⁸

Deterrence and Political Messaging

Operational coordination, military exercises, and high-level exchanges are intended to demonstrate to third parties—especially the United States—the strength of Sino-Russian defense ties, to serve mutual interests, and to have a deterrent effect.

China and Russia are increasing formal and informal coordination on the operational level. The most prominent example came in July 2019, when the PLA Air Force and the Russian Air Force conducted their first ever combined strategic bomber patrol flight in the Indo-Pacific region.^{*49} The Russian Ministry of Defense indicated that the combined air patrol was intended to “strengthen global strategic stability” in accordance with a military cooperation plan for 2019, while China's Defense Ministry spokesman said the patrol's purpose was to upgrade “joint capacity.”⁵⁰ The patrol occurred the same day that then-U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton landed in Seoul for talks with South Korean officials, timing that was likely meant to serve as a signal to Washington.⁵¹ Meanwhile, Russian aircraft penetrated airspace over the Liancourt Rocks claimed by Japan and South Korea (known by the two as Takeshima and Dokdo, respectively).⁵² Japan and South Korea both scrambled fighter jets to intercept the patrol and South Korea fired 360 machine gun rounds and 20 flares as warning shots when the Russian A-50 aircraft flew in the vicinity of the Liancourt Rocks.⁵³ Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, predicted that Russian-Chinese combined air patrols in the region would become common under the forthcoming military cooperation agreement.⁵⁴

In addition to the bomber patrol, 2019 saw an uptick in the reported coordination of Sino-Russian regional military operations. According to the Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phillip Davidson, Russia flew two bombers around Taiwan for the first time ever in June 2019.⁵⁵ “The fact that the Chinese did not challenge those flights suggests that they had the tacit approval of Beijing,” Admiral Davidson said.⁵⁶ Japan Air Self-Defense Force fighter jets intercepted two Russian maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare aircraft conducting a long-range patrol in

*Two Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers and two Chinese H-6K bombers flew together with two support aircraft, a Russian A-50 airborne early warning and control plane and a Chinese equivalent, the KJ-2000, over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Franz Stefan Gady, “China, Russia Conduct First Ever Joint Strategic Bomber Patrol Flights in Indo-Pacific Region,” *Diplomat*, July 23, 2019; Andrew Osborne and Joyce Lee, “First Russian-Chinese Air Patrol in Asia-Pacific Draws Shots from South Korea,” *Reuters*, July 22, 2019.

the Sea of Japan and East China Sea in May 2019, which may have been on their way to join the Sino-Russian Joint Sea-2019 exercises.⁵⁷ The Japanese Ministry of Defense also investigated the possibility of China-Russia military coordination after a Chinese navy ship and three Russian ships entered waters close to the disputed Senkaku Islands in June 2016.⁵⁸

China and Russia also use high-level defense contacts to signal their solidarity to the outside world. In September 2019, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Zhang Youxia met with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in Moscow and told him that China and Russia faced a concerted containment effort by the United States, its allies and partners. “The United States and other Western countries are compulsively implementing the politics of hegemony and resorting to harassment, pursuing a containment policy against Russia, China, and other countries and exerting strategic pressure on them,” he said.⁵⁹ In another prominent example of the messaging involved in such meetings, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe declared during a visit to Russia in April 2018 that “the Chinese side has come [to Moscow] to show Americans the close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia ... We’ve come to support you.”⁶⁰ Sino-Russian defense contacts occur through a number of institutionalized bilateral and multilateral dialogues, providing opportunities for defense officials and military officers to facilitate arms packages, prepare exercises, and discuss regional and global security concerns.⁶¹

The expanding geographic scope and nature of bilateral exercises also indicate that China and Russia are more openly signaling support for each other’s security interests.⁶² Recent examples include the following:

- In September 2019, Russia invited China to join its Tsentr-2019 (Center-2019) strategic-level exercise, which followed the PLA’s involvement in Russia’s similarly large-scale Vostok exercise in 2018.* For the first time, the exercise included participation by member countries from both the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)† and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)‡ within the context of a large-scale Russian strategic exercise. The exercise’s main operations occurred across multiple training ranges in Russia and involved 128,000 military personnel, according to official estimates.⁶³ The Russian Armed Forces said the exercise focused on

*Tsentr-2019 included forces from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Of these participants, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan belong to both the SCO and the CSTO.

†The SCO was established in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (and now includes India and Pakistan, which were admitted as members in 2017). Currently there are four SCO observers (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia), six dialogue partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey), and three “guests” (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Turkmenistan). Zamir Ahmed Awan, “Success of 18th Summit of SCO,” *China Daily*, June 12, 2018; Shanghai Cooperation Organization, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” January 9, 2017. http://eng.sectsc.org/about_sco/.

‡The CSTO was established in 1992 as a collective treaty organization and became a formal military alliance in 2002. Members of the alliance include Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Uzbekistan was a member from 2006–2012), while the two observers are Afghanistan and Serbia (since 2013). Richard Weitz, “Assessing the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Capabilities and Vulnerabilities,” *Strategic Studies Institute*, October 2018, xi, 1–12, 58–59.

cooperation among participants in Central Asia and the defense of Russian assets in the Arctic.⁶⁴ China's Ministry of National Defense spokesperson credited the exercise with consolidating China and Russia's "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era" and increasing the level of strategic cooperation between the two militaries.⁶⁵

- The Joint Sea-2019 combined naval exercise held from late April to early May 2019 in waters near Qingdao, China, included the two countries' first ever combined live-fire missile defense drills. These drills appeared to reflect China and Russia's shared perceived threats from the U.S.-allied missile defense architecture.⁶⁶ Since the first Joint Sea exercise in 2012, China and Russia have held these training events in strategically important areas including the Baltic Sea (2017), the South China Sea (2016), and the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Japan (2015).⁶⁷ According to one analyst, China's participation in the naval exercise held in the Baltic Sea "caused consternation in northern Europe, and generated speculations about whether [China] is seeking to insert itself into an already on-edge region."⁶⁸ The 2016 exercise appeared designed to signal Sino-Russian unity in opposition to the arbitral tribunal ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration located at The Hague invalidating major elements of China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.⁶⁹
- In September 2018, Chinese media suggested China's participation in Vostok-2018—one of Russia's annual large-scale strategic exercises and its largest exercise of any type since 1981—was in part a response to "hegemonic powers [that] target China and Russia ... severely threaten[ing] regional and even global peace and stability"—an indirect reference to the United States.⁷⁰ U.S.-based Russia analysts assessed the exercise was meant to signal to the United States and NATO that China and Russia do not perceive each other as threats.⁷¹ Additionally, the exercise served a confidence-building function, allowing Moscow to message Beijing that Russia considers China an important partner and is taking note of Chinese defense concerns.⁷²
- Beijing and Moscow's decision to hold their first computer-simulated missile defense exercise, Aerospace Security-2016, appeared to be a direct response to U.S.-South Korean discussions in 2016 about the then-pending THAAD battery deployment in South Korea.⁷³ At the start of the 2017 missile defense exercise, just months after the initial deployment of the THAAD battery, the Chinese side said that Beijing and Moscow oppose the development of missile defense systems, implicitly referring to THAAD.⁷⁴ According to Mr. Gabuev, a third exercise will be held in 2019.⁷⁵

Arms Sales and Defense Cooperation Improve Military Capability

Russian arms sales to China, defense industrial cooperation, and Sino-Russian military exercises help both countries modernize their militaries and improve their military capability. China uses Russian-made advanced systems and operational experi-

ence to improve its air defense and fighter capabilities, among other areas, while Russia receives much-needed hard currency and defense research and development funding. After a period of stagnation in arms sales—due largely to Moscow’s concerns with Chinese reverse engineering of its major systems and the Chinese military threat to Russia—Russia decided to reverse its long-held unwillingness to transfer advanced weapon systems to China (for more, see the following section on “Mistrust and Power Asymmetry Limit Ties”).⁷⁶ Major advanced systems Russia has recently sold China include:

- *S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) defense system*: China is in the process of standing up two S-400 regiments (four battalions) purchased from Russia in 2014 for an estimated \$3 billion, which will improve its air defense capabilities and could expand its air superiority over Taiwan. China was the first foreign country that Russia approved to buy its most advanced SAM system available for export. The S-400 fills an important gap for China, extending the maximum range of its air defense to around 380 kilometers (236 miles).⁷⁷ China received its first regimental set of the S-400 in May 2018, and delivery of the second set began in July 2019.⁷⁸
- *Su-35 fighter jet*: China was the first foreign customer of the Su-35, one of Russia’s most advanced fighters, which provides the PLA improved counterair and strike capabilities with its high-end avionics and radar.⁷⁹ In April 2018, China declared the fighter had entered service with the PLA Air Force.⁸⁰ In April 2019, Russia reportedly completed the delivery of 24 Su-35 fighters purchased by China in 2015 for an estimated \$2.5 billion.⁸¹ Russia’s arms export agency announced in June 2019 that it had made a new offer to sell China an additional batch of the fighters.⁸²

Energized defense industrial cooperation since 2014 has benefited both sides, providing opportunities for joint production of next-generation systems and defense research and development. Russia has superior military technology in certain areas, which can help China’s defense industry absorb know-how and technologies to fill key gaps in areas such as air defense and high-performance fighter aircraft. Russian arms sales to China may also have helped the PLA develop submarine-quieting technology. For example, China’s Type 039A YUAN-class diesel-electric attack submarine has an air-independent propulsion system that may have incorporated quieting technology from the Russian-designed Type 636 KILO-class diesel-electric attack submarine.⁸³ The YUAN-class submarine could pose significant challenges for U.S. and Taiwan forces seeking to detect its movements in the shallow Taiwan Strait.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, Beijing can provide Moscow with critical funding for joint research and development projects.⁸⁵ In August 2019, media reports indicated that the two had signed a commercial contract worth approximately \$20 billion for the joint production of 200 heavy-lift helicopters after more than four years of negotiations.⁸⁶ For China, the helicopters—which are scheduled to be

delivered by 2032—will fill a critical gap in combat logistics and lift capabilities.⁸⁷

Sino-Russian military exercises enable the PLA to gain useful experience that can be applied to unfamiliar environments as well as future joint operations.⁸⁸ In particular, such exercises give China an opportunity to deploy large forces in an expeditionary capacity beyond its borders and gain knowledge from recent Russian operational combat experience. In September 2018 at Vostok-2018, PLA participants reportedly learned about the Russian Armed Forces' experiences in the Syrian war from their Russian counterparts.⁸⁹ Dr. Weitz described such insights as including "how to deploy [integrated] brigade-sized forces ... as well as issues related to expeditionary logistics and protecting bases in foreign countries."⁹⁰

Even forms of defense engagement not reaching the level of exercises can generate useful learning opportunities. According to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, the PLA has participated in the Aviadarts air-to-ground competition of the Russian-organized International Army Games since its inception in 2015 precisely because the competition provides valuable exposure to foreign operational concepts and tactics.⁹¹ China has sent advanced combat systems to the International Army Games and a joint team from the PLA's Naval Aviation and Air Force participated for the first time in several related aviation events under Aviadart's auspices in August 2019.⁹²

Growing Energy Ties

For many years energy cooperation lagged behind other areas of Sino-Russian ties, but since 2014 both countries' converging interests have helped it become an important strategic component of the relationship. China's and Russia's complementary energy strategies pulled each side together in the wake of the global financial crisis and annexation of Crimea—events which took a financial toll on Russia's major energy firms. Russia's energy companies needed loans to stay afloat and Moscow sought to diversify from European markets, while Beijing needed to address its growing energy security requirements and reduce its reliance on maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Malacca.⁹³ Despite these and other diversification efforts, Columbia University senior research scholar Erica Downs estimates that China will remain reliant on seaborne oil imports for over 80 percent of its imported oil for at least the next two decades.⁹⁴

Russian pipelines play a key role in China's diversification efforts. Russia has become China's top source of imported oil since 2016 and is poised to become a major natural gas supplier for China over the next decade, serving both countries' interests.⁹⁵ Dr. Downs testified to the Commission that Russian oil exports to China in 2018 reached a high of 1.4 million barrels per day—comprising 15 percent of Chinese oil imports and more than six times the amount it imported from Russia a decade ago.⁹⁶ Russia's East Siberia Pacific Ocean pipeline, which stretches from East Siberia to the Russian Pacific coast, and its branches to China are the key contributor to this development with the capacity to transport 600,000 barrels per

day.⁹⁷ Russia will likely become a large supplier of natural gas to China in the near future as existing projects are ramped up and gradually come online.⁹⁸

The most consequential project is the Power of Siberia pipeline, the agreement for which was concluded in 2014 after a decade of contentious negotiations between China and Russia as Moscow scrambled to replace lost foreign investment due to sanctions over its actions in Crimea.⁹⁹ Scheduled to begin natural gas deliveries in December 2019, the pipeline will supply natural gas to China for 30 years, gradually ramping up to 38 billion cubic meters (28 million tons per year).¹⁰⁰ Dr. Downs estimates that in 2023, when the pipeline is due to operate at full capacity, Russian natural gas will equal about one quarter of the total amount of natural gas that the International Energy Agency projects China will import that year.¹⁰¹

Both countries use major energy deals and high-level contacts to overcome U.S. trade barriers and Western sanctions, sending a signal to the world that neither Russia nor China can be isolated. Dr. Downs argues that in the aftermath of U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia for its annexation of Crimea, Russia's Power of Siberia pipeline and Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in the Arctic would not have secured financing and political backing were it not for China's aid.¹⁰² She also notes senior Chinese and Russian officials at the China-Russia Energy Business Forum in November 2018 discussed the importance of energy cooperation in response to the ongoing U.S.-China trade tensions.¹⁰³ Chinese Vice Premier Han Zheng stressed the importance of bilateral energy cooperation "amid the rise in unilateralism and trade protectionism," while Russian oil giant Rosneft's CEO Igor Sechin decried "certain political conditions in the world" as incentives to deepen energy ties.¹⁰⁴

Mistrust and Power Asymmetry Limit Ties

While China and Russia are in close alignment in the geopolitical, military, and energy spheres, friction and mistrust may prevent the two from becoming formal allies. The most fundamental impediment to the positive development of the Sino-Russian relationship is each country's view of the long-term geopolitical threat posed by the other, manifested primarily in the growing power asymmetry between the two, divergent national interests, and a perception of mutual military vulnerability.

A Growing Power Asymmetry

Perhaps the most significant obstacle to the continued growth of the Sino-Russian partnership is the rapidly widening chasm between the two countries' economies. Moscow is now widely viewed by many observers, including Russian officials, as the "junior partner" in the

*While China did not levy its own sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea and condemned the U.S. and European sanctions, its biggest financial institutions de facto complied with the sanctions by refusing to provide Russia financing after July 2014. Nonetheless, Russia and China have sought to circumvent the sanctions through increased Chinese investment and currency swaps, which allowed Russian energy companies such as Gazprom to avoid U.S. sanctions on dollar-denominated transactions by trading commodities in rubles and renminbi. See Fatima Tlis, "Updated: Did China Join Sanctions against Russia?" *Polygraph*, May 1, 2019; Emma Ashford, "Not-So-Smart Sanctions: The Failure of Western Restrictions against Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2016; Gary J. Schmitt, "Why China Won't Condemn Russia over Crimea," *American Enterprise Institute*, September 29, 2014.

bilateral relationship—an outcome unacceptable to Moscow over the long term.¹⁰⁵ China—whose economy is eight times larger than Russia’s—dominates the bilateral trade relationship.¹⁰⁶ Total trade has consistently fallen below the \$200 billion target for 2020 set by Russian officials in 2016, and Chinese officials recently appeared to revise this date to 2024.¹⁰⁷ Total bilateral trade in goods exceeded \$100 billion for the first time only at the end of 2018, after having reached \$86.9 billion in 2017 and \$66.1 billion in 2016.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Moscow is increasingly dependent on Chinese imports, export markets, and investment. As Dr. Lo notes, “Russia’s need for China is far greater than the other way round, as a primary trading partner, a vital source of investment, and an expansion market for energy exports.”¹⁰⁹ Although energy sales are large by volume, low prices keep growth in trade value depressed.¹¹⁰

Notably, neither country ranks as the other’s largest trading partner, and overall bilateral investment is insignificant, with the key exception of Chinese investment in Russia’s energy sector. For Russia, China is its second-largest trading partner after the EU, while Russia is China’s 11th largest export destination, 10th largest import source, and does not rank in the top 10 in total trade with China.¹¹¹ The structure of their bilateral trade relationship is equally skewed. China largely exports finished goods to Russia. In contrast, over 90 percent of Russian exports to China consist of raw materials, 59 percent of which is fuel.¹¹² Anxieties about the relationship’s imbalance loomed over the 2019 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, where Russian billionaire Viktor Vekselberg began a panel on Sino-Russian economic cooperation by asking what could be done to broaden bilateral economic relations beyond energy.¹¹³ Mr. Gabuev observed that the large number of Chinese delegates at the forum was a deceptive indicator of the robustness of economic ties because Russia accounts for just 2 percent of China’s total outbound foreign direct investment since 2014, and most of that 2 percent comes from state-owned enterprises and state-run financial institutions rather than private businesses.¹¹⁴

China’s trade relationship with Russia—which prioritizes natural resources—effectively mirrors the dynamics of China’s commercial dealings with resource-rich African and Latin American countries, as Beijing seeks to keep pace with rising domestic energy demand.¹¹⁵ Jeanne Wilson, professor at Wheaton College, testified to the Commission that the trade imbalance between the two is so extreme that Russia is “in danger of becoming a raw materials appendage of China in the manner of an underdeveloped country.”¹¹⁶ Some Russian officials perceive Beijing as taking advantage of depressed commodity prices and Russia’s financial difficulties with the West to secure excessively favorable terms on bilateral energy deals.¹¹⁷ Outside of the energy sector, Chinese foreign direct investment in Russia is insignificant and does not compensate for Moscow’s loss of investment from the United States and Europe.¹¹⁸ Some in Moscow perceive Beijing as dragging its feet on investments in Russia and on providing credit financing to Russian companies.¹¹⁹

A Legacy of Distrust

A long history of geopolitical antagonism—and even outright military confrontation—compounds the difficulties China and Russia face in forging a deeper partnership. Mutual distrust continues to pervade the relationship. Dr. Lo observes that “at virtually no point in their history have the two countries enjoyed a comfortable relationship.”¹²⁰ In the 19th century, Russia joined other imperial powers in securing territorial concessions and additional privileges from China’s Qing Dynasty, contributing to the Chinese “century of humiliation” that still scars China’s national consciousness.¹²¹ Though China and Russia settled their longstanding border disputes in 2008, according to Asian history scholar S.C.M. Paine, Russia’s role in this history was particularly painful for China, noting, “For the Chinese people, their present northern border is an incarnation and potent symbol of China’s failure and humiliation at the hands of foreigners in general, and of the Russians in particular.”¹²² From the mid-19th to early 20th century, Russia succeeded in wresting approximately 1.4 million square miles of territory from the decaying Qing Empire, a piece of land slightly larger than modern-day India.¹²³ Russia secured the critical port of Vladivostok, supported Mongolian independence from Chinese rule, and cut away vast swathes of China’s western Xinjiang region.¹²⁴

A lack of cultural commonality may also limit Sino-Russian cooperation, though both countries have made concerted efforts in recent years to foster cultural affinity through people-to-people exchanges. Dr. Wilson notes that “despite the current bonhomie that characterizes the relationship, China and Russia lack any significant degree of cultural symbiosis.”¹²⁵ She argues that Russian political elites have traditionally identified with Europe rather than Asia, producing “a sort of identity crisis in the context of deepening ties with China.”¹²⁶ A 2019 report from the Russian International Affairs Council, a government-affiliated think tank, admitted the two countries’ lack of cultural affinity presents an obstacle to closer ties. “In relations between the two peoples there remain insufficient levels of mutual understanding, stereotypical perceptions and mistaken assessments that have formed due to the complex history of bilateral ties and significant differences in the cultures and mentalities of Russians and Chinese,” the report said.¹²⁷

Nevertheless, other Russian scholars and political elites have framed Russia’s political identity in terms of its relationship to the East.¹²⁸ Russian leaders sometimes invoke this side of the identity debate to justify Russia’s expanding activities in Asia and self-conception as an Asian power.¹²⁹ In September 2019, President Putin reinforced that Russia has a rightful place in the Asia-Pacific in a speech at the 5th Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, where he noted that the forum brought together heads of “major Asia Pacific states.”¹³⁰ More broadly, Russia arguably derives political benefits from highlighting its Asian identity. Dr. Lo observes that “identifying with ‘Asian’ traditions ... is attractive [to Moscow] above all because it reinforces the idea of an alternative legitimacy and moral consensus to the West.”¹³¹

Cold War History: From Alliance to Conflict (1947–1991)

Beijing and Moscow share a complicated history that saw an extended period of open conflict between former allies during the Cold War (1947–1991).¹³² In the years following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China and the Soviet Union maintained an alliance based on communist ideology and a shared threat perception of the United States and the non-communist West. However, between 1956 and 1962 the Sino-Soviet alliance deteriorated due to political and ideological differences, including intense competition for leadership over the worldwide Communist movement and sharply divergent approaches toward relations with the United States and other democratic countries.¹³³

The deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1950s, dubbed the “Sino-Soviet split,” had significant strategic implications. It not only caused China and the Soviet Union to view each other—rather than the United States—as the primary threat, but also established the foundation for an eventual Sino-American rapprochement. Tensions between China and the Soviet Union resulted in a series of armed skirmishes along their shared border throughout the late 1960s, which in 1969 culminated in hundreds of deaths and a serious risk of nuclear war.¹³⁴ It was not until 2008 that China and Russia reached an agreement to settle their long-standing border dispute, signing a treaty to demarcate their 2,700-mile-long border for the first time.¹³⁵

Fears of a Growing Chinese Presence in the Russian Far East

Chinese investment in Russia's Far East has stoked Russian fears of China regaining its historical influence in the region. Russia seeks to develop its resource-rich Far East, but is hobbled by a lack of capital and labor resources.¹³⁶ China's influence on the Russian Far East's economy is significant, but Russia is seeking to diversify inbound investment and workers into the region, including from Japan and South Korea.¹³⁷ As early as 2012, Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev warned that the Russian Far East could become dependent on China as a result of China's “excessive expansion” into the region, articulating a worry about the imbalanced bilateral relationship that persists to this day.¹³⁸

Exacerbating Russian fears, the demographic imbalance on the two sides of the border is significant. Only 6.3 million people live in the Russian Far Eastern Federal District, the administrative region constituting Russia's Far Eastern territory. By contrast, 110 million people live on the other side of the border in the three provinces in China's northeast. This disparity fans Russian fears that Chinese immigrants and business activities will effectively dominate the Russian Far East in the near future.¹³⁹

In addition to permanent settlement, Chinese tourism to the Russian Far East has aggravated local concerns about China's dominance. In 2018, Chinese tourist visits increased 37 percent from 2017, totaling 186,200 out of more than 1.6 million (mostly Russians).¹⁴⁰ Particular Russian grievances include the pollution asso-

ciated with high tourist flows, tax avoidance, the flouting of local construction regulations by Chinese businesses catering to tourists, and Chinese tourists' tendency to patronize Chinese-owned establishments instead of local businesses.¹⁴¹ Russian media reported that local citizens were angered when a group of Chinese tourists visiting Lake Baikal sported T-shirts with Chinese characters reading "The lake is ours."¹⁴²

China's exploitation of Russian natural resources and Russian concerns about Chinese acquisition of strategic assets in the Russian Far East have also worried local citizens, media, and political elites.¹⁴³ According to U.S. Eurasia specialist Paul Goble, local media in the region already see "Chinese occupation" as a fact because of this visible natural resource exploitation.¹⁴⁴ For example, China's plans to bottle water from Russia's Lake Baikal* and build a water pipeline back to China were viewed by local Russian citizens as "a direct attack on [their] survival" in light of the lake's perception as part of the "national patrimony."¹⁴⁵ Russian media reports note that Chinese businesses consider Lake Baikal a "Chinese" lake, a notion which relies on Chinese historical claims that are dubious at best.[†]¹⁴⁶ Such media reports have angered Russian citizens across the country.¹⁴⁷

Even Russian officials have at times openly expressed displeasure with Chinese business activities. Russian Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Dmitry Kobylnkin complained in August 2019 that Chinese loggers were buying illegally produced timber and warned that Russia could ban timber exports if China did not take steps to resolve the issue.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, the Russian government is unenthusiastic about the prospect of Chinese companies investing in strategic assets, such as ports. "This is one of the reasons why Chinese companies are not rushing to invest in the Primorye-1 and Primorye-2 transport corridors although they could give northeast China direct access to the Sea of Japan," Russian analyst Artyom Lukin observes.¹⁴⁹

Divergence on National Interests

There are a number of areas where Beijing's and Moscow's national interests do not align, such as territorial claims and partnerships with countries that Russia or China consider regional rivals. At the UN Security Council, China abstained from several UN resolutions involving Russia rather than siding with Russia outright, including

* In March 2019, a Russian district court in Irkutsk ruled that Russian officials illegally granted a permit in 2017 for a China-backed project to construct a bottling plant at Lake Baikal. The court ruled that the permit was issued based on a positive environmental impact study, which was also illegal. The case remains under appeal. *Agence France-Presse*, "Russia Rules China-Backed Baikal Bottling Plant 'Illegal,'" March 27, 2019.

† According to Nicholas Breyfogle, associate professor of history at The Ohio State University, Lake Baikal became Russian territory after it was discovered and claimed by Russian explorer Kurbat Ivanov in 1643. The geographic feature was not previously recognized as Chinese territory. Indeed, archival work has shown that Lake Baikal was considered Russian territory by the Russian empire and Qing Dynasty both before and after the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, under which the Qing ceded large swaths of Siberia to Russia. Those who argue that China possesses historical claims to Lake Baikal generally assert the lake was part of the ancient Xiongnu confederation and became connected to China under the Han Dynasty during the Han–Xiongnu War (133 BCE to 89 CE). However, the Han Dynasty did not remain in the area or exercise administrative control over the lake for any appreciable period of time after this victory. Staff interview with Dr. Nicholas Breyfogle, associate professor of history at The Ohio State University, October 25, 2019. For more, see V.S. Frank, "The Territorial Terms of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk, 1689," *Pacific Historical Review* 16:3 (1947): 265–270.

a 2014 resolution condemning the Russian annexation of Crimea.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Russia has changed positions on several important disputes involving China. After the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling invalidating major elements of China's South China Sea claims, Moscow initially responded by expressing its support for the legal authority of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the use of diplomacy to resolve maritime disputes.¹⁵¹ Jeremy Maxie, an associate at the geopolitical risk consulting firm Strategika Group, observed at the time that Russia's seemingly neutral response may have stemmed from concern that support for Beijing's territorial claims might upset Russian partners in the region who are also claimant states.¹⁵² Just two months later, however, President Putin voiced Russia's support for Beijing's position at a news conference during the G20.¹⁵³ Russia remained neutral during the China-India 2017 border dispute at Doklam, and took the side of India in August 2019 after the Indian government angered Pakistan and China by altering the legal status of the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁵⁴

Russia's strong ties with China's competitors in the Indo-Pacific, most notably India and Vietnam, are also important areas of divergence.¹⁵⁵ Russia supplies around 60 percent of India's military equipment by value.*¹⁵⁶ In October 2018, Moscow agreed to sell its advanced S-400 SAM system to India, which became only the second importer of the platform after China.¹⁵⁷ Russia's robust relations with Vietnam also have a significant arms sales component but include other areas. Russia is Vietnam's top arms supplier—in September 2018 alone, Vietnam agreed to import over \$1 billion worth of undisclosed Russian defense equipment and services.¹⁵⁸ In the past, Russia has exported to Vietnam six advanced KILo-class submarines, Su-30MK fighter jets, and antiship missiles.¹⁵⁹ The Chinese government has criticized Russian and Vietnamese state oil companies' joint gas and oil development projects in disputed waters in the South China Sea falling within China's nine-dash line sovereignty claim.†¹⁶⁰

Despite deepening ties, many analysts believe the China-Russia defense relationship may never evolve into a mutual defense agreement because they have divergent security interests.¹⁶¹ According to Dr. Weitz, neither China nor Russia wishes to be dragged into a third party conflict as a result of their bilateral defense ties.¹⁶² Vasily Kashin, a prominent Russian expert on China-Russia defense ties, assesses “there are no observable scenarios” under which the two

*China shares a decades-long border dispute with India and has long viewed it as a rival. As a counterbalance to India, Beijing maintains close ties with India's longstanding adversary Pakistan. China's and Russia's support for Pakistan and India, respectively, could create a notable source of bilateral tension in the future. For example, Russia condemned the deadly February 2019 attack by Pakistan-supported terrorist organization Jaish e-Mohammed (JeM) in the disputed region of Kashmir and has suggested that the SCO counterterrorism process serve as a possible means for countering JeM. China has been reluctant to directly condemn the group for fear of upsetting Pakistan and even sought to block UN Security Council moves to sanction JeM leader Masood Azhar before ultimately reversing itself. For more, see U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, May 2, 2019, 7–8, 14; Jacob Stokes and Jennifer Staats, “India-Pakistan Tensions Test China's Relationships, Crisis Management Role,” *U.S. Institute of Peace*, March 7, 2019; *Hindustan Times*, “Russia, Pakistan, U.S., Others Condemn Kashmir Attack,” February 15, 2019.

†The so-called “nine-dash line” or “cow's tongue” encompasses the extent of China's territorial claims in the South China Sea—about 90 percent of its area—based on China's alleged “historical rights” that have been found not to have any legal basis in international law. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2017 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2017, 158.

sides might intervene together in a conflict.¹⁶³ For example, China, unlike Russia, is careful not to side with any individual country or group of countries in the Middle East, while Moscow prefers to avoid involvement in Beijing's security interests in the East and South China seas and Taiwan, according to Dr. Kashin.¹⁶⁴ However, the July 2019 joint strategic bomber patrol over the East China Sea and involvement of both China and Russia in supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria suggest the likelihood of joint intervention in a conflict may not be quite so remote. China and Russia may have security interests that drive cooperative military action inimical to U.S. interests without requiring or seeking a formal mutual defense treaty.

Perceptions of Mutual Military Vulnerability

Sino-Russian relations are also fundamentally constrained by each country's perception of the other as a potential military threat. This perception is particularly acute in Moscow, with some analysts asserting Moscow fears the PLA could one day become an enemy—a concern significantly heightened by China's rapid military modernization.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, both China and Russia conducted large-scale military exercises that appeared to prepare for contingencies against each other as recently as 2009–2010. In 2009, the PLA's Kuayue-2009 (Stride-2009) trans-regional exercise involved about 50,000 ground and air force troops from four divisions in four different Military Regions, which caused some Russian military observers to fear that China was building capabilities that could be used to launch a ground attack on the Russian Far East.¹⁶⁶ The following year, the Russian Armed Forces conducted Vostok-2010, which simulated nuclear strikes on the PLA.¹⁶⁷ Some analysts noted that Russia's large-scale Vostok-2018 exercise, while clearly intended to show outside observers the close ties between Beijing and Moscow, was also designed in part to demonstrate to the PLA the capability of the Russian Armed Forces and the security importance Moscow attaches to its Far East.¹⁶⁸

In the defense industrial sector, burgeoning cooperation is limited by the potential for the PLA to become a future Russian adversary and competitor in the international arms market. While Moscow has loosened its restrictions on selling Beijing advanced weapons systems, it retains its policy of not transferring its most current generation of major weapons platforms.¹⁶⁹ In addition to concerns over these systems potentially being used against Russia in the future, Moscow continues to exhibit mistrust of the Chinese defense industry due to its history of reverse engineering Russian fighter jets and other equipment. In the mid-2000s, Russia paused its major arms sales to China following an egregious case of Chinese reverse engineering in 2007 when Chinese defense firm Shenyang Aircraft Corporation produced an indigenous copy of the Russian Su-27SK fighter, the J-11B. Prior to the J-11B's release, China had been producing the Su-27SK fighter under a licensing agreement with Russia until Beijing abruptly canceled the deal with half of the Su-27SKs on order already made.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, as China's defense industrial base continues to develop, it is likely that Chinese arms imports from Russia will decrease and focus more on components

than full weapon systems, which could place further strains on defense ties.¹⁷¹ Moreover, Moscow fears Beijing will increasingly compete with Russia in the international arms market, which is critical for the health of the Russian defense economy.¹⁷²

China's and Russia's vastly different approaches to arms control also create tensions in the defense relationship. Moscow's nuclear force posture has always been guided by competition with the United States, while Beijing has historically been reluctant to participate in arms control agreements that it perceives as unfairly disadvantaging China given the comparatively small size of its nuclear forces.¹⁷³ In May 2019 at the Hudson Institute, U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lieutenant General Robert P. Ashley, Jr. assessed Russia will add new capabilities to existing tactical-range systems intended to deter and defeat China in a conflict, and is allegedly developing new warhead designs for strategic systems that could penetrate Chinese command and control facilities.¹⁷⁴

Moreover, Russia continues to harbor concerns about China's military build-up in general and growing arsenal of advanced missiles in particular. The countries' divergence over the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, to which China had consistently refused to accede, is reflective of this concern.*¹⁷⁵ When INF talks began, U.S. and Soviet negotiators considered making the treaty applicable only to the European theater, a proposal which provoked opposition from China as well as U.S. allies Japan and South Korea.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, Samuel Charap, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, notes that the issue of INF missiles in Asia "became a central stumbling block" in talks throughout the 1980s because Sino-Soviet relations were highly adversarial and thus "the Soviets remained profoundly reluctant to agree to any reductions in their Asian forces."¹⁷⁷

Russian concerns about China's nuclear capability survived the Cold War. Russian leaders such as President Putin have long voiced concerns about China's refusal to join the treaty, threatening to leave the pact unless China was included in its provisions.¹⁷⁸ "We need other international participants to assume the same obligations [as the United States and Russia]," President Putin said as early as 2007. "If we are unable to attain such a goal ... it will be difficult for us to keep [our obligations] in a situation where other countries do develop such weapons systems, and among those are countries in our near vicinity."¹⁷⁹ A senior Russian parliamentarian reiterated this concern in October 2018 before the United States' 2019 decision to withdraw from the treaty a few months later.¹⁸⁰

China and Russia both opposed the United States' 2019 decision to withdraw from the treaty, but arguably neither actually wanted to be subject to its restrictions. Indeed, some well-regarded Russian analysts have framed the collapse of the INF Treaty as a positive

*The INF Treaty—designed to prevent a destabilizing arms race between nuclear powers—requires the destruction of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers (310 and 3,410 miles), their launchers, associated support structures, and equipment. The United States entered the INF Treaty with the Soviet Union in 1987. In February 2019, the Trump Administration announced the U.S. suspension of its obligations under the INF Treaty with Russia and beginning of the formal treaty withdrawal process. The treaty formally expired in July 2019. For more, see Jacob Stokes and Alec C. Blivas, "China's Missile Program and U.S. Withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty," *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, February 4, 2019, 2.

development for Russia in light of the Chinese nuclear threat. Institute for Political and Military Analysis deputy director Alexander Khramchikin, whose Moscow-based organization conducts research on military issues for the Russian government, claimed that a significant percentage of China's nuclear potential was directed at Russia, not the United States, and that failing to take the future nuclear threat from China into account was "unacceptable."¹⁸¹ Russian military expert Vladimir Popov also emphasized the need to consider the Chinese nuclear threat.¹⁸² "Moscow has a reason to listen to the Americans in some way ... in particular, to more actively involve China in international negotiations on nuclear arms control," he said.¹⁸³

The deployment of advanced Russian military assets close to the Chinese border suggests that Russian military planners remain wary of a potential contingency with China. According to retired Australian Defense Force official and independent analyst Martin Andrew, Russian defense planners are especially concerned by China's deployment of Dongfeng series short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles as well as the CJ-10 land-attack cruise missile.¹⁸⁴ As of 2017, all four of Russia's missile brigades located close to the Russia-China border in its Eastern Military District had been recently upgraded with nuclear-capable Iskander-M surface-to-surface ballistic missile systems with a range of about 500 kilometers (310 miles), bolstering conventional and nuclear deterrence against China.¹⁸⁵ Pranay Vaddi, fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, noted in his March 2019 testimony to the Commission that Russia could field intermediate-range missiles close to China's borders after the INF Treaty's termination, although there is no evidence of this happening to date.¹⁸⁶ Whether or not such missiles are deployed, Dr. Charap argues that "Russia's qualitative and quantitative nuclear predominance over China is seen as a strategic necessity in Moscow, particularly given China's growing conventional military advantages."¹⁸⁷

Central Asia and Afghanistan, the Middle East, and the Arctic

Tenuous Russian Accommodation of Chinese Inroads into Central Asia

Moscow considers Central Asia (see Figure 1) to be a part of the Russian sphere of influence, and has watched China's increasing inroads in the region with a mixture of acceptance and alarm.¹⁸⁸ China's emergence in recent years as the region's dominant economic power and preferred investment partner is threatening to erode Russia's regional standing. China is now the leading trade partner with Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, while Russia remains the largest trading partner of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.¹⁸⁹ Central Asia has embraced China's infrastructure investment through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁹⁰ Russia has largely accommodated China, due mostly to Moscow's inability to adequately counter China's economic heft, but it has also attempted to counterbalance Chinese influence, including by advancing its preferred regional in-

tegration structure under the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).¹⁹¹ According to former Kyrgyzstani official and energy expert Raul Umbetaliev, “There is a big hidden fight going on between Russia and China for influence in Central Asia.” For example, Moscow has more support from a Russian-speaking Kyrgyz population, but as Mr. Umbetaliev notes, “the Russians don’t have any money.”¹⁹²

Figure 1: Map of Central Asia



Source: Created for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

Beijing has tried to assuage Russian concerns over its growing influence by primarily engaging with Central Asian states on economic issues and limiting its overt political and security presence. Still, the strategic implications of this influence are almost certainly not lost on Moscow.¹⁹³ Many of China’s regional goals—fostering economic growth, spurring infrastructure development, and mitigating threats from extremist organizations—are shared by Russia.¹⁹⁴ Publicly, China and Russia have projected their relationship in Central Asia as a “division of labor” in which Russia is Central Asia’s caretaker, maintaining security and political order, while China focuses on investment and regional development.¹⁹⁵ However, Alexander Cooley, a Russia and Eurasia expert at Colombia University,

*The EEU was initially composed of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (later joined by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan), and promotes economic integration and Moscow’s influence in member countries. Bruno S. Sergi, “Putin’s and Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union: A Hybrid Half-Economic and Half-Political ‘Janus Bifrons,’” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 9 (2018): 52–53.

argues that the Russia-China relationship in Central Asia is more akin to “public cooperation and private rivalry.”¹⁹⁶

Despite China’s growing influence in the region, it remains far behind Russia’s cultural influence and soft power. Russia has a strong linguistic connection with Central Asia, as Russian remains the most widely spoken language, and much of the television programming is comprised of broadcasts from Moscow.¹⁹⁷ Further, Marlene Laruelle, professor at George Washington University, testified to the Commission that “Sinophobia has been on the rise in Central Asia. The recent Chinese strategy of interning Uyghurs in camps has been creating some popular reaction, especially in Kazakhstan.”¹⁹⁸

The Belt and Road Initiative and Eurasian Economic Union

An important component of the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia is the interaction between the two countries’ signature development initiatives. Launched in 2013 in Kazakhstan, China’s BRI has offered Central Asian countries multi-billion dollar investments in energy and infrastructure projects.* Such investments have also increased Chinese export flows and expanded China’s influence in the region.¹⁹⁹ The EEU, by contrast, was established in January 2015 and is Russia’s primary vehicle for economic engagement in Central Asia.²⁰⁰

Despite repeated pledges by Beijing and Moscow to coordinate BRI and EEU activities in Central Asia, there has been little cooperation between the two. Russian government officials initially viewed BRI’s route through Central Asia as threatening Russia’s traditional influence in the region and expressed their displeasure in interviews with academics.²⁰¹ In May 2015, however, Beijing and Moscow announced a merger of BRI and the EEU, which appeared driven by Russia’s need to lean more heavily on China after the imposition of Crimea-related sanctions. The merger also served as a signal that the two countries share a common approach to Central Asian development.²⁰² Yet the lack of tangible coordination between the two projects since 2015 suggests that the merger may be designed largely for signaling purposes and to defuse tensions on both sides.²⁰³ According to Dr. Laruelle, Russia’s EEU “was just a way for Russia to try to mimic [BRI] ... to say they are in coordination.”²⁰⁴

Tensions in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Tense interactions between China and Russia in the SCO, which the two established in 2001 with Central Asian countries, are emblematic of their broader divergences in regional priorities and goals. While Beijing prefers the SCO as the primary organization for ordering economic and security engagement in the region due to its leading role in the body, Moscow prefers the Russian-led CSTO in the security sphere and the EEU in the economic and legal spheres.²⁰⁵ Since the SCO’s establishment, Russia has opposed Chinese moves to use the SCO as an economic vehicle, fearing that Beijing could use the platform to expand its economic inroads in Central Asia.²⁰⁶

* For an in-depth assessment of China’s engagement in Central Asia, see U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 3, Section 1, “China and Central Asia,” in *2015 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2015.

The SCO has achieved some success in fostering regional security cooperation, for example by creating a regional legal framework and multilateral military exercises, but the organization has been unable to develop major initiatives beyond these.²⁰⁷ Further, Dr. Wilson noted to the Commission that Russia supported India's entry into the SCO, which Chinese media questioned as being potentially motivated by seeking to counterbalance China (Pakistan became an SCO member at the same time as India in 2017).²⁰⁸ In addition, China and Russia have also disagreed on statements at SCO summits, largely due to Beijing's stated principle of noninterference. China snubbed Russian proposals at the 2008 summit to recognize the independence of breakaway Georgian territories and at the 2014 summit to endorse Russia's actions in Crimea.²⁰⁹ To date, China has neither recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia nor departed from its ambiguously neutral position on Russia's annexation of Crimea.²¹⁰

General Alignment on Afghanistan

As the United States seeks to draw down its military presence in Afghanistan and reach a peace agreement to end the 18 year-long war, both China and Russia are generally aligned in their views on the situation. In particular, both countries perceive an opportunity to expand their influence in Afghanistan and to bolster their international standing.²¹¹ Although Afghanistan is not a primary focus of either Beijing's or Moscow's regional engagement, they both benefit from stability to support their interests in Central Asia and to counter the threat of terrorism and other potential risks to their national security.²¹² Dr. Laruelle testified to the Commission that the two countries are ready to accept a Taliban-shared government in Kabul as long as "it does not try to spread instability ... beyond Afghanistan's borders toward Central Asia or Xinjiang."²¹³

Beijing has the added objective of protecting billions of dollars' worth of investments in Afghanistan through BRI.²¹⁴ China and Russia have attempted to influence the final outcome in the Afghan conflict by negotiating together directly with the Afghan government and the Taliban. In September 2019, for example, China's special representative for Afghanistan hosted a Taliban delegation in Beijing to discuss the group's peace talks with the United States shortly after President Trump called off plans to host the Taliban at Camp David for negotiations.²¹⁵ In addition, China and Russia have engaged in broader dialogues with their respective regional partners, Pakistan and Iran.²¹⁶

In April 2019, the United States reached consensus with China and Russia on key components of an Afghan peace agreement. That consensus included the recognition of the Taliban's commitment to cut ties with Al-Qaeda and fight ISIS, among other terrorist groups, and a call for the "responsible withdrawal" of foreign troops from Afghanistan.²¹⁷ Beijing has been cautious about increasing its involvement, fearing it could stumble into a long-term commitment, but has been slowly changing its approach since at least 2015 when it first engaged in talks with the United States and Afghanistan on peace negotiations.²¹⁸ Seeking to protect its economic and security interests in the country, China has since 2016 reportedly operated a

military outpost consisting of about two dozen buildings and towers in Tajikistan looking out onto Afghanistan, which could support up to hundreds of PLA soldiers as well as regular patrols.²¹⁹ It has also been reported that China is funding and building a training camp for Afghan troops in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, which extends from the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan to China's Xinjiang region.²²⁰ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has denied the reports, and the Afghan embassy in Beijing said "there will be no Chinese military personnel of any kind on Afghan soil at any time."²²¹

Similar Approaches and Compatible Goals in the Middle East

Like in other regions, Chinese and Russian engagement with the Middle East is characterized by a mix of complementary and competitive behaviors. While Beijing has focused on securing oil, gas, and other raw materials, Moscow has sought to bolster its regional military presence and political influence.²²² However, the two countries increasingly pursue similar approaches to key international issues such as the promotion of authoritarian norms of governance, diplomatic initiatives, counterterrorism, and arms sales. These activities cumulatively reduce U.S. influence in the region and demonstrate Chinese and Russian global power. Left unchecked, deepening Sino-Russian cooperation in the Middle East will complicate U.S. efforts to promote its own interests.

China and Russia pursue a variety of strategies to promote authoritarian norms in the Middle East, providing political support and investment to Middle Eastern countries regardless of their domestic regime and compliance with good governance standards. Andrea Kendall-Taylor, a fellow at the Center for a New American Security, testified to the Commission that some Middle Eastern governments see China and Russia as successful examples of the "strongman authoritarian model," creating a political affinity that may serve as the basis for future political cooperation.²²³ Chinese and Russian activities in the Middle East undermine U.S. efforts to improve regional adherence to norms of democracy, human rights, and good governance.

China and Russia also coordinate diplomatic positions in response to shared concerns about regional security issues and work to deepen relations with key U.S. allies in the Middle East. Both countries have developed ties with Iran, participated in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that restricted Iran's nuclear program, evaded U.S. sanctions on Iran, and worked to move away from U.S. dollar-denominated currencies to alternatives in trading with Tehran.²²⁴ China and Russia have also expressed support for the Assad regime, provided military assistance to the Syrian government, and vetoed multiple UN Security Council resolutions on the Syrian civil war.²²⁵ Further, the two countries have pursued closer ties with key U.S. partners such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey.²²⁶

Both China and Russia are concerned about the potential return home of up to thousands of Chinese and Russian citizens who fought on behalf of terrorist organizations in Syria.²²⁷ The prospect of radicalization among members of the Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang is of particular concern to the Chinese government because the region is a crucial hub for BRI.²²⁸ Syria's ambassador to China

claimed in May 2017 that up to 5,000 Uyghurs were fighting in various militant groups in Syria.²²⁹ President Putin expressed similar concerns in February 2017, when he cited Russian security service statistics that about 4,000 Russians and 5,000 Central Asians had gone to fight for the Islamic State in Syria.²³⁰ However, Mathieu Duchâtel, director of the Asia program at the French think tank Institut Montaigne, estimates that the actual number of Uyghurs fighting in Syria may be as low as a few hundred.²³¹ China and Russia have signed several cooperation agreements on counterterrorism and the repatriation of persons who have committed crimes overseas but robust counterterrorism cooperation has yet to materialize.²³²

Finally, both countries seek a larger piece of the growing Middle East arms market, responding to rising demand from countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Iran.²³³ Russia, the world's second largest arms exporter, sold 11 percent of its total arms exports to the region from 2013–2017,²³⁴ while China exported only 2 percent of its total arms exports to the region over the same period.²³⁵ The UAE, to take a recent example, has bought missile systems from Russia.²³⁶ Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have also purchased drones from China, an area of the arms market in which China has developed a niche.²³⁷

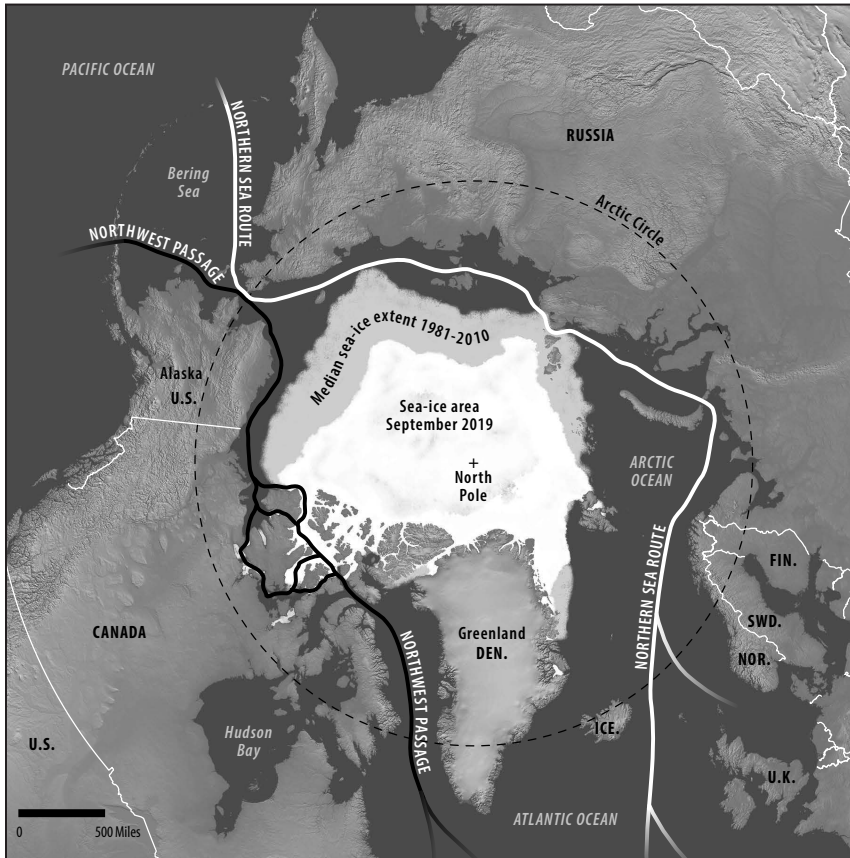
Moreover, while growing Chinese and Russian arms sales to the Middle East may stimulate competition for regional customers, the sales also pose a potential challenge to long-standing U.S. and European dominance in the regional arms market by providing customers with incompatible hardware.²³⁸ U.S. Department of Defense officials are reportedly concerned that Chinese and Russian arms sales to U.S. allies in the Middle East may enable the two countries to acquire information about U.S. military and commercial technologies because their technicians may be able to access such information in the process of installing newly-purchased systems.²³⁹

Chinese and Russian activities in the Middle East further the two countries' efforts to reduce U.S. influence in the region and demonstrate Chinese and Russian global power. In the future, growing Sino-Russian cooperation in the Middle East may further undermine U.S. interests, such as the maintenance of traditional security relationships with Middle Eastern partners and the promotion of the liberal international order.

Russia Chafes at Chinese Arctic Presence

Russia has long viewed itself as the dominant power in the Arctic (see Figure 2) and is hesitant to welcome a broader Chinese presence that could encroach on its interests. At the same time, China, which declared itself a "near-Arctic State" in 2018, seeks to expand its influence in the Arctic and gain access to the region's plentiful resources.²⁴⁰ Moscow has proved willing to accommodate some of China's demands for a greater role in Arctic affairs, particularly after the 2014 post-Crimea sanctions, for the sake of generating crucial investment and sustaining the broader Sino-Russian partnership.²⁴¹ Nevertheless, Rebecca Pincus, assistant professor at the U.S. Naval War College, testified to the Commission that "Russia will not be the junior partner in the Arctic."²⁴²

Figure 2: Map of the Arctic



Note: This map depicts the Arctic, including the two primary routes used by coast guards, naval forces, and commercial shipping entities. The Northwest Passage runs along the U.S. and Canadian coasts, while the Northern Sea Route runs primarily along the Russian coast. The map also illustrates the melting of the North Pole from 1981 to 2010 and the remaining extent of the sea ice as of September 2019. As the sea ice melts, the Arctic will become easier to navigate, inviting greater involvement by countries previously unable to access the region due to their lack of ice-breakers. It will also reduce other countries' dependence on Russia for access to the Northern Sea Route, which Russia currently controls.

Source: Adapted from Dan Lamothe, "The New Arctic Frontier," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2018.

Chinese and Russian interests currently overlap rather than align in the Arctic. Moscow possesses the largest Arctic territory in the world and has significant civilian and military assets in the region.²⁴³ According to Russia's 2008 and 2013 Arctic strategy documents, the Arctic's future development is crucial to the country's military security, shipping lanes such as the Northern Sea Route,* and access to natural resources.²⁴⁴ China, which is not an Arctic littoral state, did not significantly expand its reach into the Arctic until 2013, though its interest

*The Northern Sea Route is the shipping lane that traverses Russia's northern coast and connects northeast Asian ports with northern ports in North America and Europe. It is currently the most-trafficked shipping route in the Arctic. For more, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on an Emerging China-Russia Axis? Implications for the United States in an Era of Strategic Competition*, written testimony of Rebecca Pincus, March 21, 2019, 3.

in the region dates back to the 1990s.²⁴⁵ Russia was long reluctant to allow China to join the Arctic Council (the dominant regional organization) as an observer, due in part to its fear of China gaining influence at its expense.²⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Russia finally relented in its opposition, and China became an observer to the Council in 2013.²⁴⁷

Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic is based on mutual interests. For Russia, China can provide the capital, technical expertise, and markets needed to develop its natural resources.²⁴⁸ For China, Russia furthers Chinese economic goals in the region—particularly through the development of natural resources and use of shipping routes controlled by Russia—while addressing its growing domestic energy demand, significantly reducing shipping times and costs to Europe, and reducing its dependence on importing energy through the Suez Canal and Straits of Malacca.*²⁴⁹

The most prominent example of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic to date is the joint development of the Yamal LNG project, for which Beijing has provided approximately \$13 billion in financing.²⁵⁰ The joint development project created a “win-win” situation for both countries, enabling Russian firms experiencing financial strain related to the Crimea sanctions to secure funding, while Beijing acquired a new source of LNG and shipping route.²⁵¹ Other notable examples of cooperation include the 2018 announcement incorporating Russia’s Northern Sea Route into China’s BRI and combined Sino-Russian investment to upgrade the Russian port of Zarubino.²⁵²

Despite these much-touted cooperative projects, significant obstacles remain to deepened Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic. China’s efforts to build its influence in the region, particularly by offering funding for resource development projects with Arctic Council members, gives Russia reason to question Beijing’s long-term ambitions.²⁵³ Both countries have made little progress in the joint development of oil and gas projects, while implementation of the Northern Sea Route’s development has stalled due partly to Chinese concerns about the lack of infrastructure facilities and the expense of Russian-provided navigation and ice-breaking services.²⁵⁴ Russian legislation further restricted access to the Northern Sea Route in March 2019 by requiring foreign ships to request permission 45 days in advance of transiting the route and to take a Russian pilot on board.²⁵⁵ Dr. Pincus observes that bilateral cooperation in the Arctic “may hinge on the question of control and trust.” Thus far, mismatched expectations and the Russian side wanting to maintain total management control over development projects have been key roadblocks.²⁵⁶

*Chinese firms are especially interested in securing opportunities to mine and extract uranium as well as rare earth elements in the Arctic. In Greenland, for example, Chinese firms have pursued multiple joint mining ventures to acquire uranium, neodymium, dysprosium, yttrium, and zinc. China’s growing investment in Arctic resources has worried other countries; in 2012, European Union Vice President Antonio Tajani engaged in what he called “raw mineral diplomacy” by offering hundreds of millions of dollars in development aid in exchange for a guarantee that Greenland would not allow China exclusive access to rare earth metals. For more see Marc Lanteigne and Mingming Shi, “China Steps Up Its Mining Interests in Greenland,” *Diplomat*, February 12, 2019; Ed Struzik, “China Signals Hunger for Arctic’s Mineral Riches,” *Guardian*, June 4, 2013.

Implications for the United States

Moscow and Beijing work independently and together to counter the United States and erode the values underpinning U.S. global leadership. The two countries frame their relationship as a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era,” insisting that it is not an alliance.²⁵⁷ In key respects, this claim is true: the Sino-Russian partnership, as articulated in the two countries’ June 2019 joint statement, fails to meet most of the criteria for a formal alliance—most notably, specific legal requirements for collective self-defense.* Yet China and Russia’s mutual expectation of diplomatic support in a dispute, combined with their shared antipathy to U.S. values, opposition to U.S. alliances and observable patterns of cooperation, suggest a high degree of geopolitical alignment that has already begun to challenge U.S. interests and values.

China and Russia’s high-level defense technology cooperation, military exercises, and military-to-military coordination raise the potential security threat to the United States and its allies and partners. Moreover, coordinated Sino-Russian military activity has created new challenges for the United States and its allies to respond to simultaneous Sino-Russian military operations. Russian sales of Su-35 fighters, S-400 SAM systems, and other advanced military technology to China bolster PLA capabilities, significantly improving the PLA’s ability to contest air superiority in the region. Combined exercises have yet to demonstrate interoperability, but it is not inconceivable that both countries could operate together in a future military conflict.

The crucial challenge for the United States and its allies lies in the question of how to respond if China and Russia were to launch military operations in different theaters at the same time. It is also possible that China and Russia might choose to act more assertively in concert if they perceive the U.S. response to their separate actions as weak, a calculation arguably reflected in each country’s respective approach to Syria, Ukraine, and the South China Sea. In these cases, it appears that one country’s success in pursuing its interests in opposition to the United States may have emboldened the other to take similar actions, a dynamic that Oriana Skylar Mastro, assistant professor of security studies at Georgetown University, described in testimony before the Commission as “strategic echoing.”²⁵⁸

China and Russia employ a host of strategies to promote authoritarian values and illiberal norms that undermine the basis of the U.S.-led international order. Both countries use military force in violation of international law and support rogue, anti-U.S. regimes. At the UN Security Council, China’s and Russia’s moves to block U.S. initiatives and protect rogue regimes from official censure hinder the UN’s ability to uphold global norms. The two countries’ promotion of “internet sovereignty” erodes the principles underpinning the free flow of information and an open internet. Likewise, their common vision of space that restricts U.S. freedom of action while allowing

*According to political scientist Glenn Snyder, alliances are characterized by their “solemnity, specificity, legal and normative obligations and ... public visibility.” For more see Glenn H. Snyder, “Alliance Theory: A Neo-realist First Cut,” *Journal of International Affairs* 44:1 (Spring/Summer 1990): 103–123.

for their own development of counterspace technologies is detrimental to the preservation of a peaceful commons in outer space. Finally, China and Russia's use of influence operations, cyberwarfare, and disinformation have the potential to destabilize the United States and democracies around the world.

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