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China-Russia Military Cooperation and the Emergent U.S.-China Rivalry: Implications and Recommendations for U.S. National Security

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Abstract: As the crisis in U.S.-China relations deepens, this major fissure in the global order between East and West seems more and more to be a semi-permanent feature of world politics. Many Western strategists have posited a related problem in which a dynamic alignment between China and Russia, possibly even reaching the level of a formalized alliance, arises to threaten the West across all dimensions of power, including in the military domain. Such a concern is not far-fetched since Moscow and Beijing have seen a steady improvement in their bilateral relationship over more than three decades now. Russian natural resources, along with its crucial geo-strategic location astride Eurasia, not to mention its military prowess, could all plausibly serve to enhance China's bid for global leadership. This survey of developing Russia-China ties in the national security domain examines all aspects of military cooperation. The unique data revealed in this article, drawn from dozens of Chinese and Russian language sources, has generally not been appraised by Western scholars. This data illustrates a security relationship between Beijing and Moscow that goes beyond the rhetoric, and is instead robust and substantive. A section evaluating possible future scenarios for Russia-China relations demonstrates that this military-security relationship could yet grow much stronger. A final section of the article makes policy recommendations designed, on the one hand, to deter aggressive action by the Russia-China quasi-alliance that currently exists, but also to ameliorate the impact of a tightening security relationship between Moscow and Beijing for global politics.

Keywords: China-Russia quasi-alliance, military cooperation, strategic partnership, U.S.-China rivalry, U.S. national security

Introduction

As U.S.-China rivalry becomes ever more acute, ranging across disparate domains from 5G to pandemic response to the South China Sea, discussions regarding a prospective Chinese-Russian alliance that threatens the West have become more urgent. The U.S. National Security Strategy, published in December 2017, names these two countries as America's major adversaries.¹ Leading U.S. analysts express their concerns that "...important national interests today are being challenged by two major powers—Russia and China"² In a special report to the Congress, two leading strategists recently argued that U.S. military superiority has "eroded to a dangerous degree, so ... [that the U.S.] might struggle to win, or perhaps lose, a war against China or Russia if it is forced to fight on two or more fronts simultaneously."³

Confronted by a potential “axis of authoritarianism,” or by the genuine superpower that is contemporary China, supported by Russia’s technological prowess in weaponry and its immense resource base, U.S. national security could indeed be challenged as never before by a “peer competitor.”⁴ One leading American defense analyst maintains that “both sides’ behavior conform to alliance dynamics” and emphasizes the closer partnership relations between Beijing and Moscow on the anti-American basis, in which “China is the rider and Russia the horse.” He contends that this evolving alliance serves as a force multiplier for both states.⁵ Some U.S. observers anticipate the renewal of the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship, which expires in 2021, stating that its renewal “could introduce new dynamics to the China-Russia relationship, and the possible inclusion of collective defense provisions like those between the U.S. and Japan.”⁶

Representatives from all theoretical schools in the international relations discipline have weighed in on the significance of the Russia-China relationship over the last decade. Focusing on a “partnership that is ever more asymmetrical,” for instance, Bobo Lo, sees only a “wary embrace.”⁷ Likewise, realist John Mearsheimer contends that the China-Russia relationship is brittle and projected that China “... will become a serious enough threat to the Russians that the Russians and Americans will find themselves allies.”⁸ While not adhering entirely to systemic explanations, Russian sinologist Alexander Lukin, emphatically disagrees, maintaining that a chief explanation for the ever closer China-Russia relationship is the West’s “desire to build a unipolar world.”⁹

By contrast, American media tends to be dominated by the liberal paradigm, which puts a premium on regime type and tends to view both Beijing and Moscow as equally nefarious and effectively as partners in crime.¹⁰ This view seems to predominate now at the highest levels of the U.S. government.¹¹ Many scholars also take this approach. For example, Matthew Kroenig argues that Russia and China both “want to make the world safe for autocracy.” He states that “Democracies build larger and more reliable alliance systems,” implying that the China-Russia relationship is frail.¹² Regional specialists bring a more nuanced understanding and often incline toward the constructivist perspective, emphasizing the role of history, culture, nationalism, and ideologies. Thus, Gil Rozman concludes, “... there now exists strong correspondence in regime interests [between Moscow and Beijing], which can be traced to fundamental similarities in the reconstruction of national identity in the two countries. ... They proceed to define ‘core national interests’ in similar ways.”¹³ Another recent study of China and Russia that focuses on identity is by Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko. They explain that, “Both China and Russia are hypersensitive to perceived slights ...” due to their highly comparable “quest for status,” but that redirecting such reactions through “social creativity” can lead to more positive outcomes for the world order.¹⁴

This article does not aim to resolve the theoretical debates outlined above regarding whether the distribution of power in the international system, regime type, or identities are most analytically significant. Rather, it represents an empirically focused examination of a simple question: what is the nature and strength of China-Russia relations in the military

domain? To that end, the research below makes a distinct contribution by bringing forth numerous Chinese and Russian language sources on these critical matters that have never been accessed by Western scholars.

The article demonstrates that the major outcome of the recent development of a Russia-China partnership is an unprecedented level of strategic cohesion in the sphere of defense and security. That is rather novel considering that only a decade ago, a major study of China-Russia relations concluded that the term “strategic partnership” was not even justified.¹⁵ Today, more scholars are questioning that initial conclusion. Indeed, this study largely confirms the careful investigation of Alexander Korolev, who concluded that “China-Russia military relations have begun moving into the initial stages of deep institutionalization.”¹⁶ Our article updates this conclusion, adding substantial evidence, and we additionally go beyond Korolev’s study to make numerous policy recommendations.

Initially driven by the need to balance U.S. dominance in the post-Cold War era jointly, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has developed into a more ambitious order-forming tandem which claims a special role as a guarantor of global peace, the balance of power, and strategic stability. Bilateral interactions between Russia and Beijing have gained substantial momentum, and external actors may not easily alter their evolution. Therefore, we find it is counterproductive to develop new strategies in the West aimed at the breakup of the solidifying Russia-China “quasi-alliance.” Rather, the best way to influence the China-Russia relationship is to find new ways to cooperate with both Eurasian giants and to encourage constructive results from their partnership, following the conclusions of Larson and Shevchenko mentioned above.

The first part of the article considers some relevant history. That is followed by current developments in China-Russia security cooperation across the warfare spectrum, examining the ground, air, and sea components. The second part of the article touches on strategic capabilities, as well as political-military learning. A final segment of the article introduces three scenarios for China-Russia relations, as well as ten recommendations for simultaneously deterring and also defusing the possibility of a formalized China-Russia alliance.

Historical Background

Across four centuries of reasonably sustained interaction, Russia-China relations have been relatively peaceful. As one Russian sinologist explains: “The fact that these two countries have never been in a condition of declared hostilities, reflects ... [a] flexible approach to national interests ...” on both sides.¹⁷ To be sure, hostilities have occasionally occurred, for example at Albazin, five hundred miles east of Lake Baikal in 1685, but such tensions present as exceptions to a reasonably stable pattern of interaction that has entailed rather frequent cooperation in the security domain, particularly after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.¹⁸ Indeed, the role of Soviet assistance during the 1920s, including to the Chinese Nationalist cause under Sun Yatsen, was hardly minor.¹⁹ After Japan intensified its aggression against

China in the late 1930s, the Soviet Union sent three thousand pilots into this fight, and one-tenth of those pilots were killed, according to a recent Russian account.²⁰

China-Russia security cooperation reached an apogee in the 1950s, of course. Indeed, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) could not have fought the U.S. military to a stalemate in the Korean War without huge material, technical and doctrinal assistance from the Soviet Union.²¹ In contemporary China, this Sino-Soviet cooperation in the "War to Resist America" is now much discussed, such as in a recent book about the air war. That book, for example, explains that the Soviet pilots, operating together with Chinese squadrons, "... decreased the pressure on our aircraft, and reduced our losses."²² In the late 1950s, along with hundreds of small combat vessels of various types and many related plans, Chinese naval engineers also received prototypes for naval cruise and ballistic missiles from the Soviets. These designs became the antecedents for today's extremely capable YJ-12 anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) and JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) wielded by the PLA Navy.

A thirty-year break occurred in the China-Russia security relationship from 1960-90 during the dangerous Sino-Soviet split, which brought the Eurasian giants to the brink of nuclear conflict. That conflict has not been forgotten and has left a legacy of caution regarding the Russia-China relationship generally, but also with respect to the deleterious role of ideology in such key relationships.²³ Quite remarkably, in the early 1990s, even as the two respective countries made different choices regarding the value of Marxist-Leninism, a solid rapprochement between the two countries' security establishments was built with impressive speed, and the pattern of cooperation has proven durable. The cultural and technological legacy of the 1950s may have helped to ease this intensifying relationship. Still, the major driving factors were undoubtedly commercial for Moscow and the desire to circumvent international isolation for Beijing. The famous Chinese Admiral Liu Huaqing, father of the modern PLA Navy, visited Russia no less than four times during the period 1990-97, orchestrating major purchases for the Chinese Navy and the China Air Force, as well. Indeed, the impact on the trajectory of China's maritime power has been enormous.²⁴ The same can be said of the impact of Russia-China cooperation on modern Chinese airpower. The sections that follow will elaborate on these major strategic consequences in all dimensions of military power, extending to the strategic realm as well.

On the Ground

Unlike other service components, China's current ground forces do not rely heavily on imported Russian arms, with the single major exception of helicopters. However, joint exercises are carried out with considerable regularity. A new feature of these exercises involves international competitions, which both militaries appear to take quite seriously. The Russian doctrinal legacy for Chinese ground forces is not small, of course. That legacy predated the Korean War, but reached its apex in the 1950s. Soviet tactics gave a clear boost to Chinese armor and Chinese knowledge acquired from the Soviets, specifically from the Soviet's T-54 that was built under license starting in 1957, forms part of the key "genealogical

tree” of China’s modern tank force.²⁵ Today, China has decisively moved away from Russian designs for armored vehicles, but some similarities in ground forces doctrine remain, for example, the continuing emphasis on artillery, especially rocket artillery. Contemporary Chinese sources still underline the decisive role of such systems for the Soviet Red Army on the Eastern Front against Germany.²⁶

China has imported more than 200 Mi-171 medium-lift helicopters for the PLA. A 2012 report explains that China had in 2011 signed a contract for licensed production and forecast that “In the final tally, China will operate more than one thousand Mi-171.”²⁷ These Russian airframes have formed the backbone of the PLA ground forces’ doctrinal shift into air mobility. Such aircraft have proven indispensable for dealing with humanitarian disasters, such as the Wenchuan Earthquake in Sichuan.²⁸ However, the PLA is also currently experimenting with air cavalry concepts. Thus, they are particularly interested in Russian experimentation along these lines, including the apparent effort to convert some airborne units to form helicopter assault regiments.²⁹ Beijing has already imported several Mi-6, Russia’s super heavy-lift helicopter that is capable to heft 20,000lbs or eighty-two soldiers. While China has gone its own way for much of the future helicopter fleet, including especially attack helicopters, one major bilateral military cooperation project will be co-production of a heavy-lift helicopter. As of 2019, the project appears to be on track, but still far from delivering a prototype. Ground forces have also played a vital role in the growing regimen of joint exercises between the two armed forces. Some of these have taken place under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—often labeled as “counter-terrorism” exercises. For example, approximately one hundred Chinese armored and other military vehicles came to Chelyabinsk in August 2018 for such an exercise.³⁰ Just a month later, in September 2018, 3,200 Chinese soldiers brought nine hundred pieces of equipment, including armored vehicles and artillery pieces, to participate in ‘Vostok-18,’ a massive drill in Russia’s central and eastern regions. Finally, it is essential to understand that many of China’s most promising military officers are being educated in Russian military academies.³¹

In the Air

The very first two modern Russian fighters, Su-27UBK, arrived in China on May 30, 1992.³² The capabilities of these aircraft far outstripped the PLA Air Force (PLAAF)’s fighters at that time. The *Flanker*-era was truly inaugurated in Chinese military aviation with the delivery of the second batch of 24 Su-27s in December 1996. It was at this time that Chinese aerospace engineers undertook to produce their own *Flanker*, the J-11, under a production licensing agreement with Moscow. Still, that new Chinese indigenous Su-27 had imported Russian radar, engines, and also weapons. Yet, Beijing pressed ahead with its own upgraded *Flanker* design, the J-11B, which entered serial production in 2007. The Chinese purchase of the twin-seat Russian Su-30MK2, transferred in 2004 to the Chinese Navy, however, seemed to illustrate a continuing interest in Russian combat aircraft and related hardware. Still, almost a decade long pause in major aircraft purchases is undoubtedly illustrative of some tensions

regarding intellectual property theft with respect to key aviation technologies.³³

At the end of 2014, a contract was signed for 24 Su-35s at a price of US\$2.5 billion. In late December 2016, the first batch of Su-35s arrived in China. These jets first patrolled the South China Sea in February 2018 and near Taiwan in May of that year. Another Chinese account gave the Su-35 high marks and praised the Chinese Air Force for rapidly putting the new aircraft into service—a successful process attributed to decades of experience with Russian heavy fighters.³⁴ Another Chinese assessment argues that the new Russian Su-57 fighters deserves a careful look. It is suggested that to understand the Su-57, Chinese strategists should realize that Russian aerial combat doctrine differs quite significantly from the American version in that Russian strategists do not necessarily accept the “American embrace of the long-distance [engagement].”

China’s current front-line bomber, the H-6 is a derivative of the Soviet Tu-16. Beijing was fortunate to receive a few Tu-16s in 1958-1959. One recent defense analysis observes: “In 2007, Beijing unveiled the most comprehensive upgrade of the H-6K so far, which boasts new Russian D-30KP engines with 25 percent more thrust, ejection seats and a modern glass cockpit with LCD displays.”³⁵ These fully modernized bombers, if supported by aerial refueling, are capable of conducting cruise missile strikes well beyond the second island chain. While Beijing is expected to field as many as two new, indigenous heavy bomber designs (including stealth-type), Chinese defense analysts remain extremely interested in Russian bomber development.³⁶

Russia has also provided tankers, transports, and battle management aircraft to the PLAAF with the Il-76 playing a starring role. The PLAAF now operates about two dozen heavy transports imported from Russia. The first of these arrived as early as 1991.³⁷ Illustrating some confidence in the Russian airframe, it was the Il-76 that was dispatched both to Libya in 2011 and then subsequently to Australia in an effort to contribute to the search for the missing Malaysian airliner.³⁸ China’s large early warning/battle management (AWACS) aircraft, the KJ-2000, has also been developed on an Il-76 frame.³⁹ Finally, the PLAAF has operated a handful of Il-78 *Midas* tankers that were also imported from Russia.

Beijing has also gone to school on Russian aerial weaponry. Thus, one recent assessment explains: “China’s air force was dependent for these types of weapons on Russia from the mid-1990s and into the early 2000s with the semi-active R-27R and the active-radar guided R-77 supplied as part of combat aircraft deals.” Moreover, it is explained that China’s first air-to-air missile comparable to Western systems, the PL-12, was developed “with considerable Russian support.”⁴⁰ More recently, aviation analysts are concerned that China has exceeded Western capabilities in developing the PL-15, as very long-range air weapon that was likely inspired by Russian doctrine.⁴¹

The import of Russian surface-to-air missiles into China has been occurring since the early 1990s. In the last few years, Western defense analysts have been perturbed by the Chinese import of the Russian S-400 system. As explained by one Washington defense

analyst, “The S-400 reportedly can counter low-observable aircraft and precision-guided munitions, and is also reportedly extremely mobile.” Remarking on the impact in a possible Taiwan scenario, the same analyst concludes: “U.S. and Taiwan planners must, therefore, plan to yield air superiority to the Chinese [or] accept high levels of risk to U.S. aviation assets...”⁴² Noting the high reputation of the S-400 system, one Russian appraisal recently explained: “... it’s ... almost impossible to defend against.”⁴³

In addition, Chinese and Russian pilots now regularly visit each other’s country for joint exercises. Thus, it was a sign of Chinese seriousness, when they dispatched the relatively new PLAAF KJ-200 battle management aircraft to participate in exercises near Vladivostok in spring 2015.⁴⁴ A July 2019 joint strategic aviation exercise by Russia and China made headlines around the world when South Korean interceptors fired warning shots at Russian aircraft. According to one Russian analysis, the air mission was conceived with the dual purpose of supporting the evolving Russia-China military partnership, but also with the intention of “strengthening global strategic stability.”⁴⁵ Limited evidence, moreover, suggests a new generation of joint Russia-China aerospace breakthroughs could be in the offing as joint research goes forward.⁴⁶

At Sea

Along with aerospace cooperation, naval collaboration has been a focal point of the blossoming Russia-China quasi-alliance relationship. It is well known, to cite the most obvious example, that China’s very first carrier fighter, the J-15, is itself yet another version of China’s broad effort to reorient the basic Russian *Flanker* design to its own needs. One recent Chinese review of Soviet aircraft carrier design stated candidly that the Russian Navy’s Su-33 carrier aircraft and the J-15 are “foreign brothers’ from a common blood lineage.”⁴⁷ Of course, the first Chinese aircraft carrier, named *Liaoning*, was originally the Soviet Union’s *Varyag* that had been launched initially back in December 1988. It has also been suggested that Moscow and Beijing might team up on vertical/short takeoff and landing (VSTOL) capabilities.⁴⁸ Aside from Russian assistance to China’s aircraft carrier ambitions, one should not neglect the on-going modernization of China’s naval helicopter fleet. A key role in that on-going process has been played by imported Russian Kamov-28 helicopters.⁴⁹ China has also paid ample attention to the Russian Navy’s fixed-wing, shore-based aviation fleet, from the Il-38 and the Tu-142M anti-submarine patrol craft to the Tu-22 bomber.⁵⁰

The four *Sovremenny*-class destroyers delivered after 2000 also represented a “great leap forward” for China’s surface fleet. True, the PLA Navy has not opted to import more Russian surface ships, but certain critical components and weapons have a significant role aboard China’s newest, sleek destroyers. Thus, most PLA Navy surface combatants appear to have inherited a Chinese version of the powerful *Mineral ME* radar that could track targets over the horizon to an impressive distance of 450km.⁵¹ Indeed, the import of Russian anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM) may have the most significant impact on Chinese

naval warfare. During the 1990s, the acquisition of the Russian supersonic *Moskit* ASCM undoubtedly had a transformative impact on the capabilities of China's fleet. Beijing's new YJ-18 ASCM seems to be very similar to the Russian missile SS-N-27 *Klub*, which Beijing also acquired in the 1990s. Chinese discussions do not hide that the YJ-18 is a close cousin of the earlier Russian missile design.⁵² As explained in this Chinese article, it is projected that YJ-18 would have an initial subsonic phase estimated at .8 mach similar to the *Klub* of about 180km, but 20km from the target would unleash the supersonic sprint vehicle at a speed of Mach 2.5 to 3. The "dual-speed" function allows the system to realize certain advantages of subsonic cruise missiles, such as their "relatively long-range, lightweight and universality..." but also takes the chief advantage of supersonic ASCMs as well, namely the ability to radically compress the enemy's reaction time.

Concerning the undersea realm, Russian submarine influence once again predominated as Beijing looked to recapitalize the force on the basis of the very successful *Kilo*-class diesel submarines sold to China during the late 1990s. There is little doubt that Beijing has learned an enormous amount from Moscow's long experience of fielding submarines against the U.S. Navy during the Cold War and since. True, it is the Indian Navy and not the Chinese Navy that has leased Russian nuclear submarines over several years. Yet, Russian strategists have become much more open about discussing submarine operations in recent years. In May 2019, a leading Russian military commentator published a piece in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* advising Chinese naval strategists to learn from the Russian experience in deploying SSBN submarines (Ship Submersible Ballistic Nuclear) or simply "boomers," and even making proposals for cooperative deployments.⁵³ Not surprisingly, Chinese naval strategists have analyzed all aspects of the Russian SSBN force, including notably operational patterns and firing positions in the North Pacific against the U.S. homeland.⁵⁴ They are also interested in SSBN port egress evasion techniques and technologies.⁵⁵ Naturally, Russian SSN submarines (Ship Submersible Nuclear) or simply 'nuclear attack submarines' design is also of extreme interest to Chinese naval strategists.⁵⁶ Key design aspects, such as propeller technology, are a logical focus of such efforts to learn from Russian submarine design experience.⁵⁷ Chinese naval strategists are aware of the tactical deficiencies of conventional submarines, but also note that Russia continues to invest in this capability. Mine warfare has been a crucial domain wherein Chinese naval analysts have sought to study Russian tactics and technologies, including submarine-launched mobile mines.⁵⁸ Likewise, Russian experience appears to have been critical to China's rather advanced program for the development of unmanned undersea systems, which aims to develop robotic submarines.⁵⁹

In addition, the Russian and Chinese navies have been undertaking annual joint exercises since 2012. While not massive in size, these drills have featured "confrontational drills," and sophisticated themes, including strike warfare, anti-submarine warfare, and amphibious warfare. A 2017 joint exercise in the Baltic, moreover, featured one of China's newest Type 052D destroyers. Many Western defense analysts have expressed doubts regarding the seriousness of Russia-China bilateral military exercises, arguing that they have not yet achieved a high level of "interoperability." However, as Russia defense

expert Michael Kofman points out, that is not really what either side is seeking from such exercises.⁶⁰ During late 2019, joint Russia-China naval exercises were undertaken with both South Africa and Iran for the first time, a move that could have a variety of geopolitical implications. As one Russian analysis of the exercise off of Cape Town explains: “They have a significant meaning because the exercises are ... taking place at the confluence of the Atlantic and Indian oceans, along a major global shipping route.”⁶¹

Strategic Stability

There are more than a few hints that low-key cooperation or at least imitation occurs in the nuclear weapons realm as well. Myriad Chinese defense articles, for example, have discussed the significance of Russia’s *Iskander* short-range tactical nuclear missile. A piece in a leading Chinese defense newspaper examining Russian strategic command and control, for instance, states: “the ‘Iskander’ ballistic missile system has been connected to the command center, which can complete the attack preparation within one minute, which is more than 90% better than seven years ago.”⁶² A recent rather detailed Chinese *PLA Daily* report, moreover, on the new Russian heavy ICBM *Sarmat* reveals a design optimized to defeat ballistic missile defenses, carrying up to fifteen genuine nuclear warheads (with an option for hypergliding), in addition to forty decoys.⁶³ China’s nuclear strategy will not slavishly imitate Russia’s, but there is sure to be a substantial influence.

On the “cyber front,” prominent Russian expert Fyodor Lukyanov suggests, global strategic stability until the mid-21st century will not be determined by the nuclear factor only, and “what is happening in cyberspace can be far more destructive than even nuclear conflict.”⁶⁴ A 2019 report on Russia-China high tech cooperation reveals that the much-discussed company *Huawei* is at the leading edge of Russia-China cyber integration. That company has opened major centers in Moscow, St Petersburg, Kazan, Novosibirsk, and Nizhny Novgorod.⁶⁵ “According to Alexander Gabuev, “the ban on the company’s products in the United States will not shake Huawei’s position in the world. The giant does not only sell equipment, the cost of which is 30% cheaper than that of competitors.”⁶⁶ In January 2020, China’s *PLA Daily* reported that “Russia’s ‘disconnected network’ exercise has brought us a lot of inspiration,” citing overt threats from Washington against Russian networks, including specifically “efforts by U.S. intelligence personnel to implant malicious program code into the Russian power system.”⁶⁷

Concrete evidence of strategic-level cooperation emerged more fully in October 2019 when Putin announced that Russia was actively assisting China with early warning systems. At least one Russian specialist greeted this announcement with skepticism.⁶⁸ Yet, Moscow defense expert, Igor Korotchenko, offered: “This is really a huge contribution of Russia to strategic stability, since China receives a powerful tool in order not to become a victim of the first disarming blow from the United States.”⁶⁹ In the same Russian article, a retired deputy commander of Russia’s air defense command commented that “... a unified information space is created, and data is exchanged with Chinese radars, [and therefore] ‘the security

of our country from the east will be even better.” Indeed, China and Russia have both consistently and adamantly opposed U.S. development of missile defenses as undermining global nuclear stability for well over two decades.⁷⁰

Military-Political Lessons

Less direct, albeit still important, informal learning is also going on between Chinese and Russian security elites. A direct window into thinking on the Ukraine Crisis among Chinese defense specialists comes from an interview with Senior Colonel Fang Bing, a professor at China’s National Defense University.⁷¹ Colonel Fang employs a fascinating analogy between Russian and Chinese strategic geography. He asserts, “For Russians, the loss of Ukraine would be even more serious than if China were to lose Taiwan. This would be more akin to China losing the Yellow River Valley...” This Chinese military analyst notes the Russian employment of paratroopers as a so-called “rapid reaction force,” and also the significance of special forces units. Another appraisal of the Ukraine events was written by the Chinese geopolitics expert Zhang Wenmu.⁷² According to this Chinese scholar’s rendering, Russia has won a major victory against the West, and Putin is a master strategist. He is not shy about proclaiming the Ukraine Crisis as affording a major “lesson of experience” for China. Zhang states that Moscow triumphed because, for Russia, the Crimea is a matter of life and death, while for Europe, it is simply one of many important issues. He writes: “... the Russian people did not rely on ‘soft power,’ but rather directly employed tanks to resolve the problem.” Zhang, moreover, states China can employ the same tactics against Taiwan.

In a somewhat similar way, Chinese analyses of Russia’s war in Syria assess the intervention as providing “numerous benefits” over and above speeding the destruction of ISIS.⁷³ The intervention, according to this Chinese rendering, also significantly increased Russia’s standing in the world, altered the international system, increased Russians’ self-confidence, and also seized the initiative in the struggle with the West. It is noted that the Syrian War has afforded Moscow a “test of the results of its military building program in recent years and the results of reforms.” The author sees Moscow executing a “new type of war,” relying on such methods as long-distance precision strikes, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), surprise, and signals intelligence. Putin is cited approvingly as underlining the importance of preemptive attack against international terrorists, and thus acting as “the real friend of the Arab World.” Considering learning in the other direction, it is worth asking whether Moscow’s revived interest in Africa has resulted from Beijing’s geopolitical successes there. The Soviet Union had very substantial influence throughout Africa during the Cold War. A late 2019 trilateral exercise involving the Russian and Chinese navies in South Africa, implies that Moscow and Beijing may yet succeed in coordinating policies in this and other distant regions.⁷⁴

Problems

For all the progress in enhancing China-Russia military ties outlined above, definite complications remain in the security domain of the bilateral relationship. These persistent

tensions encompass history, demographics, ideology, as well as geopolitics. Prominent skeptics in both Moscow and Beijing warn about the excessive closeness between the Eurasian giants, moreover.

As noted above, the weight of the Sino-Soviet conflict has not entirely dissipated, especially in the security establishments of the two powers. A tendency to bury such inconvenient, hard feelings, moreover, can lead to awkwardness and even sparks when long-ignored issues resurface. As a late 2018 Russian-language article about the March 2nd 1969 clash explained with considerable candor: “[the Soviet border guards] were brutally finished off with bayonets and shots at close range,” for example.⁷⁵ Chinese have also not forgotten this anxious period, and one can still glimpse the extensive legacy of these fears, even in (and under) Beijing.⁷⁶ Russians continue to be nervous about Chinese ownership of land in the Russian Far East, reflecting persistent demographic anxieties.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, both sides have sought to downplay ideological factors in the relationship. Still, one can hardly miss the irony that China remains quite loyal to Marxist-Leninist thought, at least in theory. At the same time, Russia has moved on, and the legacy of the Soviet Union is not necessarily looked upon favorably by many Russians. That paradox came to the fore when Beijing seemed much more interested in honoring the centenary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution than Moscow.⁷⁸ Moreover, certain specific countries remain a thorn in the side of the bilateral security relationship. Specifically, extensive Russian arms sales to both India and Vietnam are not particularly welcome to Beijing. Thus, Chinese defense analysts took note of Russia’s sale of advanced submarines to Vietnam, even remarking on the digital training center that Russian technicians built to train the Vietnamese Navy submarine crews.⁷⁹ Likewise, they have monitored the transfer of advanced anti-ship missiles from Russia to the Vietnamese Navy.⁸⁰ In the wake of the June 2020 Sino-Indian clash, moreover, Russian arms sales to India could become a much more sensitive topic within the China-Russia relationship.⁸¹

It also must be noted that some elites in both countries are either skeptical or even hostile to enhanced Russia-China relations. In the Russian context, there is, for example, Alexander Chramshykin, a military analyst and frequent contributor to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. He observes recently, “For us, China constitutes the most serious external threat.” In partnering so closely with China, he asserts, Russia “is digging its own grave.”⁸² Likewise, a recent Chinese appraisal does not rule out a Russia-China alliance in the future but observes that such a development would be difficult because Moscow is focused on economic development that depends more on Europe, that the Russian people are not altogether friendly toward China, and that Russia does not need China’s help in the military domain.⁸³

Scenarios

Turning to the impact for U.S. interests, it will be advisable to consider three different scenarios for the continued evolution of the China-Russia relationship, which may be termed as “low,” “medium” and “high” trajectories for analytical purposes. Each trajectory

is based on somewhat different assumptions, emphasizes different metrics, and yields alternative sets of implications for the evolution of U.S.-China rivalry.

In the “low scenario,” China-Russia relations remain plagued by mistrust and do not yield significant results. They are imbalanced, in so far as they do not have a sound cultural, economic, and social grounding. The history of previous conflicts, whether in the late 1960s or the late Tsarist period, hang over the relationship. The economic situation remains stuck in the “resources trap,” which favors select companies, facilitates further corruption, and despoils the environment. Growth prospects are grim for the foreseeable future. Demographic anxiety hangs over the whole border area since Siberia and the Russian Far East are perennially short of labor, capital, and modern infrastructure. At the same time, these foundations for economic growth are relatively abundant across the border in North China. On the military side, arms sales had slowed dramatically since the peak back in 2004-05. The military-industrial relationship has never quite recovered from the episode involving China’s production of *Flanker*-based aircraft, including J-11, J-15, and J-16. Russian technical experts are far too concerned with Chinese technology theft to seriously entertain major cooperative defense-industrial projects. Since regimes in both Moscow and Beijing are relatively brittle and overly suspicious, they each prioritize internal security. Consequently, efforts to coordinate foreign and defense policy are lackluster and ineffectual. Neither power could count on the other one in the midst of a major national security crisis, such as a military conflict. In this scenario, the impact on U.S.-China rivalry is relatively small and mostly in the past. No major course corrections are required.

A medium scenario reflects quite different assumptions about the relationship. In this case, a firm pattern of cooperation has been developed over more than thirty years without serious disruption. Mistrust is no longer the norm, and institutions across society, from universities to health care workers to businessmen to security elites, have become much more accustomed to working closely together. Infrastructure across Siberia and the Far East remains woefully inadequate to support a major boost in bilateral trade. Still, there are distinct examples of improvement, such as the two new large and critical bridges over the Amur River. There are still rather prominent voices in Russia warning of the “China threat” to Russia, but these voices are few and far between. A consensus now exists in the Moscow foreign policy elite that Russia has no choice but to build a close and enduring relationship with China—one that avoids the ideology and condescension that plagued the former relationship. The security relationship is now established and has diversified well beyond the material benefits of selling advanced weaponry. A number of joint military development projects are underway, for example, the heavy-lift helicopter, and others are being contemplated. Strategic initiatives (e.g., early warning) are now also on the table, while regional coordination is nascent, but developing. Such a Russia-China relationship can be termed a “quasi-alliance.” Still, both countries are nevertheless reluctant to move further into a “formal alliance,” realizing this would be unduly alarming and could further destabilize world politics. Given such developments, the U.S. and its allies must take enhanced measures to guard against Russia “tipping the balance” unfavorably in the

looming U.S.-China rivalry. Western strategists must not only strive to fully understand the nature of the improving China-Russia relationship, but also to respond in certain new ways.

A “high scenario” for China-Russia relations also cannot be ruled out. In this future, the two powers develop in a highly synergistic fashion. Russia embraces the position of “junior partner” and China is careful not to overplay its leadership role. Moscow establishes effective “docking” with the Belt and Road, smoothing the way for massive Chinese investment across Eurasia. Indeed, Russia’s experience on the ground in such conflict zones as Syria and Libya enables it to take on more of the “dirty jobs” associated with an expanding zone of China-Russia influence. In this scenario, the trilateral military exercises in South Africa, and then with Iran at the end of 2019 were the nascent shoots of full-blown efforts to work in tandem across the Middle East and Africa, as part of a greater Eurasian Union. Just as Russian military elements provide some of the muscle for this alliance relationship, Russian high-tech companies are also granted certain niche markets within the new “East Bloc” to diversify export offerings. While Moscow is anxious to preserve links with other countries, such as South Korea, China comes to dominate Russian markets. Ecosystems in Siberia and the Arctic are sure to be damaged, but full-scale exploitation of these regions begins in earnest, and bilateral China-Russia trade expands apace. History becomes a pillar rather than a hindrance in the relationship, as the two powers now consider the late 1960s as the “Great Aberration,” which caused subsequent problems. Most ominously, Russia-China military exercises reach a larger and larger scale and a higher level of sophistication. Joint units are contemplated, and joint deployments are planned for various contingencies that may even include presenting Washington with “war on two fronts,” so to speak. Military-industrial potentials are also increasingly integrated, so that Russia purchases Chinese destroyers, while China purchases Russian submarines.⁸⁴ The countries work together on key projects, such as hypersonic weaponry and vertical/short-take-off (VSTOL) aircraft. Quite obviously, this scenario presents “a clear and present danger” for U.S. national security, since Russia could facilitate China’s genuine emergence as the world’s preeminent power bar none. The possibility of this scenario, albeit quite unlikely at present, necessitates some consideration of significant defense and foreign policy reforms to address the potentially augmented threat.

Recommendations

Elements of all three scenarios are visible in the evolution of contemporary China-Russia relations. Still, the most persuasive scenario is the “medium” situation given the available evidence. That is not to say that the scenario can’t change. Indeed, it can and many of the recommendations below have the goal of avoiding the “high” scenario—a full-blown, formalized China-Russia alliance that could pose a serious threat to the global balance of power.

Recommendation no. 1 (R1)-Enhance deterrence capabilities. Actions (and capabilities) speak louder than words, of course, but lately, the U.S. and its partners appear to “speak

loudly and carry a small stick.” Arguably, one reason why Russian actions, for example, against Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), have been successful is that NATO forces could not seriously contest substantial Russian local military superiority in these particular areas. Likewise, the South China Sea military balance has been trending heavily in Beijing’s favor. Allied forces must be stealthy, numerous, and well dispersed. Submarines are a prototypical example of worthy investment priorities, but VSTOL aircraft, and even well-armed infantry units could quietly present hypothetical adversaries with similarly unpalatable choices.

R2-Improve alliance efficiencies. Current U.S. alliance burdens fall unevenly, leading to constant frictions and substantial uncertainty, both in the Asia-Pacific and also in Europe. The U.S. has been at war continuously for decades in the Middle East, prompting weariness and skepticism. Moreover, American taxpayers also shoulder the burden of maintaining the West’s main nuclear deterrent, extending that umbrella over allies. But there is no escaping the fact that the possible threats to U.S. allies are more acute than to the U.S. itself. That implies that they must make a substantially greater effort. For example, Japanese wish the U.S. to defend the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from a possible Chinese challenge. Yet, Japan spends less than one percent of GDP on defense. This is not a sustainable contradiction. Moreover, Western defense industrial efforts must become more integrated for greater efficiency. Finally, a logical response to a formalized China-Russia alliance, should that come to pass, could be the creation of a NATO-type alliance for the “Indo-Pacific.” Still, that is unlikely given rather clear and emphatic signals that neither Beijing nor Moscow are seeking such a formal alliance, understanding such a move would provoke the West and thus be destabilizing.⁸⁵ At this time, the so-called “Quad” or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which encompasses Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S., may well suffice to balance increasing China-Russia security relations. Notably, the prospects for the “Quad” have increased in the wake of the June 2020 Sino-Indian skirmish.

R3-Prioritize key regions over others. Strategy means making choices among priorities, and the Western Allies have been rather poor at doing so. For example, the U.S. has squandered hundreds of billions of dollars in Afghanistan to no apparent strategic purpose. Likewise, campaigns in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and across Africa have yielded few dividends for U.S. national security, nor any other country. Rather than using the blunt instrument of force to play “whack a mole” with terrorists across the Middle East, Africa, as well as Central and South Asia, the U.S. and its allies should concentrate efforts on shoring up deterrence in the vital regions of Europe and Northeast Asia. As George Kennan famously posited in the Long Telegram, these are the regions that can impact the global balance of power.

R4-Create feasible defensive lines. Currently, the defense lines of the U.S. and its allies are in considerable disarray, leaving them vulnerable to direct challenge, as well as “strategic nibbling.” It is simply impossible to turn vague concepts, such as the “rules-based order” into concrete and defensible strategic objectives. Given the strategic geography of Eurasia, moreover, it will make sense to put maximum effort at lines that can be feasibly defended—preferably ones outside of an adversary’s massive strike capabilities. In that sense, politically

and geographically vulnerable entities should be outside the defense line. For treaty allies, such as the Philippines and Japan, home islands should be defended, but not obscure locations, such as Scarborough Shoal. Clear and bright, unambiguous red lines might result in some grousing among allies, but will immeasurably strengthen deterrence. The so-called “red line crisis” that plagued the Obama Administration with respect to Syria policy in 2013 resulted from the common foreign policy error of making excessive rhetorical commitments without thinking through consequences. Thus, red lines should only be drawn in the cases when a national consensus holds that U.S. vital interests are at stake. This was not the case in Syria—nor would it concern “rocks and reefs” in the Asia-Pacific. In other words, such red lines must be drawn in a defensive, cautious, and unambiguous way.

R5-Multilateralize foreign and defense policy. The measures above generally aim at strengthening deterrence. Still, it must be kept in mind that the “security dilemma” dictates that such measures should be carefully calibrated and must be joined by equal opportunities to calm spiraling global tensions. The remaining measures advocated here, including this one, are aimed at reassurance, recognizing that if Moscow and Beijing are extremely on edge, they are certain to join ever more closely in a defensive crouch. Therefore, efforts to form multilateral partnerships must go well beyond the usual suspects to form new groupings. Revitalizing the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as the principle decision-making body on international security issues will be crucial. Still, other multilateral organizations, from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), can help bridge the East-West divide and prevent a “new Cold War.”

R6-Emphasize non-traditional security. While some additional efforts are warranted to strengthen traditional hard-power capabilities, equal if not greater effort needs to be focused on non-traditional security (NTS). At the top of this list of NTS, priorities should be pandemic disease (obviously), terrorism, conflict management, migration, and climate change. COVID-19 has been a harsh reminder that the world did not learn the lesson adequately from the Ebola Crisis in West Africa during 2014. These NTS threats are recognized equally among the West, as well as Russia and China. Therefore, they are ripe for cooperative action. Such actions will “kill two birds with one stone,” by decreasing tensions among the great powers, while increasing the effectiveness of policy responses to NTS threats.

R7-Reinvigorate UN peacekeeping for multilateral interventions. During the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, UN Peacekeeping has been badly politicized and also plagued by inefficiencies. Yet, this tool is urgently needed to mitigate difficult conflict situations as humanitarian disasters in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Myanmar rather clearly demonstrate. Instead of treating UN Peacekeeping as an afterthought, the Great Powers, including the U.S., Europe, China, Russia, India, Brazil, and Japan, should give the “Blue Helmets” significantly higher priority. These countries have the world’s most capable militaries, and their forces should be on the front-lines, acting cooperatively with one another, in these

most challenging circumstances across the developing world. UN Peacekeeping success will dampen Cold War tendencies and build trust among the great powers.

R8-Promote key bilateral relationships that cross the East-West divide. A key to preventing the re-emergence of the 1950s type alignment of Russia/China versus the West will be to seek enhanced stability by facilitating cross-cutting cleavages. Unfortunately, the Western press often critiques such efforts as breaking “alliance solidarity,” but that represents a failure to grasp the greater stability benefits of multi-polarity⁸⁶—or at least a much looser bipolarity. Important existing examples of this phenomenon include Japan’s unceasing outreach to Russia. Another example might be Germany’s decent relationship with China. These examples of “Ostpolitik” may cause heartburn in Washington, but they should not. South Korea could also present another potent example of flexible, non-ideological diplomacy that is much needed since Seoul continues to maintain good relations with both Moscow and Beijing.

R9-Vigorously pursue arms control. Arms control regimes have been falling into disrepute and decline over the last decade. This is not entirely Washington’s fault, but the world’s strongest power must shoulder the lion’s share of the blame. Withdrawals from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, as well as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), appear in retrospect as major strategic errors. Even if America’s departure from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Accord is somewhat more excusable, one can only regard wistfully the lost potential of such regimes as the Agreed Framework with North Korea or the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) regime. Not only should these previous efforts be revived, but arms control methods should be applied to a new set of issues, including both hypersonic technology, as well as the world-wide naval buildup. Arms control provides one of the very best tools to mitigate the accelerating U.S.-China rivalry and prevent a New Cold War between East and West. In this respect, Russia might serve as a useful bridge in developing a new arms control framework that suits both Beijing and Washington.

R10-Encourage the China-Russia partnership to work constructively. Rather than seeking endlessly for sly means to break up China-Russia relations (e.g., the wedge strategy), Western strategists should adopt a more enlightened and realistic strategy.⁸⁷ The expectation should be that China-Russia relations will continue to develop smoothly. Instead of hyping the threat of an “Axis of Authoritarianism,” the West may look for some silver lining in the closer relations between Beijing and Moscow. From a commercial perspective, Siberia and the Arctic may well become more fully developed within this relationship. The West can help ensure this is done in an ecologically responsible manner by becoming active participants in the process. Benefits could also be envisioned in the security domain as well. Indeed, both Russia and China have shown themselves to be implacably hostile to terrorism and jihadist ideologies emanating from the Middle East. It is not too farfetched to consider how China-Russia diplomatic initiatives could additionally calm certain tense regional situations across Eurasia. For example, on the Korean Peninsula, the “double freeze” proposal put forward by Beijing and Moscow has significantly

calmed tensions during 2017-19. Realizing certain strategic benefits of China-Russia partnership for global security, however, requires putting aside the zero-sum intellectual lens that currently afflicts strategy formulation in the West.

Conclusion

In recent years, China-Russia relations have gone beyond simply a balancing power play within a certain geopolitical geometry. The two countries have adopted their proactive foreign policy agendas with a string of order-forming components and enhanced their multi-channel cooperation mechanism. The new model of relationship, which Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov labeled as a partnership which “even exceeds some formal alliances in terms of mutual trust, solidity and depth of cooperation,”⁸⁸ makes it hard for the West to engage one side against the other by simply making some attitudinal corrections. Sergei Karaganov, an advisor to Putin, recently said that China and Russia cannot be formal allies, but “we *de facto* need each other a lot. They strengthen us with their economic pillow, and we strengthen them with our military power.”⁸⁹

This article has endeavored to reveal the inner workings of the China-Russia relationship in the security domain to see how this key bilateral relationship might impact U.S.-China rivalry. Much more work of this kind is necessary, especially in a regional context. Yet, one can already say that real and even extraordinary improvements for both the Chinese and also the Russian armed forces are already visible across the spectrum of warfare from the ground, air, and sea domains to more strategic and geopolitical contexts as well. Whether this pattern of mutual and symbiotic improvement can continue over the coming decades is not a foregone conclusion, but Western strategists must be concerned that it might. Such a pattern could indeed threaten the global balance of power.

For that reason, the U.S. and its allies must be cautious in the present environment, neither exaggerating the contours of the China-Russia partnership nor dismissing the relationship as a brittle “marriage of convenience.” The recommendations above, therefore, aim to strengthen deterrence by concentrating efforts and realizing alliance efficiencies. However, they are simultaneously seeking to embrace a genuinely multipolar world based on restraint, “smart power” diplomacy, and functioning multilateral institutions, focused on the common threats, including especially pandemics, climate change, regional conflict, and arms racing that today threaten all countries. The alternative to restraint would be confronting the China-Russia quasi-alliance across all domains. Yet, that course will not only entail likely failure on the non-traditional security issues noted above. More specifically, this would likely mean a return to the darkest days of the Cold War with the nefarious shadow of apocalyptic world war flaring up with ever greater frequency.

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