

China-Russia Relations: Same Bed, Different Dreams?

Why Converging Interests Are Unlikely to Lead to a Full-Fledged Alliance

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Well before the crisis in Ukraine reinforced Russia's pursuit of closer ties with China, Moscow had been forging an increasingly cooperative relationship with Beijing. This is hardly surprising considering that China in recent decades has become arguably the world's foremost rising power. But what are the chances that the ongoing rapprochement could blossom into a full-fledged military-political alliance? This paper tries to answer that question by comparing trends in the two countries' development and by considering the convergence and divergence of their vital national interests.¹

Today we see many shared interests between the two in the areas of economy, security and geopolitics. China has an impact on most of Russia's vital interests, making constructive relations with Beijing a priority for Moscow. Russia's effect on China's interests may be smaller, but is far from negligible. Some Western policies are also nudging the two deeper into each other's arms—notably, sanctions against Russia and Washington's new policy of lumping China and Russia into a collective adversary.

But, as this paper will demonstrate, the convergence of Russian and Chinese interests is far from absolute. Moreover, growing disparities between the two countries—in their economies and demographics in particular—will probably make a strong, formal alliance unlikely, unless two conditions emerge. The first is that Russia would agree to settle for an unequivocally junior role in the partnership with China—something it is not currently willing to do. Yet Moscow may have to accept such a position if it grows too weak to act as an independent pole of power in the emerging multi-polar world and estrangement from the West continues to preclude any rapprochement with the U.S. and Europe. The second condition is that China would have to change its current position that such alliances should not be entered into. For Washington, this means the best course would be to find an acceptable way to prevent further deterioration of relations with Russia in the short term, while maintaining its working relationship with China.

1. Russia's Pivot to China and China's Response

The 2014 military-political crisis in Ukraine and the West's subsequent effort to punish Russia for its involvement have clearly prompted Moscow to seek deeper ties with Beijing. Indeed, President Vladimir Putin's first official foreign visit post-Ukraine was to China, where he was embraced eagerly: "China and Russia are together now like lips and teeth," Beijing's ambassador to Moscow,

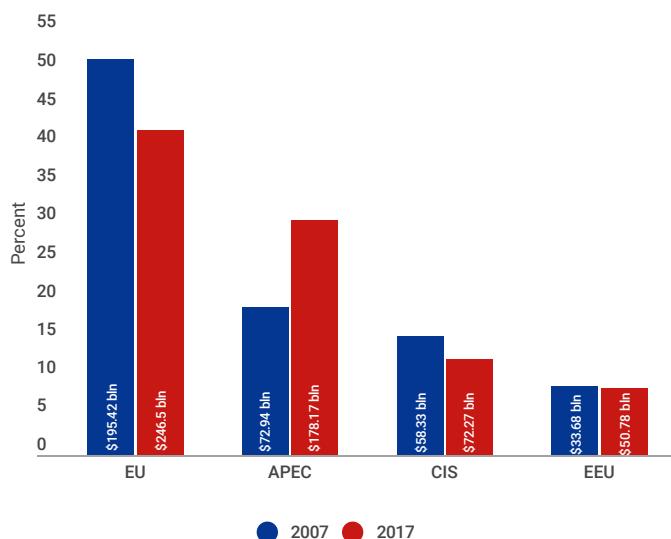
¹ The opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors. The paper is an updated and revised version of a chapter they published in Donette Murray and David Brown (eds.), "Power Relations in the Twenty-First Century: Mapping a Multipolar World?" (London: Routledge, 2018).

Li Hui, famously declared in 2015.² This development led some authors to refer to Russia's new pivot to China³; in reality, however, Moscow had begun the pivot years before the Ukrainian crisis. "Russia has long been an intrinsic part of the Asian-Pacific region," Putin wrote in September 2012. "We view this dynamic region as the most important factor for the successful future of the whole country, as well as development of Siberia and the Far East."⁴

Experts have identified multiple reasons behind Moscow's continuing shift eastward, the most obvious among them economic. The past decade has seen China become Russia's biggest trading partner among individual countries (trade volumes between Russia and the European Union are still larger than between Russia and China, but shrinking). Both countries have strived to further deepen these economic ties, with Russia interested in selling and China in buying Russian oil and gas. China likewise imports Russian weapons, which somewhat helps to limit Russia's dependence on sales of raw materials.

Beyond bilateral trade, the two countries have similar views on international security and share geopolitical concerns, often with a common anti-Western streak. Both are determined to preserve their rights as veto-wielding permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

Groups of countries' share in Russia's overall volume of foreign trade, %



Partners' share in Russia's overall volume of trade, %

Country	2007	2017	Percent change
China, P.R.: Mainland	7.39%	15.10%	104%
Germany	9.59%	8.51%	-11%
Netherlands	8.46%	6.80%	-20%
Belarus	4.78%	5.06%	6%
Italy	6.54%	4.11%	-37%
United States	3.23%	4.06%	26%
Turkey	4.10%	3.59%	-12%
Japan	3.68%	3.16%	-14%
Kazakhstan	3.00%	2.91%	-3%
Poland	3.25%	2.82%	-13%
France	2.99%	2.66%	-11%
Ukraine	5.39%	2.21%	-59%
United Kingdom	3.02%	2.20%	-27%
Finland	2.86%	2.11%	-26%
Switzerland	2.84%	1.05%	-63%

5

2 Saradzhyan, Simon. "Putin's Russia: Claims Versus Reality," Huffington Post, Nov. 19, 2015.

3 See for instance "[Russia, China and The West After Crimea](#)," "Two years after Moscow began its China pivot," in "[Friends With Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis](#)" and "[Disillusioned With the West, Russia Too Is Pivoting to Asia](#)."

4 Putin, Vladimir. "An Asia-Pacific Growth Agenda," Wall Street Journal, Sept. 6, 2012.

5 "[Direction of Trade Statistics](#)," IMF. Trade volume was determined by adding import and export activity with Russia. Top 15

Both likewise have a stake in preserving stability in Central Asia—not only in the post-Soviet republics, but also in Afghanistan—and in containing the threat that militant Islamists pose within the region and beyond.

In addition, the two countries share a number of serious grievances vis-à-vis the Western world. China and Russia are both unhappy with U.S. aspirations to retain its global leadership, and both oppose the expansion of U.S.-led military alliances, partnerships and projects, including ones related to ballistic missile defense and high-precision conventional attack systems with global range and elements deployed in space. They also resent the centrality of the U.S. dollar in world markets, which China is trying to diminish—with Russian support—through such measures as successfully lobbying the International Monetary Fund to include the renminbi in its basket of special drawing rights. Finally, they oppose what they see as Western efforts to engineer regime change under the guise of popular revolutions.

Both China and Russia also have a strong appreciation for the importance of public displays of respect and have lavished each other with praise. While refraining from seeking a formal military-political alliance with China for their country, Russian leaders seem to have conceded what they see as China's inevitable rise to global pre-eminence and expressed no intention to challenge it: “The main struggle now underway is for global leadership and we are not going to argue with China on this,” Putin said back in 2011.⁶ Whether he was fully sincere or not, Chinese leaders have been happy to reciprocate. In a March 2013 speech in Moscow, Chinese President Xi Jinping made the dubious claim that the “Sino-Russian relationship is the world’s most important bilateral relationship, and is the best relationship between large countries.”⁷ Ambassador Li Hui echoed his country’s leader as recently as December 2017,⁸ as did Fu Ying, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China’s National People’s Congress, back in 2016, contending that the “Chinese-Russian relationship is a stable strategic partnership and by no means a marriage of convenience: It is complex, sturdy and deeply rooted.”⁹ The same year saw a former member of China’s State Council, Dai Bingguo, tell a Moscow conference on Russian-Chinese ties that “the level of our relations

countries were chosen based on 2007 trade volume.

6 “Putin, otkazavshis borotsya s Kitayem za mirovoye gospodstvo, smutil Pekin i zastavil obyasnyatsya” (“Refusing to Battle China for Global Supremacy, Putin Embarrassed Beijing and Forced [It] to Explain”), Newsru.com, Oct. 18, 2011 (in Russian).

7 Roggeveen, Sam. “What is China’s most important bilateral relationship?” The Interpreter, June 7, 2014.

8 Li Hui proclaimed that “Chinese-Russian relations of comprehensive strategic cooperation and partnership are the most important bilateral relations in the world and, moreover, the best relations between big countries. One can say that they are a classic example of the healthiest and most mature interstate relations and an important force to protect peace and stability throughout the world.” Quoted in “China Snubs Trump, Says Russia Ties Best and Most Important in World,” Newsweek, Dec. 13, 2017.

9 Ying, Fu. “How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies.” Foreign Affairs. 95 (2016): 96.

is higher than [Mount] Everest, but, unlike this mountain, it can grow even higher.”¹⁰

2. China’s Impact on Russia’s Vital National Interests

This paper argues that maintaining a constructive relationship with Beijing, especially in light of its steady rise on the global stage, is crucial for Moscow because China affects most of Russia’s vital interests. In order to assess this claim, obviously, one must know what those interests are. Russia’s leaders and strategic documents routinely invoke the need to advance the country’s national interests, such as strengthening national defense or improving quality of life, but they have not presented a clear-cut hierarchy of these interests and use wording that is too vague and general to be operationalized. Days before Putin left for China on an official visit this month, for example, he said that in his current term as president he and his team “will focus on positioning Russia on the global stage as a country that … respects its partners’ interests and, of course, will protect its own interests. In this sense … we pay great attention to cooperating with our traditional and reliable partners, allies and friends. The People’s Republic of China is, of course, among them.”¹¹ Putin did not specify what these interests are, however. One of this paper’s authors has compiled a list of Russia’s vital interests by distilling key points from Russian leaders’ statements and major Russian strategic documents and then emulating previous efforts like those by the Commission on America’s National Interests¹² and subsequent projects¹³; then, as a final step, he ran the resulting list by leading Russian policy experts, on condition of anonymity, for a reality check. The latest list of Russia’s vital national interests, ordered roughly in descending order of importance, follows below, examined from a China angle.¹⁴

Prevent separatism and political violence, including catastrophic terrorism, in Russia

Whether due to lack of capacity or political will, or both, Beijing has not done much to assist Moscow in its efforts to prevent, deter and reduce the threats of secession posed by the insurgency in Russia’s North Caucasus, which represents one of the top challenges to Russia’s national securi-

10 “Russky s kitaitsem—bratya ne po oruzhiyu” (“Russians and Chinese Are Brothers, but Not in Arms”), *Kommersant*, June 1, 2016.

11 “Interview with China Media Group,” Kremlin website, June 6, 2018.

12 Allison, Graham T., and Robert Blackwill. “America’s National Interests.” Cambridge, Massachusetts: *The Commission on America’s National Interests*, 2000.

13 Allison, Graham T., Robert D. Blackwill, Dimitri K. Simes, and Paul J. Saunders. *Russia and U.S. National Interests: Why Should Americans Care?*. Washington, D.C. and Cambridge, Mass: Report for Center for the National Interest and Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, October 2011.

14 The author has discussed this list before, without the emphasis on Sino-Russian ties, in an article and then updated it for a presentation, respectively: Saradzhyan, Simon. “Russia and the U.S.: Are national interests so different?” *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 10, 2015; Saradzhyan, Simon. “Russia’s Actions in Syria: Underlying Interests and Policy Objectives.” Presentation, Harvard University, Nov. 16, 2015.

ty. Russian and Chinese generals routinely list counterterrorism among the objectives of the war games regularly held by their militaries, as well as those of other members of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization, or SCO. But China has been unable to stop the trickle of Islamist fighters from its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to Russia's North Caucasus, where they have joined local jihadists trying to establish an independent state and annually causing death tolls in the low hundreds.

Islamists, of course, represent just one variation of the separatist threat faced by Russia; another, according to some Russia-based China watchers, may come from China itself—in the form of “soft annexation” in the underdeveloped, sparsely populated eastern territories bordering China. For the first time in centuries, China is developing more rapidly than Russia, a change that manifests itself in disparities between the two countries’ provinces along their shared borders. In 2014, the regional domestic products of the three Russian federal districts east of the Ural Mountains—called the Urals, Siberian and Far Eastern districts—totaled roughly \$294 billion, compared with \$880 billion for the four Chinese provinces that border Russia.¹⁵ Demographic comparisons also favor China: The combined population of the 27 Russian provinces comprising the above-mentioned three districts totaled 37.8 million as of 2016—less than in just one of China’s four borderland provinces, Heilongjiang, which had 37.9 million people.¹⁶ All four of those Chinese provinces have significantly greater population density than Russia’s eastern regions and the demographic vacuum on the northern bank of the Amur River, which forms most of the two countries’ border, cannot last indefinitely. While estimates of the number of Chinese currently in Russia vary from 300,000 to 500,000 nationwide,¹⁷ this number is likely to grow if the population in Russia’s Far East decreases—a distinct possibility, given that the United Nations expects Russia’s population to shrink from 144 million to 132.7 million by 2050.¹⁸

While Russian leaders are usually careful to keep private whatever reservations they may have about China’s growing power, they have let their worries show at times, usually in connection with the disparities described above. Back in 1998 then director of the Federal Border Service, Nikolai Bordyuzha, warned that Russia might lose swathes of land in its Far East if the steady flow of illegal immigrants from China is not stopped.¹⁹ He was echoed by Gen. Ivan Fedotov, chief of the

15 GDP calculated at IMF exchange rates for December 31, 2014. “[Regiony Rossii: Social’no-ekonomicheskie pokazateli](#),” Russian Federal State Statistics Service, 2016; “[National Data](#),” National Bureau of Statistics.

16 Ibid.

17 Tselichtchev, Ivan. “[Chinese In The Russian Far East: A Geopolitical Time Bomb?](#)” South China Morning Post, July 8, 2017.

18 “World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision. File POP/1-1: Total population (both sexes combined) by major area, region and country, annually for 1950-2100 (thousands). Medium fertility, 2010-2100.” United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2013.

19 Saradzhyan, Simon. “Border Chief Warns Russia May Lose Land,” The Moscow Times, May 27, 1998.

service's immigration directorate: "Another 20 to 30 years of such expansion and the Chinese will become the majority. This may lead to [territorial] losses."²⁰ Much more recently, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev warned in August 2012 that the Far East "is located far away and, unfortunately, we don't have many people there and must protect it from the excessive expansion of people from neighboring countries."²¹ In 2015 Putin's chief of staff at the time, Sergei Ivanov, explained why the Russian government had banned "foreign investment in a narrow strip of border zone" near China, saying: "Our population in the Far East is scarce, we don't have enough [people]."²² That same year some Russian politicians reacted nervously to plans by the government of Russia's Zabaikalsky Krai to lease 1,000 square kilometers of land to a Chinese company for 49 years. Igor Lebedev, a deputy speaker of the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, warned that it "poses huge political risks, particularly to Russia's territorial integrity. ... They will bring in scores of Chinese. Then 20 or 30 years from now the Chinese government will demand those lands be given to China because all those Chinese people live there," Lebedev said of the plan.²³ As of early this year an online petition initiated in Russia had gathered 55,000 signatures in support of a ban on Chinese land purchases on the shore of Siberia's Lake Baikal, claiming that Beijing is seeking to transform the area into a Chinese province. One local official told the Financial Times how Chinese tour groups made a point of telling visitors that the lake was part of China during the Tang and Han dynasties.²⁴ Gu Xiaomei, a manager of China National Electric Engineering who worked at a construction site in Birobidzhan, a Russian city near the Chinese border, separately told the newspaper: "We know that we should not talk about this now, we are not strong enough yet, but when the time comes, these lands have to be given back [to China]."²⁵

Should considerable numbers of Chinese nationals settle in Russia's Far East, it cannot be ruled out that Beijing may one day seek deeper inroads there using the same rationale described by Russian politicians as "defending compatriots wherever they live" and used by Putin to take Crimea from Ukraine. So far, however, such massive settlement has not occurred in the Far East and remains unlikely in the near future. More than half of Chinese migrants, according to recent research, are in the European part of Russia, where the labor market is more attractive than in the east.²⁶

20 Ibid.

21 "Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev chairs a government meeting," Government.ru, Aug. 9, 2012.

22 "Transcript: Interview with Sergei Ivanov," Financial Times, June 21, 2015.

23 Hille, Kathrin. "Outcry in Russia over China land lease," Financial Times, June 25, 2015.

24 Hille, Kathrin. "Russia and China: Friends With Benefits," Financial Times, Feb. 5, 2016.

25 Ibid.

26 Gabuev, Alexander and Maria Repnikova, "[Why Forecasts of a Chinese Takeover of the Russian Far East Are Just a Dramatic Myth](#)," South China Morning Post, July 14, 2017.

Prevent armed attacks on Russia by other states

As stated above, Russia and China are not in a formal military alliance, though the two countries' militaries are increasingly cooperating in ways described further down in this paper. Therefore, China is not obliged to intervene in support of Russia if the latter were to become the target of armed aggression by another state or coalition of states. At the same time, Russia is well positioned to prevent an overt armed attack by any states and that includes China. The probability that China itself would stage such an attack will remain low, even in the unlikely event of a steep deterioration in bilateral relations, as long as Russia's nuclear deterrent remains robust. Several developments indicate that Russia's military retains preparedness for a conflict with Beijing, even though Russian commanders are far more circumspect in identifying China as a potential threat than was Fedotov in the 1990s. For instance, in 2010 the Russian Navy's then commander, Vladimir Vysotsky, warned that in the Arctic "a host of states ... are advancing their interests very intensively, in every possible way, in particular China"; in response, he said, "the [Russian] ships of the Northern and Pacific fleets are continuing to increase their military presence" in the area.²⁷ In 2009 a reporter for the Defense Ministry's Krasnaya Zvezda newspaper pointed out to Russia's then chief of the General Staff, Gen. Nikolai Makarov, that a slide in the commander's presentation showed NATO and China to be "the most dangerous of our geopolitical rivals."²⁸ Makarov did not mention China when responding, but Krasnaya Zvezda reporters typically seek pre-approval for the questions they ask top commanders, so it's unlikely the reference to China was an accident.²⁹ Also in 2009, then chief of the Ground Forces Staff Lt. General Sergei Skokov described the kind of warfare Russian armed forces should prepare for: "If we talk about the east, then it could be a multi-million-man army with a traditional approach to conducting combat operations: straightforward, with large concentrations of personnel and firepower along individual operational directions."³⁰

While Russia's officials and active-duty commanders largely avoid explicit, public references to China as a potential foe, former Russian officials and experts do point to possible threats posed by the People's Liberation Army's conventional supremacy. The Carnegie Moscow Center's Alexei Arbatov, for instance, has written of "Russian reliance on nuclear weapons to compensate for its growing inferiority, relative to China, in conventional forces in Siberia and the Far East."³¹ In addition to the PLA's conventional superiority, Russian experts have also been concerned about

27 Saradzhyan, Simon. "The Role of China in Russia's Military Thinking," International Relations and Security Network, May 4, 2010.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Arbatov, Alexei. "Engaging China in Nuclear Arms Control," Eurasia Outlook, Oct. 9, 2014.

the Great Wall Engineering Project—a network of underground tunnels in China that some experts believe conceal hundreds of additional nuclear warheads.³² If their suspicions are correct, then Russia “must take the ‘China factor’ into account when planning its strategic force modernization and considering follow-on nuclear arms limitation and reduction initiatives,” according to Arbatov.³³ In fact, China might be one reason why Russia is reluctant to respond to U.S. calls for a bilateral agreement on transparency of non-strategic nuclear weapons: It would reveal how many of these weapons Russia keeps east of the Ural Mountains to deter China.

In addition to maintaining a robust military deterrent to dissuade China from contemplating any overt armed attack on Russia, Moscow has also taken diplomatic steps. In 2004 the two countries signed an agreement to settle all their border disputes. Russia has also become China’s partner in such organizations as the SCO and BRICS, the loose grouping that includes Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa. These partnerships help reduce the probability that China will support any other country or coalition in staging an attack on Russia. Given the scope and depth of Russian-Chinese cooperation, China should be expected to reject any overtures by the West to allow its territory or territorial waters to be used as a staging area for military actions against Russia.

While all these steps have greatly reduced the probability of an overt armed conflict along the 2,500-mile Russian-Chinese border—described by Henry Kissinger as a “strategic nightmare” for Moscow—such a conflict is not impossible.³⁴ As suggested above, many in China still remember which country used to control the lands now making up Russia’s Far Eastern provinces. However, given the current pace of development, Russia is decades away from even a hypothetical military conflict with China. As pointed out by Singapore’s first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, an astute observer of Asia: “China wants time to grow. If there is going to be any conflict, they’ll postpone it for 50 years.”³⁵ And before considering any conflict with Russia, China will probably want to regain Taiwan and establish its dominance in Southeast Asia.

Ensure productive relations with key global players and prevent rise of hostile hegemons

As noted above, post-Communist Russia has taken pains to mend fences with China and pursue a broad partnership. One sign of the quality and depth of the current bilateral relationship lies in the timing of visits by the two countries’ leaders. China was the first country Putin visited after

32 Saalman, Lora, Gu Guoliang, Zou Yunhua, Wu Riqiang and Jian Zhang. “China’s and Russia’s Nuclear Relations,” Carnegie Tsinghua Center, July 7, 2013.

33 Arbatov, Alexei. “Engaging China in Nuclear Arms Control,” Eurasia Outlook, Oct. 9, 2014.

34 Saradzhyan, Simon. “Russia Needs to Develop Eastern Provinces as China Rises.” RIA Novosti, March 5, 2013.

35 Allison, Graham, Robert D. Blackwill, Ali Wyne and Henry A. Kissinger. *Lee Kuan Yew: the grand master’s insights on China, the United States, and the world*. MIT Press, 2013.

being inaugurated for a third presidential term in May 2012; Xi returned the favor in 2013. The two have met more than 20 times in total³⁶ and appear to have a good personal rapport—not insignificant considering the amount of power each wields in his country. Ahead of his June 2018 trip to China, Putin told Chinese media—which noted that he had met with Xi five times the previous year—that the Chinese president was the only world leader with whom he had ever celebrated his birthday: “It was a very simple event. … He probably will not be angry with me if I share that we drank a shot of vodka and just cut up some sausage.”³⁷

The policy seems to be paying off, with China helping Russia to withstand pressure from the U.S. and some of its allies, which seek to isolate Moscow in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. In theory, China’s desire to integrate Taiwan should have prompted Beijing to disapprove of any separatism (including the brand supported by Russia in eastern Ukraine), but Chinese leaders have also realized that their country stands to benefit from Russia’s estrangement from the West. The crisis in Ukraine has given Beijing at least a 10-year “strategic respite” from its global confrontation with the United States, according to a former Chinese military attaché to Russia, Gen. Van Yunhai.³⁸ Hence, a U.S. delegation that travelled around the globe to solicit support for Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia in 2014 left Beijing empty-handed.³⁹ The same year saw China abstain when the U.N. General Assembly voted on a resolution vaguely condemning Russia’s taking of Crimea. China likewise refused to condemn Russia after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. Beijing’s actions—or, rather, its refusal to take action—during both military conflicts have helped Russia avoid international isolation.

In addition to improving diplomatic coordination with China on the global scene, Russia has also sought to advance the military dimension of the bilateral relationship for its benefit. A timeline of Russian-Chinese naval exercises (see below) reveals an expanding number of vessels and locations. Recent Russian-Chinese naval drills—including the two countries’ first-ever joint exercises in the Mediterranean in 2015 and in the Baltic Sea in 2017—have also been meant to send a deterring signal to NATO. A U.S. government analysis recently noted that China’s and Russia’s national security establishments “are now experiencing arguably the highest period of cooperation… [T]he two militaries are staging increasingly complex exercises with an expanded geographic reach in strategically important areas, recently adding a new set of exercises on missile

36 “Xi in Russia to meet Putin again as countries’ ties deepen,” *The Straits Times*, July 4, 2017.

37 “Interview with China Media Group,” Kremlin website, June 6, 2018.

38 Kashin, Vasily. “Russia’s Rapprochement with China Runs Deep,” *The Moscow Times*, May 27, 2014.

39 While it has refused to join Western sanctions on Russia, which include constraints on borrowing, China has not been particularly eager to bail Russia out either. Wen Yi, a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Institute of World History, noted that China was simply unable to “put [out] such a huge fire thousands of kilometres away.” See Yu Bin, “China-Russia Relations: Russia’s Pride and China’s Power,” *Comparative Connections*, 16, no. 3, 2014: 123.

defense cooperation.”⁴⁰ The document also says that “[m]ilitary-technical cooperation similarly shows significant progress in recent years, highlighted by a major uptick in the technical capability of Russian arms sales to China, wide-ranging strategic industrial partnerships in key defense sectors and joint production deals and other cooperation on advanced military and dual-use systems... Finally, Chinese and Russian defense officials are holding more meetings at higher levels in the military bureaucracy than they did in the past, signaling closer coordination,” the report said.⁴¹

Military relations between Russia and China have become close enough that some policy influentials on both sides have begun to advocate a military-political union between the two countries. A former head of the Russian Defense Ministry’s international cooperation department, Yevgeny Buzhinsky, told a Moscow conference on Russian-Chinese relations in 2016 that “I would very much like our relations to become truly ally-like,”⁴² while another former head of this department, Leonid Ivashov, said that in light of the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review Russia should initiate consultations with China on jointly monitoring nuclear forces and studying “ways of responding.”⁴³ Official Chinese reactions to such overtures have been cautious at best. Dai Bingguo, the former member of China’s State Council, told the same conference that China is not considering establishing a military alliance with Russia.⁴⁴ And China’s ex-ambassador to Moscow Li Fenglin said there that Russians “rock from one extreme to another... First you call for an alliance and then you start deterring China by cooperating with its neighbors.”⁴⁵ Having heard Dai and Li weigh in, Buzhinsky acknowledged that an alliance is not going to materialize any time soon: “The Chinese simply feel they are stronger and, therefore, do not want an alliance,” he remarked after the conference.⁴⁶

In fact, there are signs that the Chinese military has some reservations about Russia. A recent commentary in China’s official army newspaper said Beijing must strengthen its nuclear deterrence and counter-strike capabilities to keep pace with the developing nuclear strategies of both the U.S. and Russia.⁴⁷ More important, China’s former foreign minister and chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress, Fu Ying, has flatly ruled out a formal al-

40 Meick, Ethan. “[China-Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving Toward a Higher Level of Cooperation](#),” *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review*, March 20, 2017.

41 Ibid.

42 “[Russky s kitaisem—bratya ne po oruzhiyu](#)” (“Russians and Chinese Are Brothers, but Not in Arms”), *Kommersant*, June 1, 2016.

43 “[Russia Harshly Criticizes New U.S. Nuclear Posture Document](#),” RFE/RL, Feb. 3, 2018.

44 “[Russky s kitaisem—bratya ne po oruzhiyu](#)” (“Russians and Chinese Are Brothers, but Not in Arms”), *Kommersant*, June 1, 2016.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 “[Chinese military paper urges increase in nuclear deterrence capabilities](#),” Reuters, Jan. 30, 2018.

liance: “China has no interest in a formal alliance with Russia, nor in forming an anti-U.S. or anti-Western bloc of any kind. Rather, Beijing hopes that China and Russia can maintain their relationship in a way that will provide a safe environment for the two big neighbors to achieve their development goals and to support each other through mutually beneficial cooperation, offering a model for how major countries can manage their differences and cooperate in ways that strengthen the international system,” Yung wrote in a 2015 article in *Foreign Affairs*.⁴⁸ “Beijing and Moscow are close, but not allies,” he summed up.

As important, despite the enthusiasm of some of Russia’s retired generals, it remains unclear whether Putin would want Russia to enter into a formal military alliance with China—akin to NATO or the former Warsaw Pact—anytime soon either, especially given Russian officials’ reservations about the conventional military, demographic and economic disparities between the two countries. Putin’s then chief of staff Ivanov made that clear in June 2014 when he publicly asserted that “I find no sense—and the Chinese side, I must admit, also finds no sense—in creating a new military alliance or union, or something like that.”⁴⁹ Some Russian scholars agree: “The establishment of a formal Russian-Chinese alliance remains unlikely. Russia values its political and economic partnership with China, but prefers not to tie its channels of cooperation to one country exclusively,” according to Alexander Lukin.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, the longer Russia remains in an antagonistic relationship with the West, the more incentive Moscow may have to pursue a formal, full-fledged military alliance with China. When Donald Trump became president analysts predicted that his election could lead to far warmer U.S.-Russian relations that would, in turn, prevent the further deepening of Russian-Chinese ties,⁵¹ but this did not happen. Instead, Washington continues to find its relationship with Moscow strained, with ideas of rapprochement facing widespread resistance in Congress and significant pushback from top national security officials. The problems plaguing the relationship will not have quick fixes and are likely to keep nudging Russia toward China: Investigations into Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. election grind on; new Western sanctions continue to be added; bilateral tensions over Syria remain high, as competing actors vie for positions in the war-torn country

48 Ying, Fu. “[How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies](#),” *Foreign Affairs*. 95 (2016): 96.

49 Ivanov, Sergei. “Russia and China see no sense in creating military alliance,” *Voice of Russia*, July 10, 2014.

50 Lukin, Alexander. *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

51 During his campaign, Trump had strongly, repeatedly criticized U.S. policy toward China, arguing that Washington had facilitated Beijing’s predatory economic behavior, while sounding a markedly different note when discussing Russia—avowing the importance of a stronger partnership between Washington and Moscow. When he took office many observers ventured that he would try to orchestrate a carbon-copy version of Richard Nixon’s achievement of the early 1970s, when Nixon famously exploited Sino-Soviet rivalry to forge an opening to China and weaken the Soviet Union, America’s main Cold War foe. Trump, the thinking went, might try to pursue a new détente with Russia and adopt a more aggressive approach toward China. “If there is a broader strategic thrust to Mr. Trump’s thinking,” Financial Times columnist Gideon Rachman [wrote](#) in December 2016, “it could be to split the informal alliance between Russia and China and instead form a Washington-Moscow axis.”

and Russia remains committed to keeping Bashar al-Assad in power, while the U.S., opposed to Assad, intends to keep its forces in Syria indefinitely; Russia has criticized the U.S. for increasing pressure on North Korea and abandoning the Iran nuclear deal, and denounced the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review, which states that Washington reserves the right to respond to "significant non-nuclear strategic attacks"—including attacks on "civilian population or infrastructure"—with nuclear weapons.

Moreover, the Trump administration has been lumping Russia and China together as Washington's adversaries, boosting the chances that they will view the U.S. in the same light and see good reason to join forces against it. The administration's first National Security Strategy, released in December, contends that "China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor. Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders."⁵² The Pentagon's new defense strategy, released in January, is arguably even more explicit in grouping the two together: "The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by ... revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic and security decisions," according to the document.

For Moscow, meanwhile, not only do good relations with China allow it to advance some of its interests, as described in this paper, they also help to ensure that China does not become a major spoiler for Russia as Beijing continues its rise toward global leadership. Russian leaders know that should their country's relationship with China go sour, the latter can do a lot of damage to Russia that Moscow cannot fully reciprocate. For instance, China would survive a bilateral trade war easily, while for the Russian economy it would be devastating: China is Russia's largest trading partner; Russia was China's ninth-largest in 2017, according to IMF data⁵³ (and only its 12th-largest in the first nine months of the year, according to Chinese customs data⁵⁴). In short, China's potential as a spoiler vis-à-vis Russia is as difficult to exaggerate as its role in limiting the negative impact of Western pressure.

Ensure survival of Russia's allies and prevent regime change in these countries

China's support can be instrumental for Moscow's efforts to prevent regime change in countries

52 Trump, Donald J. "[National Security Strategy](#)." The White House. December 2017.

53 [Direction of Trade Statistics](#) (DOTS), International Monetary Fund website.

54 "Russian-Chinese Trade and Economic Cooperation," website of Ministry of Economic Development of Russia, Undated.

friendly to Russia, such as Syria,⁵⁵ but the most immediate test of the bilateral relationship in this sense is likely to play out in Central Asia. It is in Russia's interest to ensure that the five post-Soviet states in the region remain, at best, Russia's military-political allies, and at least neutral, rather than anchor themselves more firmly to China. However, three of them already count China as their top trading partner, according to the IMF,⁵⁶ as it seeks to import raw materials⁵⁷ from the post-Soviet neighborhood and export more high-value-added goods. Central Asia will also be a key leg in China's new Silk Road—a project initially unwelcome by Russia—and the \$46 billion that China has set aside for the trade network equals more than one-tenth of Russia's hard currency reserves.⁵⁸ So far Russia and China have managed to reconcile their differences in the region with Moscow tacitly agreeing to Beijing's greater economic role, while Moscow continues to act as the main guarantor of security. Such a division of responsibility may eventually prove to be untenable, however: An arrangement in which Russia invests its own military resources to provide security for its ex-Soviet neighbors, while China pockets the benefits from developing economic ties with these states, cannot possibly look fair when viewed from Moscow. As Carnegie's Dmitri Trenin has warned: "In Central Asia ... there is some potential for Sino-Russian friction, even conflict."⁵⁹

One example of Beijing's balancing act in the region concerns energy supplies: On one hand, China has invested billions of dollars in Central Asian oil and gas projects⁶⁰; on the other, it has been careful not to create the impression that it is doing so to lessen its dependence on Russian hydrocarbons. In fact, China has been buying so much oil from Russia that in 2015 the latter became the Chinese economy's largest source of crude.⁶¹

It is not impossible that China's growing economic, military and political might could eventually prompt some of Russia's allies to reorient their foreign policies from north to southeast, seeking even deeper economic ties and new security alliances with Beijing. This would amount to a net loss for their former imperial master, and the probability of such "defections" will increase if China and Russia stop trying to accommodate each other's interests through projects like the SCO and start treating their interactions in the region as a zero-sum game. If Russia had greater

55 In late February 2017, China and Russia jointly vetoed a UNSC resolution "to sanction 21 Syrian individuals, companies, and organizations for using chemical weapons in Syria and to tighten export controls on components of chemical weapons."

56 Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS), International Monetary Fund website.

57 China sees post-Soviet Eurasia as a source of more than just mineral resources. A recent editorial in the Beijing News argued that Ukrainian women could help close China's gender gap. See Alexa Olesen, "Ukrainian Brides May Solve China's Gender Gap, Chinese Media Claims," Foreign Policy, Jan. 28, 2015.

58 Kuhn, Anthony. "China Promises \$46 Billion to Pave the Way for a Brand New Silk Road," NPR, May 3, 2015.

59 Trenin, Dmitri. "From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente," Carnegie Moscow Center, April 9, 2015.

60 "Rising China, sinking Russia," Economist, Sept. 14, 2013.

61 Raval, Anjli. "Russia takes over as top oil supplier to China," Financial Times, June 23, 2015.

financial resources at its disposal, it may have been able to prevent the “Chinazation” of Central Asia’s foreign trade. In the foreseeable future, however, the Russian economy will continue to lag behind China’s. While Russia’s attractiveness as a military ally means that the CSTO’s Central Asian members will not seek to enter a security alliance with China, there’s little Moscow can do to compete with China economically in the region.

That said, it is unlikely that the Central Asian states would want to put all of their eggs in the Chinese basket. One reason they would seek to continue cooperating with Russia, no matter how much China invests, is the same fear of incremental Chinazation as witnessed in Russia itself. For instance, Chinese nationals already account for about 70 percent of all foreigners officially registered under Kyrgyzstan’s quota system⁶² and bouts of anti-Chinese [sentiment](#), or at least [wariness](#), have racked the small country for years.

Ensure access of Russian exporters and importers to world markets; ensure steady development of the Russian economy

In recent years China has helped offset some of the losses incurred by Russia as a result of Western sanctions and its role in Russia’s foreign trade has generally grown. Last year, after a Moscow meeting between Putin and Xi, officials announced that Beijing would extend nearly \$11 billion worth of funding—denominated in renminbi—to a Russian bank and investment fund subject to the sanctions.⁶³ As noted above, Russia has already sidelined Saudi Arabia to become China’s top oil supplier.⁶⁴ China has made major investments in Russian natural gas projects and may eventually become an important market for the fuel: A May 2014 deal provides for Russia to supply at least 38 billion cubic meters a year to China and Gazprom recently boasted that its Power of Siberia pipeline to China is “83 percent complete.”⁶⁵ The two countries are also cooperating in the field of nuclear energy with Russia building six VVER reactors for China’s Tianwan nuclear power plant.⁶⁶ China is likewise an important market for Russian arms, with the first delivery of S-400 air-defense systems reportedly completed in May 2018.⁶⁷ That said, China’s share in Russia’s arms exports has been declining—from under 25 percent in 2007-2009 to around 10 percent since 2010, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, or SIPRI⁶⁸; the reduction

62 Asanov, Bakyt and Farangis Najibullah. “[Kyrgyz Ask Why Jobs at Home Are Going to Chinese](#),” RFE/RL, Nov. 16, 2013.

63 Seddon, Max and Kathrin Hille, “[China and Russia strike \\$11bn funding deal](#),” Financial Times, July 4, 2017.

64 “Russia takes over as top oil supplier to China,” Financial Times, June 23, 2015.

65 “[Power of Siberia gas pipeline 83 per cent complete, over 1,790 kilometers built](#),” Gazprom, May 17, 2018.

66 Jakobson, Linda, Paul Holtom, Dean Knox and Jingchao Peng, “[China’s Energy and Security Relations with Russia: Hopes, Frustrations, and Uncertainties](#),” SIPRI Policy Paper 29, September 2011.

67 “[Russia Completes Delivery of First Regimental Set of S-400 to China—Source](#),” TASS, May 10, 2018.

68 Wezeman, Siemon T. “[China, Russia and the shifting landscape of arms sales](#),” Stockholm International Peace Research

comes in part as the Chinese defense industry masters production of more and more indigenous systems, some of which borrow heavily from Russian designs. (In 2012-2016 China's regional rival India accounted for 38 percent of Russia's arms exports, Vietnam and China for 11 percent each and Algeria for 10 percent.⁶⁹⁾

Still, China cannot fully compensate for restrictions imposed by the U.S. and E.U. on trade with Russia. Though the United States accounted for only 4 percent of Russia's trade in 2017,⁷⁰ it is an important source of technology for Russia's industries. Europe's technological contributions to the development of Russia's economy are even more important. Up to 90 percent of electronics used in Russian defense systems are imported from the West, according to one Russian defense industry estimate,⁷¹ and China, despite its impressive strides in many technological fields, cannot make up for Russia's loss of access to these Western technologies or others, like for deep drilling in the energy sector.⁷² In terms of finance, Russia's Central Bank opened its first overseas office in Beijing in March 2017, but Chinese banks have remained reluctant to step up lending to Russian companies that have been frozen out of Western markets. This means China cannot hope to firmly anchor Russia economically even if it wanted to. Paradoxically, greater investments from China have also been discouraged by the guarded attitudes of some members of Russia's business elite. "We know that you like our money but you don't really like us," Cai Guiru, president of the Association of Chinese Entrepreneurs in the Russian Federation, told participants at a business conference in St. Petersburg.⁷³

Prevent neighboring nations from acquiring nuclear arms and long-range delivery systems

Russia and China hold similar positions on international initiatives to curb the spread of weapons of mass destruction, or WMD, and their delivery systems: "Both view nonproliferation efforts as important, but China and Russia do not share what they perceive as 'Westerners' obsession' with nonproliferation," according to Linda Jakobson and her co-authors.⁷⁴ China's participation in international nonproliferation regimes and its efforts to ensure that none of its nuclear materials, weapons or ballistic missile technologies are stolen are key to ensuring that none of Rus-

Institute, July 5, 2017.

69 Fleurant, Aude, Pieter D. Wezeman, Siemon T. Wezeman and Nan Tian, "[Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2016](#)," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, February 2017.

70 [Direction of Trade Statistics](#) (DOTS), International Monetary Fund website.

71 "Scientist Zuev: Western electronics constitute the main component of Russian Federation's arms," Profil Forex, Nov. 1, 2014.

72 Saradzhyan, Simon. "Stand-off in Crimea: Cui Bono?" Power and Policy, March 12, 2014.

73 "Russia and China: friends with benefits," Financial Times, February 5, 2016.

74 Jakobson et al., "China's Energy and Security Relations with Russia: Hopes, Frustrations, and Uncertainties."

sia's neighbors acquires nuclear weapons or long-range delivery systems. China has often acted in lockstep with Russia in international efforts to ensure the peaceful and transparent nature of Iran's nuclear program, and China can also play a very important role in containing North Korea's nuclear weapons program, which Moscow views as a seriously destabilizing factor. If there is a single country that has the leverage to convince Pyongyang to put the brakes on its nuclear ambitions, it is China—North Korea's prime source of aid and investment.⁷⁵ Thus far, however, Beijing has been unwilling to fully leverage this to contain North Korea's nuclear program, even as the Hermit Kingdom's leader prepared to discuss denuclearization with Donald Trump at a historic summit in June 2018. In July 2017, after North Korea held its first intercontinental ballistic missile test, China and Russia issued a joint statement calling on Pyongyang, Washington and Seoul to accept Moscow's proposal for a "dual freeze": In exchange for North Korea's halting its nuclear and ballistic missile testing, the United States and South Korea would stop conducting joint military exercises. In December 2017, responding both to North Korean provocations and trilateral missile-tracking drills by Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, China and Russia conducted "a joint computer-simulated anti-missile air drill in Beijing."⁷⁶

Prevent regime change or other interference in internal affairs of Russia

Russia's Putin and his ministers have also been keen on cultivating a common position with China on ensuring Russia's ruling elite remains in power. While vital for Putin and his retinue, preservation of the current Russian elite's control over the country does not represent a vital national interest of Russia as a state. Nevertheless, it has to be taken into account because it affects all of Russia's policies. Russian leaders have sought and received their Chinese counterparts' whole-hearted support in opposing "color revolutions," which they believe are encouraged by Western countries to achieve regime change under the guise of support for democratization. Reflecting on this common interest of the Russian and Chinese elites, Russia's then-Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov (now ambassador to the U.S.) stated in 2014 that Russia and China should jointly work against color revolutions: "We think Russia and China should work together to counter this new threat to the security of our countries," he said.⁷⁷ Chinese leaders, of course, could not agree more: "China categorically opposes color revolutions and [any] attempts to hold back Russia's development," Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli told Putin in September 2014.⁷⁸ The Chinese elite's concerns that the West might be trying to foment regime change either in China or in countries that are its partners, such as Russia, helps explain why Beijing has refused to condemn

75 Saradzhyan, Simon. "A Chinese Silver Bullet for North Korea's Nuclear Program?" RIA Novosti, Feb. 20, 2013.

76 Kwong, Jessica. "Russia and China Military Drills Target Both North Korea and U.S.," Newsweek, Dec. 13, 2017.

77 "Ministry of Defense: Russia and PRC Should Counter Color Revolutions Together," Gazeta.ru, Nov. 18, 2014 (in Russian).

78 "Meeting with Vice Premier of China Zhang Gaoli," Kremlin.ru, Sept. 1, 2014.

Russia's actions in Ukraine as much as Beijing's aforementioned calculation that it would benefit from Russia's estrangement from the West due to the crisis there.

Russian and Chinese elites do not just oppose regime change in their countries or in friendly states; they also oppose any kind of real or imagined foreign interference in their internal affairs, including criticism of major policy decisions. One of these is the lack of leadership rotation—whether in China, where Xi has just scrapped constitutional limits on the number of presidential terms he can serve, or in Russia, where Putin has made sure he can legally return to the Kremlin as long as he takes a break after serving consecutive terms. Both Moscow and Beijing also bristle at criticism of their human rights record or attempts to “revise” history to cast either Russia or China in a bad light. Li Fenglin, a former Chinese ambassador to Russia, wrote in a recent op-ed that China and Russia can cooperate “especially when it comes to shared values. … Why does the West always make an issue of democracy and human rights? I think their aim is to maintain the leading position of the U.S.,” he wrote.⁷⁹ The two countries’ elites also share an interest in defending their interpretations of history, such as the roles that China and Soviet Russia played in World War II. “To forget history means to commit treason,” Xi warned in a 2015 op-ed in the Russian press before attending Moscow’s May 9 parade that year—meant to remind the world of the Soviet Union’s indispensable role in defeating Germany and its allies in World War II.⁸⁰ Russian and Chinese elites also oppose any forms of liberalization that would undermine their grip on power. “Russia is faking democracy, and China is faking communism, yet both share the condition of ‘partial-reform equilibrium’—the phenomenon wherein major liberalizing reforms produce winners who in turn form into powerful interest groups that stymie further reforms,” according to Princeton historian Stephen Kotkin.⁸¹

3. Russia’s Impact on China’s Vital National Interests

As is the case with Russian leaders, their Chinese counterparts often invoke their country’s national interests when justifying their policies. Befitting a country of rapidly growing economic and military power, China claims to have an expansive and expanding set of interests, as demonstrated with its passage of a sweeping new national security law in July 2015. Xi has repeatedly articulated his desire for China to achieve “national rejuvenation” by 2049, the centennial of the founding of the People’s Republic. China aims to strengthen its military capabilities to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and it has placed particular emphasis on cultivating naval ca-

79 “Asian concerns draw China and Russia closer,” Global Times, Dec. 19, 2011.

80 Jinping, Xi. “[‘Pomnit’ istoriyu, otkryvat’ budushee](#)” (“Remembering History, Opening Up the Future”), Rossiyskaya Gazeta, May 6, 2015 (in Russian).

81 Kotkin, Stephen, “[Mr. Xi Goes to Moscow](#),” New York Times, March 27, 2013.

pabilities that both complicate America's ability to operate in the western Pacific and allow China to defend its interests beyond its "near abroad." Beijing also seeks to foster a regional environment that facilitates as peaceful a Chinese resurgence as possible, and to minimize perturbations outside the Asia-Pacific that would jeopardize flows of vital commodities. There are obviously other interests one could add to the list. The following section examines how Russia affects a select number of China's national interests, as well as at least one fundamental interest of China's ruling elite.

Preserve China's territorial integrity and achieve sovereignty over the South China Sea

China's principal concerns are pacifying Tibet and Xinjiang, and ensuring Taiwan does not pursue independence. Some observers contend that Russia's absorption of Crimea might embolden China to be more heavy-handed in handling its restive provinces, or even to contemplate a surprise attack on Taiwan. For now, though, the sanctions that the West has imposed on Russia in the wake of its involvement in Ukraine has likely made China more confident in its extant, patient approach—not only toward Taiwan but in its sovereignty disputes over some of the islands in the South China Sea. There are several reasons China seeks to consolidate its power in those waters. First, China believes it is historically entitled to the sea's islands. Xi explained in November 2015 that they "have been China's territory since ancient times, and the Chinese government must take responsibility to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and legitimate maritime interests."⁸² In a white paper released in May 2015, the Chinese Defense Ministry stated that, "concerning China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some of its offshore neighbors take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied. Some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs."⁸³ More recently, in response to a four-ship U.S. strike group's patrol of the South China Sea, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that the sea "has been subject to colonial invasion and illegal occupation, and now some people are trying to stir up waves, while some others are showing off forces. However, like the tide that comes and goes, none of these attempts will have any impact. History will prove who merely the guest is and who the real host is."⁸⁴

Second, China seeks to strengthen its position in the South China Sea for economic reasons. According to a recent report, "[r]oughly one-third, or \$5 trillion, of the world's commercial shipping passes through its waterways annually. The South China Sea is home to proven reserves of at least 7 billion barrels of oil, as well as what is estimated to be 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Fifty

⁸² Wong, Edward. "Xi Again Defends China's Claim to South China Sea Islands," New York Times, Nov. 7, 2015.

⁸³ "Full Text: China's Military Strategy," Xinhua, May 26, 2015.

⁸⁴ Larter, David. "After U.S. show of force, China takes hard line on South China Sea," Navy Times, March 9, 2016.

percent of all global oil tanker shipments pass through the region.”⁸⁵

A third explanation is that China wants to challenge the military dimension of America’s rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region. Political scientists Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell note that from China’s perspective, Washington is “the most intrusive outside actor in China’s internal affairs, the guarantor of the status quo in Taiwan, the largest naval presence in the East China and South China seas, [and] the formal or informal military ally of many of China’s neighbors.”⁸⁶ China has routinely expressed fear and anger over its encirclement, and with the Pentagon’s announcement that it intends to station 60 percent of U.S. Air Force and Navy forces in the Asia-Pacific region by 2020 Chinese disquiet is growing. China is accordingly pursuing a two-pronged strategy to cement its control of the South China Sea. First, it is building a sprawling infrastructure—consisting of, among other facilities, radar stations, lighthouses, airstrips and even floating nuclear power plants—in disputed parts of the sea. Second, to protect its construction activities, it is pursuing what Major General Zhang Zhaoshong has famously called “a cabbage strategy”: “surrounding a contested area with so many boats—fishermen, fishing administration ships, marine surveillance ships, navy warships—that ‘the island is thus wrapped layer by layer like a cabbage.’”⁸⁷ Should China come to dominate the South China Sea, it could seriously challenge the U.S. Navy’s ability to operate in the western Pacific.

One can gain some insight into the complexity of Sino-Russian relations by examining Russia’s position on China’s behavior in these territorial disputes. While Russia is not party to the disputes, it criticized a 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague rejecting China’s claim over much of the sea. To underscore its solidarity with China, Russia does not only refuse to recognize Taiwan, but it also sent warships to join Chinese naval forces in a bilateral exercise in the South China Sea less than two months after the ruling. At the same time, Russia is careful not to ruin relations with other claimants of islands in those waters. In fact, Russia is trying to balance Chinese power, particularly by strengthening its ties with two longstanding Chinese antagonists, India and Vietnam, and China is wary of these Russian overtures. As noted by political scientist Huiyun Feng: “Russia’s 2012 energy deal with Vietnam in the South China Sea, where China has claimed its undisputed sovereignty, was seen as a ‘stab in the back’ by some Chinese analysts.”⁸⁸ Asked in May 2018 to comment on reports that Russian oil giant Rosneft had begun drilling in the contested area, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang urged any

⁸⁵ Van Jackson, Mira Rapp-Hooper et al., *Networked Transparency: Constructing a Common Operational Picture of the South China Sea*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2016.

⁸⁶ Nathan, Andrew J., and Andrew Scobell. “How China sees America: The sum of Beijing’s fears.” *Foreign Affairs*. 91 (2012): 32.

⁸⁷ Himmelman, Jeff. “A Game of Shark and Minnow,” *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 2013.

⁸⁸ Feng, Huiyun. “China and Russia vs. the United States?” *Diplomat*, March 2, 2015.

parties “carry[ing] out oil and gas exploration and exploitation activities in waters under Chinese jurisdiction … to earnestly respect China’s sovereign and jurisdictional rights and not do anything that could impact bilateral relations and regional peace and stability.”⁸⁹

Ensure steady development of the Chinese economy; ensure the viability and stability of major markets for major flows of Chinese imports and exports; ensure a safe and secure global commons, particularly maritime, which provide China the basic commodities upon which its continued growth depends

Robust economic growth undergirds an implicit bargain the Chinese Communist Party has had with the Chinese people since Deng Xiaoping initiated economic reforms in the late 1970s: In return for acquiescing to the party’s authority, the public would enjoy sustained improvements to their material welfare. China has lifted hundreds of millions of its citizens out of poverty over the past four decades—an unprecedented achievement—and is on track to displace the United States as the world’s largest economy within this decade. However, there are growing concerns about its economic performance. It grew at its slowest pace in a quarter century in 2015. Goldman Sachs notes that “China’s debt build-up since the global financial crisis has been one of the largest in modern history, with total debt-to-GDP rising to an estimated 317 percent at the end of 2017 (or 282 percent if we exclude financial sector debts, compared with 158 percent at the end of 2008).”⁹⁰ These data suggest that even if China is not in for a hard landing, it is likely to experience some pain as it attempts to transition to a consumption-led growth model and incrementally internationalize its currency. Mitigating that pain and stabilizing its growth will be crucial for the CCP’s continued legitimacy—hence the imperative of a stable global commons that funnels vital commodities to Beijing. According to Michael Pettis, a Beijing-based analyst of China’s economy, “China’s growth miracle has already run out of steam. It is only by allowing debt to surge that the country is able to meet its GDP targets… Analysts should not read GDP growth as an indicator of China’s underlying economic performance. Piling up unsold and unsaleable goods or building empty airports may boost GDP in an economy whose financial system does not recognize bad debt, but it does not measure its performance.”⁹¹

Russia is not a top contributor to China’s economic development in the aggregate. Although bilateral trade between 2007 and 2017 increased by 75 percent from \$48.1 billion to \$84.4 billion,

89 “[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Regular Press Conference on May 17, 2018](#),” Chinese Foreign Ministry website, May 17, 2018.

90 McCrum, Dan. “[Over in China, a debt boom mapped](#),” Financial Times, Feb. 5, 2018.

91 Pettis, Michael. “[China’s growth miracle has run out of steam](#),” Financial Times, Nov. 19, 2017.

according to IMF data, Russia's share in China's overall trade remained around 2 percent.⁹² In absolute terms this lagged far behind China's No. 1 trade partner, the U.S., whose trade with China totaled nearly \$588.7 billion last year.⁹³ There is one economic sector, however, in which Russia plays an important role in China's development: energy. Russia remained China's top crude oil supplier throughout much of 2017, after having overtaken Saudi Arabia. Shipments of oil from Russia to China in October 2017 averaged 1.095 million barrels per day (bpd), according to the Chinese customs service.⁹⁴ Russia also plans to start supplying natural gas to China by pipeline in 2019.⁹⁵ With China's dependence on oil growing rapidly—it imported 45 percent of its crude oil in 2006 and will import an estimated 65 percent in 2020—it is actively attempting to diversify its portfolio of suppliers. Russia will benefit significantly from this increase in imports, but it will have to continue making significant concessions if it wishes to remain a preferred energy partner for the Chinese.⁹⁶

Partners' share in China's overall volume of trade, %

Country	2007	2017	Percent change
United States	13.95%	14.32%	3%
Japan	10.86%	7.38%	-32%
South Korea	7.37%	6.82%	-7%
Taiwan	5.72%	4.85%	-15%
Germany	4.33%	4.10%	-5%
Australia	2.01%	3.27%	63%
Malaysia	2.14%	2.35%	10%
India	1.78%	2.05%	15%
Russia	2.21%	2.05%	-7%
Thailand	1.59%	1.96%	23%
Singapore	2.17%	1.94%	-11%
United Kingdom	1.81%	1.94%	7%
Netherlands	2.13%	1.92%	-10%
France	1.56%	1.35%	-13%
Italy	1.44%	1.21%	-16%

Maintain constructive relations with the United States while deterring it from exercising effective pressure on China

The United States is the only country with the potential to constrict China's resurgence within and beyond the Asia-Pacific. At the July 2014 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Xi conceded that an armed confrontation between the two would "definitely be a disaster for the two countries and the world."⁹⁷ At the 2016 China Development Forum, former State Councilor Dai Bingguo was even more emphatic: "If there is a war between China and the U.S., there will be no winner. The only result will be mutual destruction, and the world will suffer. Humanity has suffered enough from disastrous wars and simply cannot afford another even more destructive and devastating world war. A war between China and the U.S. is bound to wreak havoc on humanity."⁹⁸ While the two countries once expressed great enthusiasm for forging a new model of

92 Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS), International Monetary Fund website.

93 Ibid.

94 "Russia remains China's top oil supplier for eighth month," Reuters, Nov.24, 2017.

95 Mazneva, Elena, Stephen Bierman , and Javier Blas. "China Deepens Oil Ties With Russia in \$9 Billion Rosneft Deal," Bloomberg, Sept. 8, 2017.

96 "Slump in oil prices fuels increase in China's crude imports," China Daily, Jan. 27, 2016.

97 "Xi says US-China confrontation would be 'disaster'," BBC, July 9, 2014.

98 "On Building a New Model of Major-Country Relations Between China and the United States," website of the People Repub-

great-power relations, optimism about developing such a structure has waned on both sides. Still, China can ill-afford an armed confrontation with the United States; it will not further endanger bilateral ties for the sake of a superficial, increasingly unbalanced relationship with Russia. As noted above, however, Russia remains an important source of arms for China, which can be used to deter the United States. SIPRI estimates that Russia accounted for 57 percent of China's arms imports, while Ukraine accounted for 16 percent and France for 15 percent in 2012-2016.⁹⁹ However, despite supplying arms to China and staging joint military exercises, Russia remains unwilling to enter a military alliance with Beijing to actively ward off the United States in the region.

Maintain the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

Above all, the leaders of the CCP want to retain power. The party's legitimacy depends on a number of factors, including: its ability to deliver sustained economic growth; the perception, if not always the reality, that it is responsive to the grievances of a burgeoning middle class; and an ongoing public commitment to the Chinese model of governance. Symbolically at least, Russia's vocal opposition to any regime change, including popular revolutions, helps the Chinese ruling elite in this regard. Putin's vocal support for scrapping limits on presidential terms by Xi also helps, but practically it has little effect.¹⁰⁰ Whether or not the CCP endures will ride on decisions that Xi and the rest of China's leaders make or do not make.

The Party's move to end presidential term limits may mean that Xi will rule over China for as long as he lives. At the first session of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, he called Chinese governance "a great contribution to [the] political civilization of humanity" and argued that democratic governance, "confined by interests of different political parties, classes, regions and groups, tears society apart."¹⁰¹ Moreover, in "Document 9," issued in April 2013, senior party leaders warned that China had to counter "Western forces hostile to China," including the promulgation of "constitutional democracy" and "universal values" of human rights. In short, a previously muted ideological component of U.S.-China relations is starting to become salient.¹⁰²

lic of China's consulate in Los Angeles, USA, March 20, 2016.

99 Fleurant, Aude, Pieter D. Wezeman, Siemon T. Wezeman and Nan Tian, "[Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2016](#)," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, February 2017.

100 While greeting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on April 5, Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed the Chinese legislature's unanimous decision to reappoint Xi Jinping as president with no term limits. Wang in turn conveyed Xi's congratulations on Putin's reelection. ([RFE/RL](#), 04.06.18)

101 Liangyu, "China's party system is great contribution to political civilization: Xi," Xinhua, March 5, 2018.

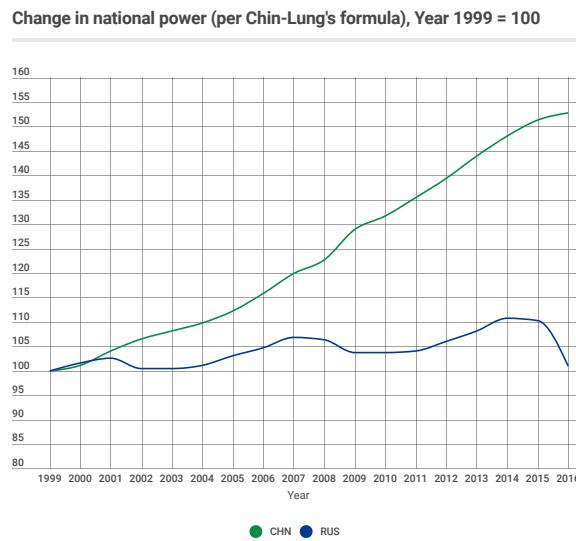
102 Buckley, Chris. "China Takes Aim at Western Ideas," New York Times, Aug. 20, 2013.

4. Why a Full-Blown Military-Political Alliance Is Unlikely

Today's Russian-Chinese partnership can safely be expected to keep growing deeper as the two governments take pains to increase bilateral trade and investments, while also advancing their multilateral cooperation projects, such as the SCO and BRICS. But despite this convergence of interests, China-Russia relations may epitomize the Chinese proverb "same bed, different dreams": Putin's ambition is to retain Russia's positions in the bilateral relationship even as Russia continues to grow weaker relative to China; the rising China, in contrast, is looking to expand its clout not only vis-à-vis Russia, but also in neighboring regions and globally.

Fundamentally, Chinese leaders regard Russia as a power in decline vis-à-vis their own country and with good reason. Recent calculations by one of this paper's authors show that four different models for measuring national power place China above Russia in absolute terms, while three of them also show Chinese power growing much more rapidly than Russia's in the 21st century. One example concerns GDP: Although economic growth in Putin's Russia has outpaced both the world as a whole and the United States, it declined versus China in the same period.¹⁰³ If Russia's GDP equaled 42 percent of China's in 1999, it equaled only 17 percent in 2016—a 60-percent decline. These economic disparities, as noted above, are particularly stark in provinces along

the Russian-Chinese border. But the difference in the two countries' might persists beyond economics. Multi-variable approaches toward measuring national power also justify Chinese perceptions that Russia is declining relative to the Middle Kingdom. One formula—proposed by Chin-Lung Chang of Taiwan's Fo-guang University, who factors in population, land area, economic output and population¹⁰⁴—Russia's national power rose by 21 percent in 1999–2016, outpacing its Western competitors. At the same time, however, China's national power rose by 76 percent.¹⁰⁵



103 Saradzhyan, Simon and Nabi Abdullaev. "Measuring National Power: Is Vladimir Putin's Russia in Decline?" Russia Matters. May 4, 2018.

104 Chang, Chin-Lung. "A measure of national power." In *Proceedings of the 2004 International Seminar at the National University of Malaysia*, Bangi, Malaysia, vol. 1617, p. 1617, 2004.

105 Saradzhyan, Simon and Nabi Abdullaev. "Measuring National Power: Is Vladimir Putin's Russia in Decline?" Russia Matters. May 4, 2018.

As discussed above, there are also formidable demographic disparities between the two countries. In 1999 Russia's population equaled 11.75 percent of China's, but by 2016 that share declined to 10.47 percent—a drop of nearly 11 percent. The combined population of the 27 Russian provinces east of the Ural Mountains totaled 37.8 million as of 2016, while there were 37.9 million people living in China's Heilongjiang—just one of the four provinces bordering Russia, all of which have significantly greater population density than Russia's eastern regions.

Though forecasts should generally be taken with a grain of salt, as they often presuppose the continuation of existing trends, they can still be useful in gauging how some of the disparities between Russia and China may change over time. A forecast by the PwC consultancy says the share of Russia's economy in global economic output will decline by 22 percent in 2016-2050, while China's will grow by 13 percent in the same period. Meanwhile, a U.N. forecast shows Russia's population as a share of the world's declining by 18 percent in 2016-2050, while the same period would see China's population decline by just under 11 percent.¹⁰⁶ If these prognoses materialize, further widening Russian-Chinese disparities, they may eventually have a negative impact on some of Russia's vital interests, such as ensuring the loyalty of its post-Soviet allies.

The disparities discussed above show that the ambitions the two countries can realistically harbor are necessarily different, and this makes the emergence of a full-blown military-political alliance between Russia and China unlikely in the near future. Russia, which seeks to be a global player on par with China and the U.S. and to play the role of the ultimate balancer in global affairs, is unlikely to agree to become a “big sister” in such an alliance, as some Chinese have referred to it¹⁰⁸ (clearly meaning the lesser of two siblings). Nor will the SCO stand a chance of becoming an

Share in world population

Country	2016	2050	Percent change
India	17.85%	20.95%	17.34%
China	18.6%	16.56%	-10.97%
Nigeria	2.52%	4.9%	94.56%
United States	4.36%	4.78%	9.53%
Brazil	2.82%	2.93%	3.8%
Russia	1.93%	1.58%	-18.15%
Iran	1.08%	1.13%	5.18%
United Kingdom	0.88%	0.93%	5.66%
Germany	1.09%	0.92%	-15.69%
France	0.88%	0.87%	0.42%
South Africa	0.74%	0.81%	8.83%
Italy	0.81%	0.69%	-13.73%
Saudi Arabia	0.43%	0.57%	30.76%
Venezuela	0.42%	0.51%	20.38%
Uzbekistan	0.41%	0.46%	11.86%
Ukraine	0.6%	0.43%	-28.16%
Kazakhstan	0.24%	0.28%	14.77%
Tajikistan	0.12%	0.18%	50.45%
United Arab Emirates	0.13%	0.16%	25.99%
Azerbaijan	0.13%	0.14%	1.42%
Kyrgyzstan	0.08%	0.1%	24.79%
Belarus	0.13%	0.1%	-21.77%
Turkmenistan	0.07%	0.08%	10.03%
Kuwait	0.05%	0.07%	34.97%
Georgia	0.05%	0.04%	-20.10%
Moldova	0.06%	0.04%	-27.13%
Armenia	0.04%	0.03%	-17.68%

107

Share in world GDP

Country	2016	2050	Percent change
China	18%	20.3%	12.76%
United States	15.71%	11.83%	-24.68%
India	7.38%	15.31%	107.45%
Russia	3.17%	2.47%	-21.93%
Brazil	2.65%	2.62%	-1.39%
Germany	3.37%	2.13%	-36.76%
United Kingdom	2.36%	1.86%	-21.05%
France	2.32%	1.63%	-29.52%
Italy	1.88%	1.08%	-42.5%
Saudi Arabia	1.46%	1.63%	11.18%
Iran	1.23%	1.35%	9.59%
Nigeria	0.92%	1.51%	63.69%
South Africa	0.62%	0.89%	43.16%

106 Ibid.

107 “World Population Prospects,” United Nations, 2017.

108 Gabuev, Alexander. “Russia and China: Little Brother or Big Sister?” Carnegie Moscow Center, July 5, 2016.

equivalent of NATO, if only because it includes arch foes India and Pakistan, making it difficult to reach consensus on military and security issues.

Though unlikely, such a full-blown, formal alliance is possible if two conditions emerge. The first would be Russia's consent to accept the role of a junior partner in such an alliance. This could happen, for instance, if Russia gets so much weaker that it can no longer play the role of an independent pole of power in the emerging multi-polar world and estrangement from the West continues to preclude any rapprochement with the U.S. and Europe. The second condition is that China would change its current position, which holds that such alliances should not be entered into. Some Chinese thinkers advocate for just such a policy change. According to Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University and one of China's leading experts on national power, the time has come for China to abandon its principle of not entering alliances, adopted in 2008, and enter such an alliance with Russia because "China is already halfway toward acquiring the status of a superpower."¹⁰⁹

A military-political union between a rising China and an antagonized Russia would not be in America's interest. To prevent it, the U.S. can, of course, try to play Moscow and Beijing off one another, but such a strategy might backfire, given how close Russia and China have become economically and politically. Washington would do well instead to normalize relations with Russia in the short term—on the condition that Moscow at the very least make concerted, genuine efforts to resolve the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria on terms acceptable to key stakeholders—while continuing to maintain a working relationship with China. If this sort of constructive relationship could permeate the whole American-Sino-Russian triangle, that would help China and America to escape what Harvard professor Graham Allison has described as "Thucydides's trap": "When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely outcome is war."

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109 Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University and one of China's leading experts on national power, believes that China's principle of not entering alliances, adopted in 2008, has become obsolete and Russia should insist on forming an alliance with China. Interviewed in "Ne ponimayu, pochemu Rossiya ne nastaivaet na formirovaniy Alyansia s Kitaem" ("I do not understand why Russia does not insist on forming an alliance with China"), Komersant, March 17, 2017.

Appendix

Timeline of most important Chinese-Russian joint military activities in 2014-2017 (in reverse chronological order)

Name and time: [Stage 2 of Joint Sea-2017 on September 22-26](#)

Location: Sea of Japan and Okhotsk

Scale: [11 ships and two submarines](#), two deep-submergence rescue vehicles, four anti-submarine warfare aircraft and four shipborne helicopters participating.

Russian naval group included a large anti-submarine ship, a frigate, a rescue ship, a deep submersible rescue vehicle, two ship-borne helicopters and marines.

Chinese naval group represented by Type 051C Luzhou-class missile destroyer, the Shijiazhuang; a Type 054A Jiangkai II-class missile frigate, the Daqing; a Type 903A supply ship, the Dongping-hu; and a submarine rescue ship, the Changdao.

Aim of the exercise: Improvement of coordination in jointly countering maritime threats.

Name and time: [Stage 1 of Joint Sea-2017 from July 21 to July 28](#)

Location: Baltic Sea off Baltiysk, a coastal city in Russia's westernmost constituent territory, the exclave of Kaliningrad

Significance: First time Chinese navy has dispatched warships to participate in an exercise in the Baltic Sea.

Scale: three Chinese warships and 10 Russian ships, including Russia's new-generation Project 20380 corvettes—the Steregushchy and the Boiky—as well as a rescue tug, Ka-27 multi-purpose shipborne helicopters, the Su-24 tactical bomber and An-26 military transport aircraft. China sent the Hefei destroyer, the Yuncheng frigate and the Luoma Lake supply ship to the drills.

Aim of the exercise: The main aim of the exercise was “to train and improve cooperation procedures at sea,” according to the Russian Defense Ministry.

Name and time: [SCO's ground exercise Peace Mission-2016, September 15–21, 2016](#)

Location: Balykchi, Kyrgyzstan

Scale: 1,100 troops (270 Chinese, 500 Russian)

Aim of the exercise: Counterterrorism

Name and time: [Joint Sea-2016, September 12-19 2016](#)

Location: South China Sea

Significance: Russia's consent to participate in an exercise in the South China Sea was significant as China [claims the sea in its entirety](#), including all the islands, islets and reefs in it, in defiance of rival claims by other countries in the region and opposition from the United States.

Scale: 18 ships and support vessels, 21 aircraft, over 250 marines and 15 units of military equipment were involved in the drills.

Aim of the exercise: Practice organization of all types of ship defense, conduct combat firing at naval and aerial targets and landing operations.

Name and time: Second part of [Joint Sea-2015](#) (August)

Location: Peter the Great Gulf, waters off the Clerk Cape and the Sea of Japan

Significance: [Billed as largest Russian-Chinese naval exercise at the time](#).

Scale: 23 vessels and two submarines

Aim of the exercise: [Live-firing drills, anti-submarine operations and close-support combat drills](#)

Name and time: First part of [Joint Sea-2015](#) (May)

Location: Mediterranean Sea

Significance: First ever Russian-Chinese naval exercise in the Med. Ahead of the exercise two Chinese [frigates visited the Russian Novorossiysk naval base](#) in the Black Sea—a first for the PLAN.

Scale: 18 warships

Aim of the exercise: Practiced underway replenishment and escort operations.

Name and time: [SCO's ground exercise Peace Mission-2014, August 24–29, 2014](#)

Location: Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China

Scale: 7,000 troops (5,000 Chinese, 1,000 Russian)

Aim of the exercise: Counterterrorism

Name and time: [Joint Sea-2014](#)

Location: East China Sea

Scale: 14 warships, 2 submarines, nine airplanes and six helicopters from China and Russia.

Timeline of most important Chinese-Russian joint military (especially naval) activities in 2003-2013 (in reverse chronological order)

Name and time: SCO's Peace Mission-2013, July 27-August 15, 2013

Location: Chebarkul, Chelyabinsk region of Russia

Scale: 1,500 military personnel (600 Chinese, 900 Russian), [more than 20 planes and helicopters](#)

Aim of the exercise: Counterterrorism

Name and time: [Joint Sea 2013, July 5-12, 2013](#)

Location: Sea of Japan

Significance: It was the [first time](#) for the two navies to stage joint military exercises near Peter the Great Gulf, and it involved the largest single batch of troops the Chinese navy had dispatched to a joint drill with foreign navies.

Scale: 18 surface ships, one submarine, three airplanes, five ship-launched helicopters and two commando units. At the time, these were billed as the largest ever Russian-Chinese naval exercises.

Aim of the exercise: Focused on joint air defense, joint escorts and maritime search and rescue operations.

Name and time: [SCO's ground exercise Peace Mission-2012, June 8–14, 2012](#)

Location: Khujand, Tajikistan

Scale: 2,000 (369 Chinese, 350 Russian)

Aim of the exercise: Counterterrorism

Name and time: [Joint Sea-2012, April 22-27, 2012](#)

Location: Waters near the eastern Chinese port city of Qingdao

Scale: 25 warships, 13 planes and nine helicopters as well as two special-forces contingents to the joint drill.

Aim of the exercise: Explored new ways to improve coordination and emergency response under multiple circumstances.

Name and time: [SCO's ground exercise Peace Mission-2010, September 10–25, 2010](#)

Location: Zhambyl region, Kazakhstan

Scale: 5,000 (1,000 Chinese, 1,000 Russian)

Aim of the exercise: Counterterrorism

Name and time: [SCO's ground exercise Peace Mission-2009, July 24–26, 2009](#)

Location: Taonan, Jilin Province, China

Scale: 2,600 (1,300 Chinese, 1,300 Russian)

Aim of the exercise: Counterterrorism

Name and time: [SCO's ground exercise Peace Mission-2007, August 2007](#)

Location: Chelyabinsk, Russia

Scale: 6,500 troops from Russia, China and other member states of SCO

Aim of the exercise: Counterterrorism

Name and time: SCO's [Peace Mission-2005](#), Aug. 18-25, 2005

Location: Off Vladivostok in Russia's Far East and later moved to east China's Shandong Peninsula and nearby waters

Significance: First [bilateral naval drill of China and post-Soviet Russia](#).

Scale: 10,000 servicemen of the two countries' ground, naval, air, airborne and marine forces participated.

Name and time: [SCO's ground exercise Coalition-2003, August 6-12, 2003](#)

Location: Kazakhstan's border city of Ucharal and Ili, China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region

Significance: The first combined military exercise in which Russian and Chinese armies participated.

About Russia Matters

Russia Matters is a project launched in 2016 by Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

The project's main aim is to improve the understanding of Russia and the U.S.-Russian relationship among America's policymakers and concerned public. It does so by showcasing the best expertise on Russia and its relationships with the rest of the world by providing top-notch analysis, relevant factual data and related digests of news and analysis. Initially, the project's contributors and institutional partners will be primarily U.S.-based and its main platform for pursuing its goals will be this website.

The specific aims of Russia Matters are to help:

- U.S. policymakers and the general public gain a better understanding of why and how Russia matters to the United States now and in the foreseeable future and what drivers propel the two countries' policies in areas of mutual concern;
- Ensure that U.S. policies toward Russia are conducive to the advancement of long-term U.S. vital national interests, but that they also improve cooperation in areas where interests converge and mitigate friction in areas of divergence;
- Foster a new generation of Russia experts.

Russia Matters likewise endeavors to build bridges between academe and the policymaking community.

It is our sincere hope that this endeavor will help advance a viable, analytically rigorous U.S. policy on Russia guided by realism, verifiable facts and national interests without sacrificing opportunities for bilateral cooperation.

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