

RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS

Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines

By Michael S. Chase, Evan S. Medeiros, J. Stapleton Roy, Eugene B. Rumer,
Robert Sutter, and Richard Weitz



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NBR SPECIAL REPORT #66 | JULY 2017

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This is the sixty-sixth NBR *Special Report*.

NBR is a tax-exempt, nonprofit corporation under I.R.C. Sec. 501(c)(3), qualified to receive tax-exempt contributions.

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The United States has a long experience in assessing the twists and turns of the relationship between Russia and China and what it means for U.S. interests.¹ The 1950s and 1960s saw Washington monitoring the initially strong and later frayed Sino-Soviet alliance for threats and opportunities. President Richard Nixon crafted his opening to Mao Zedong amid acute Sino-Soviet military tension and forecasts of war.² The successful opening established a new framework for analyzing relations between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. This so-called great-power triangle became a focal point of U.S. efforts to sustain an advantageous position in relations with Beijing and Moscow.³

The imperative to monitor changing Russian-Chinese relations declined with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet threat, but it rose again at the turn of the century. Repeated government estimates and supporting scholarship assessed the implications of growing convergence between Moscow and Beijing. Since Russia and China at the time were both weaker than they are today and seemed reluctant to challenge the United States, despite rhetoric and diplomatic activism to the contrary, Sino-Russian cooperation appeared to have few substantial strategic implications for U.S. interests.⁴ In recent years, however, China has become much stronger and Russia is now somewhat stronger. As a result, Russian leaders, and to a lesser degree Chinese leaders, have demonstrated much more willingness to challenge U.S. interests.

Growing Challenges for the United States

Common interests, opposition to U.S. pressure, and the perceived decline of the West have prompted Russian-Chinese relations to advance in ways that seriously affect the interests of the United States and its allies and partners. Russia and China pose growing challenges to the U.S.-supported order in their priority spheres of concern—for Russia, Europe and the Middle East, and for China, its continental and maritime peripheries. They work separately and together to curb U.S. power and influence in the political, economic, and security domains and undermine the United States' relations with its allies and partners in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. These joint efforts include diplomatic, security, and economic measures in multilateral forums and bilateral relations with U.S. adversaries such as North Korea, Iran, and Syria. Moscow and Beijing also support one another in the face of U.S. and allied complaints about Russian and Chinese coercive expansion and other steps challenging the regional order and global norms backed by the United States.

While not a formal alliance, the Sino-Russian relationship has gone well beyond the common view a decade ago that it represented an “axis of convenience” with limited impact on U.S. interests.

¹ Authoritative literature in this field is enormous. Salient overviews are Lowell Dittmer, *Sino-Soviet Normalization and Its International Implications, 1945–1990* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992); Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945–1963* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Stanford University Press, 1998); Gordon Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948–1972* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² “The USSR and China,” U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, no. 11/13-69, August 12, 1969, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000261304.pdf.

³ Luella S. Christopher, *United States–Soviet Union–China: The Great Power Triangle* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997).

⁴ “Russian-Chinese Relations: Prospects and Implications (Update),” U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, no. 2000-10C, September 2000, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005526244.pdf.

The forces driving Russia and China to closer cooperation at the United States' expense clearly overshadow factors working against such cooperation.

- The drivers include a determination to counterbalance U.S. influence, especially in their respective areas of concern. A strong common identity and strategic culture shared by the top leaders of both countries incline them toward opposition to the United States.
- The brakes on closer bilateral cooperation against U.S. interests involve the growing asymmetry between China and Russia in terms of economic and military power and influence, increasingly relegating Russia to the role of a junior partner—a status causing concern in Moscow. The two powers also diverge in important ways in how they deal with the United States and other countries. Vladimir Putin's stance against the United States is harder than that of Xi Jinping, who still avows seeking a positive China-U.S. relationship.

The United States' ability to deal with these challenges is commonly seen as in decline. The U.S. position in the triangular relationship has deteriorated, to the satisfaction of leaders in Moscow and Beijing opportunistically seeking to advance their power and influence. Russia's tensions with the West and ever-deepening dependence on China, combined with constructive U.S. engagement of China, have given Beijing the advantageous “hinge” position in the triangle that Washington used to occupy.

The Road Ahead

This NBR Special Report collects papers presented at a workshop convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) on January 26–27, 2017. The papers were later revised to respond to subsequent developments and incorporate feedback from workshop participants and peer reviewers. Each essay shows how the United States is affected by the prevailing trajectory in Russian-Chinese relations and illustrates ways in which the United States can improve its position and attempt to counteract the adverse effects.

Evan S. Medeiros and Michael S. Chase examine the Chinese perspective on the Sino-Russian relationship and demonstrate that a convergence of geopolitical, economic, diplomatic, and security interests will likely draw Beijing and Moscow even closer together in the foreseeable future. To counteract this trend, the United States should adopt a coherent and consistent set of policies to safeguard its interests and those of its allies and partners. Eugene B. Rumer's essay specifically warns that despite lingering tensions in Sino-Russian relations, a political opening with Russia is unlikely, would do little to aid U.S. objectives in the Asia-Pacific, and might embolden Russia to engage in geopolitical maneuvering in the European theater. Richard Weitz's essay in part suggests that the United States could implement more assertive policies, such as sanctions, to wedge against the growing security ties between China and Russia. Such a stance, however, risks driving the two states closer together rather than apart. Ambassador J. Stapleton Roy's essay concluding this report shows that through effective economic and military policies and adroit statecraft the United States would be better-positioned within the triangular relationship to lead efforts to counter Sino-Russia cooperation.

This report marks the end of the first phase of a three-part, two-year NBR project—supported by a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York—examining the strategic implications of the advancing Sino-Russian relationship. The first phase of the project sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the respective roles of Russia and China in challenging the existing international order and the degree of mutual collaboration in their endeavors.

The essays in this report benefited from critiques by six prominent scholars and practitioners serving as senior advisers to the project, ten other commissioned papers and formal presentations at workshops in December 2016 and January 2017, and deliberations at those and other meetings by 70 leading specialists from the United States, Russia, China, and Japan. The project now has a clearer view of the status, trajectory, and implications of recent Russian-Chinese relations.

On this basis, the focus of the second phase of the project will be on discerning appropriate U.S. policy options. Some options may involve imposing greater costs on Russia and China, and some could involve more cooperative U.S. relations with each country. Determining what combination is best is further complicated by recent volatility in U.S. foreign relations, particularly relations with Russia and China, and by major controversy in the United States over relations with the Russian government. This second phase will involve close consultations with U.S. government and congressional policymakers and convene workshops featuring leading specialists from the United States, Russia, and China to provide a comprehensive and authoritative assessment of U.S. policy options.

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NBR SPECIAL REPORT #66 | JULY 2017

Chinese Perspectives on the Sino-Russian Relationship

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay explores Chinese perspectives on the Sino-Russian relationship and considers the implications for U.S. policy.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Over the past two decades, the relationship between China and Russia has evolved from a marriage of convenience into one of enduring strategic value for both countries, one that China describes as a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination.” Chinese policymakers recognize the limitations of the Sino-Russian relationship and do not aspire to transform it into a formal alliance. Nonetheless, China has strong incentives to further enhance its relationship with Russia, covering economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation. Major drivers include what China perceives as the dangers of U.S. global hegemony, democracy promotion, and attempts to undermine strategic stability or otherwise threaten Chinese security interests in Asia. China also benefits from trade and investment links and energy cooperation with Russia. The sum total of these motivations is substantial, spanning Chinese perceptions, interests, and policies about global security, diplomatic, and economic affairs. China’s incentives to sustain this relationship will remain robust for the foreseeable future, while the costs for China will remain low.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Gone are the days of the Cold War’s strategic triangle. Today both China and Russia view the U.S. as the main potential threat to their interests. In this context, Beijing and Moscow have a stable strategic partnership grounded in a geopolitical reality as well as numerous areas of convergence of economic, diplomatic, and security interests.
- Regardless of the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relationships, Beijing and Moscow will very likely become even closer. Additionally, broad policy incoherence or inconsistency on key issues by the Trump administration could create opportunities for China and Russia to find new and different ways to undermine the interests of the U.S. and its allies and partners.

The relationship between China and Russia has enjoyed a sustained and substantial convergence over the past twenty years or so, by design from China's perspective. This stands in sharp contrast to their often tumultuous, and sometimes extremely unstable, relationship during the Cold War. Beginning in the early 1990s, China and Russia normalized their relationship, largely based on tactical accommodation of each other's interests.¹ This subsequently resulted in what one scholar called an "axis of convenience."² In 2001 the two countries signed the Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. The relationship has since evolved into a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination." The clear pattern was episodic convergence that turned into a partnership of enduring strategic value for both countries. In short, they grew together. As Wang Sheng and Luo Xiao of Jilin University have observed, "the first overseas visit Chinese President Xi Jinping made after he took office in 2013 was to Russia—signifying that country's unique role in China's foreign strategy and demonstrating the significance of China and Russia making a joint effort to build a new type of big power relations."³ Additionally, in a December 2016 statement, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi lauded frequent meetings between Xi and Vladimir Putin and plans to deepen the relationship, as well as highlighting its importance to China's security interests:

Both heads of state met five times within this year and made new strategic plans and arrangements for the development of bilateral relations in a timely manner, elevating [the] China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination to a higher level. In recent years, the high level operation of China-Russia relations and bilateral all-round cooperation in various fields have not only brought benefits to the two countries and the two peoples, but also injected strong positive impetus into regional stability and world peace. China-Russia strategic coordination has greatly transcended the bilateral category and become an important ballast stone of safeguarding world peace and stability.⁴

But how strong is the relationship from China's point of view, and what makes it valuable to Beijing? What motivations does China have to further strengthen its partnership with Russia? How does China evaluate the results so far, and what are the limitations of this relationship from China's point of view? Finally, what are the implications for U.S. policy?

The purpose of this essay is to address these questions by exploring Chinese perspectives on the Sino-Russian relationship. The essay finds that China has a number of strong incentives to further enhance its relationship with Russia, covering economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation. We conclude that these incentives will remain robust for the foreseeable future, while the costs for China will remain low.

Furthermore, U.S. policy toward Russia under the current administration, and perhaps future ones, will have limited impact on the Russia-China relationship. Depending on the trajectory of the U.S.-China relationship under President Donald Trump, Beijing and Moscow may actually grow closer. As Fu Ying recently wrote, the Sino-Russian relationship has become more of a strategic partnership than a "marriage of convenience," as demonstrated by tighter diplomatic, economic,

¹ Lowell Dittmer, *Sino-Soviet Normalization and Its International Implications, 1945–1990* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).

² Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2008).

³ Wang Sheng and Luo Xiao, "Building a New Type of Sino-Russian Relationship," *Contemporary International Relations* 23, no. 5 (2013): 89.

⁴ "Wang Yi: China-Russia Strategic Coordination Has Become the Ballast Stone of Safeguarding World Peace and Stability," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 3, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1421647.shtml.

and security links between the two countries.⁵ Greater friction in the U.S.-China relationship would accelerate this trend, albeit within limits inherent to China-Russia relations.

Chinese policymakers are well aware of the limitations of the Sino-Russian relationship. They are keenly aware of both its historical trajectory and the power realities that can (and have) weakened their ties with Moscow in the past. As Fu Ying subtitled a recent article addressing China's views on the Sino-Russian relationship, "Beijing and Moscow are close, but not allies."⁶ Moreover, China does not aspire to transform its relationship with Russia into a formal alliance.

Nonetheless, China's views on the importance of the Sino-Russian relationship, along with the findings of Eugene Rumer's essay in this report on Russian perspectives, suggest very strongly that the two countries will continue to believe they have compelling reasons to further strengthen their relationship. Accordingly, we conclude that the United States will not be able to successfully pursue a strategy aimed at improving its ties with Russia in order to undermine the Sino-Russian relationship, much less to use warmer ties with Moscow as a source of strategic leverage against Beijing.

The balance of this essay is organized as follows. The next section reviews Chinese motivations for strengthening the Sino-Russian relationship, and the following section explores Chinese views on its results and limitations. The essay then concludes with an assessment of the implications for the United States.

Chinese Motivations

There are a diversity of motivations that animate China's pursuit of a closer and more cooperative relationship with Russia. These motivations include the following:

- countering perceived U.S. hegemony
- countering perceived U.S. spread of democracy and subversion
- opposing U.S. defense policies that undermine strategic stability
- opposing U.S. defense policies in space and cyberspace
- gaining access to military hardware and advanced defense technology
- expanding trade and investment links with Russia
- gaining access to Russian energy supplies

The sum total of these motivations is indeed substantial, spanning Chinese perceptions, interests, and preferences about global security, economic, and diplomatic affairs. In essence, these motivations touch on broad conceptions of the global order as well as specific issues that directly impact Chinese economic and security interests. In particular, the areas of convergence in Chinese and Russian interests are broad and substantive. They cover both Chinese material and nonmaterial interests and encompass Chinese perceptions and interests that are more enduring than ephemeral. This suggests a robust basis for Sino-Russian cooperation for the near term (0–3 years) and medium term (3–5 years).

⁵ Fu Ying, "How China Sees Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2016, 96–105.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Counterbalancing U.S. Global Influence

Russian and Chinese interests converge most prominently on the desire to serve as a counterweight to perceived U.S. preponderant influence—to constrain U.S. power (broadly defined). As Fu Ying puts it, “their cooperation is conducive to balance in the international system and can facilitate the solution of some international problems.”⁷ Chinese analysts who can speak bluntly would point out that China sees Russia as a useful counterweight to U.S. power, and most Chinese believe that Russia values Sino-Russian cooperation for the same reason. For example, according to Liu Fenghua of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, an important focus of Sino-Russian diplomatic cooperation is “checking the United States.” Liu argues that cooperation with Russia has offered China advantages on a number of specific issues, such as

opposing the expansion of the U.S. military and political alliance system to include countries along the periphery of China and Russia or strengthening of the deployment of military forces, opposing the U.S. launch of the Kosovo War, opposing the U.S. deployment of theater missile systems, opposing the deployment of weapons in outer space, and opposing the unipolarity of the world order and establishing a new international political and economic order.⁸

Both Beijing and Moscow believe that the United States has preponderant and excessive power in the international system (exercised in various ways) and that this situation needs to be remedied through episodic and continual cooperation on diplomatic, military, and economic issues. Specifically, they both see the United States and its alliances (the five Asian alliances for China; NATO for Russia) as the most serious threat to their regional security interests and the main obstacle to their respective abilities to shape the regional security environment in their interests.

One important dimension to this motivation is that Russia and China have slightly different objectives, which is a function of their differing views of their role in international affairs. Russia sees itself as a global power with multiple regional interests. As such, it seeks to push back against the perceived preponderance of U.S. power in multiple theaters. Russia under Putin is comfortable with very public and continual friction in U.S.-Russia relations. By contrast, China sees itself primarily as a regional power in Asia, albeit one with growing global interests. On balance, Beijing is not yet ready to act as a global power but it is moving in that direction. Thus, it is most focused on pushing back against the United States in Asia. China is less comfortable than Russia with friction in U.S.-China relations and is happy to let Russia take the lead in confronting U.S. power in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East.

There is also an important economic dimension to the Chinese discomfort with perceived U.S. hegemony. Beijing is deeply uncomfortable with the preponderant role of the U.S. dollar in international economic affairs: trade, investment, finance, and development. China’s effort to “internationalize” the renminbi is motivated by this concern. Interestingly, Chinese media is replete with stories about how Sino-Russian trade is settled in renminbi rather than dollars.

Notably, the January 2017 edition of the National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends* report depicts Russia and China as cooperating and acting individually to advance their ambitions. In many instances, their cooperation runs counter to U.S. interests, in part because they perceive the

⁷ Fu, “How China Sees Russia,” 100.

⁸ Liu Fenghua, “Zhong E zhanlue xiezuo huoban guanxi: Cong waijiao ceying dao gongtong fazhan” [China-Russia Strategic Partnership: From Diplomatic Support to Mutual Development], *Journal of Russian Studies*, no. 6 (2015): 13.

United States and the West as in relative decline.⁹ If Chinese leaders continue to assess that the United States and the West more generally are indeed in relative decline, or if the United States is seen as increasingly unwilling to play a global leadership role, such changing circumstances would undoubtedly affect how China views its ability to expand its global influence and to resist pressure from the United States, in Asia or globally.

The natural question that arises is whether perceived U.S. and Western decline weakens Chinese and Russian incentives to cooperate closely with one another. If the presence and influence of the United States and the West are diminishing, then this could reduce Chinese and Russian incentives to balance against the United States and its allies, whether cooperatively or individually. At the very least, it could reduce the likelihood that Beijing and Moscow will place areas of disagreement or friction in their relationship on the back burner in the interest of maintaining a cooperative approach to meeting the challenge posed by U.S. global power.

On the other hand, it is equally possible that a different causal logic could be at work. Declining U.S. and Western power could instead add to incentives for closer Sino-Russian cooperation, seeking to promote their interests as U.S. influence recedes. Russia and China could perceive greater opportunities to advance their influence and interests against the United States and the West, while the potential costs of doing so appear to be lower.

Countering Perceived U.S. Promotion of Democracy and Subversion

Beijing has long been uncomfortable with U.S. policy on the promotion of human rights and democracy. Following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, China's concern mainly involved the persistent U.S. criticism of China's poor (and deteriorating) human rights situation. Chinese policymakers perceive this criticism as a sign of lack of U.S. respect for their political system, undermining their legitimacy. They are also concerned about U.S. agencies supporting efforts to undermine China's social and political stability through their efforts to build a civil society in China, such as programs for the promotion of the rule of law.

In 2011, this generic Chinese concern about U.S. human rights policy evolved into a broader concern about U.S. strategic intentions, one that dovetailed with Russian interests. Chinese leaders were convinced that the United States was behind the social revolution in the Middle East, and they became acutely concerned that they were vulnerable to such instability. Under Hu Jintao, a crackdown on basic political and civil liberties began, and it expanded under Xi Jinping.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Putin resumed the presidency of Russia, and Xi became China's top leader. Both Putin and Xi were acutely focused on domestic political and social stability, and their shared perceptions of the common threat from the United States' democracy promotion brought these two leaders together. The 2014 "Euromaidan revolution" in Ukraine only confirmed their views and cemented this aspect of Sino-Russian cooperation, as did the instability in Hong Kong in fall 2014.

Opposing Perceived U.S. Attempts to Undermine Strategic Stability

China sees Russia as sharing its interest in opposing U.S. actions that undermine strategic stability in their bilateral relations with the United States. Both countries have concerns about U.S. national and regional missile defense programs, as reflected by a joint statement on

⁹ See U.S. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* (Washington, D.C., January 2017).

“strengthening global strategic stability” that the two sides signed in June 2016. The statement highlighted “negative factors” influencing strategic stability, including “the unilateral deployment of anti-missile systems all over the world.”¹⁰ As this statement indicates, one of the reasons China views Russia as a useful partner is because of their shared opposition to such programs, including the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea. In addition, the statement reflected Chinese and Russian concerns about long-range strike capabilities, such as conventional prompt global strike, which it warned could “seriously damage the strategic balance” and trigger a new arms race as the two countries attempt to ensure that such systems will not undermine the credibility of their nuclear retaliatory capabilities.

Opposing U.S. Policies on Space and Cyberspace Security

China’s concern about protecting its interests in space and cyberspace serves as another motivation. For both China and Russia, this is about shaping the rules and norms for outer space and cyberspace.

With regard to outer space, the two countries have cooperated in a number of areas, and China clearly sees opportunities to further expand their cooperation in areas such as technology development and space exploration.¹¹ In addition, it has sought to work with Russia to promote norms that would restrict military activities in outer space, even as both countries have been developing and testing anti-satellite weapons. In 2008, Beijing and Moscow proposed the Treaty on Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects. They have continued to pursue this initiative in recent years, but the United States has opposed it for a variety of reasons, including due to concerns about verification and because it does not address ground-based weapons like direct ascent anti-satellite missiles.¹²

With respect to cyberspace, China and Russia have advocated the formation of a “new cyberspace order” and voiced shared opposition to “actions that infringe upon other countries’ Internet sovereignty.”¹³ Internet sovereignty seeks to dictate what rules should be used to govern the management of the Internet and what rights states have to control the content flowing across their country’s networks. The United States believes in open access to information across the Internet, regardless of state boundaries. Although governments have a legitimate right to protect their networks from physical security threats, according to the U.S. view, governments should not intervene to police information and content on the Internet within their borders. Beijing’s concept of cybersecurity includes the threat of information it deems harmful to the regime, society, or individuals.

To advance its view, the United States supports the current Internet governance system based on the “multi-stakeholder model,” as laid out in the Obama administration’s “International Strategy for Cyberspace.”¹⁴ The United States opposes expanding the role of governments in policing Internet content beyond their current “advisory role” to prevent threats to network integrity such

¹⁰ “China, Russia Sign Joint Statement on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability,” Xinhua, June 27, 2016.

¹¹ See “Huge Room for China-Russia Cooperation in Space,” Xinhua, April 22, 2016; and Tim Daiss, “Russia and China Discuss Joint Outer Space Exploration, Moon and Even Mars,” *Forbes*, July 14, 2016.

¹² For the updated draft of the proposed treaty, see “Draft Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects,” June 12, 2014, available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/050/66/PDF/G1405066.pdf?OpenElement>.

¹³ “China, Russia Sign Joint Statement on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability.”

¹⁴ White House, “International Strategy for Cyberspace: Prosperity, Security, and Openness in a Networked World,” May 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/international_strategy_for_cyberspace.pdf.

as cybercrime. Russia and China, by contrast, both would like to see more government involvement in aspects of Internet governance—especially policing content—and are pushing a “multilateral model” to do so.

Access to Advanced Military Technology and Other Forms of Defense Cooperation

To this day and despite the decades of collaboration and problems, Russia remains an important supplier of advanced military technology to China. This relationship has changed over time, in both its breadth and depth, but remains a pillar of their ties.

The Sino-Russian defense technology relationship started out with China purchasing numerous off-the-shelf Russian systems to upgrade its military after the first Gulf War in 1991. Iraq’s resounding defeat highlighted the glaring deficiencies in Chinese capabilities, which were of the same vintage. Russia gladly filled numerous gaps, across all the services and capabilities. In classic Chinese fashion, the relationship transitioned from the buying of large platforms into one of coproduction so that China could “learn” from Russia. Chinese theft of Russian defense technological secrets was pervasive, and this slowed and complicated—but did not stop—this relationship in the 2000s. As Moscow and Beijing sorted through these problems and as China’s defense industry improved its indigenous capabilities, the People’s Liberation Army shifted to buying select subsystems (e.g., engines, propulsion technology, and certain types of missiles) from Russia to fill critical gaps. China later focused on buying key technologies as it started building its own platforms and subsystems at home.

In the span of this evolution, Russia denied China access to its most advanced surface-to-air missiles, jet fighters, and submarines, among other highly sensitive technologies. This policy changed in recent years, however, as Russia’s need for hard currency grew and the strategic convergence between Putin and Xi gave new momentum to the relationship. For example, in late 2016, Russia delivered the first 4 Su-35 fighter aircraft to China, as part of a previously announced deal that involves the purchase of 24 of the advanced fighter jets.¹⁵ At the same time, official media reports suggested that given China’s progress with the domestically produced J-20 stealth fighter, the Su-35 could be the last combat aircraft that China needs to import from Russia.¹⁶

China also views Russia as a useful partner in other areas of defense cooperation, including professional military education, training exchanges, and joint military exercises. For example, in September 2016 the two sides conducted a joint naval exercise in the South China Sea, which featured surface ships, submarines, fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and amphibious forces and concluded with a simulated island-seizure operation.¹⁷ This was their fifth joint naval exercise in Asia since 2012, and these annual exercises are clearly used as signaling to the United States about growing Chinese and Russian presence. It is no coincidence that these exercises started just as the Obama administration’s Asia-Pacific rebalance gained momentum.

¹⁵ Zhang Tao, “Air Force Receives Four of China’s Latest Fighters,” *China Daily*, January 6, 2017.

¹⁶ See Chen Yunjie, “Su-35 hao shi saho, dan xiwang zhe shi zan zuihou yici ‘haitao’ zhandouji” [The Su-35 Is Very Good, but Hopefully It Is China’s Last “Bought from Overseas” Fighter], *Zhongguo Junwang*, December 29, 2016, http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2016-12/29/content_7429210.htm.

¹⁷ “China, Russia Conclude Joint Naval Drill,” China Military Online, September 19, 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-09/19/content_7265811.htm; and “China-Russia Naval Drill Ends with Island-Seizing Mission,” China Military Online, September 19, 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-09/19/content_7264858.htm.

Trade and Investment Links

Trade and investment ties between China and Russia have grown, albeit gradually, over the past two decades as both sides sought to develop this part of their relationship. Nonetheless, Russia's importance to China as a trade partner remains extraordinarily limited, especially compared with the latter's much larger and more consequential economic relationship with the United States. For China, economic cooperation with Russia has yet to live up to expectations, but it is still more than a fig leaf to suggest that their relationship is becoming increasingly comprehensive in nature. China has always seen Russia as a source of energy and advanced technology and is happy to sell its various manufactured goods to Russia. Russian discomfort with this asymmetry has always been a quaint concern for Beijing to manage rather than a structural constraint on better relations.

For China, the Western sanctions on Russia following its annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine were a welcome buying opportunity. Russia needed an outlet for its resources and a way to generate compensating economic activity. China happily provided just such an outlet but "requested" friendship prices, of course. Russia eased barriers to Chinese investors, which is leading to new Chinese investments in the Russian railway and telecommunication sectors. Financial cooperation further expanded as Russian banks sought refuge in cooperating with Chinese institutions. The preferential treatment was most visible in Chinese purchases of Russian energy resources. The upshot was that the asymmetry in their economic relationship deepened further as a result of Western sanctions, but Russia could not do much about it. China was gaining more and better access to the Russian market, and at better prices.

Cooperation on Energy Issues

Sino-Russian cooperation on energy has a long history. Russia's position as a net oil exporter, combined with China's position since 1993 as a net oil importer, has fostered a lasting and mutually beneficial relationship. Russia has always been among China's top five suppliers of oil, and in 2016 it dethroned Saudi Arabia as China's top supplier. A major turning point in the energy relationship occurred following the Ukraine-related sanctions when Russia started negotiating much lower prices with China for investment in Russian oil and gas fields. Chinese investments in major Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects represent a new and thorny dimension to the relationship. Chinese commitments have been robust, but Russian follow-through has been lacking, potentially opening up an area of persistent tension and frustration between the two countries. Nonetheless, such investment comes in the context of substantial and sustained diversification by China of its energy suppliers, thereby lessening the long-term impact of such frustrations on the overall relationship. Chinese policymakers and business leaders are well acquainted with the vagaries of dealing with Russian energy projects, especially ones that require major government coordination and technological expertise.

Chinese Perspectives on Results and Limitations

This section briefly assesses Chinese views on the results and limitations of the Sino-Russian relationship. On balance, Beijing has concluded that its partnership with Moscow yields substantial and enduring benefits for China, and we see limited prospect of a change in Beijing's views in the short or medium term. In particular, Chinese scholars note the importance of arms sales and

defense cooperation.¹⁸ They also highlight that cooperation with Russia has served as “a valuable strategic tool for uprooting U.S. hegemony.”¹⁹ Some Chinese scholars have even suggested that the Sino-Russian relationship might prove to be a “good model” for Chinese efforts to develop the “new type of major power relationship” it seeks to build with other countries.²⁰ Nevertheless, some aspects of the Sino-Russian relationship have been disappointing. Perhaps most notably, as a number of Chinese scholars have pointed out, the economic dimension of the relationship has lagged behind its political and security components. As Wang and Luo observed, “the scale and standard of economic cooperation are not as advanced as...strategic political relations.”²¹

Looking ahead, China has many reasons for continuing to strengthen its relationship with Russia, but it also views the relationship as having a number of limitations or constraints. These include the following:

- the increasingly asymmetric nature of the relationship and Russian suspicion of China’s exploitation of this asymmetry
- China’s declining reliance on Russia as a source of advanced military technology
- divergences over diplomatic issues
- friction over Chinese activities in Central Asia and Russian activities in East Asia

The Shifting Balance of Leverage and Russian Suspicion

Chinese analysts acknowledge that the Sino-Russian relationship has become more asymmetric in the last decade, and Moscow, as a result, has become somewhat more suspicious about China’s motives and ultimately its leverage. Chinese leaders are well aware of these and other Russian concerns, including worries about Chinese influence in the Russian Far East. Fundamentally, China is comfortable with this emerging asymmetry. Xi actively uses his personal relationship with Putin to manage this dynamic and lessen Russian anxieties. Chinese leaders are even happy to maintain the facade of Russia as its “big brother” as long as it results in more and cheaper access to energy resources and military equipment. The question is how long China can maintain this dynamic without it undermining the long-term basis for closer cooperation.

Limits on Arms Sales and Defense Cooperation

Another limitation is that Russia, though still an important source of technology in some key areas, has less to offer China than it once did as a source of advanced military hardware because of improvements in China’s defense industries. Beijing is also well aware that Moscow has been frustrated and concerned by Chinese reverse engineering of systems sold to China. This pillar of the relationship may be reaching its limits as Russia sells China its most advanced defense platforms, equipment, and technologies. Another limitation is the potential for growing competition between Chinese and Russian arms exporters in some niche areas of the international arms market. Russian defense sales to Vietnam and other countries in Asia are an interesting area to watch, as they suggest some differing views on diplomatic issues of consequence to both countries.

¹⁸ See, for example, Li Shuyin, “Dui Zhong E junshi hezuo de lishi kaocha yu sikao” [Historical Investigation and Reflection on China-Russia Military Cooperation], *Journal of Russian Studies*, no. 3 (2016): 5–9.

¹⁹ Wang and Luo, “Building a New Type of Sino-Russian Relationship,” 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

That said, the cooperation and coordination between the two militaries is expanding. China is happy to learn from Russian operational capabilities, while both countries enjoy the strategic signals associated with their growing joint military operations all over the world.

Diplomatic Divergences

Chinese and Russian views on global affairs and each other's role in managing their primary spheres of influence—Eurasia for Russia and the Asia-Pacific for China—converge more than they diverge. This convergence in visions of order and architecture is what provides the basis for continued, albeit episodic, cooperation on sensitive diplomatic issues.

Russia's penchant to take the lead on controversial issues of marginal Chinese influence and relevance, such as Syria, offers a similar point of convergence. Yet there are limits to such cooperation. For example, Russia tends to be more concerned with the regional implications of a nuclear North Korea, whereas China may be coming to the view that it can live with a nuclear North Korea as long as it does not proliferate or cause too much instability.

Similarly, Russian and Chinese positions on territorial question are not perfectly aligned. Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine clearly violated China's ironclad commitment to the inviolability of a country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Yet China was careful in its public and private diplomacy not to accentuate this tension. Similarly, Russia is agnostic about most of China's claims in the South China Sea in an effort to avoid alienating China and Vietnam, as well as other claimants such as the Philippines and Malaysia. The latter are both potential recipients of Russian arms. There is little evidence, however, to indicate that these policy differences are a source of any major tension in the relationship.

Competition in Central Asia and East Asia

Another limitation could arise from friction or competition in Central Asia. Both sides have failed to coordinate their economic strategies in the region. China simply has much more to offer Central Asian countries than Russia and has gained political influence through its trade and investment activities. The Belt and Road Initiative holds the prospect of orienting these economies more toward China than Russia in the long term. Russia's relative discomfort with this trend is an open question, but China is dedicated to continuing its engagement with the region, for both security and economic reasons. This situation has de facto produced a rough division of labor between China and Russia in Central Asia, with China as the primary provider of economic goods and Russia as the security provider. A looming question, and potential source of tension, is whether China's growing economic role will inevitably lead it to play an increased security role—and how Russia might respond. If the Belt and Road Initiative goes ahead as envisioned, China may very well increasingly become a security provider for Central Asia. This would pose new challenges for the Sino-Russian relationship. Chinese analysts, for their part, are well aware of the possibility that greater Chinese involvement with security issues in a region that Russia views as its sphere of influence, at least as far as security matters are concerned, could lead to increased friction. Yet they appear to believe that Beijing can manage this challenge in a way that maintains its interests and influence without gratuitously offending Moscow or unnecessarily exacerbating Russian sensitivities.

It is also possible that increasing Russian activities in East Asia could create tension in the bilateral relationship. For example, as mentioned above, Russian military ties with Vietnam,

especially arms sales, could become a greater source of friction between Beijing and Moscow. Some Chinese scholars have already criticized Russian defense cooperation with Vietnam as a type of “covert containment” of China inasmuch as Russian arms sales give Hanoi a “stronger hand” to play against Beijing in the South China Sea.²²

Implications for the United States

The lack of a clear U.S. strategy toward China and Russia in the first few months of the Trump presidency and the resulting fluidity of U.S. policy toward them make it difficult to assess the impact of Sino-Russian cooperation on U.S. interests. Nonetheless, some historical background and context provide a framework for understanding this evolving dynamic.

Gone are the days of the Cold War’s strategic triangle. The United States enlisted China—and China gladly enlisted the United States—as a partner in counterbalancing the Soviet Union during a period in which both countries saw the Soviet Union as the main threat to their security. Today both China and Russia view the United States as the main potential threat to their interests; in this context, Beijing and Moscow have a stable strategic partnership grounded in a geopolitical reality as well as numerous areas of convergence of economic, diplomatic, and security interests. Notably, Xi is personally invested in this relationship and sees it as offering diverse value; indeed, his personal ties with Putin provide both ballast and momentum for the partnership. China is aware that Russia is worried about the shifting balance of power between the two countries, but it feels equipped to manage this dynamic—and has demonstrated it can do so. China knows that Russia views it as a much less serious threat than the United States. Beijing may have concerns about Russia’s reliability, but that is not new and has not been apparent for over a decade. Chinese policymakers are well aware that the structural features of the relationship are in their country’s favor. China’s growing power and Russia’s various internal problems lock in the asymmetric nature of the relationship; thus, Beijing does not need to worry very much about Russia as an immediate or long-term threat compared with the United States.

The U.S.-China thaw under Richard Nixon is not a model for the current set of interactions among China, Russia, and the United States. Any approach by the Trump administration that aims to revive the geopolitics of the Cold War, while reversing the roles of China and Russia in Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy, would make little sense in the context of the current dynamic among the three major powers. If Trump’s praise of Putin reflects a strategy that centers on attempting to improve U.S. relations with Russia with an eye toward enlisting it as a partner to contain China, this approach is very likely doomed to failure. Indeed, any U.S. efforts under the Trump administration to move closer to Russia would have limited impact on the Russia-China relationship. Regardless of the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relationships, Beijing and Moscow will very likely become even closer. Additionally, broad policy incoherence or inconsistency on key issues by the Trump administration could create opportunities for China and Russia to find new and different ways to undermine the interests of the United States and its allies and partners.

²² Wang and Luo, “Building a New Type of Sino-Russian Relationship,” 99.

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

NBR SPECIAL REPORT #66 | JULY 2017

Russia's China Policy: This Bear Hug Is Real

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay considers Russian-Chinese relations from the perspective of Russia, challenges some of the widely held assumptions about Russian foreign policy and its goals, examines the key drivers of Russian policy toward China, and concludes with implications for U.S. interests.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Russia's relations with China have undergone a complete transformation in the past quarter century and have developed into a genuine strategic partnership. Although the Kremlin no doubt is aware of its junior partner status vis-à-vis Beijing, this relationship is truly without an alternative for Russia's leaders. Russian foreign policy is controlled exclusively by a narrow circle of the country's elite, whose chief preoccupation is with preserving domestic stability and the security of the ruling regime. The West's insistence on domestic change in Russia makes it an incompatible partner for the Kremlin. Beijing, by contrast, does not confront Moscow with such demands and, moreover, partners with it to oppose the West's pursuit of democratic change worldwide. These domestic considerations largely offset potential sources of friction in relations with China.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Largely because of its one-sided relationship with China, Russia is unlikely to be a useful partner in addressing U.S. priorities in the Asia-Pacific, including in the South China Sea and on the Korean Peninsula.
- Given that Russian elites' chief preoccupation is with domestic stability and the survival of the ruling regime, attempts to split Russia from China are unlikely to be productive. Russia's opposition to the West's promotion of democracy and human rights can be expected to override any concerns about overdependence on China.
- The U.S. must beware of unintended consequences of outreach to Russia. Any opening that the U.S. provides could enable Russia to engage in its own geopolitical maneuvering in the European theater, while doing little to weaken China.

One of the major international developments of the post-Cold War era has been the emergence of a close partnership between Russia and China. Developing gradually over a period of nearly three decades, the partnership has grown stronger and defied much skepticism about its nature and underlying ulterior motives, as well as warnings about its inevitable demise. Claims about the shaky nature of that partnership and predictions of its demise are entirely understandable, considering the nearly three-decade political and ideological rift that preceded the Russian-Chinese détente of the late 1980s. Indeed, tensions between the two countries ran high and at times even broke out into armed confrontations. Nonetheless, from Moscow's perspective, the partnership is real and without an alternative.

Throughout the three decades of hostilities, the differences between Russia and China seemed deep and irreconcilable. At times during the Cold War, they even provided the rationale for a powerful strain of thinking in U.S. foreign policy about playing Moscow and Beijing against each other. More recently, some have suggested that President Donald Trump's benign view of Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, in reality is a carefully thought out cover for a strategy designed to split Russia from China and thus shift the geopolitical balance in Eurasia in favor of the United States.¹ Yet if the grand strategic rationale behind President Trump's positive take on Russia and Putin is really intended to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing, then the Trump administration will likely be frustrated and disappointed in its pursuit. Russian foreign policy is controlled exclusively by a close-knit circle of the country's elite, whose chief preoccupation is preserving the domestic stability and security of the ruling regime. A productive relationship with the West would require from Russia significant domestic changes that make the West an incompatible partner for the Kremlin. Beijing, by contrast, does not confront Moscow with such demands and, moreover, shares its opposition to the West's pursuit of democratic governance, human rights, and humanitarian intervention, which both Russian and Chinese leaders view as destabilizing interference in the internal affairs of other countries. These considerations override other concerns and potential sources of friction in relations with Beijing.

Thus, an attempt by the new U.S. administration to drive a wedge between Russia and China would be so transparent as to be understood by Moscow and Beijing for what it is—a clumsy geopolitical ploy. A leader of Putin's experience and obvious ability would certainly understand that the real target of this strategy is China, that Russia is merely a tool of U.S. policy, and that a shallow opening of this nature is not worth risking his partnership with Beijing.

The first section of this essay argues that Russia's foreign policy is guided primarily by considerations of domestic stability and regime survival rather than by some broad vision of national interest. The second section then examines the partnership between Russia and China within the framework of this domestically focused foreign policy. The essay concludes by drawing implications for the United States with respect to several U.S. priorities in the Asia-Pacific.

¹ Simon Tisdall, "Donald Trump Attempting to Play Nixon's 'China Card' in Reverse," *Guardian*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/12/donald-trump-us-china-relations-taiwan-nixon>. It is worth noting that it is not at all clear how the escalation of tensions between Russia and China could benefit U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific, where North Korea's erratic behavior and disputes about boundaries and competing interests in the South China Sea have already created significant strategic challenges for the United States. Adding a potential confrontation between two nuclear-armed giants to this mix would not make U.S. diplomacy or military strategy in the region any easier.

A Domestic Foreign Policy

What Could Have Been

A major—perhaps even the key—shortcoming in a number of geopolitical strategies designed to shift Russia’s orientation in one direction or another is the lack of appreciation for the critical drivers of Russian foreign policy and the nature of foreign-policy making in Russia. Russian foreign policy is often thought to be guided by a broad vision of Russian national interests formulated around several major strategic goals, such as enhancing the material well-being of the population, improving security, and modernizing and diversifying the economy. This would not be an unreasonable set of assumptions to make about a country where policymakers expect to be held accountable for their recommendations and choices and to be judged based on their results. Such thinking also presupposes that there is a sizeable or otherwise influential segment of the population interested in foreign policy and ready to hold its policymakers accountable.

If this interpretation of Russian foreign policy drivers is correct, then it would be reasonable to expect that this policy should aim to advance the country’s integration with the liberal international order through robust engagement with Western-dominated economic, security, and political institutions. The United States and Europe are uniquely able and, if their leaders’ statements are to be believed, willing to serve as a major source of investment, technology, managerial expertise, and overall know-how to help Russia modernize, diversify, and develop its economy. Furthermore, considering the proliferation of global threats and turbulence not far from Russia’s borders, it would make sense for Russian foreign policy to seek security partnerships or even alliances with some of the most powerful and wealthiest nations in the world to address common security threats. Thus, a closer partnership with the United States as the world’s only military superpower, and with NATO as the world’s most successful military alliance, would make sense for a country with limited resources to spend on defense and the largest land boundary in the world to defend. Last, but not least, a partnership with the United States could validate Russia’s claim to great-power status on the world stage, which is widely acknowledged as a major goal of its foreign policy.

By this logic, Russia should have welcomed NATO’s expansion into Central Europe and the Baltics and encouraged the extension of NATO’s partnerships further into Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The alliance’s expansion into Central Europe has brought to the region an unprecedented degree of stability and security, with no military presence to speak of that could threaten the physical security of the Russian state. NATO’s partnerships with Russia’s neighbors were intended to enhance the security of these new and struggling states, strengthen them internally, and make them more capable security partners to NATO and Russia.

Following NATO’s expansion, the eastward growth of the European Union likewise brought an unprecedented degree of prosperity to Russia’s doorstep, along with the promise of a mutually beneficial expansion of trade and economic relations. All of this held the promise of great benefits for Russia and should have been encouraged by Russian policymakers. For example, having complained countless times since 1991 about Ukraine’s unpaid debts—a problem that has caused major friction between Russia and Europe—Russian policymakers should have welcomed the association agreement between Ukraine and the EU as the necessary step toward long-delayed reforms and solvency by this troublesome neighbor.

What Is

Needless to say the reality of Russian foreign policy is different from the scenario described above. NATO's expansion always has been viewed by Russian policymakers as arguably the biggest threat to national security—bigger than the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and certainly bigger than Iran's or North Korea's WMD program. The prospect of Ukraine seeking NATO membership at some future date, and moving closer toward the EU in an even more distant future, was perceived in Moscow as the gravest threat to Russian interests and as a legitimate reason to upend the entire post-Cold War security order in Europe.

The question is then why Russian policymakers have chosen to focus their ire on the EU and NATO, which are seemingly benign, beneficial to Russian interests, and nonthreatening to Russian security, while paying little attention to other threats. Why would they forgo the benefits of a potentially highly productive and profitable relationship with the West and instead treat it as the source of the biggest threat to Russian security and economic interests? By the same token, why have Russian policymakers seemingly turned a blind eye to what outside observers have described as the biggest challenge Russia is facing in the foreign policy arena—the rise of China? To answer these questions, one needs to look at these relationships from the perspective of Russian leaders.

Russian foreign policy is not guided by a broad-based vision of national interest, as sketched out in the preceding subsection. The creation of a diversified, modern economy firmly established on the path of sustainable growth is not a major strategic goal that Russian policymakers are pursuing. They have not pursued closer relations with the West—in either the economic or security realm. They have not sought to develop a productive relationship with NATO. The record of Putin's tenure running Russia, especially since the start of his third presidential term in 2012, points to a very different set of foreign policy objectives. Russian foreign policy since 2012 has sought to isolate Russia from the West, to insulate Russians from Western cultural and political influence, and to promote the image of the West as the enemy of Russia and the source of hostile and destructive political and cultural ideas alien to its traditions and harmful to its interests.

The rift between Russia and the West of course predates Putin's return to the presidency, but it has become especially pronounced since then. Putin's sharp pivot away from the West and toward China occurred in the aftermath of the large-scale demonstrations in Moscow to protest the results of the December 2011 parliamentary election, which were widely seen as unfair and compromised, and Putin's own decision to reclaim the presidency from his interim successor Dmitry Medvedev.² The protests, their endorsements, and the criticism of Putin's handling of the situation in the West apparently convinced the Russian leader that the West was committed to regime change in Russia, that Medvedev's attempted reforms and temporary rapprochement with the West were ill-advised, and that a change in the country's direction, both foreign and domestic, was necessary.

The break with the West was a blow to the Kremlin's aspirations for recognition of Russia as a major power by the United States. The Obama administration's mix of negative and dismissive assessments of Putin's Russia after 2012 sent a strong signal to the Kremlin that such recognition was not forthcoming and that the price for it would be too high in terms of threats to the regime's stability and core security interests.³ As a result, Putin must have decided that Russia

² Michael Schwartz and David M. Herszenhorn, "Voters Watch Polls in Russia, and Fraud Is What They See," *New York Times*, December 5, 2011; and Ellen Barry, "Rally Defying Putin's Party Draws Tens of Thousands," *New York Times*, December 10, 2011.

³ "Remarks by the President in a Press Conference," August 9, 2013, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/09/remarks-president-press-conference>; and "Full Transcript: President Obama Gives Speech Addressing Europe, Russia on March 26," *Washington Post*, March 26, 2014.

would have to assert itself on the world stage by means other than partnering with the West. The expulsion of Russia from the group of eight (G-8) after the annexation of Crimea must have reinforced that logic.

The pivot in Russian foreign policy away from the West and toward China, which only intensified in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, underscored that the principal function of Russian foreign policy under Putin's leadership is domestic—to maintain the stability of the regime. In other words, its goal is to provide for the security and well-being of the country's elite rather than the well-being, security, and international standing of the country itself and its people. All foreign policy decisions are subordinated to this concern with regime stability, and other priorities, such as recognition by other powers of Russia's greatness, are never pursued at its expense.

Foreign policy is the exclusive property of a narrow elite that does not see itself accountable to the population for its choices, and that the population does not hold accountable. Independent institutions that could subject the elite's foreign policy to scrutiny—a free press, an independent legislature, a community of independent academics and think tanks, independent business associations, and other civil society actors—do not exist in Russia. With the elite fully in control of all major media outlets, foreign policy choices are presented to the general public so as to maximize the public's support for the regime.⁴ Russian foreign policy is thus an instrument of domestic stability and regime preservation.

Russia and China: Made for Each Other

A Win-Win across the Board

When viewed in the context of the domestic focus of Russian foreign policy, the choices that Russian leaders have made not only appear eminently sensible but are the only options available to the country's elite to preserve their position. A rapprochement with the West and participation in its institutions would require Russia to adapt to the norms governing these institutions. These include the adoption of an open political system with active participation by civil society, a free media, and a legislature independent of the executive branch. Western norms also call for removal of barriers to trade and investment (both foreign and domestic), a robust anticorruption effort, and the demonopolization of the economy. In the area of foreign and security policy, they call for adherence to the principles enshrined in the Charter of Paris, including free choice for states to join alliances and respect for other countries' territorial integrity. In other words, a rapprochement with the West and participation in its institutions would require the Russian elite to take steps that would be certain to diminish its hold on the country's domestic politics and economy. Thus, a rapprochement with the West would mean, as Putin and other elite members have correctly assessed, regime change in Russia.

By contrast, no such threat is inherent in Russia's relationship with China. Beijing does not call for the Russian political system to become more open; it does not call for a more transparent and orderly investment regime; it does not require Russian leaders to take on the entrenched bureaucracy, demonopolize the economy and open it up to more competition, or remove other barriers to trade and investment. Beijing appears content to accept Russia as it is.

⁴ The literature on public opinion, media, and foreign policy since Putin's third term began is nascent and focuses primarily on anti-American sentiment. See, for example, Theodore P. Gerber, "Foreign Policy and the United States in Russian Public Opinion," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 2 (2015): 98–111.

Moreover, from the perspective of Russia's ruling elite keen to protect its interests, the rationale for partnering with China is reinforced by the complementary nature of the two countries' economies. China is a manufacturing giant, while Russia is rich in natural resources. China has a huge pool of labor, while Russia has a severe demographic problem and must import labor from neighboring countries. Each side's comparative advantage complements that of the other. Trade and economic relations with China do not require reforms in Russia. Modernization is not a part of the Russian-Chinese trade and economic agenda, which essentially calls for the perpetuation of the status quo. Thus, the interests of major Russian economic actors and interest groups are not threatened by the partnership with China.

It is important to note in this context that Russian popular attitudes toward China are not universally benign. Russians doing business with Chinese companies complain about the difficult and unfair negotiating practices of their Chinese counterparts. Russian security experts warn about Chinese military superiority.⁵ Local residents in the Far East resent and protest against long-term leases of agricultural land to Chinese investors.⁶ Yet as important as they may be, these considerations appear to have had little effect on the Kremlin's strategic calculus vis-à-vis China and the views of senior Russian policymakers.

Moscow and Beijing also agree on many major international issues. First and foremost, they share a deep aversion to the concepts of democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention embraced by the United States and its NATO partners. They also oppose what they see as the United States' lack of restraint in the use of its superior military power. Russian elites consider U.S. support for color revolutions around the periphery of Russia as destabilizing and intended to serve as a vehicle for projecting U.S. influence. Likewise, they view U.S. support for the Syrian opposition and efforts to isolate the Assad regime as at best naive and misguided and at worst a cover for regime change intended to install a friendly government in Damascus. Moscow has found in Beijing a willing partner in its efforts to oppose U.S. policy toward Syria. Chinese diplomats, however, have been content to let Russia take the lead in this campaign—along with the blame from the United States—while reaping the benefits of demonstrating the limits of U.S. power on the world stage. This situation has been a win-win for Beijing and Moscow. The former has seen its principal rival frustrated and weakened, while the latter has asserted itself at the expense of Washington as a worthy rival, if not as a peer competitor.

Another area of agreement between Russia and China is human rights. Both countries reject U.S. criticism of their human rights practices as an attempt to interfere in their internal affairs. This issue is especially important for Russian elites, who believe that a major goal of U.S. policy toward Russia is regime change. Chinese officials' rejection of U.S. efforts to promote human rights and democracy must be reassuring to Russian elites.

Thus, both countries gain from their partnership. Both are able to accomplish important goals, but not at the expense of each other. Yet the benefits of this relationship are greater for Russia than for China. As a declining power, Russia gains the ability to assert itself at the expense of the United States and maintain its great-power status, which is important for enhancing the Putin regime's legitimacy inside Russia.

⁵ Matthew Bodner, "In Arms Trade, China Is Taking Advantage of Russia's Desperation," *Moscow Times*, November 1, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/in-arms-trade-china-is-taking-advantage-of-russian-desperation-55965>.

⁶ Alexander Gabuev, "Who's Afraid of Chinese Colonization?" Carnegie Moscow Center, June 26, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/60515>.

No Alternative

The partnership with China has undoubtedly served the interests of Russia's ruling elite. It appears to be a deliberate choice of the Kremlin, sustained over a long period of time, and is likely to continue as long as the current elite remains in power. Looking back at the development of Russian-Chinese relations over the past three decades, one might ask whether Russia might have pursued an alternative course. A brief overview of the relationship from the standpoint of the Russian elite suggests that there never was an alternative to the present course and state of affairs, at least not without regime change.

The reconciliation with Beijing during the late Soviet period under Mikhail Gorbachev, after three decades of hostilities, was undertaken as part of a general shift in Soviet foreign policy from confrontation to peaceful coexistence with both the West and China. The Soviet economy could no longer sustain the burden of competition on two fronts, and the task of launching economic reforms called for cuts to defense expenditures. That was one of the major drivers of détente with both Beijing and Western governments—a necessary step to which few, if any, alternatives were available to the Soviet leadership.

The implosion of the Russian economy that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union and the domestic political turmoil that engulfed the country for most of the 1990s left few resources available to the Kremlin to design and implement an activist foreign policy. Thus, the path of reconciliation remained the only feasible course for Russian foreign policy with China. China, however, was still in the early stages of its economic transformation and hardly in a position to serve as a source of financial aid or know-how. The Kremlin thus had no choice but to accept the West's terms in exchange for its assistance. However, it did so with growing resentment.

Russia's relations with China, by contrast, did not suffer from such resentment. To the contrary, Chinese skepticism of Russia's experiment with political reforms stood in stark contrast with the West's urging of more reforms and insistence on adherence to the "Washington consensus." As the West sought to expand its network of relationships and influence in areas that Russian elites considered their sphere of interest—the states of the former Soviet Union—Russia sought to engage China as a counterweight to the West. The convening of the Shanghai Five—Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—in 1996, followed by the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2001, was an important upgrade in the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Beijing.

The subsequent development of trade and economic relations between Russia and China was consistent with the course of their political relationship. As China's economic growth gathered momentum, the Russian economy continued to sputter. It was beyond the Kremlin's ability to set the terms for economic relations with China, and trade developed along a pattern that Russian policymakers have publicly lamented but done little to correct: Russian raw materials flowed to China in exchange for manufactured goods. The two economies were thus becoming complementary. Russian exports to China fed its economic rise, while the flow of manufactured goods in the opposite direction ensured that the Russian economy was relieved of the burden of modernizing and developing its own manufacturing base.

In the early 21st century, the acceleration of Chinese growth and the spike in commodities prices further cemented that relationship. As Sergei Ivanov, then chief of staff to Putin, told the *Financial Times* in June 2015, "in the 2000s, when we had very high oil prices, the motivation

for carrying out structural reforms and diversifying the economy was not very high.”⁷ The economic boom that Russia experienced during that time was fueled by commodity exports and thus worked against, rather than for, the diversification of the Russian economy, and by extension helped cement Russia’s role as a raw materials supplier to China and consumer of its imports. This asymmetrical partnership was further strengthened in the beginning of Putin’s third presidential term in 2012. In a symbolic move, the Russian president chose not to travel to the G-8 summit in Washington, D.C., shortly after his inauguration and instead made his first foreign trip to China. Putin could not have more clearly signaled his rejection of the West and embrace of the partnership with China in the wake of the domestic unrest and Western criticism that accompanied his return to the presidency.

Given the course of Russia’s development since the collapse of the Soviet Union, one might ask whether at any point in the past three decades Russia had the option of choosing an alternative path. The answer is that within the constraints of Russian foreign policy—the weak underlying economic conditions and priority given to regime survival above all else, often at the expense of the country’s long-term development and economic and social modernization—the ruling elite did not have another option. Considering Russia’s long-term trajectory as a declining power, there was, and continues to be, no alternative to a strong relationship with China. Russia can ill afford to have China as an adversary. Moreover, given the existential threat that a partnership with the West holds for the country’s ruling regime, a close relationship with China—even as a junior partner—is the only sensible choice.

This is not to say that Putin would not seek to exploit such an opening to advance his own interests, but this would not lead to a new U.S.-Russia-China geopolitical realignment. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe’s recent attempts to achieve a breakthrough in relations with Russia are instructive in this respect. Abe’s intense diplomatic engagement with Putin focusing on the issue of the four islands occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II and still held by Russia was partly motivated by the rather transparent desire for a rapprochement with Russia at the expense of China.

Putin has gone along with Abe’s courtship, while inflating expectations in Tokyo of a breakthrough in relations. His visit to Japan in December 2016 did not produce any tangible results for the Japanese side, beyond the promise to keep talking. For Putin, however, the visit was a significant breakthrough. Despite the efforts by the Obama administration to sustain a regime of international isolation around Russia (and Putin personally) in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis and Russia’s expulsion from the G-8, Putin broke through that *cordon sanitaire* and was warmly received in Japan. He thus demonstrated that Russia is by no means isolated on the world stage and succeeded in cracking the solidarity of the new G-7. Russia’s relations with China, in the meantime, do not appear to have suffered as a result of Putin’s flirtation with Abe.

Implications for the United States

Events since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, launched an undeclared war in Ukraine, and rejected the post-Cold War security order in Europe, have extinguished any remaining hopes for what had already become an increasingly unlikely prospect—that Russia would become a security

⁷ “Transcript: Interview with Sergei Ivanov,” *Financial Times*, June 21, 2015.

partner to the United States and its European allies. Without a fundamental change in U.S. policy, the relationship with Russia is more than likely to remain adversarial.

Should the new U.S. administration deliver on its promise to restore relations with Russia and strike a new partnership, this partnership is likely to prove disappointing for U.S. policymakers and fall short of their apparent expectations. It may pay off in greater Russian willingness to cooperate in the fight against ISIS, although Moscow has shown little inclination to become involved in the Syrian conflict beyond its support for the ruling regime. However, a renewed partnership is unlikely to result in Russia being willing to forgo its close relations with China and side with the United States, should the Trump administration challenge Beijing's position on Taiwan, trade, the disputes in the South China Sea, or North Korea—the major issues identified by the new team as its priorities with China.

Taiwan. U.S. relations with Taiwan might be considered a potentially thorny problem for Russia, which has had its own challenges with sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia has both struggled to restore its control over the North Caucasus and violated several of its neighbors' territorial integrity. Moscow had maintained—quietly—contacts with Taipei during the Cold War. There is also the history of Soviet involvement with Chiang Kai-shek under vastly different circumstances. However, nothing in the history of Russian foreign policy before or since 1991 suggests that Moscow may be inclined to exploit this issue for geopolitical or some other advantage and depart from its long-standing adherence to the one-China policy, which recognizes that Beijing is “the sole legitimate government of the whole of China,” that “Taiwan is an inalienable part of the Chinese territory,” and that “the Taiwan question falls within China's internal affairs, in which external forces have no right to interfere.” As a result, Russia “will not establish official relations with Taiwan or conduct official exchanges.”⁸ The expansion of trade and economic relations between Russia and Taiwan after 1991 was not a departure from that policy. Given the strategic importance of Moscow's relations with Beijing and the interests at stake, its position on Taiwan and the one-China policy promises to remain “clear, firm and consistent,” as recently reaffirmed by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹

Trade. A shift in Russia's position on trade closer to that of the new U.S. administration would likely be inconsequential. Russia is not a big enough economy or trading partner for the United States or China to matter for either country's stance opposite the other. Russia's bilateral trade with China and the United States in 2016 is estimated at around \$66 billion and \$20 billion, respectively.¹⁰ For comparison, trade between the United States and China was approximately \$600 billion.¹¹

South China Sea disputes. Russia has not staked out an active position on the South China Sea disputes, in keeping with its rather marginal interests in Southeast Asia. Its main interest in the region appears to be avoiding antagonizing China and protecting this bilateral relationship. In 2016, Russia took an important symbolic step and joined China in a maritime exercise in the South China Sea, but even that was conducted far from the disputed area. Russia's overall position

⁸ “Russia Reiterates One-China Policy in Joint Statement,” Xinhua, March, 21, 2006, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-03/21/content_4328142.htm.

⁹ “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Sochi, May 19, 2016,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), May 19, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2287934#18.

¹⁰ “Russian Trade with China in 2016,” Russian Foreign Trade, February 28, 2017, <http://en.russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2017-02/russian-trade-with-china-in-2016>; and U.S. Census Bureau, “Trade in Goods with Russia 2016,” <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4621.html#2016>.

¹¹ Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, “U.S.-China Trade Facts,” Fact Sheet, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china>.

on the territorial disputes has been that such matters should be handled by regional actors without interference from outside powers—a clear reference to the United States. Putin has publicly backed Beijing in its refusal to recognize the decision of the international arbitration court in China's dispute with the Philippines.

Thus, Russia is unlikely to shift its position on the South China Seas disputes significantly, considering its trajectory so far and the strength of the overall relationship with China. Even if it did, a change in Russia's position would be unlikely to make much difference for U.S. interests given the country's marginal role in the region.

North Korea. Unlike in the case of the South China Sea disputes, Russia considers itself an important party to the situation on the Korean Peninsula and would insist on a seat at the table with veto power over any resolution pursued by the United States or another party. This is similar to the role that Russia played in efforts to resolve the problem of Iran's WMD program. As a global power, Russia would see it as both a right and responsibility to have an active role in the resolution of this crisis.

In addition to concerns about prestige and recognition as a global power, Russia has several more tangible interests at stake in the situation on the Korean Peninsula. In some respects, its interests are very similar to China's and very different from those of the United States. Although Russia shares a land border with North Korea, Russian policymakers do not consider North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles a direct threat to Russian security. From their point of view, North Korea's nuclear weapons program serves as the guarantee of its survival in the face of the far superior enemy—the United States and South Korea. North Korea's nuclear capability presents a threat to Russia only insofar as it could trigger a crisis on the peninsula leading to a military confrontation or outright war. Thus, U.S. policy on the peninsula poses a greater threat to Russian security, for it could provoke desperate actions by North Korea.¹² From Moscow's perspective, pressuring Pyongyang is unlikely to deliver the results that Washington is trying to achieve and could only aggravate the situation. This stance has the additional benefit of being highly consistent with China's position and most likely will not change unless the latter pursues a different course on this issue. Thus, the rapprochement with Russia initially promised by the new U.S. administration (but which now appears unlikely) probably would not result in Moscow significantly changing its stance on the North Korean problem.

Looking to the future, Russian policymakers probably prefer the status quo on the peninsula to other options. The potential for tensions to escalate to the point of an outright conflict carries negative consequences for the interests of Russia as a neighbor of North Korea. But peaceful unification too would bring unwelcome prospects. If it is ever to occur, unification is more likely to be accomplished on the terms dictated by the South than by the North. That would result in an expansion of U.S. influence and almost certainly U.S. military presence right up to Russia's border. Russian policymakers remember German unification and do not welcome its repetition on their Asia-Pacific frontier. In this respect, too, Russian and Chinese interests coincide.

Arms sales. Arms sales to China have long been an important component of the bilateral security relationship, as well as a source of much-needed export revenue for Russia. They have also been a source of concern for U.S. policymakers. This is likely to continue as long as Russia has something to offer China that China's defense industry cannot manufacture on its own or procure

¹² See, for example, "Russia, China Say North Korea's Nuclear Threats Are No Excuse to Deploy U.S. Missile Defenses," Reuters, May 26, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-russia-china-urge-caution-in-countering-north-koreas-nuclear-program-2017-5>.

elsewhere. Decisions to sell or withhold certain kinds of hardware or designs will be made on the basis of Russia's own security concerns, as they have been thus far, rather than in deference to U.S. concerns.

The important point here is that Russia shares many threat perceptions with China, and both see the United States as the militarily and technologically superior adversary whose actions challenge their core interests. China's growing military power is not lost on Russian policymakers, but the United States represents a bigger threat to them. This applies to the U.S. pursuit of missile defense, precision-guided conventional capabilities, and naval, air, and space capabilities, among other factors. What is also not lost on Russian leaders is that the United States represents a much greater challenge or threat to China, which reduces the likelihood of threatening Chinese behavior toward Russia. Thus, security cooperation with China that undercuts the United States in areas of U.S. superiority serves Russian interests.

Moreover, this calculus is unlikely to change in the increasingly improbable event of a U.S.-Russian détente. From Russia's perspective, even if relations were to improve, the United States would still possess threatening capabilities. A change in Russian arms sales policy toward China would require major shifts in the U.S. defense posture—such as abandoning missile defense programs in Europe and Asia—that would be highly improbable under any U.S. administration, no matter how favorably inclined toward Russia.

Central Asia. Central Asia—comprising the former Soviet states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—has undergone a fundamental strategic rebalancing in the past quarter century. Long considered Russia's exclusive domain and economic dependent, the region has reoriented itself toward China, which has invested tens of billions of dollars in its vast mineral resources and infrastructure projects. Russia continues to control important export routes from Central Asia and is still an important market for the region's goods and excess labor, but it has been eclipsed by China as a trading partner and source of investment.¹³ In the future, the disparity between Russia and China as economic partners to Central Asia promises to be even greater if China proceeds with the infrastructure and investment projects planned under the Belt and Road Initiative.

This reorientation of Central Asia toward China has encountered little, if any, resistance from Russia and does not appear to have had an adverse impact on relations between Moscow and Beijing. The former apparently has accepted the latter's economic superiority as a fact of life, as well as its own inability to challenge or compete with China in this domain. Russian policymakers possibly even view this situation as beneficial to their interests insofar as Chinese economic engagement with Central Asia helps provide for the region's economic well-being and stability, which Russia would have been unable to support on its own. The key factor from Moscow's point of view is that Beijing—unlike Washington—does not promote political reform in the region or threaten its stability. The result is a Chinese-Russian condominium in Central Asia, which suits Russian interests and complements other aspects of their overall relationship.

¹³ Toh Han Shih, "China Upstages Russia in Fight for Central Asia," *South China Morning Post*, March 22, 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/business/china-business/article/1744809/china-upstages-russia-fight-central-asia>.

Conclusion

Russia's partnership with China is here to stay for the foreseeable future, or at least so long as the current domestic political arrangement exists in Russia. It is a product of Russia's domestic circumstances, its position on the world stage, and global trends, as well as of a deliberate series of strategic choices by Russian policymakers. Any attempts by the United States to split Russia from China in the interest of exploiting it for geopolitical gain against China are likely to fail.

There are several reasons for this situation. First and most important is the fact that Russia is simply not a big enough factor in areas where U.S. interests collide with those of China. On the issues of both trade and the disputes in the South China Sea, Russia is a marginal actor at best and will remain one for the foreseeable future. In addition, any opening that the United States provides to Russia could enable it to engage in its own geopolitical maneuvering in the European theater, while doing little to weaken China. Washington must beware of unintended consequences.

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

NBR SPECIAL REPORT #66 | JULY 2017

Sino-Russian Security Ties

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NOTE: The author would like to thank Brian O’Keefe for providing research and Rina Katzovitz for editorial assistance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay analyzes the recent increase in Sino-Russian security ties by looking at a range of indicators, including arms sales, joint military exercises, and treaties, and discusses the impact on the U.S. and its allies.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Chinese-Russian security collaboration has been expanding in several areas. In addition to their frequent senior-level political discussions on counterterrorism and regional security issues, China has been buying several more sophisticated weapons from Russia, including new warplanes and air defense systems. In addition, the two militaries have increased the pace of their joint exercises and defense dialogues. Whereas they used to hold one or two drills each year, they now conduct several ground and naval exercises annually. Shared security goals include averting bilateral conflicts, maintaining border security, facilitating arms sales, and influencing the U.S. and other parties. Regular Sino-Russian military exercises have since been a foundational tool for institutionalizing their defense ties. The leaders of both countries view their changed security relationship as a major success that they strive to sustain. Nonetheless, their mutual defense commitments are tenuous and their engagements remain below that found in a traditional military alliance.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Chinese-Russian defense ties reinforce and complement other aspects of the bilateral relationship, which has remained focused on economic, energy, and nonsecurity issues.
- Russian arms sales to China allow both countries to circumvent Western sanctions, while the air and naval weapons systems that Russia is selling China would facilitate possible Chinese military operations against the U.S. and its Asian allies.
- The U.S. could proactively try to counter Sino-Russian security ties through more assertive policies—e.g., sanctions designed to limit the relationship. This strategy, however, risks driving China and Russia closer together instead of apart.
- For now, security relations between China and Russia remain considerably weaker than those between the U.S. and its main allies in Asia or Europe; in particular, there is little indication that Beijing and Moscow will soon enter a formal mutual defense alliance.

The first decade of the Cold War saw adversarial defense relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union. This enmity continued until the late 1980s, but after the Soviet Union's collapse, ties improved significantly. The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident and the Cold War's end catalyzed their partnership. These events weakened Sino-Western security ties and enabled the Russian Federation to become the primary weapons supplier of the PRC. Sino-Russian national security collaboration continues to grow in many areas, including arms sales, defense dialogues, joint exercises, and other bilateral and multilateral activities. China and Russia have signed several arms-control and confidence-building measures, expanded contacts between their national security establishments, and institutionalized their defense and regional security dialogues, military exchanges, and strategic consultations, within both bilateral and multilateral frameworks, especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Their shared objectives encompass averting bilateral conflicts, maintaining border security, promoting arms transfers, and influencing third parties such as the United States. Regular Sino-Russian military exercises have become a foundational tool for institutionalizing defense ties between the two countries—showing their shared commitment to military cooperation despite having no formal mutual defense alliance. The leaders of both countries view their changed defense relationship as a major success that they strive to sustain. Beijing's and Moscow's strained ties with Western countries leave each as the most crucial security partner of the other. Despite Chinese and Russian representatives denying that this cooperation is directed against the United States or any other country, the wide-ranging ties between China and Russia present security challenges to Washington and its allies. Specifically, Russian arms deliveries have enhanced the anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Asia-Pacific. Greater security collaboration would make both countries more formidable military rivals of the United States.

This essay examines the three main dimensions of the Sino-Russian defense relationship: Russian arms sales to China, expanding binational and regional security dialogues, and the growing number and scope of military exercises. It then reviews the political-military implications of these developments, especially for the United States.

Arms Sales

The PRC has purchased more weapons from Russia than from any other country, with around four-fifths of its foreign weapons coming from Russia. Meanwhile, Beijing has been one of Moscow's major arms clients—around one-fourth of the Russian Federation's defense exports have gone to the PRC. During the 1990s, China's purchases of Russian arms amounted to around a billion dollars each year. During the mid-2000s, the total annual value of Russian arms sales sometimes exceeded two billion dollars.¹ Yet the nature of the weapons transfers has changed. The structural transformation of the PRC's military-industrial complex has forced Russian sellers to adjust their tactics to keep their share of the Chinese market. Rather than buy more widely available Soviet-era systems, which the PRC can now build itself, China demands higher-quality military technology transfers from Russia and has pushed for joint defense R&D, which has begun with respect to some

¹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

aviation projects. Instead of obtaining weapons directly from Russian manufacturers that the PLA can use with the simple turn of a key, Chinese defense managers have sought to incorporate Russian technology more directly into the PRC's military-industrial complex.

Toward the end of the last decade, the PRC abruptly reduced its defense purchases from Russia, no longer negotiating new multibillion-dollar arms deals. Russian defense contractors mostly maintained existing Chinese weapons systems by selling spare and replacement parts or upgrading technologies that Russia had provided earlier. By the end of the decade, the PRC's ability to manufacture weapons had improved, while Russia worried that China was misappropriating its defense technologies. Concerns about Chinese reverse engineering and illicit copying of Russian-supplied defense technology were focused on how China drew on Russia's Su-27SK Flanker in making the PLA Air Force's J-11B.² Moscow began demanding that Beijing order a minimum number of items, such as two dozen warplanes, for each major weapons system it purchased. Meanwhile, Russia was rearming its own military and selling more weapons to other countries—such as India, Syria, and Iran—reducing the importance of the Russian defense transfers to China.

However, in recent years, China has begun buying some of Russia's most sophisticated weapons—the Su-35S Flanker-E high-performance fighter jet and the S-400 Triumf (NATO designation: SA-21 Growler) surface-to-air missile system are two prominent examples. Russian arms exports have excluded only missile early-warning, military space, nuclear weapons, and other strategic capabilities.³ Even so, the Su-35S will provide Chinese engineers with the ability to learn more about the jet's AL-41F1S engine, Irbis-E radar, and electronic warfare suite. The S-400 Triumf can target aircraft and short-range ballistic missiles.⁴ In order to meet China's demands for higher-quality systems and additional technology transfer without risking the theft of more Russian intellectual property (IP) or the loss of the Russian defense industry's foreign markets to China's increasingly effective arms exporters, Moscow has agreed to codevelop new major weapons systems with Chinese partners and sell them to third parties. For now, however, progress has been modest, concentrated in dual-use systems with civilian as well as military applications, such as helicopters.⁵

In several ways, China and Russia are natural arms transfer partners. The PLA cannot buy weapons from Western countries due to the EU arms embargo and U.S. sanctions. Additionally, China can more easily absorb Russian defense products due to its large and growing base of Soviet-era military technologies. In turn, Russia's military modernization program is partly funded by defense exports, and foreign sales could become more crucial if the government implements plans to stabilize military spending in coming years.⁶ Other reasons for the recent uptick are more rigorous IP agreements between China and Russia alongside additional measures to protect Russian-supplied defense technology from Chinese reverse engineering and knockoff

² Gabriel Domínguez, "Why Russia Needs China to Buy Its Weapons," *Deutsche Welle*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/why-russia-needs-china-to-buy-its-weapons/a-18870472>.

³ Author's interview with Russian defense expert, Washington, D.C., January 2017.

⁴ "China to Receive 6 Battalions of Russian S-400 Air Defense Systems," *Defense Watch*, November 14, 2016, <http://defense-watch.com/2016/11/14/china-receive-6-battalions-russian-s-400-air-defense-systems>.

⁵ "Rostec and China to Sign Contract for Heavy Helicopter Production at the End of 2016," *Rostec*, July 11, 2016, <http://rostec.ru/en/news/4518543>.

⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Soveshchaniye po voprosam ispol'zovaniya potentsiala OPK v proizvodstve vysokotekhnologichnoy produktitsii grazhdanskogo naznacheniya" [Meeting on the Question of the Use of the Potential of the Defense Industry in the Production of High-Tech Civilian Products], Kremlin, September 8, 2016, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52852>.

production. For example, the Su-35S fighters provided to the PLA had their engines welded shut as a safeguard against Chinese reverse engineering.⁷

Conversely, Russian policymakers may have calculated that they had better sell China some advanced systems like the Su-35 or S-400 now, given that in a few years the Chinese defense industry could acquire the capacity to manufacture such advanced weapons itself.⁸ Russian companies derive substantial revenue from arms sales to China at a time when the country faces many general economic challenges and national firms have struggled to maintain their second-ranked status in the global arms market.⁹ Moreover, China's high-value defense purchases help address Russian criticism about the imbalanced nature of Sino-Russian trade, with the PRC buying mostly natural resources rather than high-technology exports. Through arms sales Russia also gains insights into, and perhaps influence over, Chinese military developments. Another respect in which this relationship is beneficial is that Russian strategists perceive the PLA's growing capabilities as distracting Pentagon planners from focusing U.S. defensive efforts against Russian armed forces. Arms sales also enhance Moscow's leverage with other potential Chinese adversaries such as Japan, whose leaders want to limit Sino-Russian defense cooperation as well as reduce security tensions with Moscow to gain leverage with Beijing.¹⁰

Growing Security Ties

China and Russia's extensive defense ties encompass mutual consultations, a reciprocal "no first use" nuclear weapons posture, and cooperation against separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism. The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, signed in 2001, promotes security ties but lacks a mutual defense clause, such as that found in the mutual defense treaty that the PRC and Soviet Union signed in 1950. The treaty stresses mutual nonaggression, noninterference, peaceful coexistence, antiterrorism, international law, and respect for national sovereignty, equal security, and territorial integrity.¹¹ Representatives from both sides deny that they view each other as a military threat. They have also avoided publicly expressing concern about one another's military activities, while jointly criticizing third parties such as the United States and its allies. For example, Moscow and Beijing have recently focused their criticism on the U.S. deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea, though the two governments have not engaged in any other visible concrete joint countermeasures, such as pooled R&D against U.S. ballistic missile defenses.

⁷ William Ide, "Prospect of Warming U.S.-Russia Ties Worries China," Voice of America News, January 17, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/prospect-of-warming-us-russia-ties-worries-china/3679349.html>.

⁸ Pavel K. Baev, "Russia's Pivot to China Goes Astray: The Impact on the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture," *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no. 1 (2016): 98.

⁹ "Asia and the Middle East Lead Rise in Arms Imports; the United States and Russia Remain Largest Arms Exporters, Says SIPRI," SIPRI, February 22, 2016, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2016/asia-and-middle-east-lead-rise-arms-imports-united-states-and-russia-remain-largest-arms-exporters>.

¹⁰ See, for example, John Grady, "Report: Russian Arms Sales Give China a Better Chance in Competing with U.S. Ships," USNI News, September 2, 2015, <https://news.usni.org/2015/09/02/report-russian-arms-sales-give-china-a-better-chance-in-competing-with-u-s-ships>; and Paul N. Schwartz, "Russia's Contribution to China's Surface Warfare Capabilities," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 28, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia%E2%80%99s-contribution-china%E2%80%99s-surface-warfare-capabilities>.

¹¹ "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation," July 24, 2001, available from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC) at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t15771.shtml.

Chinese and Russian leaders have described the two countries' military ties as a critical dimension of their broader strategic partnership.¹² Over the course of the 1990s, both sides established confidence- and security-building measures, developed processes to avoid future incidents, placed constraints on conventional military activities within one hundred kilometers of their border, constructed rapid communication networks, and arranged regular consultations between their general staffs and defense ministries. For example, on October 13, 2009, China and Russia signed an arrangement to notify each other of impending ballistic missile launches. Vladimir Putin called the accord "a very important step towards enhancing mutual trust and strengthening our strategic partnership."¹³ There are regular sessions of the Russian-Chinese Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation, deputy chiefs of staff meetings, and other binational meetings of national security officials.¹⁴ PRC and Russian leaders also frequently meet during the summits of regional institutions such as the SCO and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Professional education exchanges allow soldiers from one country to attend the other's military academies.

Major Sino-Russian meetings usually discuss regional security issues affecting Central Asia, the Middle East, and other critical areas.¹⁵ For instance, China and Russia have at times sharply criticized the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan, especially its inability to suppress narcotics trafficking. Yet they also worry about a Western military drawdown that could worsen instability in Central Asia and undermine their regional integration projects. (Both Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative and Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union traverse Central Asia.) Beijing and Moscow have expressed alarm at the recent spread of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Eurasia and launched a controversial trilateral peace initiative involving the Afghan Taliban, which now encompasses the Afghan government, India, Iran, and other parties.¹⁶

Regular military exercises have further institutionalized Sino-Russian defense ties. Multilateral and bilateral drills have varied in format, location, and size, ranging from tabletop command post drills, such as a recent one simulating joint missile defense, to full-scale field exercises, such as the annual SCO drills. The PLA also regularly joins Russian-run multinational showcase events, such as the International Army Games and tank biathlons. The May 2016 aerospace security drill in Moscow represented the first joint command air and missile defense exercise between the two countries.

The most prominent ground exercises have been the Peace Mission drills held every one or two years since 2005. China and Russia rehearse such skills as fighting insurgencies, interdicting guerrillas, liberating hostages, and rendering tactical air support, as well as preparing for airborne and other special forces assaults. They also have held several rounds of maritime maneuvers, which Russia refers to as Naval Interaction and China calls Joint Sea. These naval exercises cover maritime search and rescue, antisubmarine warfare, combined air defense, freeing of seized ships,

¹² "China, Russia Agree on Military Cooperation Projects," Xinhua, November 6, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-11/06/c_127183099.htm.

¹³ Luke Champlin, "China, Russia Agree on Launch Notification," Arms Control Association, November 5, 2009, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_11/ChinaRussia.

¹⁴ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on September 13, 2016," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), September 13, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1397276.shtml.

¹⁵ Dmitry Solovyov, "Energy, Aerospace on Agenda of Putin's Trip to China: Kremlin," Reuters, June 22, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-china-idUSKCN0Z81HS>.

¹⁶ Cristina Burack, Mikhail Bushuev, and Masood Saifullah, "U.S. Skips Out on Afghanistan-Taliban Conference in Moscow," Deutsche Welle, April 14, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/us-skips-out-on-afghanistan-taliban-conference-in-moscow/a-38426486>.

escort of civilian vessels, and amphibious assaults on Pacific islands. In 2012 the first round of joint maritime drills occurred in the Yellow Sea, off the coast of Qingdao; the second was held in the Sea of Japan (also known as the East Sea); and the third occurred in the East China Sea. The 2015 maritime drill was notable for occurring in two phases in separate parts of the world, with the first phase taking place in the Mediterranean Sea and the second in the Sea of Japan.

These Sino-Russian exercises serve several purposes. For instance, they can enhance interoperability between the two armed forces through developing joint tactics, techniques, and procedures.¹⁷ At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2016, Russian deputy defense minister Anatoly Antonov stated that such exercises show a “high level of practical cooperation” and “help improve combat skills and credibility of the Russian and Chinese armed forces and demonstrate the defense ministries’ readiness to effectively counter modern challenges and threats together.”¹⁸ The exercises also encourage arms sales and other defense industrial collaboration, send signals to third parties—reassuring security partners while deterring potential adversaries—and keep China and Russia informed on each other’s military capabilities as a means of mutual confidence building.

Implications

Impact on the United States and the Region

Chinese and Russian officials claim that the partnership between the two countries promotes peace and security globally. While this assertion is debatable, the cooperation does enhance their own security and regional interests. For example, Russian arms sales to China circumvent Western sanctions on both countries and give the PLA weapons that it cannot acquire from domestic suppliers. Of note, the PLA’s A2/AD capabilities have been enhanced by its purchase of Russian anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles. The sales limit the United States’ ability to deter Chinese coercion of Japan, Taiwan, and other U.S. partners situated in the region and enable China to continue building its power and presence in the western Pacific.¹⁹ Likewise, the Sino-Russian partnership allows Russia to focus its military efforts on Ukraine, Syria, and other areas outside Asia. Their overlapping security spheres, centered on their joint border region, give China and Russia a de facto secure “strategic rear”—a sphere where they do not perceive a threat from each other and that lies beyond the reach of the Pentagon.²⁰

Both countries seek capabilities meant to negate the United States’ technological strengths and exploit asymmetrical weaknesses in U.S. defenses.²¹ For example, Russian and Chinese security experts have discussed ways to cooperate against U.S. missile defenses, especially those in Northeast Asia, and Beijing and Moscow have announced that they will hold their second missile defense drill in 2017.²² Chinese and Russian arms sales also proliferate A2/AD capabilities

¹⁷ Charles Clover, “Russia and China Learn from Each Other as Military Ties Deepen,” *Financial Times*, June 23, 2016, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a3e35348-2962-11e6-8b18-91555f2f4fde.html#axzz4Ckj1hDbn>.

¹⁸ “Expanding Military Ties with China Priority for Russia—Defense Ministry,” TASS, June 3, 2016, <http://tass.ru/en/politics/880015>.

¹⁹ Rakesh Krishnan Simha, “China Emulates Russian Military Strategy in the Pacific,” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, August 20, 2015, http://rbth.com/blogs/2015/08/20/china_emulates_russian_military_strategy_in_the_pacific_48627.html.

²⁰ Artyom Lukin, “Why the Russian Far East Is So Important to China,” *Huffington Post*, January 12, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/artiom-lukin/russian-far-east-china_b_6452618.html.

²¹ Simha, “China Emulates Russian Military Strategy in the Pacific.”

²² “Russia, China to Hold 2nd Missile Defense Drill in 2017,” *Sputnik*, October 11, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201610111046212661-russia-china-missile-defense>.

(e.g., cruise and ballistic missiles, cyber weapons, air defense systems, and naval and land mines) to other countries, which threatens U.S. primacy in the global commons by possibly negating some U.S. conventional power-projection advantages. Russia, for example, is negotiating new arms deliveries to Iran worth billions of dollars.²³ From a regional security perspective, such deals make U.S. deterrence less credible because U.S. adversaries like Iran and North Korea now see China and Russia as possible security counterweights to the United States. Such increased military cooperation also puts pressure on U.S. relationships with allies such as Japan, which look to Washington for protection against China and Russia.

Despite closer security ties, it is unlikely that there will be a scenario where a combined Sino-Russian fleet engages in joint military action. Even in Central Asia, the SCO lacks standing military structures or functions and its counterterrorism center conducts few activities besides exchanging information about terrorist threats and harmonizing members' terrorism-related regulations. There is also no evidence that China and Russia have been consistently coordinating their political-military pressure against third parties like Japan on a regular basis. In some cases, Sino-Russian collaboration could arguably benefit the United States. For example, greater Chinese and Russian security assistance to the Afghan government and army could allow the United States to redirect its counterterrorism resources to other priorities.

However, China and Russia may cooperate more directly against U.S. interests in the future. Russia may sell China more advanced air, sea, and ground platforms. It may also begin buying military technologies from Chinese manufacturers, including major weapons systems like the Type 054A frigate, which joined the 2015 joint naval exercise with the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea. China and Russia have already agreed to codevelop new major weapons systems and sell them to third parties, which might include states hostile to U.S. interests. Their growing foreign military activities may also increase the risk of accidents or inadvertent encounters with the U.S. and other militaries, given that confidence- and security-building measures are harder to negotiate on a trilateral basis than bilaterally.

In theory, China and Russia could sign a formal mutual defense treaty, under which each country would render military aid to the other in cases of armed aggression against one partner by a third party, or other stronger defense cooperation agreements. Although Beijing has consistently denied any intention to seek foreign military alliances and bases, it has made major changes to its foreign security policies in recent years. In the South China Sea, China has adopted a more assertive stance, involving the massive construction and ongoing militarization of artificial islands in disputed territory. Beijing could likewise decide to revise its no-alliance policy. More plausibly, China and Russia could deepen their defense collaboration by increasing the frequency, size, and ambition of their military exercises and other engagements. In particular, they could prepare to conduct more extensive joint military campaigns, such as in Central or East Asia.

U.S. Options

The United States could proactively try to counter Sino-Russian security ties through more assertive policies—with the danger of driving China and Russia closer together instead of apart. If Washington wants to pursue this risky strategy, it could try to exploit their differences. For example, Chinese analysts doubt Moscow's willingness to support Beijing in a possible

²³ Roland Oliphant, "Russia May Sell Iran \$10 Billion Worth of Tanks and Jets in New Arms Deal," *Telegraph*, November 14, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/14/russia-may-sell-iran-10-billion-worth-of-tanks-and-jets-in-new-a>.

confrontation with another Russian partner such as India or Vietnam. Likewise, while Moscow has moved toward backing the Chinese position in the South China Sea disputes, it still has not fully sided with Beijing. In a direct Sino-U.S. confrontation, the failure to adequately support Beijing's territorial claims could have the same embittering effect as Moscow's lukewarm backing for the PRC's assertive foreign policy during the 1950s. Meanwhile, the PRC has not recognized the self-declared separatist "governments" backed by Moscow in occupied Georgia. Although China and Russia regularly denounce U.S. sanctions that affect their entities, Chinese banks and corporations have de facto respected Western-imposed measures limiting commercial operations in Crimea. By pursuing the risky strategy of adopting additional sanctions on Russia designed to limit Sino-Russian defense cooperation, Washington could weaken this dimension of their partnership. Alternatively, reducing U.S. sanctions on Russia could remove one factor that has been motivating its eagerness to deepen security ties with China.

Arms control issues provide another means for the United States to amplify Sino-Russian differences. Some Russians want China to join the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) negotiations, which until now have occurred exclusively within a bilateral framework. The Obama administration argued that the next round of strategic nuclear force cuts following the 2010 New START agreement should still apply only to Russia and the United States, given that they have so many more nuclear warheads than China or any other country. The Trump administration may wish to explicitly call on Beijing to join the next round of force cuts, though Moscow will at least initially demand inclusion of NATO allies Great Britain and France as well. The United States may also suggest that Russia try to convince China to join the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which China would also likely decline to do.

Future trends may weaken the Sino-Russian security partnership even without overt U.S. countermeasures. Beijing's doubts about Moscow were seen earlier in Chinese concerns about Russia's capacity to ensure the security of Central Asia. This region has thus far not seen much overt rivalry between Russia and China due to their harmonious near-term interests, but Central Asia's stability is becoming more crucial for the PRC's plans both for east-west integration and for the security of its western borders against sub-state terrorist threats. Doubts about Russia's will and capacity to maintain Eurasian stability have been less evident since Moscow moved against Ukraine in 2014 but could resurface. If Chinese leaders believe it necessary to intervene militarily in Central Asia, Moscow could grow uneasy about the implications of China's rising power for Russian influence in Eurasia.

Russian arms exporters already want to develop a wider portfolio of clients and seek to balance sales to China with deals to other key partners. Some of these buyers, such as India and Vietnam, are potential Chinese military adversaries. India in particular is becoming more important. From 2012 to 2016, China acquired 11% of Russia's arms exports, whereas India received 38%.²⁴ Moscow has recently agreed to sell its S-400 systems to New Delhi. Russia's military establishment also seeks to deepen its joint ventures with Indian firms, in part to maintain its dominant market share and influence in the face of strong U.S. defense competition.²⁵ Conversely, Russian arms dealers worry about having to compete with increasingly formidable Chinese weapons manufactures. Thus far, Chinese defense exports have contested Russian military sales in only a

²⁴ Aude Fleurant, Pieter D. Wezeman, Siemon T. Wezeman, and Nan Tian, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2016," SIPRI, Fact Sheet, February 2017, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-in-international-arms-transfers-2016.pdf>.

²⁵ Anuj Srivas, "India, Russia Look to Massive Defense Deals to Bring Back That Loving Feeling," *Wire* (India), October 14, 2016, <http://thewire.in/73136/india-russia-look-massive-defence-deals-bring-back-loving-feeling>.

few low-value markets. Yet Russian policymakers understand that Chinese technological prowess could allow the PRC to find a niche for its defense exports by selling weapons only slightly less capable than their Russian equivalents but at a lower price. For instance, in 2016, Moscow expected the Royal Thai Army to order Russian T-90 main battle tanks. Instead, Thailand negotiated to buy China's less expensive MBT-3000 tanks.²⁶ Similarly, Russia's fear about Chinese cybertheft of technological secrets in the defense realm and other areas remains high.

During the U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump stood out for openly discussing the need to counter a Sino-Russian alignment against the United States. Trump faulted the Obama administration for confronting Beijing and Moscow concurrently and therefore driving them together. Following his election, several of Trump's advisers indicated that they intended to work more actively to avert stronger Sino-Russian alignment against U.S. interests by reducing tensions with Russia. From one perspective, the enactment of new sanctions on Russia by the Obama administration and the U.S. Congress actually gave Trump more chips to use in bargaining for changes in Russian policies toward China. For example, the United States could make Russia constraining its arms sales to China a condition for the relaxation of some sanctions. The Trump administration also seemed prepared to allow Russia to take the lead in Syria.

However, several factors have at least delayed the anticipated U.S. policy reversal of moving closer to Russia while more directly confronting China. These include the United States' decision to launch a missile strike against the Assad government following its use of chemical weapons against civilians, subsequent U.S. pressure on Moscow to abandon Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, the sustainment of U.S. sanctions on Russia, and Trump's decision to avoid more directly confronting China in return for Beijing helping U.S. efforts to end North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programs.

Even if the Trump administration continues the Obama administration's policy of confronting Beijing and Moscow concurrently, Washington should still devote more attention and resources to assessing Sino-Russian arms sales, military exchanges, and other security ties. Furthermore, U.S. and allied sanctions should more directly aim to deny Beijing and Moscow technologies that they could obtain from the other so as not to strengthen their defense ties. The U.S.-EU dialogue on major arms sales should comprehensively cover possible sales to both China and Russia so that U.S. allies and partners understand the depth of Washington's concerns about such transfers and adopt better end-user and other export controls. Trade agreements and related measures could improve defense industrial ties with key U.S. partners and discourage them from buying Chinese or Russian weapons. Finally, the United States should continue to strive to maintain its military technological advantages over both states in critical areas such as air power, information operations, and missile defense.

²⁶ Gleb Fedorov, "After 20 Years Russia Makes First Inroads into ASEAN," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, May 20, 2016, https://rbth.com/international/2016/05/20/after-20-years-russia-makes-first-inroads-into-asean_596093.

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

NBR SPECIAL REPORT #66 | JULY 2017

Sino-Russian Relations in a Global Context: Implications for the United States

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay analyzes the newfound closeness and potential trajectory of Russia-China relations in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia and assesses the implications for U.S. interests and policies.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Sino-Russian relations have been friendly and cooperative over the past 25 years as a result of common strategic interests. Since the Ukraine crisis in 2014, Moscow has felt it necessary to surmount earlier reservations about China's rapid rise and move into an even closer relationship with Beijing that masks an underlying level of discomfort. China now occupies the most favored position in the strategic triangle between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Whether this trend persists will depend, as it has in recent history, on Chinese and Russian interests, tensions in their bilateral relationship, each country's relations with the U.S., and most especially the wisdom of U.S. foreign policy. Central Asia, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia are three regions where closer Sino-Russian relations are likely to pose a greater challenge to U.S. interests. U.S. foreign policy needs to be formulated with regard to the specific dynamics in Sino-Russian relations at work in each region.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- U.S. foreign policy must realistically adjust to the shifting global power balance and adopt a coherent, sustainable, and affordable approach that is consistent with fundamental U.S. interests and principles.
- The U.S. must restore confidence among allies and friends that it intends to remain fully engaged in the world, including as a security guarantor to its allies in the Asia-Pacific.
- In regions where China and Russia have stronger historic and geographic interests than the U.S., as in Central Asia, or where their alignment can adversely affect U.S. interests, as in the Middle East, the U.S. should not play a spoiler role but should engage with both countries when desirable and resist their individual and collective challenges when necessary.

Pundits, scholars, and public officials are preoccupied by a growing perception that cooperation between Russia and China is evolving to a degree that could profoundly undermine U.S. interests and policies. Some experts conceptualize the bilateral relationship as an “axis of convenience,” while others see a genuine strategic alignment emerging against the United States.¹ This essay stakes an intermediate position and, upon that basis, analyzes Sino-Russian interests and cooperation in three key regions: Central Asia, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia. The two countries’ individual and collective interests in these regions pose major challenges for the United States; yet skillful U.S. diplomacy can moderate the adverse impact through careful management of relations with Moscow and Beijing. This essay thus argues that U.S. policy is a key factor in determining the future direction and nature of Sino-Russian relations.

The Current State of Sino-Russian Relations

Until the Ukraine crisis in 2014, Sino-Russian relations were close, friendly, and healthy. Chinese and Russian public attitudes toward the other country were positive.² Each side was deferential on issues of primary importance to the other: for China, North Korea; for Russia, Ukraine and Syria.

China’s turn to pragmatism under Deng Xiaoping and later the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the element of ideological rivalry from the relationship. Both countries have good reasons for strategic cooperation: They both are opposed to a world dominated by a sole superpower. They both feel threatened by the United States’ unilateralism, interventionism, and support for color revolutions. Their economies are complementary, with Russia supplying military equipment, energy, and raw materials, while China provides capital and consumer goods. They have a common interest in not allowing Central Asia to become a breeding ground for terrorism.

For over three decades since the breakthrough in U.S.-China relations in the early 1970s, the United States occupied the favored position in the strategic triangle between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, in the sense of having the best relationship with the other two. China now occupies this position. The disintegration of the Soviet Union essentially negated the Russian threat in Chinese eyes and vastly reduced the element of great-power rivalry in bilateral relations. From China’s standpoint, this is a desirable development. Obviously, it is less so in the eyes of Russians, who regret their fall from superpower status, worry about the rapid rise of China, and resent their “junior partner” relationship with Beijing.

Nevertheless, common interests between Russia and China are sufficient to hold in check Russia’s strategic insecurities resulting from China’s rise and ill-concealed ambitions to expand its influence in Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Until now, neither country has believed that its interests would be served by forming a strategic alliance against the United States, although the constraints in this respect are stronger in the case of China.

The statistics speak for themselves. Although Sino-Russian trade increased twenty-fold over the past 25 years, reaching a level of approximately \$95 billion in 2014, China’s trade with the

¹ For a recent defense of the axis of convenience framework, see Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World* (Docklands: Penguin Random House Australia, 2017).

² Dmitri Trenin, *True Partners? How Russia and China See Each Other* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2012). Since the mid-2000s, Chinese have regarded Russia as either the friendliest or the second-friendliest country toward China. In Russia, an opinion poll in 2009 ranked China as the fourth-friendliest country.

United States was six times as large that year and ten times as large in 2015.³ Chinese investment is pouring into Russia and the states of the former Soviet Union, and China is now Russia's largest trading partner. Yet there is still minimal Russian investment in China, in contrast with the hundreds of billions of dollars of Western investment.

Moreover, China's leaders are acutely aware that overt hostility toward the United States would carry a major risk of compromising their strategic objective of keeping Taiwan within a one-China framework. Ever since Richard Nixon's breakthrough with China in the early 1970s, successive U.S. administrations have favored peaceful and constructive cross-strait relations and the development of broad common interests in trade, investment, and communication links between Taiwan and the mainland. A decision by China to form a partnership with Russia that was clearly targeted against the United States would increase the likelihood that the United States would once again begin to view Taiwan as a strategic asset in dealing with an antagonistic China, thus undermining Beijing's unification goal.

The Impact of the Confrontation over Ukraine

Following the emergence of the NATO confrontation with Russia over Ukraine in 2014, the relationship between Beijing and Moscow has become unhealthy close. Under the impact of Western sanctions, Russia is now setting aside the reservations that had limited its cooperation with China in areas such as energy, regional infrastructure development, security in Central and South Asia, and the sale of advanced weaponry.

To understand the dynamics of the Sino-Russian relationship since 2014, it is important to address the question of whether Vladimir Putin's embrace of China is a function of his inherent hostility toward the West, or whether the West's failure accurately to read Russian signals with respect to NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine produced an avoidable confrontation whose consequences drove Russia into the arms of China. While both factors may have played a role, the latter factor is arguably the more important consideration.⁴ To the extent that Western actions in Europe partly explain the current unnaturally close alignment between Moscow and Beijing, then easing tensions between the West and Russia in Europe could help restore a more normal and limited pattern of cooperation between Russia and China.

The Chinese have a saying that "when the snipe and the clam grapple, it is the fisherman who stands to benefit"; in other words, it is the third party who benefits from a tussle between two other parties. China has benefitted from the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine, and this is reflected in the current state of Sino-Russian relations. Although the relationship is now unnaturally close and adjustments can be expected in the future, the underpinning of common interests is still sufficient to offset Russia's strategic worries about China's growing heft in world affairs, including in Russia's backyard. Xi Jinping is no longer following the earlier rule of thumb that Russia would not seek to block Chinese economic expansion in Central Asia, while China would respect Russia's primary security interests in countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union. In the short term, these nagging issues will not destabilize the Sino-Russian relationship, though over time the discordant elements could become more significant.

³ Alexander Gabuev, "Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis," Carnegie Moscow Center, June 2016, 3-4, 15, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_CP278_Gabuev_revised_FINAL.pdf; Implications for the United States.

⁴ For background material on this issue, see Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015); Peter Conradi, *Who Lost Russia? How the World Entered a New Cold War* (London: Oneworld, 2017); and "Russia: Kosovo and the Asymmetry of Perceptions," Stratfor, December 18, 2007.

A Stable but Imbalanced Strategic Partnership

Former Chinese vice foreign minister Fu Ying's 2016 article in *Foreign Affairs* provides a useful characterization of the Chinese view of the Sino-Russian relationship.⁵ She characterizes it as a stable strategic partnership, not a "marriage of convenience," and as "complex, sturdy, and deeply rooted." Fu concludes that "changes in international relations since the end of the Cold War have only brought the two countries closer together." That is a polite way of saying that U.S. behavior since the end of the Cold War, which both countries view as high-handed, has driven them toward a closer relationship.

At the same time, Fu frankly acknowledges that China's rise has produced discomfort among some Russians. In particular, there is still talk in Russia of the "China threat." A 2008 poll by Russia's Public Opinion Foundation showed that around 60% of Russians were concerned that Chinese migration to the border areas in the Russian Far East would threaten Russia's territorial integrity, while 41% believed that a stronger China would harm Russia's interests. In addition, Russians are worried that China is competing for influence in their neighborhood. Moscow initially was reluctant to support Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative before ultimately embracing it in 2014 (after the crisis with the West over Ukraine).

On the Chinese side, Fu notes that some in China continue to nurse historical grievances regarding Russia. Despite the formal resolution of the border issue, Chinese commentators still make critical references to the nearly 600,000 square miles of Chinese territory that tsarist Russia annexed in the late nineteenth century.⁶ There is also no question that China has reservations about Russian behavior in Ukraine. While Beijing stopped short of direct criticism, Fu noted that after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated unequivocally that Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity should be respected. At a trilateral China-Russia-U.S. conference hosted by China that spring, a Chinese specialist on Russia pointedly told the Russian participants that their country's actions in Ukraine had consequences for East Asia.⁷

Two aspects of Russia's behavior in Ukraine are particularly disturbing to China. First, the use of a referendum in Crimea to provide a basis for separating Crimea from Ukraine and returning it to Russia. This decision set an undesirable precedent from China's standpoint. During the independence-minded presidency of Chen Shui-bian in Taiwan from 2000 to 2008, Beijing adamantly opposed proposals by Chen to hold referenda in Taiwan on issues such as UN membership. Beijing saw such measures as a means of mobilizing public opinion in Taiwan in favor of independence. Second, Putin's blatant infiltration of weapons and troops into eastern Ukraine to prevent Kiev from reasserting central control plays out China's worst nightmare. It is exactly this sort of behavior that Beijing fears with respect to its separatist-minded areas of Tibet and Xinjiang. China has not forgotten the CIA's support for separatists in Tibet during the 1950s and 1960s.

⁵ Fu Ying, "How China Sees Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-12-14/how-china-sees-russia>.

⁶ See, for example, Miles Yu, "Storm over Russia Border Rages," *Washington Times*, November 12, 2015. The article notes that when the Chinese media reported that a small adjustment of border markers had been made on the Sino-Russian border, signifying the return to China of roughly 1.8 square miles of land from Russia, tens of thousands of Chinese netizens accused the government of failing to demand the return of all the "lost territories" ceded to Russia in the mid-nineteenth century. Similar demands were raised at the time of President Xi's visit to Moscow in 2013.

⁷ Yu Xiaoli, "Academic Seminar on U.S.-China-Russia Relations Held in SJTU," Shanghai Jiao Tong University, April 8, 2014, <http://en.sjtu.edu.cn/news/academic-seminar-on-us-china-russia-relations-held-in-sjtu>.

These differences, however, should not be blown out of proportion. At the moment, there is little to no outside support for separatist elements in China. Beijing is also sympathetic to Russia's resistance to NATO's westward expansion, even while it views Russian behavior in Ukraine as undesirable from the standpoint of China's own interests.

In sum, over the 25 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China's worries about the Soviet threat have been displaced by a sense that cooperative relations with Russia will serve Chinese interests. Chinese leaders have consistently failed to express strategic concerns about Russia during this period and are pleased that relations with Moscow are good and getting better. Russia, by contrast, still harbors strategic concerns about the future behavior of the emerging Chinese colossus, even while Beijing is treating Moscow as a true friend in need.

These tensions need to be kept in perspective when assessing the implications of contemporary Sino-Russian relations for the United States. The closeness of the relationship at present has the potential to have an adverse impact on a host of U.S. foreign policy interests around the world, especially in regions where the Trump administration will face daunting challenges. Nevertheless, there are policy-relevant differences in the respective interests of Beijing and Moscow in dealing with the United States that will limit, but not negate, the challenge posed by the current close alignment between China and Russia.

The remainder of this essay looks at three regions where the impact of closer Sino-Russian relations on U.S. interests will be greatest: Central Asia, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia. As important as the bilateral Russia-China relationship is, part of what will determine its impact will be U.S. policy and the dynamics of the strategic triangle involving the United States.

Regional Explorations: Central Asia, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia

Central Asia

China and Russia are both collaborators and sparring partners in Central Asia. Long closed to Chinese influence during the prolonged period when it was part of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, Central Asia has now resumed its traditional role as a cockpit for major-power competition and a crossroads for interactions among Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. Russia nurses deeply felt grievances over the loss of its dominant position in Central Asia, while China is moving quickly to fill the vacuum through economic penetration and ambitious infrastructure projects. This has made Central Asia a testing ground for the balance between cooperation and rivalry in Sino-Russian relations. The United States needs to be engaged in order to be well informed.

Russia has small troop deployments throughout Central Asia, has struggled to draw regional countries into its Collective Security Treaty Organization, and has thus far had only limited success in drawing them into the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia's efforts have been inhibited by the dismal state of its economy, which has been further undercut by low energy prices and Western sanctions, as well as by the resistance of the newly independent Central Asian countries to too close an association with their former ruler.

China has made better progress with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which it launched with Russia in 1996 as the Shanghai Five grouping (with the other members being Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the three Central Asian states bordering China). The Shanghai Five expanded into the SCO by bringing in the other Central Asian states, minus

Turkmenistan, and eventually became the primary vehicle for coordinating Chinese and Russian activities in Central Asia. Regular meetings of security, military, defense, foreign affairs, economic, cultural, banking, and other officials from member states have taken place under the aegis of the SCO. However, the admission of Pakistan and India as full members in June 2017 has lessened the utility of the organization as a coordinating mechanism dominated by China and Russia.

In the meantime, China's attention has shifted to its Belt and Road Initiative. President Xi proposed this ambitious program during a visit to Kazakhstan in 2013. It is aimed at massively expanding China's links to these "western regions," which have loomed large in the country's imagination for millennia. The program entails two component projects: (1) an overland "belt" featuring vastly improved transportation, communication, and energy infrastructure, and (2) a complementary maritime "road" that will extend from the eastern coastal regions of China through Southeast Asia into the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and East Africa and include upgraded port and harbor facilities capable of supporting higher levels of seaborne trade.

The obstacles to implementation are significant.⁸ But if these projects are realized, Central Asia will in a few short decades be crisscrossed by a network of high-speed highways and railroads, running alongside oil and gas pipelines, that will vastly improve China's land and sea access to the western parts of Asia and even to Europe. In contrast with earlier proposals, China's Belt and Road Initiative is backed by tens of billions of dollars that can be disseminated through Beijing's policy banks and the newly launched Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Despite thinly disguised U.S. opposition to the AIIB, virtually all the leading Asian and European countries, with the exception of Japan, have joined this Chinese-led bank.⁹

The initial U.S. response to these developments has been wrong-footed. This is perhaps understandable, as China's Belt and Road Initiative involves not only an explicit but also an implicit dimension, both of which must be subjected to careful scrutiny.

The explicit dimension is the infrastructure development. Here even the United States agrees that Central Asia has vast infrastructure needs that should be addressed. For example, in a speech in Chennai, India, in July 2011, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton called for the creation of a new Silk Road through Central Asia consisting of an international network of economic and transit connections.¹⁰ Her words sounded like a U.S. version of what Xi later proposed in 2013, the difference being that Xi's proposal was backed by vastly more resources than the United States could muster to advance its concept.

The implicit dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative involves the geopolitical implications of linking China more closely by land and sea to Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. If China makes significant progress with the initiative, the strategic implications would be enormous.¹¹ Beijing, however, has not addressed this aspect of the initiative directly in

⁸ For a discussion of the obstacles, see Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 151–75.

⁹ Simon Denyer, "China Gloats as Europeans Rush to Join Asian Bank," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-gloats-as-europeans-rush-to-join-asian-bank/2015/03/18/82139f88-9915-4a81-81af-ae6eacf528c7_story.html.

¹⁰ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century" (speech given at Anna Centenary Library, Chennai, July 20, 2011), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168840.htm>.

¹¹ Nadège Rolland, through an analysis of Chinese primary sources, interprets the Belt and Road Initiative as an attempt to "create a 21st-century version of a Sinocentric regional order across the Eurasian continent." Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century?* 178.

public remarks.¹² Not surprisingly, it is with respect to the implicit dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative that countries have differing views and interests.¹³

The United States wants to reduce Central Asia's dependence on Russia, to link the region more closely to the democratic market economies of Europe, and to promote democracy and respect for human rights. It also believes that tighter trade and transportation links between South Asia and Central Asia will be helpful in stabilizing Afghanistan, and it is mindful of Eurasia's importance as an alternative route for logistical support for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

Russia still has a proprietary interest in its former territories in Central Asia and wants to retain a predominant influence, especially in the security sphere. China, for its part, already plays a significant trade and investment role in Central Asia and is keenly interested in the oil and gas resources. It has generally respected Russia's security concerns in the region and has kept its focus on trade and energy. As discussed in the previous section, Sino-Russian relations have been friendly and cooperative in recent decades, and the two countries have worked well together in the SCO.

However, in addition to China's economic interests in Central Asia, Xi's proposal in May 2014 for the establishment of a new security and cooperation mechanism in Asia demonstrated that Beijing also views the region from a security perspective that is broader than its desire to block terrorist elements from infiltrating Xinjiang. Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative would further Beijing's declared intention to become a major global power.¹⁴

All the elements of a new Great Game are thus present in Central Asia, although the cast of players is different. The United States is in large measure a bit player in this scenario. The Central Asian countries have welcomed its presence as a means of defending their newly gained independence against potential future encroachments by more powerful neighbors such as Russia and China. Nevertheless, they are clearheaded about the distinction between countries with permanent interests in the region, such as Russia and China, and those like the United States that have a significant near-term presence but can cut and run whenever they are unwilling to pay the costs of continued involvement. This is not to say that the United States lacks important interests in Central Asia. However, these interests are largely derivative of far more important U.S. interests with respect to Russia, China, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even Iran.

It is difficult under these circumstances for the United States to have a coherent and closely integrated policy approach to Central Asia, especially when it must address initiatives by major outside powers such as China. Nevertheless, both Washington and Beijing profess their support for the goal of fending off a dangerous drift toward a destructive Cold War style of rivalry by strengthening areas of cooperation wherever possible. Several measures would increase the likelihood that such an approach will be successful:

- The infrastructure needs of Central Asia are greater than the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank can meet.¹⁵ The AIIB can play a useful supplemental role. If the United

¹² Beijing has launched a soft-power, English-language campaign designed to portray the project as nonthreatening—even employing Western child actors to sing songs and listen to bedtime stories about the initiative. See “‘Belt and Road Bedtime Stories’ Episode 1,” *China Daily*, May 8, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/beltandroadinitiative/2017-05/08/content_29255516.htm; “‘Belt and Road Bedtime Stories’ Episode 2,” *China Daily*, May 9, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/beltandroadinitiative/2017-05/09/content_29274082.htm; and Xu Han, “Cute Kids Perform Belt and Road Song,” China Global Television Network, May 11, 2017, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d6b444f79677a4d/share_p.html.

¹³ See Tom Miller, *China's Asian Dream: Empire Building along the New Silk Road* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

¹⁴ Xi Jinping, “New Asian Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation” (remarks at the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Shanghai, May 21, 2014), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml.

¹⁵ See, for example, Jim Yong Kim (remarks at the opening plenary session of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Beijing, May 14, 2017). In his remarks, Kim noted that the World Bank was signing a memorandum of understanding with other multilateral development banks to support the Belt and Road Initiative.

States is not prepared to join the AIIB, it should at least work cooperatively with the bank and seek where possible to gain a piece of the action for U.S. companies.

- The United States should not exaggerate its importance in Central Asia. The interests of both Russia and China in the region are greater and more sustainable. The United States will be more effective in enhancing its regional influence if it can work cooperatively with both countries.
- Constructive engagement in the region will enhance the United States' understanding of the geopolitical forces at work. This can lead to wiser policy choices.

The Middle East

Russian and Chinese interests in the Middle East differ significantly. As an oil and gas exporter, Russia is not dependent on the region's rich energy resources. During the period of Russia's imperial expansion, the region was an arena for competition with Great Britain for access and influence as an extension of the Great Game. Under the Soviet Union, ideological considerations came into play, in addition to Moscow's geopolitical approach to the region. The Soviet Union attached importance to weakening historical Western ties in the Middle East, particularly those of the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. The formation of the Baghdad Pact in 1955 and the Suez intervention in 1956 helped Moscow strengthen its ties with Syria. In 1971 an agreement was reached for a Soviet naval base in Tartus, which Russia continues to use for its Black Sea Fleet. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Moscow has been concerned with countering the threat of terrorism fomented by radical Islamic groups, along with preserving its influence with countries such as Iran, where Russia has had traditional interests, and Syria, a former client state.

For China, by contrast, access to these energy resources is an important national interest. Its presence in the region has been centered on expanding economic and trade links, now enhanced by the Belt and Road Initiative. The country's military presence is also growing through its UN-mandated antipiracy patrols off the Somali coast and the creation of its first military base in Djibouti. Defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia, in particular, is on the rise, partly facilitated by tensions in U.S.-Saudi relations. China first sold export versions of its DF-3A missile to Saudi Arabia in 1988 and reportedly again sold the country conventional DF-21 missiles in 2007.¹⁶ Its energy ties with Saudi Arabia are also growing.

When it comes to U.S. interests in the Middle East, the United States faces an uphill climb if it is to transform U.S. policy from a destructive to a constructive influence in the region. Washington will likely find Moscow and Beijing acting more as spoilers than as supporters of U.S. initiatives, given that both have capitalized on U.S. failures. Russia's military intervention in the Syrian civil war and China's success in promoting its image as a country that supports state sovereignty and noninterference in domestic affairs illustrate but two of the challenges that Russia and China, working individually or together, pose to U.S. interests in the region. At the same time, the Iran nuclear agreement illustrates that in limited areas the United States can find common interests with both Moscow and Beijing in the Middle East.

¹⁶ Ethan Meick, "China's Reported Ballistic Missile Sale to Saudi Arabia: Background and Potential Implications," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Staff Report, June 16, 2014.

Northeast Asia

Russian and Chinese interests in Northeast Asia contain substantial areas of alignment but are not identical. Neither country wishes to see potentially hostile forces gain a foothold in the geographic area of North Korea. Neither favors the collapse of the Kim regime because of the unpredictable nature of what could result and the opportunities that a destabilized North Korea would present for outside intervention. And neither desires a unified Korean Peninsula within a Western alliance system.

At the same time, the impact of instability in North Korea on the domestic situations in China and Russia would be quite different. China shares a much longer border with North Korea than does Russia and has a substantial ethnic Korean population in adjacent areas, especially in Jilin Province. A flood of refugees entering China, therefore, could undermine Beijing's ability to manage its border population. Russia is less vulnerable to such consequences and could close its border with North Korea more effectively than could China.

In addition, while there are no immediate prospects for Korean unification, if or when unification occurs, it would leave China as the sole remaining country that emerged from World War II in a divided state. This would inevitably have an impact on Beijing's management of the Taiwan situation by increasing domestic pressures for resolution of China's divided status. Russia, by contrast, would not be subject to such pressures. Another difference is that the Soviet Union was not a direct combatant in the Korean War and, unlike China, did not incur massive casualties.

Thus, although Russia has important historical and geographic interests associated with the Korean Peninsula, these pale in comparison with China's interests. For this reason, Moscow seeks participation in matters affecting the Korean Peninsula, such as the six-party talks on denuclearization, but it defers to Beijing on matters involving Korea and does not seek to play a leadership role. Both Russia and China have lined up against the United States on the issue of deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea to strengthen defenses against the threat from North Korea. Beijing is concerned that the powerful radar associated with THAAD will strengthen the U.S. ability to monitor China's missile development and adversely affect its nuclear deterrent. Moscow shares similar concerns and earlier displayed strong opposition to U.S. radar deployments in Eastern Europe.

The situation regarding Russian and Chinese interests with respect to Japan is more complex. Both countries do not wish to see a remilitarized Japan, or a Japan with nuclear weapons and long-range offensive missiles. Both Russia and China also believe that the U.S.-Japan alliance, including the Mutual Defense Treaty, limits their options in Northeast Asia and poses a potential threat to their security. Both have ongoing territorial disputes with Japan that complicate the maintenance of fully normal relations. Moreover, domestic opinion in both countries limits the freedom of action of the respective governments in managing or resolving the disputes.¹⁷

In many other respects, however, Moscow and Beijing view Japan through different lenses. Both Russia and Japan harbor latent concerns over China's rapid re-emergence as a great power. Neither wishes to see China achieve a hegemonic position in East Asia. Both countries would

¹⁷ In 2016, before being labeled a "foreign agent" by the Russian government, the Levada-Center asked a representative sample of Russian adults whether it was more important to sign a peace treaty with Japan in exchange for credit and technology or to keep the Kuril Islands. Respondents preferred the latter by a margin of 56% to 21%. "Kuril Islands," Levada-Center, August 24, 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/en/2016/08/24/kurile-islands>. A 2016 survey by the Pew Research Center of 3,154 Chinese adults and 1,000 Japanese adults found an increase in mutual negative stereotyping compared to a decade ago and that 59% of Chinese and 80% of Japanese were now concerned that territorial disputes between China and neighboring countries could lead to military conflict. Bruce Stokes, "Hostile Neighbors: China vs. Japan," Pew Research Center, September 13, 2016, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/09/13/hostile-neighbors-china-vs-japan>.

like to cultivate a relationship that could serve as a check on Chinese ambitions, a goal that is blocked by their unresolved dispute over the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories. Nevertheless, the incentives in Moscow and Tokyo to overcome this obstacle have been sufficiently strong to enable both sides to explore possible solutions, albeit thus far unsuccessfully.

In the past, China and Japan have competed for access to Russia's rich natural resources, especially energy, timber, and minerals. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Japan had an advantage in this competition because of Moscow's reluctance to contribute to China's rapid economic development. Since then, China has gradually gained the upper hand, especially following the heightened tension between NATO and Russia over Ukraine. This crisis permitted the conclusion of several Sino-Russian energy deals that Moscow had been reluctant to approve in the past, though implementation of these agreements was undercut by the sharp drop in energy prices at the end of 2014.

China remains the primary strategic competitor of the United States in Northeast Asia, with Russia occupying a lesser but important role. In a crisis over North Korea, especially one involving military action, the United States cannot afford to ignore Russian interests, even though China will be the most significant player. In addition, through its status as an alternative supplier of weapons to East Asian countries, Russia can have an adverse impact on U.S. interests.

The complexity of the interactions among China, Russia, and the United States in Northeast Asia is illustrated by a number of developments that could occur in the future. Both China and the United States, for their own reasons, likely harbor reservations about the desirability of a resolution to the island dispute between Russia and Japan, which could clear the way for better relations. Both Beijing and Washington would need to tread carefully in expressing their views because of the damage this could do to important relationships—with Moscow in the case of Beijing, and with Tokyo in the case of Washington.

China is in a better position than Russia to exploit a troublesome contradiction in the U.S. alliance structure in Northeast Asia, where South Korea, for historical reasons, does not share the United States' enthusiasm for Japan taking on a greater security role in East Asia. Seoul does not look with favor on constitutional revisions in Japan that would facilitate such a role—a move quietly supported by the United States under the guise of considering this a question for Japan itself to decide.

The North Korean nuclear issue could also place Washington in an awkward position that Beijing and Moscow would seek to exploit. This would occur if Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons eventually convinced Tokyo and Seoul that they needed a nuclear deterrent of their own. Russia and China would both adamantly oppose such a turn of events, while the United States would be constrained by its alliance relationships from frontally opposing such a development.

This said, all the major powers in Northeast Asia have a common interest in seeing the region remain peaceful, prosperous, and stable. The key question is whether their respective policies will serve this purpose.

U.S. Foreign Policy Considerations

Surveying the international scene in 2017, it is clear that the post-Cold War period has not been good for the United States. This is in large measure because of failures of U.S. leadership and the

growing dysfunctionality in the U.S. political system. Such dysfunction poses a major problem in addressing the question of global order. If the leading world power cannot conceptualize its foreign policy goals in terms that reflect global realities rather than an ideological vision, then little can be accomplished. The best that can be hoped for is further evolution of the international system in a haphazard way that lacks coherence and an organizing principle. There are no indications that China or any other country can step into this vacuum. This is dangerous because Westphalian systems do not function well, or peacefully, without some organizational structure.

The collapse of the United States' main strategic competitor, the Soviet Union, presented an extraordinary opportunity to restructure the global system that had emerged from World War II to better reflect the changes that occurred from 1945 to 1990. The goal should have been the creation of a more just and better balanced international system with agreed-on rules that would constrain the exercise of power by stronger and weaker countries alike. Instead, the United States gloried in its role as the sole superpower and resisted the strengthening of any international system that could constrain the arbitrary use of U.S. power.

The curious fact, betraying a lack of serious intellectual attention to this question, is that the United States ignored the core American political concept that power corrupts and must be checked and balanced. We applied this concept to our domestic political system, while ignoring its applicability to the international system, where it is equally relevant. The consequences of this ill attention to basic principles are evident in Europe, where policy errors have transformed the region from a major contributor to stability and prosperity into a source of dangerous tensions and emerging great-power confrontations.

The tension between NATO and Russia over Ukraine is troublesome in ways that transcend Europe. Most importantly, it is diverting scarce U.S. resources away from the western Pacific, where China has assumed the role of the United States' major strategic competitor. As argued above, it has also forced Russia closer to China in ways that are not beneficial to U.S. interests. For example, after the Ukraine crisis, Russia agreed to sell China the S-400 air and missile defense system, which it had earlier been reluctant to provide.¹⁸ This is in addition to the energy deals that were brought to conclusion after the Maidan events. The two sides have also held joint military exercises in Northeast Asia and the South China Sea.

These developments are taking place at a time when a new U.S. administration has assumed office and when important shifts are occurring in the global balance of power. We are well along in the process of moving from the post-Cold War world we have known for the last 25 years to a new world without a single hegemonic superpower. The rapid rise of developing countries such as China, India, and Brazil is creating a multipolar world with a number of powerful actors and a larger group of lesser but strong secondary players. In this new world, creating and sustaining a global balance of power, resting on lesser balances at the regional level, will be the principal strategic challenge. The question is whether a stable balance is possible within such a configuration. The answer will depend in large measure on how successful the most powerful actors are in gaining the cooperation and support of lesser but significant players.

Against this backdrop, one of the primary challenges confronting the Trump administration will be addressing the diminished confidence among U.S. allies and friends in the United States' intention to remain fully engaged in the world. This will not be easy. The U.S. election campaign

¹⁸ Zachary Keck, "Putin Approves Sale of S-400 to China," *Diplomat*, April 11, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/putin-approves-sale-of-s-400-to-china>.

sent two disturbing messages to the international community: first, that the dysfunction in the U.S. political system is likely to continue and will hamper the United States' reliability as a long-term strategic partner; and second, that the United States is turning inward and moving toward a protectionist trade policy.

In East Asia, these perceptions are reinforced by the growing belief among regional countries that the balance of power in the western Pacific is shifting in China's favor. Asian leaders recognize that the United States still has a substantial edge over China in terms of air and naval power. Nevertheless, some countries are beginning to adjust their foreign and security policies to accommodate Chinese interests. If the United States wants to play a leading role in fashioning this new balance of power, Washington must move quickly to address the erosion of confidence in the United States' ability to continue its traditional role as the guarantor of regional peace and stability.



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