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The Russo-Chinese ‘Strategic Partnership’ Enters a New and Dynamic Phase

Lyle Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev

Abstract: This paper explores the recent developments in Russo-Chinese strategic alignment in the security sphere. Prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the alliance-like relationship between Moscow and Beijing had been driven by the two parties’ shared threats perception on the global level and regionally. The two Eurasian great powers demonstrated their concerted effort to alter both structural (power balance) and normative aspects of security. Along with some tangible progress in terms of interoperability between the two militaries, the Russian and Chinese leadership were prepared in principle to pursue a coordinated strategy in the field of nuclear deterrence, missile defense, militarization of space, and cyber warfare. This momentum in the security sphere of the bilateral relationship, built up over the course of decades, does not appear to have been interrupted by the Russian war against Ukraine—and with accelerated US strategic pressure—may even lead to a more robust quasi-alliance.

Keywords: US-China-Russia; Russian-Chinese quasi-alliance; China and Ukraine War; “securitization” of Russian-Chinese partnership; balance of power in Eurasia; US “Smart Power.”

Introduction

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has shaken the foundation of the post-Cold War international order, reversed globalization, and shocked the world. While many countries demonstrate unprecedented solidarity in supporting Ukraine and mitigating this new security conundrum, the government in Beijing explicitly and implicitly concurs with Moscow’s “legitimate security concerns” aroused by the Western strategic decision to proceed with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) eastward enlargement by integrating Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. From the outset of Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, the Chinese regime under Xi Jinping has retranslated Russia’s position concerning regional and national security issues, calling for realization of the “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security concept” respecting the idea that “one country’s security cannot be at the expense of harming the security of other countries, and regional security cannot be guaranteed by strengthening or even expanding military blocs.” The Chinese government, in fact, approved the Kremlin’s interpretation of the crisis stressing that, in the case of NATO’s five consecutive rounds of eastward expansion, “Russia’s legitimate security demands deserve to be paid attention to and properly resolved.”

As the relations between the West and Russia become ever more aggravated, the administration of US President Joseph Biden had to warn Beijing of the isolation and potential penalties Beijing will face if it helps Moscow to bail out the Russian economy hit
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by Western sanctions or even dares to assist the Kremlin in its invasion of Ukraine.  

A debate has emerged among specialists concerning the extent to which the Russia-China quasi-alliance will be strengthened by the Russia-Ukraine War, or whether a new conflict will severely strain or even break the unique relationship linking Beijing and Moscow. This debate reflects a long argument, at least a decade old, regarding the nature, strength, and strategic implications of that relationship. Western academics have delved into the new Russo-Chinese rapprochement looking at the alignment between the two Eurasian great powers from different theoretical perspectives, focusing on the distribution of global power and China’s and Russia’s role in it, balancing and counter-balancing strategies in the US-dominated world, Beijing-Moscow order-forming efforts and great power management strategies to secure global stability, common ideational and cultural foundations, or the shared status-seeking and identity-related aspirations of China and Russia in the changing global environment. One powerful argument in the West explaining this new “entente” stems from interpreting it as just a manifestation of the “axis of authoritarianism.” Just prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some analysts predicted that a shared Russian-Chinese “hostility towards the United States, and an overlapping (though not identical) illiberal vision of the world order are likely sufficient to power the relationship for at least the next decade.” At the start of the conflict, Graham Allison of Harvard asserted that, despite all their sovereignty-related rhetoric, the Chinese leaders have “essentially defied geopolitical gravity in building a functional ‘alliance’ between China and Russia that is operationally more significant than most of the formal alliances the United States has today.” Yet, contrary to these assessments, many Western analysts believe that the conflict will illustrate the brittle nature of the Russia-China relationship. Thus, Yun Sun of the Stimson Center argues, “There is no better example of a ‘marriage of convenience’ than [current Russia-China relations], and China will pay dearly for this choice [to back the Kremlin].” Quite similarly, Yale's Odd Arne Westad asserts that Beijing “gave [Russian President Vladimir] Putin the green light to invade,” decries “China’s pro-Russian rhetoric since Putin's attack began,” but ultimately argues that “Russia and China are not natural partners,” and they are likely to be driven apart by cultural differences and power asymmetries. Bobo Lo's interpretation is that Moscow and Beijing actually see the world very differently. While admitting that they have developed a certain durable “habit of partnership,” this author nevertheless believes their relationship will become more akin to that between Pyongyang and Beijing—a relationship “defined principally by its limits.”

The analysis presented below, however, demonstrates that the picture is much more complex. The model of comprehensive strategic partnership of a new type, constructed by the Chinese and Russian leaders in the recent years, reflects the effect of multiple foreign (structural) and domestic variables that could yet increase durability of the current Russia-China quasi-alliance based on their shared world vision, security considerations, as well as the dynamics of the war in Ukraine. To be sure, this is not the first academic paper to underline the relatively strong foundations of the Russia-China quasi-alliance. Indeed, a 2022 book by Australia-based scholar Alexander Korolev does an admirable job at
describing the strength and durability of this unique partnership, while also attempting the laudable goal of building a theory of great power strategic alignment based on objective metrics. As admirable as that objective may be, the goal in this paper is not to build theory, but rather to simply gather crucial data, relying heavily on Chinese and Russian language source materials, to paint a more accurate picture of this crucial bilateral relationship for the future of world politics.

Recent dramatic geopolitical shifts demonstrate that, at the time of an acute security crisis unprecedented since the end of the Cold War, the Russian-Chinese rapprochement does not dissipate. Even after the battles in Ukraine have passed the six-month benchmark, the political willpower of the Xi-Putin leadership seems to be boosted by coming of a “new reality” which Richard Sakwa describes as Beijing and Moscow’s attempt to challenge the West on the level of power, norms, and ideas. The Kremlin’s actions against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 had set off significant alarm bells already in the West, but Russia’s initiation of a major conflict in Europe creates a previously unimaginable situation of a nuclear confrontation between the major great powers, which generates new security risks for all. The outcome of Russia’s war in Ukraine is becoming a factor impacting a prospective conflict between China and US over Taiwan. Closer ties between Russia and China have been at the center of policy debates in Washington that have induced some revision of the Pentagon’s force planning construct (FPC). Some experts have predicted since 2018 that the US military might fight a war against China or Russia on two or more fronts simultaneously. Matthew Kroenig suggests that Washington and its allies should develop a defense strategy capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating Russia and China at the same time.

This paper examines the Sino-Russian partnership in the security sphere in the context of the crumbling global security order and the system of international governance. The key questions that arise are how feasible the two countries’ prospective security alliance might be; will such an alliance be possible; and would this alliance indeed challenge America or even engage the US into the “two-front” armed conflict. The paper first focuses on the changing geostrategic environment and recent political perceptions of the Russian and Chinese leadership in the sphere of security. Second, the paper provides an overview of the strategic partnership “of a new type” between Russia and China, established prior to the war in Ukraine, including the rapidly growing component of security cooperation, with its advancement and limitations. The third section will examine some developments in the two countries’ cooperation in the sphere of nuclear planning, missile defense, and space and cyber cooperation, and also speculate about the impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the realization of Russo-Chinese projects.

This paper drives from the assumption that the Russian and Chinese leadership have embarked on a much more systemic security dialog and counter-balancing against Western dominance, by not only delegating some responsibilities to each other in their respective regions, but also possibly extending mutual support and cooperation to even more spheres
of security. By deepening their interactions at times of an unprecedented security crisis, both China and Russia seek to hedge the US strategic preponderance in Eurasia. Being driven into the Chinese orbit due to the pressure by the West, the Kremlin might be obliged to provide some back-up capabilities to China’s assertive regional policy in the Asia-Pacific, possibly in the form of fostering security ties with China within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China has exploited its multiple diplomatic and institutional tools to provide political support to Russia in the international arena. By potentially making tacit commitments to Russia in the midst of a serious security confrontation with the West, China further develops its continental counter-strategy which might deepen a bipolar confrontation between the groups of states and alter security architecture in Eurasia. The paper demonstrates that, in the context of the Russo-Chinese partnership “of a new type,” strategic security issues have moved to the center of this regional quasi-alliance, and the degree of bilateral cooperation in the security sphere will determine the solidity of their prospective alliance in the near future. Building on some recent interpretations of the current Chinese-Russian partnership as a well-prepared framework for alliance without political decision to formalize it, this paper adds that political decision in Beijing and Moscow will be contingent of American policies toward China and Russia. Given China’s deepening strategic interdependence with Russia in the security sphere, as well as its increased capacity to influence Russia’s behavior by economic and political means, the US administration should be observant of some potentially new forms of security cooperation between China and Russia in the near future, which might challenge America’s alliance-building effort in both Europe and Asia.


The new era of Russo-Chinese security cooperation in the years of Putin-Xi presidency has largely been informed by the two countries’ shared vision of geopolitical environment, threat perceptions, and their perceived responsibilities in the sphere of preserving global peace and stability. In both capitals, major security concerns all relate to the U.S.-induced challenges to global strategic stability, interconnected global economy, and homeland (domestic) security and socio-political stability challenged by external forces.

The crisis of neoliberal globalization and political cosmopolitanism has prompted the return of state-centered geopolitics, power balancing, the policies of alliances, and the security dilemma. One Russian analytic report points to the return to the pre-World War I condition stating that “the rise of nationalistic sentiments (currently they have anti-globalist flavor), re-emergence of aggressive forms of economic behavior in a neo-mercantilist spirit all make us recall the atmosphere in Europe and in the world in the beginning of the last century.” At present, as the authors of the above-mentioned report suggest, in order to fix the shaky foundation of the current order, the international community should either enhance the framework of the global open system or restore the mechanisms of stability based on deterrence and arms control applicable to the condition of a cold war between superpowers.
Currently, neither solution seems to be feasible. With a gradual shift of the major world powers toward “local contentism” and neomercantilism, some repetitive calls at international forums to reverse economic globalization might not be sufficient as the major economic powers—the US, the European Union, or Japan—continue pursuing their own inward-looking competition strategies while simultaneously updating their defense postures and reviving their military potential. The active use of economic statecraft for political or geopolitical ends leads to mistrust and alienation due to the destructive effect of sanctions and the asymmetric character of interdependence. Hence, western analysts have returned to studying the utility of various containment strategies, by learning from the lessons of the first Cold War of 1946-1989.

So, for Moscow and Beijing, the current major security threats stem from the deterioration of the globalized liberal order, the return of great power rivalry, and the challenges of a “rules-based” post-sovereign world. More importantly, turbulence within the current world order and the danger of a new world war are regarded in Russia and China as a result of America's hegemonic decline and Washington's aggressive attempts to preserve its global supremacy. The image of the “hegemon-in-agony” remains popular among the politicians and think tanks in both Russia and China. Moscow and Beijing consider America's rapid imperial decline as the cause of Washington's unpredictability, aggressiveness, zero-sum mentality, excessive uses of force, confrontational behavior, and ignorance of the norms of international law. China's 2019 National Defense White Paper comments that growing US hegemonism and unilateralism undermine the world's universal “pursuit of peace, stability, and development,” and US policies have “provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability.” For example, as the Chinese document states, while NATO continues its enlargement and increases its military deployment in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia is strengthening its nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities for strategic containment and striving to safeguard its strategic security space and interests.

The post-hegemonic America, as many believe in Russia and China, is retreating from its leadership role as a conductor of free trade and globalization, and it is no longer capable of preventing the emergence of a new architecture of global politics, new modernization models, new industrial revolution, and new format of global governance. Russian and Chinese strategists acknowledge, however, that the US is not ready to voluntarily surrender its global predominant position; hence, serious conflicts and crises between the great powers could occur. One year before the Russian intervention in Ukraine, one of Putin's key advisors, Sergei Karaganov, openly called for toughening deterrence against the US, since the behavior of its ruling elite leads to a high degree of chaos and unpredictability in global politics. At present, Karaganov explains that Russia perceived Ukraine's pro-Western orientation as an existential threat since the “declining West” decided to turn Ukraine into “a spearhead aimed at the heart of Russia.” This Russian strategist considers that the belligerent aspirations of the Western powers have resulted from the economic, moral, and political collapse of the West, which has made this conflict
imminent and pushed Moscow to “pre-empt and to dictate the terms of the conflict.” In the world which is becoming increasingly “uncertain and unstable” (Xi) and “complicated and volatile” (Putin), China and Russia have to “help each other,” and to “support each other in pursuing their own development path and safeguarding their core interests, and to safeguard the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of each country.”

Some Chinese analysts contend that America’s “irrational” global behavior stems from its disruptive attempts to link the changes in power capacity of a state with excessive uses of force and the desire to impose a new set of values. While some key Western authors justify the inevitability of confrontation between the US and its major contender China, the latter seeks to promote the idea that a country’s material power status may not necessarily be converted into aggressive behavior. In the case of China, while being in par with the US in terms of power potential, it is still possible to avoid rigid bipolarity through the policy of multilateralism. This focus on a state’s behavioral choice which is not necessarily determined by structural factors and which depends on political will, justifies a new type of relations between great powers and explains China’s reluctance to acknowledge China-US structural bipolarity as central for international politics, leaving it up to a superpower to decide if a rigid bipolar confrontation or just multilateral order would be more favorable.

Even well after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Xi, the Chinese leader, launched his “Global Security Initiative,” which resonated closely with the rhetoric of Sino-Russian joint statements in the recent years. Trying to avoid its involvement into a major confrontation between Beijing and Washington, the Kremlin has adopted a similar posture calling for prevention of a rigid bipolarity and the enhancement of the old military blocs or the formation of the old ones.

In their February 4, 2022, Joint Statement, the leaders of Russia and China expressed grave concern about serious international security challenges caused by some Western attempts to ensure its own security “separately from the security of the rest of the world and at the expense of the security of other States,” which contradicted the principles of “universal, comprehensive, indivisible and lasting security” supported by Russia and China. This document directly points to the West which attempts to undermine security and stability in the regions adjacent to China and Russia, enhance military and political alliances and coalitions to obtain “unilateral military advantages to the detriment of the security of others, including by employing unfair competition practices, intensify geopolitical rivalry, fuel antagonism and confrontation, and seriously undermine the international security order and global strategic stability.”

The danger of strategic instability has been placed to the forefront of Russo-Chinese security cooperation. Leading Russian security expert Dmitry Trenin formulated some key features of the Cold War-era strategic stability system. They included a bipolar global system with just two major adversaries; mutual expectations that any war between the two superpowers would go nuclear, and rise to the strategic level; a degree of confidence that the prospect of mutually assured destruction would deter both sides from attacking each other;
a constant fear that the adversary would find a way to break out of the mutual suicide pact; bilateral arms control as a method of limiting the arms race; and arms control negotiations as a way for the two antagonists to adjust to the strategic status quo. It is noteworthy that there was a clear understanding that any conventional war between the nuclear powers could evolve into a full-fledged nuclear exchange, and all doctrines of a limited nuclear warfare were dismissed by specialists as unrealistic. Besides, the history lessons of the Cold War teach the contemporaries that deterrence was no guarantee of stability since it could easily fail. By the mid-2010s, strategic stability again became an issue, and the relationship between the major great nuclear powers became more complex. At that time, those major actors, the US and Russia in particular, abandoned the previously adopted concept of “strategic stability,” which meant by 1990 a state of strategic relations that removed incentives for a nuclear first strike, losing the common ground in their interpretation of the term, which now needs to be updated in the context of the emergence of effective long-range cruise missiles and hypersonic weapons, and the deployment of missile defense systems in the US, Russia, and China. Some Chinese scholars contend that there is a large deviation between the nuclear strategy actually implemented by the US and the classical nuclear deterrence theory. They point to the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty as the turning moment which facilitates the actual combat nature of nuclear weapons and triggers nuclear proliferation potentially involving Japan and South Korea, provoking a new round of the arms race.

In the context of the recent Ukraine war-related dangers of a new nuclear conflict, Otto Dettmer points to the possibility of wars and conflicts which becomes high even in the nuclear age due to the stability-instability paradox—because the threat of a nuclear war is too terrible to contemplate, smaller or proxy conflicts become “safer,” then rival superpowers feel confident that neither side will allow the fight to escalate too much. Besides, as Barry Posen indicates, the prospect of mutual nuclear destruction constrains great power war and has limited US and NATO support for Ukraine. Other states may take note and seek their own nuclear deterrents. This means that for China, the only option is to increase its nuclear potential.

The prospect of a new nuclear arms race has also caused non-nuclear states to disagree with nuclear states for failing to realize their nuclear disarmament obligations as soon as possible in accordance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Some other factors such as potential space warfare systems, cyber warfare technologies, and growing nuclear forces of third states should also be taken into consideration, let alone the lack of strategic security negotiations and the ongoing disintegration of the arms control system and regimes. Russian strategists contend that one of the causes of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, for example, has been Moscow’s concerns of Ukraine’s effort to restore its status as a nuclear power. Simultaneously, Russo-Chinese concerns and military upgrades inform America’s own security dilemma. Some experts draw attention to Russia’s and China’s increased missile capabilities that challenge the US in different domains, calling for further investment to the space-based layer of proliferated satellites (to track hypersonic missiles), as well as to the
development of the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI), the directed energy and the Glide Phase Interceptor programs. As a result, the prospective developments of the SM-3 Block IIA interceptor and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems, which might be deployed on the regional theatre raise concern among the Russian and Chinese analysts.

As tensions among the major economic actors aggravate, the Chinese and Russian leaders have elevated the importance of economic security, considering America’s ongoing trade wars and economic sanctions as a security threat. China considers its economic security, along with the security of the people and political security, as the cornerstone of national security—the formula that was first presented by Xi on April 15, 2014, in a special report, which comprised all aspects of national security into an amalgamated concept. In 2015, Beijing adopted the “National Security Law of the [People’s Republic of China] PRC,” which addressed such aspects of economic security as foreign investments, globalization risks, trade-related risks and financial risks, calling for supervision and market management, control over international supply of resources, export control. Since the outset of trade wars with US, Beijing prioritized the technological security intellectual property rights supply chain as well as data management as important aspects of economic security. While continuing the new course of the two-step strategic arrangement in economic modernization announced in 2017, which prioritized the quality of development (including quality, efficiency, and power) to high-speed growth, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government promoted the idea of “self-reliance” and the concept of “dual circulation” of the economy. After the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the Kremlin passed a federal law, “On Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation” (June 28, 2014), and Putin signed a decree on May 13, 2017: “On the Strategy for the Economic Security of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030,” which addressed Russia’s overdependence on global markets and the financial system, and the problems of governance and economic regulation, calling for strengthening Russia’s economic sovereignty, reducing the impact of external and internal challenges, ensuring economic growth, and developing scientific and technological potential and competitiveness of the Russian economy, including the capabilities of the military-industrial complex. In June 2018, Russia and China added global economic stability to the list of major security risks. Along with such threats as confrontation in cyberspace, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and illegal migration, Beijing and Moscow regarded the trade wars waged by the US as a new dangerous blow to the architecture of the world order. Long before the current “sanctions from hell,” Russian commentators explained Russia’s changed attitudes toward the US treasuries through the prism of geopolitics. To hedge new economic security challenges, Russia since 2014 has launched “de-dollarization” campaign seeking new terms of trade operations with its economic partners on the base of national currencies. Since 2018 China has been supportive of a number of new projects within the other BRICS ((Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations and SCO aimed at the formation of alternative currency transaction mechanisms, fostering regional integration to reduce dependency from West and creating the economic foundation for strengthening national military capacity to prevent a disarming strike by any power. The recent exchanges
within these organizations signal that the alternative currency plans are on the agenda today.\textsuperscript{40} Since the beginning of war in Ukraine, however, the meaning of economic security for Russia under the sanctions is no longer associated with the preservation of an open trade and investment environment, which has been the core principle of China’s current position toward economic globalization.\textsuperscript{41} Russia is struggling to adopt a new model of economic survival based on self-reliance, import substitution, and some elements of mobilization economy. At the same time, its dependence on China’s economic support has grown tremendously.\textsuperscript{42} In addition, China seems to be helping Russia stabilize its economy by assisting in the control and stabilization of the rouble’s value.\textsuperscript{43} Korolev documents well that substantial tensions have existed in the China-Russia relationship, which has been viewed as imbalanced, so that Russia could turn into “China’s resource appendage.” But he explains that this is recognized now as a problem in both Beijing and Moscow: “The year 2013 appears as a relative transition point after which Russia’s non-energy exports to China started to pick up slowly.”\textsuperscript{44} Nevertheless, there is still evidence in 2022 that Russia does not want to get too economically dependent on China.\textsuperscript{45}

The strengthening of cultural security (ideological battles) of the Chinese and Russian nations to offset the impact of the Western “democratic offensive” may be considered the third pivotal aspect that underpins Russian-Chinese security cooperation. In his observation of Russia’s and China’s international behavior since 2014, Gilbert Rozman highlighted the importance of ideology, culture, and value systems that boosted their ties, separated these countries from the West and undermined global normative consensus. This ideational aspect of Sino-Russian cooperation which relates to the overlapped national identities of these post-communist countries, explains, according to Rozman, durability of Sino-Russian “tacit partnership.”\textsuperscript{46} From the early days of Xi’s presidency, external threats to Chinese cultural security became the focus of the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which took place on November 2013, and prioritized cultural development in China by stating the need “to improve the cultural management system, establish and improve the modern cultural market system, and build a modern public cultural service system.” In pursuit of its cultural security strategy, the key Chinese analysts even recommend globalizing the fundamental principles and virtues of the traditional Chinese culture, which may be complementary with the fundamental Western values.\textsuperscript{47} On par with the Chinese efforts, the Russian leadership has also become alerted by Western “cultural imperialism” and concerned about the “cultural crisis” resulted from Russia’s involvement into the globalized cultural and normative environment. In the view of some Russian experts, similar to China, the Russian society has to address the Western “hybrid warfare” which represents a “transition to non-military, non-forced, veiled, psychologically implicit ways and means of destroying the foundations of statehood and indirect mechanisms for managing the situation in the victim country has been practiced by the United States for a long time.”\textsuperscript{48} Along with the implementation of the official cultural policy strategy, the Russian experts suggest that a public–private partnership should be established to formulate Russia’s own value set and improve regulatory measures
over the web-based media which endanger the cultural-information security of each Russian individual. Both Russian and Chinese elites continue developing new tools to address the challenge of “hybrid warfare,” in which ideology, public opinion, online rhetorical constructs, cultural narratives, and social protests have become a powerful and destructive weapon. Putin’s self-perception as a missionary representing a “civilization state” pursuing its own interests have dramatically fueled Russia’s encroachment in Ukraine. The months of Russia’s war in Ukraine have demonstrated the importance of some alternative historic narratives and the competing assessments of right-wing movements and the Nazi legacy in the information warfare between East and West.

The Formation of Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership of a ‘New Type’ and Its ‘Securitization’

Strategic competition between China and the US in East Asia and the clash between Russia and the West over Ukraine have produced a situation of an unprecedented Western pressure on Russia by means of sanctions, and on China by further pursuing the policy of rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific. This American policy of estrangement of Russia and “smart pushback” against China have predictably resulted in the speedy development of a “new type of strategic partnership” between the two major Eurasian powers determined to expand cooperation, in Xi’s words, “no matter what changes occur in the world.” Moscow and Beijing have become more articulate about their intent to challenge the existing US-dominated world order in a coordinated practical way, on the base of inclusiveness and cooperation. Those efforts have not been intended to create rifts or stimulate divisions in the world. The “new type” does not mean confrontation. The concept of a “new type” stems from China’s reluctance to sign a formal alliance which would prompt it to jointly use force with the other party. Han Shiyiing draws attention to Xi’s principled position toward alliances which he noted in his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015. Xi, in fact, called for a “global partnership at the international and regional level,” developing a “new approach to interstate relations, characterized by dialogue rather than not an alliance.” By considering “bloc mentality” and “alliance-building” unacceptable in the new century, Beijing, in fact, disavows the possibility of a formal alignment with Russia. China’s relations with Russia, therefore, may be regarded as part of China’s holistic approach toward universal cooperation and development.

For China, alliance relationship concerns the commonality of the allied party’s joint political goal, to be achieved by military means. In Russia, emphasis is placed on the real military interaction as a foundation of an alliance. The relationship is “new” because it contains some elements of a de-facto alliance but rejects the classical alliance-building principles. The new nature of an “alliance-like partnership” targets the existing US practices of alliance-building in the twenty-first century, which are driven, in the view of China and Russia, by “bloc mentality.” These practices create political rifts in the international community, establish hierarchies of states, and eventually undermine stability. Russia has accommodated China’s holistic approach to partnerships which are “not directed against”
the third party. Xi’s “New Security Initiative” at the Boao Forum for Asia in April 2022 demonstrates China’s devotion to this principle, which China and Russia intend to legitimize to prevent global political polarization. In his speech at the SCO summit in Samarkand on September 16, 2022, the Chinese president once again stressed the significance of security cooperation within the SCO, according to the principles of “common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security” and aimed at the formation of a “balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture.”

Hence, Sino-Russian strategic closeness has been based on their willingness to consider one another’s national interests and create the mechanism of conflict aversion and build “great power relations of a new type,” which would determine the parameters of a new security and economic order, beneficial for all nations. Prior to the recent deterioration of US-Russia and US-China relations, two major drivers determined the essence of the renewed partnership between Moscow and Beijing. One driver related to status-seeking and norms-adjustment effort. The two countries’ aggravated concerns about the state of international norms, rules, and institutions modified by the American hegemony, reflected the two countries’ dissatisfaction with the way the international system was functioning. Beijing and Moscow were eager to be rightful members of the international community, on the same footage with other great powers, to build a multipolar order. Another driver was the opposition to the political globalization and post-sovereignty narrative. Both Moscow and Beijing were alarmed by the neoliberal narrative of political globalization, which undermined the role of the state in all countries other than the hegemonic ones (favoring the latter). Chinese and Russian security analysts have a shared perception of “Gray Zone” threats, allegedly instigated by the US and West in general. The fear of domestic turbulence and social unrest inspired by the ideological, political, and normative incursion of the West in their domestic affairs drove the Russian and Chinese leadership toward an even more autocratic condition. Homeland security and stability in the era of open markets and open societies seemed to be even more prone to challenges and threats. In 2017, the Russian defense minister, Sergey Shoigu, stressed the importance that Russia and China were “ready to defend the world with mutual effort and strengthen international security.” In April 2018, the newly appointed Chinese defense minister, General Wei Fenghe, warned that the US should pay close attention to the bolstered military ties between Russia and China. In 2020 Putin did not rule out the possibility of forming a military alliance with China. In 2020-2021, Beijing and Moscow shared similar approach to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which enhanced, at least in public narratives, their strategic cohesiveness. Along with numerous joint maneuvers in the air, at sea, and on the ground, the governments of both countries have recently agreed to jointly address the potential threat of US nuclear attack on Russia and China and step up strategic military exercises and coordination between the two country’s nuclear strategic forces, to offset US pressure and military threats. Beijing remains particularly concerned that ballistic missile defense could be used to pressure China in a crisis with the US and seeks to learn from Russia’s experience with nuclear strategy. In the Russian-Chinese joint statement signed
just before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, one could discern the views, shared by Beijing and Moscow, on international security and global strategic stability, on the prospect of nuclear non-proliferation, on the risks of nuclear wars, embracing the principle of indivisible security, criticizing US security strategy in both Europe and Asia, and condemning the unrestricted development of anti-ballistic missile defense systems, formation of closed blocs, “ideologized cold war approaches” including the formation of the Australia, United Kingdom, and US (AUKUS) security pact and America’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.60

It is noteworthy that Xi and Putin tried to emphasize the factor of a great power’s policy behavior, in addition to the balance of power or other structural factors, as a prerequisite for strategic stability, which went beyond the notion of nuclear stability and now involved the use of conventional forces, the principles of uses of force, and also required an adequate “political behavior” in the global arena.61

A new type of Russian-Chinese partnership is driven by a staunch opposition to the Western policy of alliances. Until the recent security crisis, Moscow and Beijing had been calling for the formation of an inclusive security mechanism, in the Russian version, a “collective leadership,” to address global challenges, while remaining devoted to the realist logic of the balance of power.

In their opposition to the West, Moscow and Beijing have tried to dismiss ideologization of international relations fostered by the West. While the US position has increasingly drifted toward the confrontational rhetoric of fighting the “axis of authoritarianism” and illiberal practices, Russia has remained supportive of China’s holistic order-forming concept of the “community of the common destiny of mankind.” In the June 2021 Joint Statement between the two countries, the US was criticized for splitting the world “along ideological lines,” and for “unceremonious interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, arbitrary application of sanctions unilaterally, undermining the legal framework of the system of international relations, including the sphere of arms control.” Unlike the US, the two Eurasian great powers have pledged to “unify the world,” instead of splitting the world into rival blocs, and “postpone differences, show genuine humanism and solidarity, strengthen cooperation, refuse from attempts to use in geopolitical interests the problems that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic.” To contribute to the reform of global governance system, Xi agreed with Putin’s initiative to convene a summit of the states—permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, to jointly address common challenges and maintain international peace and security.62 In the area of global economic governance, it is China that opposes the emergence of trading blocs and remains the major proponent of economic liberalization and open trade, and Moscow actively backs up Beijing’s stance against protectionism and the use of restricting economic sanctions initiated by the West.63

Overall, in their 2021 Joint Statement, the leaders of Russia and China agreed that, while “not being a military-political alliance, similar to alliances that developed during the
Cold War, Russian-Chinese relations are superior to this form of interstate interaction.” These relationships were declared as “not opportunistic in nature, free from ideologization, presuppose a comprehensive consideration of the partner's interests and non-interference in each other's internal affairs, are self-sufficient and not directed against third countries.” Along with the continuation of anti-nuclear rhetoric, the recent February 4 Joint Statement has significantly enhanced the homeland and cultural security component of this partnership, stating that any nation “can choose such forms and methods of implementing democracy that would best suit its particular state, based on its social and political system, its historical background, traditions, and unique cultural characteristics.” In the sphere of global governance, the known Chinese idea of democratization of international relations were also formalized. The parties insisted that in international affairs nobody can “draw dividing lines based on the grounds of ideology, including by establishing exclusive blocs and alliances of convenience, prove to be nothing but flouting of democracy and go against the spirit and true values of democracy.” This includes opposition to “color revolutions,” strengthening the international human rights architecture, which should be based on the “principle of equality of all countries and mutual respect.” To address economic security challenges, the two parties intend to enhance cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China “in various areas” and promote the Greater Eurasian Partnership and “greater interconnectedness between the Asia Pacific and Eurasian regions,” including Russia’s support of the China-initiated Global Development Initiative (GDI), and cooperation in the Arctic region.

The authors of the influential Russo-Chinese analytical report published by the Russian International Affairs Council explain that the formation of an institutionalized alliance might create additional demarcation lines in the world; hence, Beijing and Moscow strengthen ties by developing a joint vision of cooperation priorities and the ability to set their own agenda on the regional and global level. It is absence of clear alliance commitments promulgated by the original 2001 Sino-Russian Friendship Treaty that could explain unique sustainability of the document for the period of 20 years.

Many experts explore the question if the Russian-Chinese construction is indeed a functional analysis, how their inter-military cooperation actually works, and whether there are systemic incentives for the two countries to align with each other. The phenomenon of a Chinese-Russian “entente” may be comprehended neither on the base of any established theories of alliances nor on the base of examination of some pragmatic elements of the two countries' collaboration resulted from just their ad hoc reactions to US policies or regional events or developments.

In his 2018 study of the international-systemic incentives for the China-Russia alignment and the actual mechanisms of the China-Russia military cooperation, Alexander Korolev argued that by that time Russia and China were “on the verge of an alliance,” that a strong basis for an alliance was in place, and only minor steps are needed for a fully-fledged alliance to materialize; the occurrence of such steps is still an open question. Korolev noted
that both China and Russia interpreted the US and its policies as an explicit external threat, which would constitute a foundation for a China-Russia military alignment.68

Some Russian and Chinese observers believe however, that in the new era of anti-US counterhegemonic confrontation, Moscow and Beijing need security guarantees toward each other, in case conflict occurs between either Russia or China, and the US. China might be compelled to use force against the US Navy in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait, which requires a firm backup from its northern ally. Despite the uncertainty about China backing Russia in case of a Russia-NATO conflict, some Chinese publications are still speculating about that possibility.69 David Sacks argues, that, given the increasing alignment between Russia and China, the US cannot rule out that Russia would offer significant assistance to China during a conflict over Taiwan, including arms, energy, food, and intelligence. The US should also assume Russia would seek to distract it from any fight against China by conducting cyberattacks or seeking to destabilize Europe.70 During the Aug 2022 Taiwan Crisis, China expressed its thanks to Russia for backing its position so overtly.71 This logic stimulates Russo-Chinese defense cooperation which includes continuous arms sales and military-technical cooperation, joint exercises (including new counter-space and anti-access/area denial) and military exchanges (which deepen interoperability of the two countries' armed forces), expanded technology exchanges and joint development, though joint operations against the prevailing US forces might be realistic only if China and Russia achieve a high degree of technological superiority, which is problematic joint operations and assistance countering US forces.72

Meeting the New Challenges: Dramatic Shifts in Sino-Russian Security Realm

Facing the “new reality,” Russo-Chinese defense coordination and military cooperation have gained new momentum. Russia has upgraded its previous model of defense industry cooperation with China. Prior to the current war in Ukraine, this cooperation has ceased to be the “one-way street” when Russia provided China with defense equipment and technology in exchange of Chinese cash.

Three major developments could be observed in the recent years. The first one is the growing role of the Russian companies as subcontractors in the Chinese defense industry research and development (R&D) and production projects. A good example of such cooperation is the agreement on cooperation on advanced heavy helicopter project signed during Putin’s visit to China in June 2016. According to this agreement, Russia will help to design and supply a number of subsystems (including the engines) for the Chinese heavy helicopter which will be assembled in China and for the Chinese market. In early 2022, it was reported in Chinese military media that this project continues and will eventually yield helicopters that can carry up to 60 persons or heft ten tons.73 The second one is the start of major joint projects, including joint large body civilian aircraft which is supposed to be produced jointly for the markets of the two countries. The third one is the start of significant imports of the major Chinese components for the Russian platforms and systems. During
Putin’s visit to China in June 2016 led to an agreement on large-scale procurement of the Chinese electronic components for the Russian space satellites. Russia’s current missile capabilities may be explained by the fact that these arrangements have brought some results. This practice can be expanded to the new areas, including unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technology, marine gas turbines, etc.\(^{74}\)

There is a more nuanced and coordinated policy aimed at blocking US anti-missile efforts regionally and globally. This includes potential alliance in space reconnaissance technologies and weapons, and probably joint effort to offset these new US developments. One special document issued by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 2017 stressed the significance of China-Russia military relations in the sphere of joint maritime drills, and international military skill competitions, including the First Joint Computer-Enabled Anti-Missile Defense Exercise in 2016, and close coordination within the defense and security cooperation framework of the SCO.\(^{75}\)

**Cooperation in space.** In September 2018, the Chinese side proposed Russia to join a special project which involves the creation of satellites in low, medium, and geostationary orbit to compete with the 900-satellite-strong British OneWeb Global Internet coverage system and share the benefits of using it. Given the recent statements from Roscosmos that Russia will no longer cooperate with OneWeb, there is a possibility that Moscow will intensify the implementation of a joint Internet system with China, probably by aligning Russia’s own global low-orbit project Efir with it.\(^{76}\) A special US Defense Intelligence Agency report published in 2019 indicates that Beijing and Moscow have reorganized their militaries, incorporating since 2015 new space programs and space capabilities into their future defense potential. In particular, the development of space-based intelligence, fostering new launch technologies and satellite operativity, as well as improving counterspace capabilities—this all enable the two Eurasian rivals to advance their command and control systems and “reduce US and allied military effectiveness.” One of the most notable aspects is Chinese and Russian anti-satellite operations on high altitudes in all earth orbits. Special emphasis is placed on “jamming and cyberspace capabilities, directed energy weapons, on-orbit capabilities, and ground-based antisatellite missiles that can achieve a range of reversible to nonreversible effects.”\(^{77}\)

As the US global defense system develops, the Russian and Chinese strategists express their deeper concerns about the danger of America’s “prompt strike” on their territory. Moscow and Beijing seek to respond the NATO’s Space Defense Concept (June 2019) and the US’s intention to create a space echelon with missile defense systems to destroy ballistic missiles in the early stages of their flight would stimulate militarization of the outer space.\(^{78}\) By 2022, China intends to assemble and operate a permanently inhabited, modular space station that can host Chinese and foreign payloads and astronauts. Not so long ago, China landed an automatic station on the moon. Beijing has also invested into the Asia-Pacific Ground-Based Optical Space Object Observation System (APOSOS), which includes telescopes in Peru, Pakistan, and Iran, capable of tracking objects in Low Earth
orbit (LEO) and Geostationary orbit (GEO). By 2025, it is planning to send a new AMS to a natural satellite, and a manned flight is expected in the thirties.79

Another aspect of Sino-Russian cooperation in space is their persistent attempts “weaponization of space,” by engaging the US into legal, binding space arms control agreements. In order to integrate cyberspace, space, and electronic warfare (EW) capabilities, China and Russia reorganized their air and space capabilities into China’s Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Russia’s Aerospace Force, respectively. If deterrence fails, Russia believes its counterspace forces will offer its military leaders the ability to control escalation of a conflict through selective targeting of adversary space systems. The defense minister stated the change was “prompted by a shift in the center of gravity… towards the aerospace sphere” and as a counter to the US Prompt Global Strike (PGS) doctrine. Russia numbers third in the world, behind the US and China, in terms of operational satellites, with over 140 in various orbits. These systems provide Russia’s military with satellite communications, high-resolution imagery, navigation, ballistic missile early warning, electronic intelligence, and meteorological services.80

The Russia-Ukraine War has become a serious cause for extending Russian-Chinese defense cooperation and military exchange. Since the beginning of Russia’s military operations in Ukraine, SpaceX’s support of Ukraine’s defense forces with the Starlink communications technologies demonstrated their utility as the critical part of “US space military industrial complex,” which stirred significant alarm in China. Western observers refer to the multiple publications in China which have been critical of SpaceX’s deep links to the US armed forces, including commercial contracts with the military, slamming Starlink’s capacity to “enhance the US military’s combat capability” and “bringing the world into chaos or calamity,” so that China is prompted to pursue “soft and hard kill methods” to be prepared to take down Starlink satellites and destroy its operating system.81

In his excellent description of China’s diplomatic actions to support Russia since the beginning of the “special operation” in Ukraine, Evan Medeiros refers to the continued practice of joint patrolling by Russian and Chinese bomber jets in the region, particularly, a demonstrative joint strategic bomber patrol over the Sea of Japan in late May 2022, and the timing of this patrol coincided with the meeting of the leaders of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in Tokyo. Medeiros concludes that “as the first military exercise since February, this action offers some indication of the type of activities China will conduct under its modified policy of ‘no ceiling’ but also a bottom-line.”82

Meanwhile, since 2014 Moscow has decided to upgrade significantly the level of sophistication of its arms sales to China. After Russia’s supply of the advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to China, Russian military expert Vassily Kashin noted that with its firing range of up to 400 km, Beijing’s possession of these systems would signify a fundamental change in the rules of the game in Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands, two potential hot spots where China is involved.83 Another Chinese acquisition—two dozen
SU-35s fighter jets from Russia for $2 billion—also may have a considerable impact on regional security: experts estimate that even a single regiment of Su-35s may be enough to affect the balance of power in Taiwan. Being deployed in the reclaimed artificial islands in the South China Sea, those jets could employ their Irbis radar systems that can detect airborne targets at a range of up to 400 kilometers, which will improve Beijing’s access denial capabilities.84

Russia’s growing strategic importance vis-à-vis the US is being appraised in China. Medeiros points to the risk for the US if Russia were to face mounting military challenges in Ukraine, then it might request military assistance from China. According to this scenario, Russia could offer “heretofore inaccessible Russian military technical assistance,” especially if China “were to become less invested in US-China ties or were it to believe that ties may soon deteriorate.” To satisfy Russia’s economic demands, Beijing could start providing substantial economic assistance to Moscow, taking more risky behavior regarding the sanctions, potentially putting Chinese firms at risk of secondary sanctions from Washington.85

Thus, Moscow and Beijing have set the foundation for the prospective military and defense cooperation—which might include joint operations, if a political decision is made. Since 2016 the Russian and Chinese militaries have pledged to “defend the world with mutual efforts and strengthen international security.”86 In November 2021 the defense ministries of the two countries extended the “roadmap for military cooperation” until 2025, indicating the role of this partnership as a stabilizing factor in global affairs.87

Cybersecurity cooperation. This is considered as an increasingly important area of Russo-Chinese strategic partnership. As prominent Russian expert Fyodor Lukyanov suggests, global strategic stability until the mid-twenty-first century will not be determined by the nuclear factor only, and “what is happening in cyberspace can be far more destructive than even a nuclear conflict.”88 Driven by their growing concern over the recent decade about threats to national sovereignty, the US democratic offensive along with its ideological and cultural domination, as well as technological dependence from the leading Western powers, the Chinese and Russian governments have developed a comprehensive set of laws and regulations aimed at safeguarding their Internet security and the critical infrastructure in the cyber space. Both China and Russia relate cybersecurity to the other essential aspects of national security—economic, energy, financial, communication, socio-political, and military. As an inherently transnational information environment, the cyberspace is regulated in Russia by the federal law “Information, Information Technologies, and Information Protection” (passed by the State Duma on July 8, 2006), substantiated by the “Outlines of the Russian Federation National Policy in the Sphere of International Information Security for the Period till 2020” (2011) and the “Doctrine of the Information Security of the Russian Federation” (December 2016). For its part, Beijing has methodically deepened control over information security and linked cybersecurity issues with the core national interests and protection of sovereignty. China’s “Anti-Espionage Law” of 2014,
and “Anti-Terrorism Law” and “National Security Law” of 2015 promulgate that the government develops systems to ensure network and information security, accountability of basic network and information technologies, strengthening network regulation, and improving its capacity to protect network operations and information security, as well as the Critical Information Infrastructure (CII) including critical information systems and the data. In 2016 the Chinese government formulated its vision of information security in the national segment of the global Internet publishing the “Cybersecurity Law” (November 2016), followed by a comprehensive “International Cooperation Strategy in the Cyberspace” (March 2017).

The latter is the first official strategic document regulating China’s participation in international exchange and cooperation in cyberspace. China prioritizes data safety, critical infrastructure protection, and assurance of cybersovereignty. According to this document, the primary goals of China’s policy were the “creation of an international mechanism for its implementation and are based on the principle of preventing interference in internal affairs, holding measures against the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of states,” which is synchronized with Russia’s major documents in this field aimed at the development of an international code of conduct on the Internet that is common to all participants in the development of cyberspace. Chapter IV of the strategy defines the PRC action plan to establish peace and stability, international rules of order in cyberspace, and partnerships, and to reform the global Internet governance system. Interestingly, by introducing its cyberspace security principles, Beijing demonstrates its compliance with the principles of the UN Charter, and the provisions of the SCO Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of International Information Security, including the updated International Code of Conduct for Information Security submitted in January 2015 by the SCO to the UN General Assembly.

As US-Chinese and US-Russian relations deteriorated, the two Eurasian giants strengthened their bilateral cooperation in the cybersecurity sphere. During Xi’s visit to Russia in May 2015, Moscow signed a special agreement with China on international information security cooperation. Observers noticed that, prior to signing, Russia had not had such close cooperation in cyberspace with any country that was not a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The document identifies the key threats to global information security, which include the use of technology “to carry out acts of aggression aimed at the violation sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of states,” “to interfere in the internal affairs of states,” to cause economic damage, to commit crimes, including data breach, for terrorist purposes, or to disseminate information that “harms political and socio-economic systems, or the spiritual, moral, and cultural environment of other states.”

Military aspects of cybersecurity lie at the center of this cooperation. Russia is aware of China’s posture on the threats of information warfare. For Beijing, “networkization” of the battlefield accelerate confrontation, and the struggle for control over the information space becomes a priority. China also seeks to secure its dominant positions in cyberspace.
and guarantee its own attack on the adversary’s cybersystems. “Information superiority” may be achieved by weakening the enemy’s ability to receive, process, transmit, and use information. Both China and Russia are adamant to secure the protection of the internal information space from outside interference, and to sustain ideological control over the net since some alien services may support the content which confronts the political and ideological guidelines of the national governments and may affect the state power.

Moscow and Beijing are set to combat these threats by developing communication channels within the framework of the Russian-Chinese Subcommittee on Communications and Information Technology, between the defense ministries and law enforcement agencies or national response centers to computer incidents. The parties agree to activate the information and technology exchange, ensuring the security of critical information infrastructure (defense, nuclear, transport, and other facilities). The public-private partnership, as well as cooperation between the major IT companies are seen as an optimal mechanism for successful cooperation. On the regional level, both Moscow and Beijing are trying to incorporate cybersecurity cooperation into the existing regional multilateral mechanisms, the SCO in particular. However, even within the SCO sporadic attacks on Russian, Mongolian, or Indian energy, or research networks and enterprises from Chinese domains occur.

For many years Moscow and Beijing—often within the format of the SCO—have been conducting special military simulations and exercises in the cybersecurity sphere. In December 2017, for example, Russia and China conducted the second joint computer-based command-and-staff missile defense exercises “Air and Space Security 2017.” Observers noticed in summer of 2017 that Moscow and Beijing were considering a joint Russian-Chinese technological platform to repel cyber threats and reduce risks in the information space. As Russian analyst Alexander Isaev concludes, the two parties are developing “mutually acceptable approaches to solve problems arising in the developing cyber space, identifying mutually acceptable criteria and possibilities for creating a secure network environment.” In the wake of the war in Ukraine, China and Russia coordinate their cyber efforts. Western cyber threat security experts maintain that China’s belief that their state-backed technological advancement “will make them highly capable of overturning the Western world makes them the perfect ally to Russia’s current power play over Ukraine.”

China and Russia also accelerate their cooperation in the “hardware” production (e.g., microchips, processors, digital memory) for IT needs. The IT production technology components have been one of the most important conditions for ensuring national cyber security. Both China and Russia to a different degree are dependent on imports of these products from the Western markets. In the period from 2012 to 2016 China spent up to $211 billion on the import of microchips. US-China decoupling in the recent years has prompted Beijing to heavily invest in import substitution in the IT industry. By 2018, 40 factories for processing 300 mm and 200 mm plates were operational in the country, and 13 more plants were under construction. Being isolated from the major producers of global microchip
industry, Russia deepens its cooperation with China in this area under the auspices of the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Chip shipments from China to Russia more than doubled to about $50 million in the first five months of 2022 compared with a year earlier, and the US authorities noticed continuous trade deals between Russian defense firms and China Poly Group, a defense conglomerate already sanctioned by US authorities.\textsuperscript{100} Besides, the Chinese observers have highly appreciated Russia’s own model of industrialization in the sphere of microelectronics, focusing on quartz-crystals inverted mesa-technologies which are based on the highly reliable analog technologies that play a crucial role in the modern military sphere.\textsuperscript{101}

**Scientific and technology cooperation in strategic industries.** Major directions of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing in the sphere of science and technology have been determined by the mutual complementarity between Russia’s tradition of fundamental research and China’s ability to transfer scientific innovations to the real sector production.\textsuperscript{102} Started in the early 1990s, Russo-Chinese scientific cooperation has been managed by a special inter-governmental Russian-Chinese Subcommittee on Scientific and Technical Cooperation, which set the foundation for institutional cooperation between the two countries. In 2000, the two parties signed a special Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People’s Republic of China, which prioritized innovation as the driver of bilateral cooperation. By the end of the 1990s Russian and Chinese enterprises and research centers were involved in the realization of 79 joint projects in automation, new materials, biotechnologies, nuclear physics, space and communications, chemistry, cyber technologies, machinery, seismology, metallurgy, mining, and oceanography. The Russian Ministry of Industry and Science in 1995 sponsored the formation of the Russian-Chinese consortium “Center of Science and High Technologies,” followed by the establishment of direct ties between Russian and Chinese institutions, which formed multiple centers of industrial and technological cooperation across China (such as the joint research center in Yantai, Shandong province, scientific parks in Jiuzhou, Zhejiang province, or Changchun, Jilin province). By the beginning of Xi’s presidency, more than 30 institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences carried out scientific cooperation with various scientific organizations of China under interinstitutions direct agreements.\textsuperscript{103}

Funded by the two countries’ governments, particularly by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research and the Chinese Foundation for Basic Research, the existing joint programs cover multifarious research interaction between institutions, academic exchanges, production of scientific equipment, and innovative products predominantly for the Chinese market, and the creation of joint technology parks to commercialize and implement the scientific developments of the two countries. Russia’s most advanced technologies inherited from the Soviet times—in the areas of nuclear physics, astrophysics of high and ultrahigh energies, micro- and optoelectronics, powerful pulsed sources of x-ray and neutron radiation, the numerical solution of plasma physics problems, diamond synthesis, nanotechnologies, gyrocliston complex and sonar emitters and their software—
may successfully be used in China’s military-industrial complex. Along with China’s and Russia’s participation in the development of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), the world’s largest nuclear fusion reactor in Cadarache, France, China has advanced in the construction of its own Experimental Advanced Superconducting Tokamak project (HL-2M Tokamak), and some Russian sources report about China’s success on the way toward a controlled thermonuclear reaction, which provides the opportunity to build a “pure hydrogen bomb” in the future.\textsuperscript{104}

One notable example is cooperation between Russia’s academic and research institutions in Siberia and the Far East and China’s northeastern provinces in the spheres of geology and geophysics, biological sciences, nuclear physics, aerodynamics, new materials, ecology, and chemistry of various directions. Among these joint projects, the most remarkable have been the study on semiconductor physics, composite solid electrolytes for fuel cells, formation of integral metal compounds, advance material and structural chemistry, applied mechanics, and geochemistry.\textsuperscript{105} Chinese participants are active at the many annual scientific symposia and workshops, and even within specialized international conferences the parties convene separate Russo-Chinese workshops.\textsuperscript{106} On August 26, 2020, Chinese Vice Premier Sun Chunlang confirmed that, during the Russian-Chinese Year of Science and Technology Innovation announced in 2020, the number of joint projects surpassed 1,000, showing the great potential for cooperation in science and technology innovation. At the opening ceremony of the Year, a road map for Russian-Chinese cooperation in the field of science, technology and innovation for the period 2020 to 2025 was signed.\textsuperscript{107}

Concluding Remarks

Overall, in the recent years, Russia has abandoned its previous role as a neutral onlooker of China’s rise and accommodated the Chinese leadership. Commenting on the prospect of Moscow’s alliance with China, Russian former foreign minister Igor Ivanov explains that China and Russia “enjoy flexibility in their decision making, avoid balancing against one another, promote their interaction in the form of new international regimes, favorable for both parties, [and] develop multi-layered partnership, addressing simultaneously security and development issues.”\textsuperscript{108} But clearly the two countries’ bilateral relationship has grown from the energy-based to a geopolitical one—driving China and Russia toward economic complementarity and potentially mutual security commitments. Indeed, among the many facets of this renewed relationship between Moscow and Beijing, the regional and global security cooperation has gained utmost importance given the profound shifts in the international order over the last decades. While in the post-Cold war era Sino-Russian efforts in the security sphere were aimed to stabilize the post-Soviet space, secure peaceful environment for modernization, and address numerous non-traditional threats in Eurasia, today the policies of Moscow and Beijing have increasingly been driven by the revived logic of great power politics and anti-hegemonic balancing. Leaders in both countries often justify Russo-Chinese strategic closeness by the need to prevent the deterioration of the current international system dominated by the West.
Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, it is risky to underestimate the increased role of security relations in the forming of this alignment. In order to make a judgment about the quality of an alliance, one should examine the major factors fueling such an alliance. The paper states that most of the aspects of this strategic partnership have become “securitized”—i.e., seen from the perspective of their national security. Tensions from the Ukraine War are spilling over into the Asia-Pacific and seem to be pulling China and Russia into deeper security cooperation. For example, a Chinese perspective views Japan as using the Ukraine Crisis to “exaggerate the ‘China threat,’ strengthen the Quad, build its own military and security cooperation with NATO, and instigate regional confrontation.” Another recent Chinese analysis observes that “the US will use the [Ukraine] conflict to speed up the building of alliance and partner systems, especially the enhance … military offensive capabilities…” On the Russian side, a sense of solidarity with China seems even more widespread. As one Russian strategist observed in mid-2022: “China and Russia went to war with the Western world. Each in their own way, but we have a lot in common. It cannot but be used for the common good.” Such viewpoints serve to deepen security cooperation between the two countries enhances the alliance-type relationship.

The Ukraine War is a challenge for both countries. As noted above, many Western analysts contend that the stresses of the current Ukraine War could severely challenge the underlying premises of the current quasi-alliance that exists between Beijing and Moscow. They contend that the war has sullied Moscow’s prestige and presents Beijing with the possibility that Russia could become more of a burden for China than a valued partner. They note that China has not stepped up with major material support for Russia in the conflict, and that many Chinese businesses have proven to quite risk averse when presented with the possibility of Western sanctions. While very much in the minority, there are still voices in both China and Russia that question the viability of the quasi-alliance. It may be true that China is seeking a kind of “neutrality” with respect to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet, it is also widely recognized that this is a distinctly pro-Russian neutrality. Ali Wyne calls the Sino-Russian relationship is “kind of a paradox” which has grown stronger since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and which reflects the strengthening of strategic cooperation and a more strained mode of alignment simultaneously. Beijing stands to benefit from wider access to Russian resources, especially energy. Not surprisingly, China-Russia trade has witnessed a significant bump in the first half of the year 2022. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leading Chinese academic experts on Russia are calling for Russian studies in China to be prioritized, since it has sometimes been neglected in the recent past. Others specialists in China, likewise, have defended the Kremlin’s invasion as a “strategic awakening” in response to NATO’s allegedly myriad provocations. No doubt, Beijing is buoyed by the fact that much of the Global South has refused to go along with Western sanctions against Russia. While there have been few signs of overt Chinese military aid to Russia, Chinese drones are now apparently a common site on Ukrainian battlefields.

Russia’s catastrophic war in Ukraine continues and it is far from clear how this will end. While the China-Russia quasi-alliance seems to be strengthened by this test, there
clearly are costs to Beijing for adopting a relatively pro-Russian stance. The room for policy change in Western capitals seems quite limited, but one overall conclusion of this study is that increased Western pressure simultaneously on both Moscow and Beijing—even if somewhat justifiable when considering the maintenance of global norms—is nevertheless driving these Eurasian giants into an ever closer embrace as a consequence. Therefore, a prudent policy might strive for a “reset” with Beijing in order to stem that worrisome tendency, which could threaten the global balance of power. Further measures to stabilize a clearly explosive international security environment would be to revive arms control efforts, and even more obviously to engage diplomatically with both Beijing and also Moscow. After all, during the first Cold War, the US and Soviet Union always continued diplomatic talks and these were crucial to defusing numerous major crises. In the nuclear era, there is no option to shut down diplomatic channels – as seems to be the case at present – an obvious strategic error of massive proportions. Moreover, the US should act extremely cautiously in both the Ukraine situation and also with respect to the delicate Taiwan issue. Both of these crises concern the “core interests” of Russia and China—and therefore have the potential to result in catastrophic (nuclear) wars among the great powers. Creative diplomacy or “smart power” could alternatively be employed to lower global tensions. With China, this could mean energizing climate change diplomacy—on which Beijing has demonstrated considerable concern. Likewise, Russia could be drawn back into multilateral negotiations to support stability by reengaging with Kremlin on Arctic diplomacy and development—an area that Russia evidently has great enthusiasm for. In both cases, the goal should be to elevate issues that are non-zero sum, in order to reduce major tensions between the great powers.

There can be no doubt that Beijing’s diplomatic, organizational, and information support of Russia’s policies have become invaluable for Moscow. The very fact that Russia continues conducting joint exercises Vostok-2022 with China (along with other friendly militaries) demonstrates the degree of trust and coordination among these allies. Chinese military media continue to enthusiastically laud military cooperation activities with Russia in mid-2022. Moreover, there is little doubt that China will be striving to learn the military lessons of the war in Ukraine, so these lessons could help in honing Chinese military capabilities. Russian military specialists talk more and more about the experience they can lend to the Chinese military in terms of planning large-scale military exercises and operations. They openly admit, moreover, that Russia benefits from US-China tensions over Taiwan. Russian military strategists have also recently been publicly praising Chinese military equipment, including tanks and artillery, implying the possibility that Russia could import some of these key items in the future. China has pulled no punches when supporting Moscow on a rhetorical level, as when Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian critiqued the West as: “[those] that delude themselves into thinking that they can lord it over the world after winning the Cold War, those that keep driving NATO’s eastward expansion five times in disregard of other countries’ security concerns, and those that wage wars across the globe while accusing other countries of being belligerent.”
There is little reason to question the sincerity of such articulations by the Chinese leadership, since Beijing has had substantial bitterness toward the West going back well over a decade now. Xi himself appears to have an affinity for both Russia and for Putin—no small factor in the enduring quasi-alliance. Then, Beijing likely does not mind that China is, at least to some extent, out of the world headlines while Russia absorbs much of the attention of the global media. Meanwhile, Russian elites seem increasingly comfortable with the growing coziness between the two Eurasian giants. In the end, they have little choice but to accommodate to the new geopolitical reality of China's ascendance and extraordinary influence. Chinese may continue to strive for neutrality, in some sense, but ultimately the CCP leadership envisages much harder times for its own strategic survival, should Russia collapse under the increasingly damaging pressures from the West.

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Endnotes


11. Alexander Korolev, *China-Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022). He characterizes these relationships as developing gradually and evincing characteristics that can be allow classification as “early … moderate …and advanced” (p. 23). His model introduces “three balances” to help determine the intensity of a given bilateral relationship, including the “balance of power,” the “balance of threat,” and the “balance of interests” (p. 26). Moreover, he makes an innovative and intellectually rewarding check on his theoretical claims by comparing the Russia-China relationship to the budding US-India alignment (pp. 157-188). While this line of theorizing seems to be strongly rooted in the realist tradition, building on issues of power and interest, it is quite weak in considering history, identity, culture, and domestic politics. For major contributions relating to these vital theoretical issues related to China-Russia relations, see also Deborah W. Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New London: Yale UP, 2019); and Karrie Koesel, Valerie Bunce, and Jessica Chen Weiss, eds., *Citizens & the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).


17. “Providing for the Common Defense.”


28. “Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022,” April 21, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xzzx_662805/202204/t20220421_10671083.html. Xi affirmed Beijing’s desire to “uphold the principle of indivisible security, build a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture, and oppose the pursuit of one’s own security at the cost of others’ security; stay committed to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of crises, reject double standards, and oppose the wanton use of unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction.”


44. Korolev, China-Russia Strategic Alignment, 146.


46. Rozman, The Sino-Russian Challenge, 178; 252.


53. See, for example, Yang Guanghai “Returning to the ‘Gray Zone’: A Policy Choice of America’s Strategic Competition with China” (杨光海, 重拾 ‘灰色地带’ : 美国对华战略竞争的策略选择) Peace and Development (和平与发展) (February 2022): 41-55.


67. Igor Denissov and Alexander Lukin, “Correction and Hedging: Twenty Years of the ‘Big Treaty’ and the Evolution of Russo-Chinese Relations,” Russia in Global Affairs, no. 4 (July-August 2021) (in Russian), published online July 1, 2021, https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/korrekcziya-i-hedzhirovanie/?fbclid=IwAR0g-YD9h15n9tpaVpk69s5r5GmsbQn1SzDIlhWBxb-WL8vYhgFZNVEr7B8s.


71. See, for example, Ou Yi, “Expose and Criticize Pelosi’s Farce on Stage, Russia Stands Firm” (欧诣, 揭批佩洛西窜台闹剧, 俄罗斯坚定站了出来), Global Times (环球时报), August 6, 2022, https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/4983Pog7APm.


73. “Details of China’s Heavy Lift Helicopter Exposed” (中国被露重型直升机细节), Weapon (兵器), no. 274 (March 2022): 11.

74. On Russia’s purchase of Chinese marine engines, see Korolev, China-Russia Strategic Alignment, 77.


79. “General Staff,” 18, 20.


85. Medeiros, op. cit.


97. Isaev, 236.


106. Examples may be found in the conference agendas of this year’s scheduled conferences such as the Russian-Chinese symposium on Organoelement Chemistry between the A.N. Nesmeyanov Institute of Organoelement Compounds of Russian Academy of Sciences and its Chinese partners at Nankai University in Tianjin, https://ineos.ac.ru/conferences/rossijsko-kitajskij-simpozium; or between the Nikolaev Institute of Inorganic Chemistry in Novosibirsk and its Chinese partners, http://www.niic.nsc.ru/institute/conferences-inx/826-conferences-2020/2900-13-symposium.


112. See, for example, Wen Min, “The Soviet Union's Border Strategy with China after the Secret 1969 Zhenbao Island Incident” (闻敏, 秘密1969年珍宝岛事件后苏联对华边境战略), Ordnance Science and Technology (兵工科技), no. 10 (2022): 120-123.


119. See, for example, coverage in CCTV7, Military Report (军事报道), July 25, 2022.

120. Indeed, Chinese military media are now full of such analyses. See, for example, Feng Jian, “The Importance of Helicopter Self-Defense Jamming System Viewed from the Russian-Ukrainian War” (冯健,从俄乌战争看直升机自卫干扰系统的重要性), Ordnance Industry Science Technology (兵工科技), May 2022: 70-72.

121. “The Great Game” (Большая Игра), Channel 1 (Первый Канал), August 30, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCQfg7s05Nk&list=PL8vSwhqVh6ObT7YDZIAWqFZ71gZWvArnQ&index=48.

122. See, for example, Ilya Polonsky, “Due to Pelosi’s Likely Visit to Taiwan, China Began the Transfer of Military Equipment to the Coast” (Из-за вероятного визита Пелоси на Тайвань Китай начал переброску военной техники к побережью), Military Review (Военное Обозрение), July 30, 2022, https://topwar.ru/199703-iz-za-veroyatnogo-vizita-pelosi-na-tajvanskij-kitaj-nachal-perebrosku-voennoj-tehniki-k-poberezhju.html?ysclid=l7i8svt1if191934783; or “The Great Game” (Большая Игра), Channel 1 (Первый Канал), August 2, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/.
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Feldman, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation, 73-78.
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