



U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission Testimony: The Russo-Chinese Alliance: What Are Its Limits?

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

Every observer of Russo-Chinese relations can attest to these states' growing intimacy, especially since Russia invaded Crimea in 2014.[i] However, whereas most analysts and officials like Former Secretary of Defense Mattis deny the existence of a Sino-Russian alliance, I believe that this exactly what has come to be. Moreover, in this alliance, to use Bismarck's metaphor, China is the rider and Russia the horse.[ii] And it goes without saying that this alliance is explicitly anti-American targeting U.S. policy and values that both sides see as representing a threat to the continuation of their governing system and their great power ambitions. Similarly, Russian commentators have also long believed this relationship to have evolved into an alliance some time ago.[iii] In this connection, Yuri Ushakov, Putin's advisor on foreign policy, has said that, Strategic interaction with China is one of the top priorities of our foreign policy. The relations have reached quite a high level and to some degree serve as an example of how two major states can and should build an inter-state dialogue."[iv]

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

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

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

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

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

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

Scholars and experts, including this author, have long recognized that a Sino-Russian alliance constitutes a profound threat to both U.S. interests and values and to our allies.[x] Therefore to delineate the limits of this alliance it is first necessary to persuade observers that the alliance really exists. Despite the majority view that no alliance or no formal alliance between Russia and China exists notwithstanding their visibly growing intimacy; this author and some other writers dispute that finding.[xi] Russian officials also freely employ the term, the most recent example being Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov's remark that an "energy alliance" exists between Russia and China.[xii] In 2014 Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that,

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

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

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

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

Thus in 2016 Putin described comprehensive strategic partnership as follows,

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

Similarly Foreign Minister Lavrov has stated that,

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

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

I am visiting Russia as a new defense minister of China to show the world a high level of development of our bilateral relations and firm determination of our Armed Forces to strengthen strategic cooperation, --- Second, to support the Russian side in organizing the Moscow International Security Conference the Chinese side has come to show Americans the close ties between the Armed Forces of China and Russia, especially in this situation. We've come to support you, --- The Chinese side is ready to express with the Russian side our common concerns and common position on important international problems at international venues as well." ^[xxiii]

Therefore it is hard to know how a privileged partnership expands upon a comprehensive one. Moreover, this alliance is not merely a political relationship but one involving economics and active military collaboration. In addition, leading officials in both countries expect this relationship to deepen, including in its military dimensions, during 2019.^[xxiv] Indeed, President Xi Jinping told Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu that not only can both militaries deal with "common security threats" but also they should increase cooperation and unswervingly deepen their strategic coordination.^[xxv] Thus the evidence for the existence of an alliance, albeit informal, is strong and arguably growing stronger.^[xxvi]

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

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

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

Likewise this inter-agency review led to the conclusion that the Chinese military would not be a threat to Russia through at least 2030. Neither is there an immigration time bomb of Chinese migrants flooding into the Russian Far East a likely threat. The invitation to China to participate in the recent Vostok-2018 exercises that culminated the annual schedule of official Russian drills, confirms those perceptions.^[xxxiii] Moreover, a narrow window of opportunity existed as the PLA acquired more capability to sell its weapons and form lasting relationships with it before it became self-sufficient. Thus policy has proceeded accordingly and major arms deals have been concluded e.g. the sale of S-400 air defenses and Su-35 Fighters.^[xxxiv]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More recently Shoigu remarked that,

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

This solution meets China's refusal to join formal alliances and Chinese leaders' repeated calls upon Moscow to forge ever closer ties and cooperation regarding Asian and international security, support China's vital national interests, and even build a new world order based on "global strategic stability." [xlv] It also allows Putin (and Xi Jinping) to pretend that there is not an alliance and that Russia is expanding its ties in Asia. Yet "Russia and China stick to points of view which are very close to each other or are almost the same in the international arena," Putin said, in 2016.[xlvi]

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

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

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

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

But beyond these examples of inter-governmental coordination statements like Shoigu's on the Chinese students studying in Russian military establishments attest to the long-standing character of institutionalized bilateral defense cooperation and coordination. In fact, more Chinese are going to Russia for defense training, in hits case, 100 PLA personnel are going to Russia for training on the S-400 air defense system. So it seems quite clear that this aspect of the relationship whereby Chinese military personnel learn Russian technology, tactics, etc. causes no problems for Russia and is continuing without letup.[xlix]

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

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

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

This de facto if not formal Sino-Russian alliance derives from geopolitically and ideologically congruent perspectives aiming squarely at America's values, interests, and the world order it largely created. It is not a binding wartime alliance like NATO or pre- World War I alliances but today's concept of alliances is much more elastic and therefore suitable to both sides. Admittedly these are contentious claims for many, possibly most, analysts deny that an alliance is occurring or is sustainable.[lxii] Vasily Kashin recently wrote that both sides may avoid the term alliance but the relationship already far exceeds "neighborliness" or even "strategic partnership" even though China's lasting gains in Asia are arguably at Moscow's, not Washington's, expense, most obviously in Central Asia.[lxiii] Therefore we must understand what is meant by such an alliance. As Lavrov stated in 2014,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thus, as Ivan Krastev has written,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More recently Shoigu remarked that,

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

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

Dissenters

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

Two critics who have previously openly warned about the Chinese military threat are Aleksandr' Khramchikhin and Alexei Arbatov. Khramchikhin, who heads the Analytical Department of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis, has long argued that, "China will unavoidably expand and China will occupy Siberia and the Far East. China's occupation of the region will not be achieved by peaceful means like immigration and economic expansion, but rather by force." [ci] He further wrote that,

There is no other state that would so openly declare its right to military

aggression due to the lack of resources and territory. The underpinning idea of this concept is that due to the growing population and the limited resources China is facing natural need to expand its living space in order to support further economic activities and broadening its sphere of survival. It is assumed that territorial and space frontiers only delimit the area where the state can commit military force to effectively protect its interests. Strategic frontiers of the living space should be extended as China's comprehensive power increases. This concept envisages moving hostilities from border areas closer to strategic frontiers or even beyond them, as the armed conflicts can be brought about by difficulties in ensuring legitimate rights and interests of China in [the] Asia-Pacific. China believes that the frontiers of the great powers' living space lie far beyond their national borders, while the spheres of influence of smaller nations are less than their national territories.[cii]

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

Meanwhile Arbatov argued that,

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

Retired General Viktor Yesin, another nuclear expert, concurs with Arbatov's figures.[cv]

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

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

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

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

From Wariness to Defense Alliance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As part of this buildup of interest and capability regarding the Arctic, in 2010 China challenged Russia's assertions of sovereignty over large parts of the Arctic much as Vietnam challenges China's similar assertions in the South China Sea and now the East China Sea. [cxxiii] Russia reacted predictably against China to challenge its claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea much as China has reacted against Vietnam. In 2009-10 China disputed Russian claims to the Arctic, publicly stated its interests there, and demanded that it be taken into account there. Hu Zhengyue, Chinese Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, outlined China's overall Arctic agenda while attending an Arctic forum organized by the Norwegian Government on Svalbard in June 2009. Hu said,

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

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

Essentially this meant<