

Assessing Russia-China Military and Security Relations

Briefing notes

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Political and strategic implications of Sino-Russian defence relations

Bobo Lo

Complementary but different agendas

China and Russia have a strong mutual interest in developing defence ties. The benefits of engagement are considerable, and there are few downsides. At the same time, Beijing and Moscow have different priorities.

Russia

For Moscow, defence cooperation is the one area of the strategic partnership where Russia is clearly the senior player – the exception to the overall trend of growing asymmetry in Beijing's favour. As such, it represents an 'equalizer' in the relationship. This matters both in terms of Russia's standing as an independent great power and the dynamics of bilateral engagement.

With the attention of the West focused increasingly on geopolitical and security challenges, the Kremlin views the expansion of defence ties as key to projecting Russian power. Close association with China gives Russia an international weight that would otherwise be unattainable. It drives home the message that Russia is back as a global force. From the Kremlin's perspective, Sino-Russian defence cooperation is a source of strategic leverage vis-à-vis the West.

Russia's position as the senior partner in the military sphere also ensures that China will continue to respect its interests and sensitivities. Unlike in other areas of the relationship, Moscow has options whereas Beijing's choices are constrained. Russia can and does sell arms to a wide range of customers, but is the only source of high-end equipment for China. This effective monopoly not only strengthens its position in negotiating arms contracts, but also more generally across their partnership.

China

Beijing's motivations in developing defence ties with Moscow are straightforward. Most immediately, cooperation is important to the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Advanced Russian weapons, such as the Su-35 multi-purpose fighter and the S-400 anti-air missile system, fill technological gaps in indigenous Chinese capabilities, and improve its regional power projection capabilities. PLA participation in military exercises, such as Vostok-2018, Tsentr-2019, 'Peace Mission', and 'Joint Sea', gives Chinese troops valuable operational experience.

Burgeoning defence ties are also important in terms of security confidence-building. Indirectly, they consolidate China's 'strategic rear' to the north, freeing Beijing to concentrate on pursuing its primary objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. They also discourage possible attacks by a third party. More broadly, defence cooperation reinforces the positive 'vibe' in Sino-Russian relations, and is a source of psychological comfort to both sides at a time of mounting pressures at home and abroad.

Successes and limitations

Defence cooperation is one of the most successful areas of the Sino-Russian partnership. Moscow has raised Russia's international profile, spooked the West, and achieved a reasonable balance in the bilateral relationship. Beijing has secured unprecedented access to advanced military technology, while the PLA has been given practical opportunities to improve its fighting capabilities.

Yet Sino-Russian defence cooperation is less impressive than it looks. Take arms sales. Although the fall-out from the annexation of Crimea expedited the Su-35 and S-400 deals, these were already in train before 2014. China is only one of several major Russian arms clients in Asia, well behind India. There is no evidence, too, that the latest deals have contributed to Beijing's more aggressive approach in the South China Sea.

It is a similar story with Sino-Russian military exercises. Interoperability is minimal. The size of Chinese contingents in major Russian exercises such as Vostok-2018 – 3,200 troops out of an estimated 300,000 – is small and their involvement peripheral. A joint air patrol in July 2019 had a tremendous shock effect at the time, but was not repeated until December 2020. The Russian offer to assist China in building a missile early warning system, far from exacerbating a China threat, should bring greater predictability and therefore contribute to strategic stability in the region.

To highlight the limits of Sino-Russian defence cooperation is not to dismiss its importance or potential to expand. It should be carefully monitored. But for the time being their engagement is relatively modest. It is not the game-changer that alarmist voices claim it to be. That said, it suits Beijing and Moscow to talk it up. The more impressive their cooperation seems to others, the greater the strategic leverage.

The strategic context

Sino-Russian defence cooperation needs to be seen against the backdrop of their views of world order. Beijing and Moscow seek to constrain the exercise of American power; oppose liberal universalism; and believe in the primacy of great powers. But they are strategically autonomous actors, and there are fundamental differences in their attitudes towards global governance.

Beijing is a system-player. It acts on the core premise that China requires a benign external environment in order to prosper. The existing international order, while far from perfect, nevertheless continues to favour Chinese interests in the main. It also offers Beijing plenty of scope to game the system from within.

Moscow is a system-disruptor. It identifies few benefits from the current global order, and seeks a return to a *de facto* Concert of Great Powers. Meanwhile, continuing instability in international politics suits Russia's opportunistic approach – as demonstrated by its unilateral military interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria.

While such differences are manageable, they limit Beijing and Moscow's capacity for strategic coordination – be it in the Asia-Pacific, Central Eurasia, or Europe. The suggestion by some that Moscow would be willing, in the event of US-China confrontation, to engage in joint operations with Beijing or run interference on its behalf is delusional. Not only would this risk huge collateral damage to Russian interests, but it would also contradict Putin's overriding goal: to situate Russia as an *independent* centre of regional and global power, with multiple options.

Beijing's calculus towards Russia is no less cold-blooded. It knows that Putin will act in his own interests, and that any Russian support for Chinese aims is likely to be partial and conditional, and not even always desirable. It is enough, though, that Russia sells it high-end weaponry, shares its operational experience, and provides moral support for Chinese positions on many regional and international issues.

Implications for the West

There is a tendency in the West to invest Sino-Russian defence cooperation with disproportionate significance. It is important to restore some analytical balance. Any serious attempt to meet the challenges posed by China and Russia must recognize several realities.

First, the Sino-Russian partnership is a typical great power relationship, driven by *realpolitik*, not emotional attachment or normative convergence. Substantive policy coordination is limited, and each side scarcely influences the other's decision-making. Their partnership, including defence cooperation, is less than the sum of its parts.

Second, there is no grand conspiracy against the West and the liberal order. Sino-Russian cooperation has its own intrinsic and multifaceted logic. While their interests often come into conflict with those of the United States, hostility towards Washington is not the primary *raison d'être* of their partnership.

Third, China and Russia are committed to defence cooperation because it benefits them both. Crucially, no-one – least of all the West – is able or willing to offer either side a better deal. That is why various triangular schemes, as entertained by Macron and

Trump, are doomed to fail. The hope that being ‘nicer’ to Putin will somehow draw him away from Beijing is beyond naïve.

Fourth, Western policymakers should focus on concrete threats, rather than wallowing in abstractions, such as the bogey of an ‘authoritarian governance model’. The real threats posed by China and Russia are *unilateral* – the PLA’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and in relation to Taiwan; Beijing’s ‘foreign influence’ activities; and Russian hacking operations (‘Solar Winds’).

Most importantly, Western decision-makers must raise their game. That means restoring good governance within liberal democracies; modernizing security capabilities, especially in areas such as cyber; working more closely with allies and regional partners; and cooperating with China and Russia in areas where there may be common interests, such as mitigating climate change and preventing or managing conflicts. President Biden has made an encouraging start, but there is a huge amount to do – not just by the United States, but also the Europeans.

Russia-China military cooperation: the view from Russia

Dmitry Gorenburg

Russian senior officials have highlighted the special nature of Russia's defense relationship with China by characterizing the ties in terms of a strategic partnership. As the two countries have expanded the number of military exercises and consultations while deepening military technical cooperation, analysts have suggested a growing alignment between the two countries at a political level that allows for stronger defense ties. This does not mean that Russia and China are about to enter a military alliance.

As cogently argued by Michael Kofman, Russian and Chinese leaders have labeled the relationship a strategic alliance because a military alliance is not needed, given that the two countries do not need each other for security guarantees or extended nuclear deterrence.¹ That said, they have sought to make their ties more formal, as shown by the 2017 agreement on a three-year road map to establish a legal framework to govern military cooperation.

This framework is still being negotiated, but is expected to be completed and signed in the near future, further codifying various aspects of defense ties, including the option of conducting joint long-range aviation patrols. Since I have described the broad outlines of Russia-China military cooperation elsewhere, this memo will serve to highlight the Russian perspective on developments over the last year.²

Discussion of strategic cooperation

Russia and China continued to take steps to cement their efforts at strategic cooperation over the second half of 2020. Leaders from both countries made a number of statements promoting Russia-China partnership. At a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, held virtually on November 10, Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted the intensification of foreign policy and military cooperation among SCO members, particularly welcoming Chinese President Xi Jinping's statement focused on opposing interference in the region by external forces.³ At his annual press conference, Putin highlighted that Russia and China have overlapping interests in many areas and that his relationship with Xi Jinping is trusting and friendly.⁴

¹ Michael Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente?" Riddle, November 29, 2019, <https://www.ridl.io/en/towards-a-sino-russian-entente>.

² Dmitry Gorenburg, "An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation," Marshall Center Security Insights #54, April 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-04/SecurityInsights_54.pdf

³ "SCO Heads of State Council meeting," Kremlin.ru, November 10, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64385>

⁴ "Ежегодная пресс-конференция Владимира Путина," Kremlin.ru, December 17, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64671>

This effort at building closer ties is aided on the Russian side by positive perceptions of China among the Russian population, Russians view China as one of the most friendly countries, second only to Belarus, with 40 percent having positive attitudes toward China according to a recent Levada Center survey. Only three percent see China as hostile.⁵

The two countries have also sought to expand military and security cooperation, characterizing it as one of the most significant areas of partnership between the two states. In a recent statement after a bilateral meeting, Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov said, “The cooperation between Russia and China is of a more expansive and deeper nature than a relationship between members of military-political alliances,” while Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, “There is no end to China-Russia strategic cooperation, there are no limits.”⁶

Cementing the relationship

In the last year, the two sides have continued to work to extend military cooperation with both new agreements and interactions on the ground. An existing bilateral agreement to notify each other of ballistic missile and space launches was extended for ten years in December 2020.⁷ The new joint China-Russia missile attack early warning system is nearing completion, with Voronezh radar stations now set up on Chinese territory.⁸

Security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region is seen as especially important in order to counter the United States’ deployment of global missile defense systems and its plans for placing intermediate and short range missiles in the region.⁹ China has also continued its recent history of participating in major Russian military exercises, including the Kavkaz exercise that took place in the Caucasus region in September 2020.¹⁰ It has also continued to procure weapons from Russia, recently revealing that in 2019 it signed a record contract for 121 new helicopters, including 68 Mi-171 helicopters

⁵ ““Друзья” и “Враги” России,” Levada Center Press Release, September 16, 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/16/23555/>

⁶ “Russia in Review, Dec. 18, 2020-Jan. 8, 2021,” *Russia Matters*, <https://www.russiamatters.org/news/russia-review/russia-review-dec-18-2020-jan-8-2021>

⁷ “Russia-China deal on notifying of missile launches shows mutual trust, Moscow says,” TASS, December 15, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1235205>

⁸ Andrew Hammond, “Russia and China double down on anti-Western alliance,” *Korea Times*, December 7, 2020, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2020/12/197_300411.html

⁹ “Russia-China cooperation in Asia-Pacific region important in light of U.S. plans to deploy new missiles - Russian defense minister,” Interfax, December 15, 2020, https://www.interfax.kz/?lang=eng&int_id=21&news_id=47963

¹⁰ Luo Shunyu, Yang Xiaobo and Li Hui, “Chinese troops for Kavkaz-2020 strategic exercise arrive in Russia,” *China Military Online*, September 15, 2020, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-09/15/content_9903330.htm

(including upgraded Mi-171E), 18 Mi-171Sh military transport helicopters, 14 Mi-171 helicopters with a VK-2500 engine, and 21 Ansat helicopters.¹¹

There was also some continuing high-level discussion of the possibility of a formal military alliance between Russia and China. Vladimir Putin was asked whether such a union was possible when speaking at the annual Valdai Club conference. He noted that “We don’t need it, but, theoretically, it’s quite possible to imagine it,” and “Without any doubt, our cooperation with China is bolstering the defense capability of China’s army.” He further noted that he could not exclude the possibility of even closer military ties between the two countries.¹²

These statements came despite widespread consensus that a formal military alliance was not needed and could be counterproductive since it would scare neighbors such as India into potentially increasing their cooperation with the United States.¹³ As a result, most Russian analysts believe that the Russian leadership is not actually seeking an alliance, but that Putin’s rhetoric instead is an effort to signal to the United States and its European partners that greater hostility might force the two partners into a closer embrace.¹⁴

The overall sense in Moscow is that given the sanctions resulting from Russia’s confrontation with the West and its increasing dependence on China in the economic sphere, China is “an increasingly important partner that would be hard to replace, [while] for Beijing, Moscow could easily be supplanted, since most of what it supplies China with could be bought elsewhere.”¹⁵

Russian analysts fear that Russia’s military relationship with China is on a similar trajectory. While for now Beijing continues to buy Russian arms, as its defense industry develops it will become increasingly self-sufficient. The worry is that in 10-15 years, Russia might become so economically dependent on China that it would be susceptible to Chinese pressure on foreign policy issues. This potential trend runs counter to Russian leaders’ desire to maintain an independent foreign policy, which will make it very difficult to accept Chinese leadership or impose limitations on their relationships with other countries for the sake of Chinese foreign policy.

¹¹ Dylan Malyasov, “China orders 121 more Russian helicopters,” *Defense Blog*, October 22, 2020, <https://defence-blog.com/news/china-orders-121-more-russian-helicopters.html>

¹² Vladimir Isachenkov, “Putin: Russia-China military alliance can’t be ruled out,” AP News, October 22, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/beijing-moscow-foreign-policy-russia-vladimir-putin-1d4b112d2fe8cb66192c5225f4d614c4>

¹³ “Military alliance with China to tie Russia’s hands, scare off partners, says expert,” TASS, October 20, 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/1218485>

¹⁴ Yohei Ishikawa, “Putin’s real intention in talking up a Russia-China alliance,” *Nikkei Asia*, December 17, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Putin-s-real-intention-in-talking-up-a-Russia-China-alliance2>

¹⁵ Alexander Gabuev, “Is Putin Really Considering a Military Alliance With China?” *The Moscow Times*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/12/02/is-putin-really-considering-a-military-alliance-with-china-a72207>

Russia-China military cooperation: the view from China

Mathieu Duchâtel

The key word to understand China-Russia military cooperation from a Chinese perspective is “strategic stability”. The 2019 joint statement on strategic stability underscores a common aspiration to oppose “the pursuit of a strategic advantage in the military sphere, in the intention to ensure absolute security and in order to gain unlimited opportunities for military-political pressure on opponents of such states”.

This formulation reflects a traditional military balance perspective centered on the US superiority, but also a shared vision of an international order in which Western support for regime change and liberal political values would be successfully contained. Indeed, the Chinese understanding of “strategic stability” goes beyond the arms control definition of the term to encompass what is listed by Xi Jinping as the top priority of his approach of national security: political security, understood as “national sovereignty and regime security, as well as the country's fundamental system, and the security of its institutions”.¹⁶

China's quest for political security in an environment of strategic competition with the United States determines the gains that China seeks from its military cooperation with Russia: filling the gaps of China's arms industry and enhancing China's nuclear deterrence posture. Political security is also the main rationale from a Chinese perspective behind military signaling activities conducted with Russia through joint exercises. It could be tempting to downplay the strategic importance for China of access to Russian military technology. After all, the progress of China's arms industry is spectacular, and the country pursues an “innovation driven development strategy” centered on technological leadership and industrial self-reliance. But the combination of ideological convergence and a shared concern regarding the future of the military balance with the United States, including in the nuclear domain and in the military application of emerging technologies, provides a stable and powerful foundation to the further deepening of China-Russia military cooperation.

Russia as a partner for the Chinese arms industry

China's 2019 order with Rostec to purchase a batch of 121 helicopters – the majority of which for the People's Liberation Army – is a reminder that procurements of full weapons systems have not disappeared from a bilateral relationship increasingly moving towards joint development, subcontracting and production of key components. But the trend is less big-ticket contracts, and more industrial cooperation. China's

¹⁶ Wang Puqu, “全面落实总体国家安全观 深刻把握国家安全的辩证关系” (Fully implement the overall national security concept and deeply grasp the dialectics of national security), People's Daily, 8 February 2021, http://www.qstheory.cn/qshyjx/2021-02/08/c_1127078930.htm

“Advanced Heavy Lift” is an excellent example in the area of heavy-lifting helicopters, for which China lacks a manufacturing capacity. Built in China, the program is designed after Russia’s Mi-26, with some Chinese specifications. Russian engineers serve as consultants and no technology transfer is included in the cooperation.¹⁷

The reliance of China’s military aircraft on Russian made turbofan engines has long been a symbol of China’s dependence on the Russian arms industry for a key system. China has purchased various generations of the Russian AL-31F engine for the carrier-based J-15 and the J-10, and for the early versions of the J-20 new generation stealth fighter. But there are new signs that China is breaking free from that constraint. China’s ambitions to replace the AL-31 FM with the domestically built WS-10C for the J-20 program have been accelerated as a result of Russian insistence that new batches of AL-31 engines be tied to additional purchases of Su-35 fighters, according to the military sources of the *South China Morning Post*.¹⁸

Indeed, Chinese experts argue that the military relationship is increasingly a relationship of “mutual learning” (互学互鉴).¹⁹ The science and technology cooperation agenda is gaining importance for military cooperation, with the creation in 2019 of a US\$1 billion bilateral investment fund that specifically targets dual-use areas such as new materials and artificial intelligence has been boosted by the creation.

This evolving pattern also means that acquisitions by Russia of Chinese defense technology will increasingly feature as a factor in the relationship. China has strengths in defense electronics but also because of its complete industrial defense base – there is a recent case of purchase of Chinese-made diesel engines for Grachonok anti-saboteur ships, in replacement for German MTU engines, no longer available because of sanctions.²⁰

Enhancing China’s nuclear deterrence

The progress of missile defense and the constant US maritime surveillance in the South China Sea weaken China’s deterrence posture. A key determinant of China’s modernization efforts in the nuclear domain is the imperative to eliminate the possibility of a disarming US first strike so that the US does not fully dominate the escalation ladder.

¹⁷ Matthew Bodner, “Russia flexes its heavy-lift helo muscles with new Mi-26 test flights”, *Defense News*, 15 April 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2019/04/15/russia-flexes-its-heavy-lift-helo-muscles-with-new-mi-26-test-flights/>

¹⁸ Minnie Chan, “China’s next-gen J-20 stealth fighter jettisons Russian engine in favour of home-grown technology”, *South China Morning Post*, 8 January 2021

¹⁹ Viviana Zhu, “The Russian connection, strategy over frictions”, *China Trends* no. 8, Institut Montaigne, February 2021. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/publications/china-trends-8-military-options-xis-strategic-ambitions>

²⁰ Michael Kofman, “The Emperors league, understanding Sino-Russian defense cooperation”, *War on the Rocks*, 6 August 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-emperors-league-understanding-sino-russian-defense-cooperation/>

Russia plays an increasingly important role in that regard. President Putin's admission at the 2019 Valdai Club that China was receiving Russian support for the construction of its early-warning missile attack system has brought to the forefront a new dimension in China-Russia military cooperation. This is strategically significant because a reliable early-warning system would give China the option to adjust its nuclear doctrine. With the ability to detect ballistic missile launches in real time, China could move its no first strike doctrine to a posture of launch under attack, instead of its current emphasis on assured retaliation, which implies absorbing a first strike before striking back. The extent of Russian support is not known precisely, but it could include technical support in helping develop long-range ground-based radars (rather than space-based assets) and even command control systems.

The two strategic air patrols that the Chinese and the Russian Air Forces conducted in July 2019 and December 2020 in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, forcing the ROK and the Japanese Air Forces to both scramble, are the signaling dimension of this importance of the nuclear deterrence domain for the partnership. According to the Chinese Defense Ministry, the joint air patrol aimed at "further enhancing the level of strategic coordination and joint operations capabilities between the two militaries, and jointly maintaining global strategic stability against third parties".²¹ As Li Shuyin from the Chinese Academy of Military Science argues, the strategic air patrols are of "high strategic significance" because they demonstrate to the international community "the firm determination of China and Russia to maintain global strategic stability".²²

Vladimir Putin at the Valdai Club has stated that bilateral cooperation includes "very sensitive things and I am not going to speak about them in public, but our Chinese friends know them". It is risky to speculate, but to increase the reliability of its second-strike capability, China needs to improve its anti-submarine warfare, from the quietness of the next generation of its submarines currently under development to its development of underwater sensors.

The way forward

A broad strategic direction has been set for the relationship. With strong leadership commitment, it will continue to deepen in areas of mutual interests. Defense cooperation is evolving from an asymmetric relationship centered on Chinese acquisition of weapons systems to joint development and industrial partnerships, and the area of nuclear deterrence is gaining importance in the overall relationship. It is not unthinkable that Chinese military modernization gains more from the exploitation of

²¹ "香山论坛 | 中俄军事关系不断深化, 导弹预警系统合作引热议", (Xiangshan Forum: China-Russia military relations constantly deepen, the ballistic missile early warning system becomes a hot topic), Sohu.com, 22 October 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/348607858_260616

²² Li Shuyin, "中俄军事关系进入新时代" (China-Russia military cooperation enters a new era), *PLA Daily*, 13 December 2019, http://www.mod.gov.cn/jmsd/2019-12/13/content_4856707.htm

open-source science and technology intelligence from the West than from cooperation with Russia – but it is not possible to measure. As Shang Yue from CICIR argues, what matters in the relationship is a logic of “you watch my back, I watch your back” (背靠背).²³

There will be difficulties and obstacles in moving the partnership forward, but this is a relationship that has brought enormous benefits to the rise of China in the reform era. Wang Haiyun, former defense attaché to Moscow, recalls how much acquisition of Russian weapons systems has played an important role after the mid-1990s to address the situation in the Taiwan Strait. Today, he notes that to move cooperation forward, it will be important to combat two forces – the Russian proponents of a “China threat theory”, and the Chinese advocates of the “Russian unreliability theory” (俄罗斯不可靠论). But military cooperation is a “ballast stone” of the strategic partnership, which helps China face an international environment characterized by “changes unseen in a whole century” (世界面临百年未有之大变局).²⁴ Looking ahead, the big strategic picture should prevail over the irritants.

²³ Shang Yue, “新时代的中俄关系与俄罗斯亚太外交”, *Shijie Zhishi*, 11 December 2020, <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/NEW/opinion.html?id=08476089-1ca1-4f1e-9f8c-1b16136361be>

²⁴ Wang Haiyun, “中俄军事关系七十年:回顾与思考”, (70 years of China-Russia military cooperation), *Russia and Eastern Europe Research Journal*, no. 4, 2019, pp. 37-48. <http://www.oyyj-oys.org/UploadFile/Issue/optftdui.pdf>

Russia-Chinese military cooperation: the Far Abroad

Erin Sindle

Russian and Chinese engagement with Africa has its roots in the Cold War-era wars of national liberation when Moscow and Beijing provided military and technological assistance to a number of African countries as they fought for independence from European colonial powers. Although both nominally communist, the Soviet Union and China were engaged in a competition to become the driving force of communism in the post-colonial world. As a result, the two countries often supported conflicting sides, as they did during Angola's civil war, in which China backed the Maoist UNITA against the Soviet-supported MPLA following Portugal's withdrawal from the country.

Although the aid provided to Africa by the USSR far surpassed that of China – in Angola, for example, Moscow would spend at least [\\$300 million to support the MPLA](#) – the end of the Cold War saw the Soviet Union lose interest in and withdraw from the continent as it struggled with its own internal political issues at home. China remained, however, and used its [Maoist ties with Africa's new leaders](#) and elites, its own experience with post-colonial struggles, and investment in economic development and infrastructure projects to cement its influence.

Following a decades-long absence, Russia began modest re-engagement with Africa in the mid-2000s, exploiting its Soviet-era political, economic, and cultural links on the continent and focusing on pragmatic issues that African leaders could relate to, namely arms and natural resources. This approach proved successful, with Moscow signing a number of agreements on arms deliveries and economic cooperation during that period. The decade that followed saw Africa become a foreign policy priority for Russia. Since reassuming the Russian presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin has increased the Kremlin's efforts to expand Russia's footprint and strengthen its influence across the continent.

Russia

Moscow continues to use security cooperation agreements, arms sales, and military training programs to forge stronger military ties across Africa, part of its wider bid to strengthen Russian influence globally. Russia is the largest supplier of arms to Africa, accounting [for 35 percent of arms exports](#), and signed at least 21 military agreements with African countries between 2015 and 2020. In April 2020, Rosoboronexport announced its [first contract](#) to supply assault boats to an undisclosed country in sub-Saharan Africa, marking the first export contract of Russian-made final naval products to the region in two decades. This was followed by reports in August that Moscow intends to [construct military bases](#) in six African countries: the Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan. In December, Russia announced that it had signed an agreement with Sudan to establish a naval base at Port

Sudan, providing it with a strategic foothold along the Red Sea from which to project power.

Russian private military companies (PMCs) are believed to operate in at least 15 countries, including the Central African Republic, where personnel from the [Wagner Group](#) provide military training to the country's special forces, and Sudan, where its personnel assisted the government forces of President Omar al-Bashir in putting down anti-government protests in 2019.

China

China's activities have historically focused primarily on infrastructure, trade, and investment, but this economic penetration of the continent has been accompanied in recent years by a gradual increase in its military presence. China has become the second-largest supplier of arms to Africa, accounting for [17 percent of total arms imports](#) by 2017. While small arms and light weapons make up the majority of arms sales, China is increasingly exporting larger and more sophisticated systems, including aircraft, tanks, and combat drones, at highly competitive prices. Beijing has also made a number of donations of lethal and non-lethal military equipment to its partners in West Africa, but [recurring problems with the quality](#) of the weapons makes it unlikely that China will become the provider of choice for African militaries anytime soon.

In 2017, China established its first foreign military base in Djibouti, joining the United States, France, Japan, Italy, Spain, and Saudi Arabia in using the country's strategic geopolitical location to increase its power projection capabilities. Beijing justified its need for a military facility by citing its increasing role in [humanitarian relief, peacekeeping, and stabilization](#) missions across Africa, including international counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and United Nations peacekeeping missions, to which it has contributed some 2,500 soldiers and police. The former head of U.S. Africa Command, Marine Corps Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, warned Congress in 2018 that China is actively working with its African partners to [open new bases](#) in several key locations across the continent. With these bases, Beijing would gain access to ports, bases, and airspace that could be used to threaten or limit U.S. and allied freedom of maneuver in and around Africa.

Beijing hosted the first China-Africa Peace and Security Forum in July 2019, which brought together nearly 100 security officials from 50 African countries and the African Union, including 15 defense ministers and chiefs of general staff. In November that year, Russian and Chinese warships participated in Exercise *Mosi* with the South African navy, marking the countries' first trilateral naval exercise in waters off Africa.

Beijing is rapidly increasing its use of PMCs in Africa as well. Unlike their Russian counterparts, who have carried out combat operations in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya on Moscow's behalf, however, most Chinese PMC activity is in support of the Belt and Road

Initiative. Companies like DeWei Security Group and Chinese Overseas Security Group are engaged primarily in training the military and security forces of African states, as well as in providing private security for Chinese citizens and companies and protecting Chinese economic interests. While they currently lack the capability to “inflict lethal violence,” this is likely to change in the near future, with the risk of Chinese PMCs [expanding their operational capabilities](#) to mimic their Russian counterparts, in particular the Wagner Group.

Security cooperation and competition

Although the geopolitical rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing has created the impression that Russia and China are working closely together throughout Africa, there is little evidence to support this. Cooperation between the two countries remains focused primarily on taking similar positions in the U.N. when voting on issues tied to the organization’s work, particularly peacekeeping operations in conflict areas like the Central African Republic and South Sudan.

Moscow and Beijing have, however, found certain areas of mutual interest on the continent. This has led them to support the same factions in Sudan, where both countries have extensive interests, and the Central African Republic, where China has taken steps to cultivate a relationship with the government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who receives presidential protection and military support from the Kremlin.

This relationship of mutual interests extends beyond Africa as well, including in Syria, where Russian military power preserved the Bashar al-Assad regime and where China likely will play a critical role in the country’s post-war reconstruction, and Central Asia, where the Belt and Road Initiative has become interlinked with Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union. It seems increasingly likely that their respective initiatives in Africa will follow a similar path.

When an alliance that wasn't, isn't: untangling the Sino-Russia Arctic 'axis'

Elizabeth Buchanan

Popular geopolitical narratives of the Arctic flashpoint almost always include a Sino-Russia alliance or 'axis' component. Here, Moscow and Beijing are working together to carve-up the Arctic riches and take control of new global transport corridors. This narrative of an Arctic partnership between Russia and China has also started to make its way into the policy and defense planning documents of Arctic-rim states. Washington's recent litany of Arctic strategic planning documents – Naval, Air Force and Coast Guard strategies - feature renewed great power competition in the Arctic as a central security threat. However, the notion that there is a Sino-Russian Arctic alliance is a misinterpretation of the realities that drive China and Russia together in the High North.

As others have covered in depth, mistrust, centuries old-tensions and hangovers of failed alliance attempts are all permanent features of the Sino-Russian relationship. And they will continue to shape their strategic future, to an extent curtailing the two states' 'axis' potential. Moscow and Beijing have both learnt that nations do not have allies. Secure, successful states seek merely mutually beneficial relationships. That sentiment frames Sino-Russian engagement in the Russian Arctic. The factoring out of the Russian Arctic from the global Arctic concept is something most western policy and strategic planners fail to do. This is overtly detrimental to not only understanding the geopolitical fault lines of the Arctic, but for successfully planning future strategy.

This commentary will do three things. First, it will illustrate how Russia and China engage in a *functional* Russian Arctic context. Second, I will tease out the potential flashpoints and tensions in which the Sino-Russia relationship is under pressure due to existing *fractures* in the Arctic context. Third, this commentary will look to avenues for the Sino-Russia Arctic relationship to become *fragmented*.

Functional Sino-Russia Arctic ties

The realities of the Sino-Russia relationship (dubbed by both as one of 'mutual benefit') in the Arctic is best grasped when we consider the *limits* of the partnership. Limits in terms of geographical boundaries. By way of basic geography, we know this area is the lion share of the Arctic region, home to the northern sea route (NSR) and a vast percentage of Arctic resources. The Russian Arctic zone is also the geographical 'limits' of Sino-Russian Arctic 'cooperation' as well.

Of the eight members of the Arctic Council, Russia took the most convincing to grant China its observer status in 2013. Moscow approved membership, and with-it

legitimacy, on the basis that Beijing explicitly acknowledged the sovereignty of Arctic-rim states and reaffirmed its commitment to the legal architecture of the Arctic region—the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Russia watches, with tempered suspicion, Beijing's Arctic high sea missions and scientific research agenda in what China dubs – a global commons. Yet within the Russian Arctic zone, Russia welcomes Chinese engagement, on Kremlin terms. Since 2014, with Western sanctions over Russia's annexation of Crimea and sustained aggression in Ukraine, Moscow has had a cash flow problem. When sanctions targeted energy projects in the offshore Russian Arctic, China wasted no time in offering capital injections and technology for offshore exploration.

In this zone, the Sino-Russian mutually beneficial arrangement includes access to the NSR which slashes transit between Asia and Europe by roughly half. China does pay to use this route. Indeed, Chinese vessels have been refused entry, and those that pass abide by Russian transit laws—vessels must be piloted by Russian pilots and Russia must be forewarned about trips. The functional Arctic relationship is also couched in energy interests. China is a key investor in Russia's hallmark Arctic LNG projects. Beijing's share in the Yamal LNG venture is 29.9%, (with the balance held by Russia's Novatek at 50.1% and France's Total at 20%). China holds 20% of Russia's Arctic-2 LNG project (with the balance held by Russia's Novatek 60%, Total 10% and remaining 10% by a Japanese consortium).

Fractured Sino-Russian Arctic ties

Despite key economic strategic partnerships in the Russian Arctic, China is busy diversifying itself throughout the region. Efforts to offset any overreliance on Moscow further illustrates existing fractures in the relationship. China is actively engaging with other Arctic-rim powers and has commercial ventures, investment plans and entrenched soft-power strategies in Norway, Canada, Iceland, and Greenland.

Great power ambitions also serve as fracture-points throughout the Sino-Russia Arctic relationship. In 2018, Beijing tabled its Arctic strategy, squarely placing itself as a rightful steward of stakeholder of the High North 'global commons'. China is driven by the prestige a polar footprint brings, now spanning both the Arctic and Antarctica. This is further facilitated by Beijing's expanding indigenous ice-breaker building capabilities. Russia is aware of the rationale behind China's Arctic strategy. Any efforts by Beijing to move beyond the agreed terms of its arrangement with Moscow within the Russian Arctic zone, or failure to uphold its observer status commitments in the global Arctic, will no doubt encourage deeper cooperation among the Arctic-rim states. Of course, it might be geopolitically pertinent to pry Moscow away from Beijing in the region.

The existing fracture points in the Sino-Russia Arctic relationship are also evident when we consider the role of international law. Here, China adheres to the legal and sovereign

Arctic arrangements for now – but uses these norms like UNCLOS to argue it has unfettered access rights to the high seas of the Arctic Ocean. Of interest is the way in which China picks and chooses international laws to promote and adhere to, for instance Beijing has interpreted UNCLOS in a very different manner in the South China Sea. Russia also interprets international law and norms in rather creative ways to bolster its strategic position in the Arctic. Here, Moscow argues Article 234 of UNCLOS (dubbed the ‘ice law’) facilitates its ability to assign special access requirements to the NSR.

Fragmented Sino-Russian Arctic ties

Russia’s Arctic strategy is built on both economic security and frontier border security objectives. The Sino-Russian relationship lends itself to these economic security interests and ambitions, but it is less effective at navigating Russia’s Arctic ‘siege mentality’. Primarily because it is the kind of increased interest and activity which China is undertaking in the Arctic which Russia seeks to secure its vast open frontier against. Any deterioration in Sino-Russian ties could threaten this delicate balance.

Russian efforts to securitize its economic interests in the Arctic falls short of an expansionist agenda. If we peel back the posturing, ultimately Moscow’s Arctic priority remains regional *stability*. Continued regional cooperation with its NATO-member and Western Arctic neighbors remains a central strategic objective. After all, keeping the arena free of conflict is crucial to ensuring the NSR (and Russia’s future economic resource base) remains open and commercially viable. Russia needs to be able to deliver secure, trusted, and unimpeded energy supplies from its northern frontier to Asian and European energy clients.

The same can not be assumed of Chinese Arctic interests, with clear indicators of an expansionist agenda emerging. While much of Beijing’s recent Arctic Ocean missions have been primarily about ‘raising the flag’ and promoting soft power public relations campaigns for domestic consumption, it is evident that China is set to stay in the Arctic. While much of the Arctic Ocean is delineated by territorial seas and agreed maritime boundaries, the central Arctic Ocean does hold international waters which facilitates Chinese engagement. Fragmentation of Sino-Russia relations in the Arctic context might yet emerge from the outcomes of the Arctic continental shelf debate. Via the UN CLCS, Russia, Canada, and Denmark have all submitted formal, yet overlapping, claims to this continental shelf. Should a claim be upheld, the awarded state will then claim exclusive rights to the seabed and the resources beneath the area of the North Pole. This would block China’s access to seabed or energy resources in the international Arctic zone.

Chinese Arctic interests are related to the region's resource and shipping potential. While Sino-Russian ties have balanced mutual suspicions and competition with economic and commercial realism, potential for the relationship to become fragmented

simmers below the surface. Aware of this reality, Russia has worked to offset Chinese investment and the risk of overreliance in all Arctic energy ventures by diversifying its capital pools. Saudi Arabia, Japan, India, and South Korea are all increasingly linked to Russian Arctic energy ventures.

Overall, continued efforts to put Moscow and Beijing in the same ‘basket’ when it comes to great power competition in the Arctic ‘great game’ is short-sighted and misses critical opportunities to futureproof the Arctic as a zone of international cooperation, collaboration, and low tension. Sino-Russian Arctic ties will continue to be predictable to a large extent. Ties will remain mutually beneficial—until they are not. Predicting this point should be the priority for Arctic stakeholders. The problem appears to be, for now, many stakeholders assume a fractured or fragmented Sino-Russian Arctic relationship does not exist.

Moscow is unlikely to plunge into conflict in a region it holds the largest stake in, and which it has tied its future economic and social security to. The same cannot be said of Beijing’s Arctic endeavors. Herein lies a strategic problem.